Sympathy for the Devil

by BigDemoband

Summary

Most, when presented with ADVENT, would not hesitate to ring the death knell for them. The Elders fully expect this as XCOM draws closer to the Hunter's Stronghold. But when faced with a fate far different than what they ever could have imagined, how will the Chosen react in the face of it? Where will their future lead?
The Commander thumbed through some documents on the datapad. Coordinates, pictures, written notes... the Reapers may not be the type for paperwork, but on terms of scouting an area thoroughly, they were unmatched champions. There was hardly a piece of data missing that she required.

“As much as I’d like to brag that my Reapers pulled the work, I’ve gotta say, you had a hand in this too.”

Eliza looked up at the screen in the Resistance Communications room, smiling, tucking a lock of deep brown hair out of the way. Her pale blue eyes caught the light of the screen, revealing a dash or two of purple tint. “I’d still put a lot of the awards on you guys. My soldiers certainly did their best, but without you and your Reapers, we wouldn’t have had a chance to find his hideout in the first place.”

Her attention went back to the datapad. Everything put together a nice imagery of the Hunter’s Stronghold. Deep in the woods, no civilization for miles around... or ADVENT sites, for that matter. Total isolation. That could be a benefit. Then again, she wouldn’t pin the Hunter as being one for backup anyway. Still, it meant that once they flew in that airspace, they’d stick out like a sore thumb. No room for sneaking.

She straightened, just in time for Volk to start speaking again. “I’m sure you’re aware, Commander, but that thing probably got word of our scouts.” Volk shifted, rubbing at his chin and looking to the side. “We haven’t heard any evidence to that but knowing that Hunter, I’m sure it knows. Probably just biding time. If you don’t crash in the front door soon, you might lose the opportunity when boredom sets in.

The Commander did a mental check of her supplies. She already had a squad in mind for the mission—and that squad included a little bit of borrowed help from them. “Technically speaking, we could drop in right now. More than enough soldiers for a squad, and I’m sure Wukong would like a chance to give the Hunter a new piercing or two.”

That earned a smirk from Volk. Arsozu, or “Wukong,” was instrumental in many missions, and Eliza counted him as a true blessing from the Reapers. “You’d have a buddy for life, there.”

She chuckled, sending the data along and putting down the pad. “In this war, I’ll claim as many friends as I can get.”

As many friends as she could get... Eliza scanned over the walls. All three Resistance factions were on good terms with her, if not each other. Word of XCOM was spreading and Resistance havens were backing them up. So why was she feeling this melancholy? Her eyes flicked back down to the pad.

_The Hunter_. A somewhat blurred photo of him taking aim at something out of frame was included in the files. The Commander knew he was the enemy. It was impossible to know how many deaths that rifle he held knew, and how many more he knew personally. But yet, a few things lingered at the back of her mind. Remnants of her time in the network. _Queries_.

Queries
“Volk... you know what’s the most interesting thing to me?”

Volk didn’t respond. He had already caught her far-off look at the datapad and was now sitting at attention, waiting to see what she was going to say next. She took his silence as a nod to continue.

“When I was hooked up to the ADVENT Network, I was basically an info base. I’d apparently run simulations in the background, but at any time, I could get questions. Mostly tactical data for officers, but regularly, I’d get questions from the Chosen.”

“Something tells me I’m going to get a little concerned at where you’re going with this.”

Eliza’s mouth twitched, undecided between a smile or a frown. “The Warlock and Assassin asked their fair share of tactical questions and my subconscious answered the best it could. The Hunter, though? He’d always bounce interesting stuff off of me.” She gave a soft chuckle, crossing her arms. Her gaze hadn’t moved from the datapad. “He’d prod me with joke questions and I remember automatically snarking back, much to his delight. But he... he asked some fairly interesting ones as well.”

“Commander.” Volk’s tone was hard and she could see his face had set out of the corner of her eye. He didn’t sound like he was inviting any further discussion, and she took the hint, sighing.

“Right. Thank you for all of your help, Volk. We’ll take things from here.”

He nodded, and then the feed cut. Eliza cast her gaze to the door. How long Bradford had been standing there, she didn’t know. He was currently leaned up against one side of it, giving her a trained look. Behind it, though, she could see his concern.

“Commander O’Leary.”

She nodded at her proper designation. “Did you get the files?”

His shoulders went rigid, and he stood up properly. “Interesting questions?”

Eliza gave the datapad one last look before sighing, turning the display off. “Going to cut me off at any point? This isn’t a topic I want to be constantly interrupted on.”

Bradford paused for a second as he was walking into the room, and then shook his head. “Just know I’m concerned for what you’ve said so far.”

Her eyes flicked to the dark screen for a moment before she crossed her arms again. Central’s concern was valid. Volk’s apprehension was valid. But yet... she wanted to give stock to her own feelings.

“Where was I... Right. Among the Hunter’s ‘usual’ questions came some interesting ones. Ones the others didn’t ever really ask. ‘Do you think you’ll ever be out of there?’ ‘Have you ever feared death?’ ‘Did you ever wish you could be born in someone else’s shoes?’”

Bradford opened his mouth, but then closed it into a tight line, respecting her implicit request. The Commander continued. “These kind of questions just started popping up more and more often for him. At some point, it seemed to move from morbid curiosity to... projecting? Seeking help?” She grimaces. “One of the final questions he asked me before you sprung me from that tube was ‘Have you ever wanted to die?’”

She turned to Bradford, gripping her arms with her hands. “I know he’s the enemy. I’m aware that he’s an aggressor. But, Bradford... you’d have to be there.” A few images flashed through her head
and she suppressed a shudder. “The simulations, the failure states, the memories. If that’s what I went through without becoming a Chosen like them, then imagine what’s going on behind closed doors.” She runs a hand through her hair. More and more white strands were popping up in it every day. “There’s gotta be a way other than just killing him. Don’t misunderstand me—if push comes to shove, he is the enemy, and I won’t hesitate to give the order to end him. Just...”

She trailed off, the hand still on her arm digging her fingertips into her flesh. Bradford shifted on the spot, then sighed, putting a heavy hand on her shoulder. “Eliza. I know you went through hell with the Elders, and I’m sure the process of becoming a Chosen isn’t any more glamorous. But you’re talking about possibly taking a Chosen in alive.”

She nods, sighing, letting a bit of tension go. “It’s... it’s true. I know we’ve stopped taking subjects in alive twenty years ago. I know we don’t negotiate. Do you think that I don’t know? Do you think that I don’t realize I’m advocating for sparing a mortal enemy of XCOM?”

Bradford returned her sigh, shaking his head. “I’m sure you’re fully aware. Just let me ask: how?”

Her gaze returned up to Bradford. “I don’t know. But I’m thinking. Standard knockouts should still apply, hell, you’ve seen the things that Clint can do. I’m definitely sending him on mission regardless, but maybe he could help.”

Bradford grunts, looking off to the side. “Vonnet is our strongest psion... but even against a Chosen, I’m wary.” He looks back to the Commander, shoulders relaxing. “I suppose as long as you’re willing to off him if the need arises, we might be able to do something. There are those old cells back in the lower deck, and we do still have a room open for planning.”

Eliza didn’t smile but her appreciation was palpable. “Thank you, John. I promise I’ll keep my mind on the mission. You’re just one of the few people I can clear this with without them damning me for being crazy.”

“Well...” He smiled. “You’re not out of the woods there, yet.”

She returned the grin. “Let’s go round up the soldiers.”

The time had arrived. Amidst rubble and ruin, five soldiers and a SPARK touched down in the first room of the Hunter’s Stronghold.

Sherry was the first to step forward, keeping her Plasma Rifle at head-level as she did a sweep of the room. Her brown hair was up in a bun, keeping it out of her face and preventing it from covering the burn scar on her face. Her GREMLIN was similarly primed, smoothly flying about, running a scan on the alien containers on racks that formed a loose grid in the area.

Roland was right behind her, though his sweep was much less smooth. He kept his pace steady even as he practically wheeled around, gauging the room for any signs of threat, Storm Gun held at the ready. The dress beret on his head still stayed firmly attached, keeping his short, white hair from falling out at the scalp. A repurposed Muton mask covered his face, and a scar on his left cheek trailed up from it and up his eye. At some more rubble falling down from the breaching charges, his hand jerked to one of the Fusion Axes on his back, but calmed a bit when he realized what it was.
SYNCLARE’s servos groaned as the robot rose to a more proper standing position, taking his place at the front of the squad. His sleek, almost alien chassis glinted in the light, the smooth grey material catching it from the new skylight. The heavily modded Elerium Phase-Cannon in his hands remained stationary as he lumbered forward, his BIT staying close.

Rosa was right behind him, already loosely using his big frame as cover, watching his back. A tactical helmet covered her head, obscuring her features. She kept her Beam Cannon hoisted like a trained professional, the weight meaning almost nothing to her in her WAR Suit.

Arsozu was quick to dash to the front, already at one of the open doors, peering in. His Reaper’s coat fanned out behind him, while his hood remained firmly in place. Despite his sudden movement, nobody in the squad stopped him. He kept his profile low and his peeks short, turning back to the squad and shaking his head. “No hostiles in the next room,” he stage-whispers, voice slightly muffled thanks to his mask.

Clint was the last to start moving, walking calmly with his Plasma Bolt at ease. His long, white hair was kept tucked in his alien-esque helmet, a few locks peeking out the back. Purple eyes scanned the room, the color matched by the psi-amp on his back, glowing with passive power. He raises a hand to his helmet.

“Avenger, this is Menace One-Five. We have landed safely and Wukong says the next room is free of hostiles. Everything’s quiet for now.”

“Solid copy.” The Commander’s voice came over comms as the Avenger got a feed of the area. “Approach the next room carefully, and keep to cover if you get near any doors.”

“Understood.” Clint put his hand back on his gun. “Squad, move out. Wukong, you’re on scout. SYN, you’re behind him. Fortuna, you’re behind him. Rascal, watch flanks and stay near the front. Cherry, you’re backline with me. Are we clear?”

He got various affirmations, and the squad settled into their positions as they moved to the next room. Sherry’s GREMLIN joined her as she waited for Clint to catch up, the two keeping back.

The Commander watched, pensive, as the squad advanced. Thanks to the support of the Reapers and a nearby Resistance haven, they were getting a clean feed of the scene. The next room seemed like a communications hub of sorts, with desks littered with displays and inputs arranged neatly, monitors on the walls of various venues. She caught a flash of one that seemed to be a shot from the Blacksite, dread starting to settle in her gut.

She dismissed the feelings, casting a glance over to Bradford. “Any input, Central?”

“None so far, Commander.” The two were back to professional faces, concentration set on the mission. “Your plans?”

“Sweep the area, look for trouble, expecting to find it. Sensors lit up when we flew in here so they’re expecting us. Had no plans for sneaking, anyway. There’s got to be some sort of power source for the Chosen to keep resurrecting, and chances are, that’s deep in the compound.”

Bradford cleared his throat. “Good to hear, Commander, but I was referring to your other plans.”

A few staff members stifled chuckles, and Eliza let them simmer down before she spoke. “I’ve settled on psionic subduing. Clint has more than enough power to get him to at least panic, but the optimal goal would be to knock him out entirely.”

“That is quite a lofty ambition, Commander.” Tygan’s presence was announced by his comment,
nearly making the Commander jump. That man could be a Reaper if he wanted to. “We’ve observed that even the non-psionically gifted Chosen are almost immune to mind-altering effects. Unless our operative plans on completely overloading the Hunter...”

Tygan lets the statement hang. Eliza hums, then gives a subtle smile. “I’m taking the suggestion onboard. Thank you, Tygan.” Before anyone could retort, she turned her attention back to the screen. “Wukong, status.”

Arsozu paused as he was about to open a door. He continued the action, peering beyond. The room beyond was bathed in a menacing red light, and Arsozu made note of an almost-fresh blood smear on the floor that angled away from some sort of contraption. It seemed to be the stronghold’s prison area. Standing in the middle... “I’ve got eyes on two Stun Lancers, an Officer, and a Shieldbearer, and that’s just from this angle. They look alert, but of course, they don’t know I’m here.”

“Roger.” Clint answered for the Commander, voice lowered. “SYN, I want you to activate Overdrive and plow through that wall. Fortuna, follow him. Try to take down the Shieldbearer first. Rascal, follow-up. Cherry and I will pick off stragglers.”

“Actually, from your position...” The Commander hums. “Crazo, I want you to move forward about ten feet, to Wukong’s right. They’re standing close enough together... drop a Void Rift into their midst. Then proceed with your plan.”

Clint grins, moving up. “The Commander is ever insightful! One pocket in reality, coming up.”

“I think I see some high ground in there as well. Wukong, slip in, and take it. Pick off a straggler if need be.”

“Roger roger.” Arsozu grinned to himself as he slunk in the room, keeping to sightlines. “Not like these guys could be any more blind if they had buckets on their heads.” He scaled a ladder, pausing at the top. “Oh, wait...”

“Cut the chatter or we won’t hear a thing!” Roland scuttled forward, scowling a bit. “If something goes wrong I want to be able to know it happened.”

That made the Officer’s head turn in the next room to the door, readying their gun. Arsozu leveled his rifle. “I blab because I can afford it—you better make the most of your time, because you’re about flat broke, boys!”

Clint didn’t spare another word, holstering his weapon and bringing his psi-amp into his left hand. His right glowed a rich purple, siphoning energy from the amp, suffusing his whole body with light. At the point where he was starting to become blinding, he hurled it into the next room, a bright spark tracing a trail of energy that went right into the pod’s midst. It hit the end of the tracer, and with a ghastly sound, a purple mass of swirling energy opened in the midst of the enemy, buffeting them with pure psionic power.

“I think I’ve got one.” Clint sing-songed, and clenched his fist. The rift closed and the tracer whipped out at the Officer, causing him to spasm from the sudden infiltration. It hung limp for a moment before straightening, taking on Clint’s confident posture. “Go for it!”

At that moment, SYN burst through the wall between the two doors. He stopped in front of the enemy, rubble strewn around him and with light blue energy coursing across his frame. “I apologize in advance for your untimely deaths,” he quipped, before smoothly taking aim at the Shieldbearer and opening fire.
He gets a clean hit and downs the soldier. The two Stun Lancers exchange a look before bolting in
different directions, one of them getting gunned down by Rosa in a hail of plasma.

Roland bursts forth from the hole in the wall, doing a slide around the corner, keeping a frightening
pace with the Lancer, axe in hand. With a shout, the blade comes down on the soldier’s back,
catching it and bringing forth a burst of orange ichor as the enemy crumples to the floor.

“Well,” Clint says, his voice coming from the Officer. “My whole squad appears to have died.
That’s brutal.”

“Crazo, don’t mock the dead.” The Commander sighs. “Or the mind-controlled, for that matter.”

“I don’t know, I suppose he has a point.”

Most of the squad jumped at the sound of the Hunter’s voice on comms, nervously scanning the
room. “Oh, don’t be babies, I’ve known you guys were here ever since those Reapers showed up at
the ends of my yard. You really need to get yourself some better stealth operatives, Commander.”

Bradford opens his mouth to speak but the Commander holds up a hand, smirking. “Look, we were
playing baseball in the next town over and a Berserker hit the ball and we think it sailed through
one of your windows, can we just get it back?”

“Mmm... here’s the thing. That was a closed window, mind you, and now there’s a draft. Sorry to
say, but you racked up some property damage. I think I’ll take the ball, along with a soldier or
two.” The Hunter pauses. “And look at that, you’ve spilled blood in the hall. You’re awfully messy
baseball players, and it’s not my fault you let a Berserker try to be Babe Ruth.”

“Well, can’t say I didn’t try.” The Commander drops her hand. “No chance we can just be friends
and play together nicely?”

The Hunter chuckles. “Sorry, Commander. I’m more of a hockey fan.”

“Plan B, then.” She switches the comms, limiting herself to Clint’s channel only. “Crazo, I’m
going to be directing you personally from now on. Don’t think he can hear me on here. Keep the
squad moving in formation, but be cautious. That gunfire probably echoed through the whole
facility.”

“Understood. People, keep moving!”

“You know,” starts the Hunter, “I wouldn’t peg XCOM as the type to go storming bases. Maybe
mess up some shrubbery here, nick some office pens there... coming here’s awfully, I don’t know,
suicidal.”

Eliza switched back over to main comms. “Well, what better way to mess with the Elders than to
take out a Chosen? Don’t worry, your pens are still under consideration.”

The Hunter’s laughter fills the comms. “You’ve got the wrong alien, Commander. If you want to
actually make them despair, go for either of the others. They’d practically thank you for killing me.
I’d almost let you go so you could do that, if you didn’t threaten my pens.”

“Someone around here keeps hiding ours, just let us borrow yours for a bit.” At this point, one or
two of the staff were trying to suppress laughter while Bradford sighs, Tygan trying and failing to
stifle a smile, himself. “And hey, we had nothing else to do tonight.”

“Well, fair point. Idle hands are the devil’s workshop, and everything. I’ll give you a hint, you’re
looking for a room.”

“I appreciate your thorough input in assisting us with finding your location.” Back on the ground, SYN withdrew his gauntlet from the wreck of a MEC, a few blackened marks on his chassis but otherwise unharmed. “We will be en-route to your position shortly. Thank you for your compliance.”

“Ohoho, even the robot’s getting lippy! Rubbing off on the bots, Commander?”

“Not a matter of ‘rubbing off,’” Rosa interjects, a spray of plasma destroying an ADVENT Priest’s cover, “Trust me, he’s always been like that.”

“He’s awfully fun, though!” Arsozu’s ensuing shot gets lost in the commotion of the battle, allowing him to remain undetected even as it pierces the Priest, giving it no chance to Sustain. “And you, my dear Hunter, I’m gonna enjoy taking it right to ya!”

“Oh, really? Any Reaper worth half their salt would watch their six.”

Arsozu whipped around but by that point, it was too late to do anything about the Berserker fist sailing towards him. He crumpled around it as he was thrown from his position and into a nearby wall, hitting it and slumping, unresponsive. The Berserker’s triumphant roar was cut short by Clint burying a bolt into its stomach, doubling it over in time for Sherry to get a clean shot off of its head.

“God damn it, Wukong!” Roland fired another round into the Berserker for good measure before reloading, making sure the coast was clear before running over to him. Blood was seeping from behind his mask and his armor was bent in at the front. “We’re gonna need an evac—he’s unconscious and I don’t think he’s getting up anytime soon.”

SYN advanced forward, his BIT whirring into the room ahead. It flew back in sight, chirping. “My BIT reports an empty room ahead of interest. It appears to be a portal location housing a transporter.”

“Damn. Not my front door. You’ve found it.” The Hunter deadpanned. “Well, I’m a lovely, sporting fellow. You’ve basically killed all of the guards there and I don’t enjoy hunting nearly dead prey. Take your wannabe home—I’m gonna enjoy killin’ the rest of you.”

Bradford turned to the Commander. “You gonna trust that?”

Eliza stares at the screen. Her face was unreadable. Losing their special operative just before fighting the Hunter was a serious blow, to say the least. Had she been actually able to give direct orders instead of tiptoeing around giving the Hunter info on what she was doing, maybe she could have avoided it. As it stood, she had few options. “Might as well. He pulls a fast one, he forces my hand. Not about to make Wukong march into his inner sanctum like that, grudges be damned. Crazo, get him out of there. Firebrand, prepare an evac.”

“Got it, Commander. Firebrand, flying in.”

“Understood, Commander. I’ll have Rascal cart him over.”

She leaned back a bit, watching Roland gingerly hoist up Arsozu and start walking with him. The Hunter’s true stronghold was just within their reach. Despite her calm appearance, her heart was pounding, and that dread she shook of earlier was returning in force, settling like a stone in her gut.

The Commander leaned back in, tuning to Clint’s headset and speaking low. “Clint.”
Yes, Commander?

“You are only to respond ‘understood’ to what I am about to tell you. Is that clear?”

She watches as Clint looks around at the other members of his squad. His voice drops a bit as he speaks, more reserved. “I understand. What is it, Commander?”

Commander O’Leary sucked in a breath. “You have a special mission. It’s within my interests to bring the Hunter back alive, but he needs to be unconscious to do so. You, right now, are our best way of achieving that. If we can get him cornered and shut down whatever means he has of resurrecting, I want you to employ everything you have in your power to disable him. Stun him, mind control him, completely overload him and knock him out if necessary. Just make sure he’s in a state where we can safely move him. But, all else fails, if the squad is in danger due to this, you are to drop this order and kill him. Do you read me, Clint?”

It was a while before Clint responded, even after the Commander finished talking. He nodded subtly. “Understood, Commander.”

She switches outgoing comms out, letting herself sigh. Bradford moves in a bit closer, hand on her shoulder. “Eliza...”

“I know the mission, John.” Their voices were low enough that only they could hear them, drowned out by the ambient noises of the ship or distance. “You heard me, right? I just want a chance to not completely destroy something the Elders have corrupted without the chance to save it.”

Bradford gave her shoulder a squeeze, looking to the screen. “... as your XO, it’s my job to be concerned. I don’t think you’ll ever hear the end of it from me, but I just want to make sure that you think you’re making the right choice. And, hell, who knows...” He sighs, giving her a good-natured smile. “You might just make this work. If anybody could do it, it’d be you.”

She returns the smile, patting his hand. “Thank you, John. Nice to know I’ve got you, in the end.”

They let the moment hold for a bit before before breaking it off, both Central and the Commander returning to their practiced, professional personas. The Commander switched outgoing comms back on, tuning to a channel where she knew the Hunter could hear her. “Alright, Mordenna. We’re knocking down your front door shortly and taking our ball back by force.”

“Ooh, getting familiar, are we, Eliza?” At that, Bradford bristles, but the Commander remains unfazed. “Well, I invite you to try. Don’t knock over the hockey sticks on your way in.”

“Just for that, I will.”

“Damn. Whatever shall I do.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for getting through the first chapter. This story's been up for a bit so eventually I really need to get back and work on these earlier bits. Eh, when I'm done with the story proper.

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personalized content--check out my Patreon. https://www.patreon.com/bigdemoband
The fight with the Hunter begins, and ends.

The force of the dimensional shift put a few of the squad into a stumble as they landed at their new destination, with SYN and Clint being the only ones who retained their balance. Clint made quick work of surveying the area as the others regained their balance.

Where they were didn’t seem to be a place on Earth. Construction was sleek, gilded, looking of alien origin. Torches burned with purple flames, and chandelier-like decorations hung high in the air with no support. There was no visible ceiling, and an abyss consumed anything outside of the area they were in, with massive pillars being the only distinguishing traits as far as the eye could see. Clint made note of the high ground at the four corners of the platform, including in the middle of the area as well.

He put his hand up to his helmet. “Commander, do you read? We’ve arrived at what I can only describe as the Hunter’s inner sanctum.”

Static greeted him in response. Worry grew. “Commander, can you hear us?”

“... connection ... different area ...” The Commander’s voice came through in bursts, muddled and overpowered by static.

“Oh, the poor Commander.” The squad snapped to the far end of the area. At the end was a raised platform, stairs leading up to it. Above it, levitating and cloaked in purple energy, was a tall, rectangular, smooth slab. In front of it stood the Hunter, arms crossed, looking amused as he sizes up the squad. “This is her team? She might be in worse shape than I thought.”

Clint scoffed. “We’re more than well-enough equipped to take you down!”

The Hunter laughed. “Quite the social call you’re here for! I mean, I’ll applaud you, you guys have made it this far.” He jerked a thumb back at the slab. “You’re seeing my sarcophagus. Take it in—no other human has ever laid eyes on it. Nobody was ever supposed to learn about our little ‘trick.’ Suppose you guys are full of surprises.” He levelled a deadly look at them. “Soon to be full of holes.”

SYN leveled his weapon. “Thank you for your compliance. We apologize in advance for any undue stress we may cause you.”

“Hold on, hold on.” The Hunter held up his hands. “I can hear your Commander desperately trying to get a signal in here. Give me a second.” He closed his eyes, and suddenly the Commander’s voice came in crystal clear on the comms.

“Menace One-Five, do you read me? We’re getting... a very high quality video feed. How did you...?”

“You can thank me for that, Commander.” The Hunter’s eyes opened, looking sharply at the squad. “Technically you’re on the Network right now, which I’m sure is going to make someone
angry. But hey.” He shrugs, hands out. “I figure I’m about to kill all of you anyway, so surely I’ll be forgiven.”

“Thank you, dear, you’re always so hospitable.”

The Hunter chuckles, his right hand falling to his side. “You’re welcome, darling. I’d say I aim to please, but...” He tilts his head forward at the squad, the act suddenly and easily giving him a threatening air. “That’d be a lie.”

He straightens out his left arm in a split second, and it barely budges as he fires out a grappling hook, the claw burying in the wall of the raised corner. He flies as it retracts, smoothly and easily vaulting over the railing as he comes into contact with it, crouching in the low cover, taking his Darklance off of his back and looking down the sight, right at Sherry. “Might as well shoot the medic first. Can’t have you saving the others.”

“Move!” Clint swept out his arm, and everyone scrabbled for cover, Sherry taking her place behind a column of the platform in the middle.

“Oh, you’re no fun.” The Hunter scowled, re-adjusting his aim, focusing SYN in his scope. “Well, easy target it is.”

SYN’s head locked onto the Hunter. “You appear to be trying to forcefully deactivate me. I’m sorry, Ref-Il Mordenna, but I cannot let you do that.” He shuddered as his frame glowed up blue.

“Hah! I might let you live for that one, tin can.” He aimed up a shot at SYN’s chassis, spotting Rosa right behind him. “Hm, this thing should be high-caliber enough to get a penetration shot. This’ll be—”

What he wasn’t expecting was SYN to launch himself into a full-on sprint, Rosa keeping pace with him right until she ducked behind cover right in front of the Hunter’s perch. SYN kept running, forcing him to trade his rifle for his pistol and crack off a shot. The specialized ammunition only grazed the side of SYN’s armor but even a glancing shot was enough to cleanly shred off the bit it did hit.

SYN’s rockets activated and he slammed down behind the Hunter, using his momentum to throw an Overdrive-strengthened punch, undoubtedly taking a cue or two from a Berserker. “I advise you to watch your six.”

It connects fully with him as he’s turning around, picking him up by his chest and throwing him off of his feet, flying off of his perch and flat on his back on the ground below. The Hunter sucks in air through his teeth, clutching his chest and coughing. “Had t’ be fuckin’—ngh!—brittle, didn’t I?”

The whirr of a Beam Cannon spinning up to his right makes him turn his head, greeted by the barrel of Rosa’s gun just a few feet from his face. On the high ground, SYN raised his gun, his own Elerium Phase Cannon preparing to shoot. Rosa barked out a laugh. “See you, sucker.”

The Hunter’s face fell. “Well, shit.”

That was all he got out before the combined fire of Rosa and SYN tore him up, Sherry in the back getting her own chance to add a shot or two. Orange blood sprayed from each wound, leaving the Hunter crying out, ghastly screams eventually silenced as enough plasma was bored into him to be fatal. Rosa stepped back into cover just as his body was teleported away. SYN descended, taking a few steps before his head swiveled to the Hunter’s sarcophagus. The purple psionic energy that had been moving in waves over its surface had dispersed, and power was saturating the air. In the back,
Clint noticed it as well.

SYN turns fully towards it, then fires an experimental shot. The bursts of plasma connect with the surface, leaving darkened holes wherever they landed. “It appears as if the sarcophagus is now vulnerable. Firing upon it is advised.”

“*You heard the robot, and Tygan said as much up here,*” the Commander said, coming in on comms. “*Fire at it.*”

“No need to ask twice!” Sherry clamors up to the high ground in the middle of the room, standing at one of the corners and getting off a shot. Everyone else moves to their formations, unloading their guns on the slab. More and more black marks marred its surface, cracks starting to form that bled a lavender light.

It got to a point where everyone had to reload, all except SYN, his Phase Cannon’s mag having plenty of juice left in it. He took his chance to fire off another volley of shots before the Hunter’s voice filled the room, coming from the sarcophagus.

“*Going for the gold, I see. Well, I can’t really just let you guys run amok, that’d be bad.*” A raised pad in the room started to glow. “*Commander, since you like tin cans so much, have a few.*”

Three ADVENT Heavy MECs appeared on the platform as the light faded, guns at the ready and surveying the squad.

“Oh, MECs!” Clint laughed, moving forward a bit. He took his psi-amp into his hand, starting to channel his power through it. “How quaint.”

He threw the energy forward at one of them, the psionic energy curling around it and centering on the launching mechanism on its back. With a menacing click, the explosives in it detonated, destroying the Heavy MEC outright and heavily damaging the other two, shredding their armor. Roland took it as his chance to hop over a barrier or two, coming to a stop in cover, taking a shot at one of the MECs with his shotgun. It went down, the other standing its ground, aiming at Roland and firing, keeping him pinned to his cover.

“Hold on,” Sherry says, moving to the other side of the platform, “I’ve got you covered.” She carefully took aim while the MEC was busy suppressing Roland, her ensuing shot hitting home successfully. All three Heavy MECS lay on the ground.

“What was that about robots?” The Commander said.

“... Well. I *never* said they were good tin cans. Maybe this’ll be more of a challenge.”

Once the Hunter was done speaking, a pad behind everyone’s general positions started to glow, revealing a Muton flanked by two Archons, already taking aim at the exposed party.

“Shit, move, move!” Clint dove for cover as a plasma beam nearly took off his head, the rest of the squad following suit. Rosa was slow on the uptake, watching as the Muton took aim and fired at her.

She braced for a shot that never came. Looking back, SYN was standing in front of her. His armor had absorbed the blunt of the plasma, but a few spots belied the wiring beneath it. “Rosa, I highly advise faster reaction times. Losing you would surely put the squad at a disadvantage.”

“Yeah? Losing you is gonna put us in hot water!” She practically glued herself to his back. “This WAR Suit can take more than you think!” Rosa took the chance between the Muton’s shots to rev
up her Beam Cannon, stepping out from behind SYN to unload back on the Muton, taking a chunk out of it as it scrambled for cover.

“If only Wukong hadn’t got himself punched...” Roland eyed the Muton, looking over to Sherry. Sherry herself had moved back to her previous spot, popping off shots at the Archons, preventing them from standing still long enough to aim their fire well. While they were distracted, he moved up, but the Muton caught him moving and blind fired at him, plasma shooting over his head. He cursed, hugging his cover. “Cherry! Need a Defense Protocol if I want to do anything!”

She took another shot or two before nodding to her GREMLIN. “Go cover ‘em!”

The GREMLIN spared no time, whizzing over to Roland and projecting a field over him. To the outside observer, Roland’s position kept changing, his form blurred and hard to define. He lept over his cover, easily dodging shots from the Muton, moving to flank it. He took his spare Fusion Axe in hand and with a great overhead throw, sent it flying, the blade burying itself a few good inches into the Muton’s skull, downing it.

Clint climbed up to high ground with Sherry, standing behind a raised wall, taking aim with his Plasma Bolt Caster. “Dodge this, infidel!” The two arches of the bow fanned out as the plasma bolt formed, the shot screaming through the air. Even as the Archon tried to dodge, once the plasma caught even just the edge of it, the shot seemed to redirect into it, burrowing through it, bringing the second enemy of the pod down.

The second Archon roared out, the flames of its rockets gaining a sinister red hue. It blazed a flight path towards Roland, dodging the spread of his Storm Gun, arms closing in around the illusions. The Ranger screamed as the Archon flew higher and higher into the air, mockingly laughing as it prepared to drop him. Sherry’s GREMLIN chirped out in panic, flying back over to its operator.

Clint cursed, reloading his single-shot weapon. SYN had already reloaded, taking aim and firing, but missing, over calculating due to trying to avoid hitting Roland, circuits whirring in distress at the shot. Rosa was also in the middle of reloading her cannon.

“Awww, someone’s about to learn the tale of Icarus quite literally. If you people had some sense, maybe you could’ve saved him.”

The Commander’s voice came in through comms. “Cherry, reload!”

Sherry activated her Auto-Loader, taking aim. “They all said I should put a Repeater on this instead of a Loader, look where we are now.” After her quip, she landed a shot square in the Archon’s side. It cried out in agony, releasing its hold on Roland, whose first order of business now that his arms were free was to grab his axe and catch himself on the still-floating Archon with it. The blade sunk into its gut amongst the groan of metal and tearing of flesh, bringing out another agonized scream as it spiraled to the ground. The Ranger brought his axe free and made a heavy, but safe landing as it crashed into the floor.

Rosa finished reloading her cannon, casting her gaze over to the sarcophagus. The psionics around it were starting to cover the surface of it again, the bare exterior of it shrinking among the encroaching wave. It’d take too long to get her gun spinning again in prep for a shot and she was sure everyone else was still making sure Roland was fine. In a bout of quick thinking, she raised her left arm, the mechanism on it giving a high-pitched whine as it quickly primed. “You’re not getting away that easily!”

Her arm bucked as she fired off the Shredstorm Cannon, the force of it enough to push her slightly even with the aid of the WAR Suit. The spread of alien alloy shrapnel and plasma burrowed into
the exposed part of the monolith with a sound like booming thunder. The force of the shot was 

enough to widen the crack that was forming in the middle of it, the other side visible as they 

spread, and spread, and spread...

The purple of the psionics fled the sarcophagus as the cracks splintered over it, each successive one 
giving a sound like a combination of ice and metal shattering. The fractures reached the edges of 
the slab, each piece still holding together but shaking and cracking with more pinkish sparks.

“How is that it?!” Roland shouted, out of breath.

The Commander was the one to spy the energy rising upwards, channeling into one of the transport 
pads. “Not yet, stay alert!”

Soon, the rest of the squad spotted it too, quickly scrambling into better positions. When the light 
faded and the column of purple retreated, the Hunter was revealed, appearing to be in perfect 
shape... except for one or two wounds still in his gut.

Before anyone could fire, he held up a hand. “Wait, wait, shh...” He put a hand up to his hood, as 
if listening to something. “Can you hear that? Trick question, you can’t, you haven’t ever been 
able to.” He broke out in a grin, starting to clap. “The Elders have shut up for once in their glorious 
lives! I’ve gotta thank you, XCOM, if I knew having my sarcophagus trashed was the way to make 
them stop bugging me, I would have invited you over for this houseparty sooner.”

His grin got wider, looking a bit more unhinged. “I suppose I’m mortal now. Good. As thanks for 
freeing me, XCOM, I’ll give you a little gift. One last battle to the death. Don’t disappoint, now.”

Quick as the flash, the Hunter darted from where he stood, gunning for one of the closest towers. 
SYN fired on him but the Hunter was far enough from him to weave between his shots, pulling 
himself up a ladder with one hand and swiftly drawing his Darklance again. “Oh yeah, you. I’m not 
going to have you punch me into oblivion with a stupid one-liner again.”

SYN shuddered as he attempted to activate Overdrive again, but the Hunter was quicker, aiming up 
a shot and firing, the mysterious shot shredding through the air, leaving a dark pink trail in its 
wake. It hit home on one of SYN’s leg joints, completely obliterating the socket, causing the 
SPARK to topple and crash to the floor, systems loudly beeping in alarm.

“SYN!” Rosa cried out in distress, crouching down next to him. The robot was still bulky enough 
to be low cover, but had to drop his gun to keep himself steady. Rosa fretted over him, looking up 
as the Hunter lined up another shot, just barely ducking her head down in time, the bullet splitting 
the top of her helmet.

“Fortuna, you’re a sitting duck there! Move!”

“No!” Rosa had practically dropped prone, one hand on her cannon while the other gripped SYN’s 
chassis. “I’m not leaving him!”

“RRRRR -Ro—sa...” SYN’s audio matrix had been scrambled by the fall, making his voice glitch, 
his head angling back to “look” at her. “R-r-ruu— uuuu ...”

“Aa, ain’t that just heartwrenching.” The Hunter laughed sadistically. “If I didn’t know any 

better, I’d say you two had a thing for each other.”

Roland let out a cry of rage, vaulting over his cover. “You sick basta—!”

“Oh, no you don’t!” Supporting his sniper rifle on the railing in front of him, the Hunter’s other
hand grabbed for his pistol, switching the mode on it and cracking off a shot. It hit Roland square in the neck, causing him to collapse, a quickly-draining needle jutting from his neck. “I’m not about to be challenged by either of you.”

He chuckled darkly, setting his sights on Sherry. “And before you can do anyth—”

The Hunter didn’t spot the Specialist’s missing GREMLIN until it was shocking him, making his shot go wide, giving a pained shout. Sherry stuck out her tongue and made a gesture the Commander wouldn’t approve of, firing and grazing the Hunter’s side, wearing him down further.

Clint could practically hear the Commander jump forward on his comms, voice panicked. “Clint, NOW!”

Face set in determination, he sprinted around for a clean shot at the Hunter, taking out his psi-amp once more, absolutely flooding it with power until he hurt to look at. With a shout of exertion, he flung the power at the Hunter, his psionics coiling like a whip around the Hunter’s mind.

The Hunter dropped his weapons, clutching his head. “N-nice t-to know you’re r-resorting... resorting to—!!” His speech was cut off by his own scream, one matching his volume coming from Clint.

There was a battle of wills taking place between the two of them. Clint was searching desperately for entries in the Hunter’s mental fortress. No gifted psionic was he but he was still able to force him out at every turn. Clint couldn’t pick up anything—all of his smaller powers; disorientation, panic, dazing, the Hunter was blocking all of it.

He surged more and more of his power in, almost forcing a weakness open before that, too, was closed. No mind control. He could just feel the Hunter taunting him as he was progressively getting more and more shut out.

Clint couldn’t fail the Commander. At this point, he was starting to feel the strain of his failed efforts on himself. If he stopped now, he’d only be taking himself out of the fight, leaving Sherry and Rosa to the wolves. He couldn’t fail. He couldn’t stop.

Clint screamed out, his psi-amp starting to shudder violently, cracks forming in the sleek design. Sherry and Rosa had to cover their eyes at this point—looking at him was like looking at the Sun. The trail of energy in the air connecting the Hunter and Clint’s heads gained the same blinding brilliance, and he forced his psi-amp forwards, completely draining himself of the shining psionic power, throwing it down the line, right at the Hunter’s head.

Both screams were cut short, leaving agonizing silence. Sherry was the first to brave opening her eyes. The Hunter laid on his back on his perch, weapons discarded. Clint was face-first on the floor, similarly unmoving.

Rosa was the next to start looking, along with SYN. “Are they...?”


She nodded, directing her GREMLIN over to the unmoving Chosen. A blue scanner moved over his form for a minute, chirping and flying back over to Sherry, who read the output. “He’s alive too.”

Rosa shakily stands up, hoisting her Beam Cannon. “Good. I wanted to finish him off myself.
“Stand down, Fortuna. That’s an order. Crazo put him out of commission for a reason.”

The barrel of her gun faltered, tipping downwards. “What...?”

A familiar groan came from nearby as Roland woke up, slurring his words. “Where’s that... that fuckin’ prick... m’gonna stab him...”

“Rascal, good to see you’re alive. Take it easy, the fight’s over.”

He held his head up a second more before slumping back to the ground, muttering incomprehensibly. Rosa took the chance to look over SYN. “SYN, are you—are you ok?”

“Ddddd —damage d-d-diagnostics conclu ddddd ed. Vvv ocal systems: 65% s-s-s-stability.” He picked up his weapon, putting it on his back. “Aaaaaaaa —ambulatory systems: 25% damaged. M-m-movement still po sssss ible.” There was a storm of groaning and whirring as the plates on his arms shifted, his gauntlets getting wider and thicker. He planted them on the ground, and with servos groaning, pulled himself into a handstand.

Exhausted and emotionally shot, Rosa could only laugh. “I, uh, I guess that answers it.”

“Sure does.” Sherry couldn’t suppress a smile, relieved at the mission being ultimately successful. Her face fell as she remembered what the Commander said. “Commander O’Leary? You said the Hunter was ‘out of commission’ for a reason?”

There was a moment before the Commander responded. “Yes. I instructed Crazo to see if there was any way to render him able to be captured. Like I have spoken to him, I have interests in the Hunter, ones that want him alive. I’d wait for Rascal to wake up further before moving out—I want at least two people on the Hunter. Considering Crazo is likely going to remain unconscious and SYN is in no state to do any carrying, you and Fortuna should assume the task.”

Sherry was silent, looking over at the Hunter’s unmoving form. Quite a few thoughts were racing through her head, but she silenced them. If the Commander wanted the Hunter in alive...

“Understood. Give me a minute to check up on everyone and we’ll move out. I’m sure I have something that can perk Rascal right up.”

“Copy that.”

Eliza remained staring at the screen for a while longer after that.

“Commander.”

She didn’t react to Bradford.

“Commander O’Leary, your knuckles are white. Take your hands off the railing.”

With a shaky sigh, she wrenched her hands off of the metal bars. She rubbed them, still staring up at the screen. “We... it happened. He’s down. Can’t revive. Elders can’t reach him.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Central nod, but his face escaped her. “Thanks to Clint, though I’m worried about his state. Using that much psionic power—”

“Likely has put them both in a comatose state,” Tygan finished from somewhere behind Eliza. She was still trained on the screen as Rosa and Sherry hoisted up the Hunter. “I expect the Chosen to recover faster than Clint, but even then, it is unclear how long either of them will be unconscious for.”
“Guess that means we better hurry up,” the Commander mutters, running a hand through her hair. “Get the cell ready. Firebrand’s still in the area but we better make this quick. Something tells me that we’re gonna get a lot of heat, really quick.”

“ADVENT’s way ahead of you, Commander.” Shen was at one of the other monitors, typing away at a pad. “They’re sending in everything they’ve got from the other cities. They’re going to be a while, but we need to start moving soon.”

She nodded, crossing her arms, head buzzing with thoughts. “Menace One-Five, get moving on the double. ADVENT’s coming in and probably knows we’re making off with one of the Chosen. If we weren’t public enemy number one, we sure as hell are now.”

Bradford sighed. “So we just stole a Chosen.”

Despite herself, Eliza grinned. “Yes we did.”
Broken Throne

Chapter Summary

The other Chosen deal with the fallout of the Hunter being captured.

By the time the Assassin felt herself leaving the Elders’ embrace as she landed in the gathering hall, she could see that she wasn’t alone.

The Mindbutcher, the Warlock, was already standing off to her left. He looked just as confused as she was to see her there. Though, they must’ve continued along the same train of thought, because they both looked to the last spot.

The Banehound, the Hunter, was missing.


Fal-Mai felt herself sharing a bit of the Warlock’s contempt. But there was something... strange, about Ref-Il’s absence. It wasn’t out of character for him to be missing, no, but he’d never shirked a gathering before, assuredly because the punishment would be worse than him speaking out in front of an Elder. What was this feeling in the pit of her stomach, as well?

She closed her eyes. She longed for the ability to call upon the Commander’s knowledge in times like this. The Hunter may have been the Elders’ greatest tactical creation, but Eliza was greater. Stronger. Maybe even more cunning. The Assassin supposed she would attempt to draw the Hunter’s location out of the Network.

She sent out her query. Where is the Hunter?

The answer she got back screamed in her mind.

LOCATION: UNKNOWN. Last known location: Inner Sanctum, in combat with XCOM.

The fact that she got a comprehensive answer at all sent a chill down her spine. Normally Ref-Il was monitoring any queries relating to himself on the Network, prone to shutting down one’s access if the matter was even tangentially related to him. He seemed like he thrived off of being a nuisance. If the Assassin was able to inquiere and get an uninterrupted response...

Last known status?

A flood of data entered her consciousness. Of the Hunter facing off against XCOM, being forced back into his sarcophagus. The Commander’s forces firing upon it, breaking it. Ref-Il coming back in, mocking the Elders as always, taking his ground, the psion of the squad taking him over—

Then, nothing. Nothing as the only access the Network had into the room was... Killed? The vitals data she got indicated that he was still alive up until the link was cut. He could still be dead, but usually the Network was able to confirm death status as whoever was hooked up to it sent out a last packet. This was... something else.

She found herself speaking aloud as she opened her eyes. “He’s gone.”
Jax-Rai looked at her strangely for a second, before dipping into the Network himself. He opened his eyes before wearing a wicked grin. “Oh, how the impotent fall. Take heed, Fal-Mai, for his ignorance at the Elders’ true glory, he has been slain—”

He stopped shortly, as did the Assassin’s current train of thought. The file they both accessed was being updated by a Codex, furiously uploading new data. They both dipped back into the Network, accessing the rest of the status report as it was provided.

The room was different—it was his Stronghold, a room where light shone through a gaping hole in the ceiling. Blast charges. From a door that was in-focus on screen, movement emerged. An XCOM SPARK, rebalanced to walk on its hands, a gun on its back, a leg missing, the socket blown out. A soldier, carrying the psion from earlier slung over his shoulder. Two more soldiers, carefully navigating the doorway—

With the Hunter carried in their arms, limp and unmoving.

Data popped up as Ref-Il was hoisted by the two operatives. He was alive. Unconscious, and the Network identified his status as a psionically-induced comatose state that the psion shared.

The gathered squad walked to the middle of the light in the room. Four black cords dropped down from above, each awake operative grabbing ahold of one. The SPARK set itself into a sitting position and seemed to almost gingerly take ahold of it, while the two soldiers carrying Ref-Il did a careful balancing act to keep him held between them. The ropes retracted, taking the squad up with them, out of sight. A few more seconds and the feed concluded.

The two remaining Chosen returned from the Network. Now the Assassin’s gut was burning, but she couldn’t identify what exactly was trying to work its way up her throat. Alive. Captured. The Hunter had been taken from them, just as they had taken soldiers from XCOM. Taken. The fire burned harder.

She was brought from her thoughts by the sound of the Warlock’s laughter. It echoed in the open space, sharply ringing off of her sensitive ears. He never laughed. “Captured!” Jax-Rai Tessura ceased his laughter quickly, as if aware of the fact. “Not only shown his incompetence, but taken in by XCOM!” He grinned, all teeth, extending a hand to Fal-Mai. “Is this not justice? Is this not the Elders’ will in action?”

“He was still one of us.” She averted her gaze, looking into the middle of the room. The circular opening housing a bright purple flame, burning low for now. She hoped the Elders would come soon, and give guidance. “Unfit for ruling, yes. But no child of the Elders deserves this fate—if the Elders willed it, They would have severed him Themselves.”

The Warlock’s face fell, taking in her words. “Even among the Elders’ children, there can still be disgraces to Their name.” He joined her in looking to the flame. “No mistakes, yes, but they can still stray from Their path. His fate was sealed the moment he thought of Them as anything less than his saviors.”

“But...” Her face twisted. There was something she couldn’t place. A feeling of loss that tugged at her gut, only making that sick fire burn harder. “He still belonged to the Elders. Stood beside us.” Even if the Hunter was uncooperative just like Jax-Rai, even if he was insufferable , Fal-Mai was distraught.

The Warlock didn’t answer, eyes catching the firelight. How long were the Elders going to let them wait? The Assassin’s hands balled into fists. She was getting emotional. “Perhaps... perhaps these crude emotions are blinding me in regards to the situation.”
Jax-Rai looked at her, and there was something in his expression she couldn’t place. “They very well may be. If you’re looking for council, I would remember what the Elders intended for you.”

*What the Elders had intended for her...* She took a deep breath, letting the air come in and blow the flames away. An icy, chilling wind, cutting down unacceptable notions. She would be the Elders’ blade. Unquestioning. Unmoving. *Unemotional.* She was nothing but Their will. She offered the Warlock a glance of appreciation before gazing back into the fire.

They didn’t have to wait much longer. The phantasmal flame started to grow in height, and the braziers at the four corners of the square platform alighted. The two Chosen kneeled respectfully as the voice of the Elders filled their minds.

“*Our children, We are sure you have learned the fate of your sibling.*”

The Elders’ presence washed over them like a wave; strong, yet soft; commanding, yet comforting. Fal-Mai relaxed in Their company, reinforcing her notions.

“*Even now We feel his absence. A voice... silenced. Taken from Us.*”

Even deep in her concentration, the Assassin could hear the flames of the braziers burn higher as the Elders’ presence grew among them. She dared look up, watching as the form of one of Them took shape.

“*You are born of Our power... does not Our very life force flow within your veins?*” The Warlock and Assassin could feel the Elders’ very being spread over them, mingling with their thoughts, their form. “*We feel such... loss.*”

The outline of the symbol of the Chosen glowed a foreboding red where the Hunter would have stood. Doubt began to creep. The Assassin was beginning to feel dread. *Loss.* She had felt it! She had shared with the Elders’ grief, but... that was earlier.

*Before she remembered what They wanted from her.*

“*Yet, within you, We sense something else.*”

Their anger was starting to permeate the area, making the spectral flames burn violently, almost threatening to lash out at the Chosen. She could feel Their attention turn to the Warlock.

“*Arrogance.*”

Jax-Rai looked... confused, stunned, even. He quickly averted his gaze to the side, frustration evident in his visage. Frustration at himself and... The Assassin dare not think it, not when They were so close.

“*And...*”

She could feel the full weight of Their judgement upon her. Taking ahold of the empty state she had presented Them with, clutching it, resenting it.

“*Emptiness.*”

For just a second, she could see the Warlock spare a gaze her way. He was unreadable again, but just for the tiniest second, she thought she saw a flicker of something. *Apology.* Before she could get too close a look, she bowed her head in submission to the Elders.
“There can be only one explanation.”

Thanks to her hearing, Fal-Mai could pick up on the sound of the Elders’ mask coming slightly open just before the Elders enacting Their wrath.

The torrent of overwhelming psionics crashed down on the both of them, starting at their backs and them spreading in an instant. Fal-Mai gave a guttural cry as the air was forced from her lungs, buffeted by the Elders’ force, until all she knew was pain. The roar of Their power filled her ears until they were overwhelmed, doubling her agony as the Elders seemed to take advantage of her weakness, forcing it against her as punishment. Whether by her intention or not, the pose she took as she was being pushed to the floor was supplicant. Begging for the Elders to stop. Her eyes were squeezed shut and if she had any more sense, she’d likely be sobbing. All of her being felt like it was being destroyed, cell by cell, until there would be nothing remaining.

“YOU HAVE SUCCumbed To THE FAILings OF YOUR HUMANITY. YOU SQUander Our GIFT TO YOU.”

The torrent continued even as the Elders spoke, Their voice twisted with rasping fury. The Assassin couldn’t process anything anymore, so overloaded with pain and agony. She couldn’t even formulate a single thought as all she could perceive was the unimaginable suffering being forced upon her. She had no breath, yet she had to scream, jaw dropped in silent pleading.

“What was given can be taken away.”

Even though it was mere seconds that went by after that before They ceased Their onslaught, it felt like another eternity. But eventually, the blasting of psionics subsided. Fal-Mai took in a pained gasp, not daring to open her eyes yet, still bowed and shaking. Their punishment was done but she could still feel the pain, could still feel it coursing through her body. A blow that left no marks that could heal.

Her hearing returned just in time for her to pick up Jax-Rai’s own gasp that quickly turned into pain-wracked coughing, hearing his voice gently rise as it seems he was getting back to kneeling. Despite how every nerve in her body screamed against it, she too started to rise again, trembling with the phantoms of pain. She gingerly started to open her eyes, but kept her head bowed, hearing the Elders’ headdress close.

“Destruction awaits us all if you fail, and this pain is but a fraction of that.” She could feel Their attention sweep over the two of them, now no longer furious, but contemplative. “But there is still something to be done.”

Even though the pain had largely subsided, Fal-Mai refused to let herself relax. She knew that nothing could truly prepare her for another round of punishment. Is this what Ref-II felt every time he was at the Elders’ mercy? Why did he even act out, knowing that was in store for him? Even with his disrespect, there had to be a reason...

She cleansed her thoughts before the Elders spoke again. “It would pain Us greatly to lose another of Our children, and even greater to know they were falling into the enemy’s hands. We will not sit by and let another one of you be taken.”

The Assassin dared a look over at the Warlock. He was still slightly trembling from the onslaught he went under as well, but he seemed to have largely recovered. He looked somewhat calmed by the Elders’ words but there was a ghost of something underneath even as They continued. “Our eldest, Jax-Rai Tessura. We know that you will never succumb to the assault that the Commander’s forces put upon Ref-II Mordenna. Leave, but know that We love you.”
He bowed his head, eyes lidded. The Warlock flashed another glance to her before the braziers flared, and he disappeared in a fog of psionics. That left her as the sole audience to the Elders. At an earlier time, she would have laid herself low for the chance to be the sole recipient of the Elders’ attention. But now...?

She dashed her thoughts, slowly looking up at the Elders’ projection. She felt as if They were looking down on her. “Fal-Mai Neylor, Our youngest. Your potential is still yours to grasp, even if We are disappointed in your failings.”

She bowed her head again, unable to meet Their perceived gaze. She desperately tried to cleanse her head of thoughts, even as doubts and worries scurried around her skull like bugs. “Please forgive me for my mistakes...” Her voice was hoarse. Even if she was unable to scream, her throat was still raw from the effort.

“We love you, child. If you are willing to make amends, We are always willing to forgive.” Calm spread over her, projected by the Elders, soothing her, making her relax her muscles a bit. “You are Our blessed creation. The product of Our greatest efforts. We do not wish to see you stolen as your sibling was. We wish for you to feel honored at Our efforts.”

She nodded. Deep down, she wasn’t. “I am. Thank you, my Elders.”

A warm glow of feelings suffused her—the Elders’ pride. “You will always have a place in Our design. Now, We must take precautions to make sure you are not stolen from Us.”

Fal-Mai counted herself lucky she was able to return to her state of emptiness before the Elders surged into her mind. She felt as if every stone that made up the foundation of her consciousness was being turned over and inspected as They washed Their power over her, feeling Them fortify her in a manner she couldn’t quite grasp. She desperately thought nothing, felt nothing, was nothing.

Eventually They receded from her mind. “We have done everything in Our power to ensure that you will befall no psionic force that befell the Banehound. This is Our love for you. Now, go.”

She nodded, and felt the pull of Their power at her. She didn’t resist, letting the tide of Their strength wash her away until she found herself back in front of her sarcophagus.

Once she was sure she was alone and that there were no remnants of the Elders in her mind, she allowed herself to collapse, shuddering out a breath she didn’t know she was holding. Now that she was certain that she was not being monitored, her suppressed thoughts came back in full force.

Punished for doing what the Elders had asked of her. Punished for adopting Their will unto herself. Her thoughts went to the Warlock. Punished for being proud in the Elders’ will.

Involuntarily, she curled into herself. This had to be some fault of her own. She must’ve misinterpreted Their will, or at the very least, misunderstood what Jax-Rai meant. The Elders were infallible, beyond reproach, above sin. Should she have attempted to cooperate with the Hunter more, to prevent this? What was the Elders’ intentions for him?

How was she supposed to act if she was being punished for what she was expected to do?

There was no honor in this. There was no honor in being reprimanded for just attempting to please her masters. There was no honor in any of it.

The Assassin’s hands were on her head now, starting to swim in the pain that she had nearly drowned in. Such a brutal punishment. Such overkill on display. Despite herself, her heart went to
Ref-Il, of his many times under that maelstrom of power.

Yet, what was she to do? Run? She almost laughed at that. The Elders were all-encompassing. She would be caught and likely flayed alive. Rebel? She thought of being punished again and shuddered, drawing further in on herself.

A single thought wormed its way into her head and refused to go away until it was acknowledged. XCOM. No... there was no chance. XCOM would never harbor the likes of her, who has slain so many of Resistance, so many of the Skirmishers—and yet...

She drew herself into a sitting position. There was nothing to be done. The Elders had the fate of the universe in mind. Anything done was justified against total annihilation. It didn’t calm her feelings, but it gave it something to grasp onto, attempting to rationalise her whole life.

_The life the Elders forced upon you_, spoke an intrusive thought.

She didn’t think about it.

The Assassin settled into her favorite sitting position—legs crossed, arms on her knees, palms up, thumbs and index fingers together. Such a position was always comforting, allowing her to slip into a calmer state of mind, even if her thoughts tried desperately to brew like a storm.

Though, annoyance sprang on her when her head Priest came into the room, her presence standing out in the Assassin’s senses, waiting for permission to enter further. Fal-Mai took a deep breath.

“Come.”

The Priest walked calmly in, coming to stop in front of the Assassin and kneeling. “My Chosen, there has been word of XCOM coming closer and closer to your Stronghold. As you were meeting with the Elders, two of their ranks and one of the Skirmishers encroached upon your territory.” She looked up at her Chosen, whose eyes were open, but lidded. “They... they are still in the area. Forgive me for presuming, but do you want to move upon them?”

“Do not fear for suggestions.” The Assassin looked at her Priest, voice soft. “If I was not willing to hear them, I would not have invited you in.”

“Thank you, Nightmaiden.”

Fal-Mai tilted her head downwards in thought. The image of the unconscious Hunter being lifted into the sky entered her mind’s eye as she contemplated what to do. If XCOM encroached upon her Stronghold and she proved victorious in pushing them out, the Elders would look upon her with true pride, wouldn’t They?

If she failed... XCOM were successful in taking Ref-Il. The Assassin knew the Commander’s way of thinking. Even if Fal-Mai’s mind had been hardened against the psionic overload she had used against him, what was to say she wasn’t going to attempt something else? After all, Eliza had adapted to their strengths and weaknesses well. The thought she had observed before came roaring back.

This time, she didn’t squash it, despite her best thinking.

“Let them observe.” She let her mouth form into a knowing smile. “Let them come. Let them _fight_. If the Commander wants to test her troops against me... that will be its own punishment.”

“Yes, Nightmaiden. I will let your forces know of the possible incursion.”
The Assassin nodded, the Priest taking it as dismissal, venturing back out of the room.

As she returned to her meditation, clearing her mind, she allowed herself to muse over a single thought before she went back to the breath.

What were XCOM going to do with the Hunter?
Hospitality

Chapter Summary

The Commander meets with the Hunter and has a little chat.

Chapter Notes

The beginning of this chapter deals with heavy themes of suicidal thoughts and situations. If content like that bothers you, scroll down to the page break and read on from there.

Sleep was not something the Hunter got often.

If it was to annoy the Elders when they wanted him to do something, sure, he’d snore for about as long as he could force himself to. But there was just so many things he could be doing while he was awake.

He figured he didn’t have a choice, now.

He’d deigned to sleep in front of his sarcophagus, shirking a bed. He’d slept on worse places than on hard floor, so this was practically a designer bed. Strange thing was, his eyes were open. He wasn’t one of those weird open-eye sleepers, he just couldn’t move.

All he could do was stare at his sarcophagus. Watch as the world slowed to a crawl, watch as the first crack in it formed and spread, branching off into more splinters, watch as it exploded and drowned him in the psionic backlash, stripping him of his sense of being and thoughts and feelings —

Then suddenly he was on the outskirts of a haven, sitting in a tree, watching a few people go about their lives. Their faces kept shifting, twitching. He could never pick out anyone he recognized, and what was with this pervasive sensation of purple? Was he on a bad trip or something? He looked down at his hands.

They were beige, covered in worn gloves.

Next thing he knew he was knocking around in his Trophy Room. Didn’t know what he was doing there, just ogling his various kills. His eyes lazily scanned the room, noting the new alien additions. Sectoids, Berserkers, Mutons... come to think of it, he never remembered mounting this stuff. He’d tried before; the Elders weren’t all too happy about it.

Come to think of it, this wasn’t his Trophy Room. He was on a ship of some sort, by the looks of it, and he was staring at a wall of mounted heads. Faceless, Archons, hell there was a Gatekeeper strung up from the ceiling. If he didn’t know any better, he’d say these looked like XCOM’s kills.

He spared a look to his right. Huh. Yeah, that was the Skyranger, all right. Even had some soldiers
filing out of it—the same soldiers that he remembered seeing coming into his stronghold. That robot still had its leg shot out and that Ranger was carrying... Clint, was it? He’s gonna be out for a long time. Then the medic and the gunner...

The Hunter looked back at the trophy wall, and there was three new additions. From the shoulders up, it was him, the Assassin, and the Warlock, stuffed and mounted, eyes missing.

“Well,” he said to himself. “That’s pretty morbid.”

“Query unclear. I’d answer you, but I have no clue what you just asked.”

Back in his Inner Sanctum. His Darklance was strewn out in front of him, disassembled. Right, he was cleaning it out and was going to work on the Darkclaw next. Must’ve asked the Commander a question to pass the time. What’d he ask? Eh, didn’t matter. He could just ask her something else. Something hilarious! He loved how she’d snark back perfectly and joke with him. Made him feel like he actually had someone worth talking to. Oh yeah, there was this one joke he remembered perfectly. She probably did, too. He’d ask that.

“Where do you think you’d be if there were no aliens?”

Wait. That... wasn’t what he wanted to ask at all. A few parts of his Darklance were missing.

“Living my life as the tactical head of some nation. I was prized for my ingenuity even before the XCOM Initiative was founded. Honestly, I would settle with whoever was right with me.”

Well. Interesting. He tried again.

“You ever think all of this is hopeless?”

No. No, no, no. He realized what was happening now. His Darklance was gone completely, his pistol disassembled in front of him. A sense of foreboding was gripping him.

“Occasionally. I don’t think about it much. From what data the Elders provided me, there’s at least a nonzero chance that They can save the universe. In Their mind, I suppose that’s worth fighting for.”

She sounded concerned, which didn’t match her words at all. Ref-Il knew what his next question was going to be.

“Have you ever wanted to die?”

His pistol was fully assembled, hovering a few feet off the ground. It was pointed directly at him, even as both of his hands were down. He dully stared it down, challenging it to fire.

“You don’t have to do this.”

“Commander, you and I both know you’re just some database hooked up just how the Elders want you.” His eyes were locked on the barrel, his whole body feeling like lead. “I don’t think I’ve ever talked to you for real. I don’t think you ever really recall anything. I think an ample solution would be for me to stop thinking entirely.”

“There’s always another answer that’s not staring down the barrel of a gun.”

“If you care so much, stop me.”

Something happened that wasn’t the memory. A flash of light blue. Suddenly the gun was gone
and the Hunter was alone again. Sitting in front of a broken sarcophagus. No link to the Network.
Just him and his thoughts.

He knew that wasn’t how things went. It was him holding that gun, pointing it at himself, half-
tempted to ask himself if he felt lucky. The Commander didn’t answer after his last statement,
either unable to do anything or just pulled away to answer someone else’s questions.

He had pulled the trigger, felt a flash of pain, and then was back into the void. The Elders didn’t
even contact him this time, as busy as they probably were with something more important. All it
had gotten him was one bullet less and about a few minute’s time loss.

God knows the Elders probably chose to ignore him. They were always on his back at the worst of
times, and the one time they could’ve swooped him and make him feel like maybe, maybe
someone cared? Fucking forget about it.

He sighed, leaning forward where he sat. XCOM killing him would’ve been a mercy. From what
his subconscious was trying to piece together, they took him in alive. For interrogation, probably,
but as long as they kept him away from those damn pompous pricks, he’d call it paradise. Who
knows, maybe he’d find a way to off himself while they weren’t looking. Or maybe just force
them to kill him. Being unruly and uncooperative was his specialty, it wouldn’t take much, surely.

Unless the Commander were there.

The Hunter cursed, rubbing his mouth. Yeah, all of this thinking assumed that the Commander
never saw him at all. Things might get a bit more complicated if she actually talked to him even
semi-daily. Even if all the talking they had done before XCOM took her back was strictly
speaking, with a vegetable, he still felt like she was about the only person he’d connected with.
The impressive tactical prowess she had, her capacity to keep up with him in jokes... and the
genuine concern she had whenever he started asking “interesting” questions.

“Fuck.” He rubs the short, curly, white hair that always got hidden by his hood. It was shaved on
one side, and it was a remnant of something the Elders could never take away from his past. “If
she remembers any of that, it’s gonna be an awkward conversation.”

“He’s alive.”

“Yes.”

“On... on your ship.”

“Yes.” Commander O’Leary tried and failed to suppress a smile as the conversed with Volk. “Yes,
the Hunter is alive, on my ship. He’s captured.”

Volk continued to stare at her dumbly before giving an impressed whistle. “Wow, uh... Command?
It’s one thing to kill a Chosen, but it’s a whole other woods to take one in alive. You
could be a Reaper any day, if you wanted.”

Eliza held up her hands, smiling good-naturedly. “Alas, I have a resistance movement to
spearhead.”
Volk grinned. “Nobody said you couldn’t be a Reaper and a Commander.”

“Please, it’d ruin relations with all the other factions.”

They shared a laugh, calming down, before a thought occurred to Volk. “You’ve... got him locked up, right?”

“Of course!” The Commander crossed her arms, giving him a disbelieving look. “I go through the trouble to wrangle one of the Elders’ kids and you think I’d just leave him on the floor of the barracks?” This was an awfully big show Eliza was putting on, and she knew it.

Behind her confident persona she was chatting up Volk with, there was a considerable amount of worry. It had been a few days, and neither the Hunter nor Clint showed any signs of waking up. In the Hunter’s case, that was fine to an extent, but Clint? Not having their greatest psionic operative was bound to make some of the soldiers a little nervous going out into more dangerous situations, but there were others that could hold the mantle well.

The Hunter being out for as long as he had been was a blessing in some rights—the Commander had already structured out plans with the help of Tygan and Lily for a cell that could house him. It took a bit more prodding and hushed whispers, but she had also managed to strongarm them into including two other rooms into the plan.

There was a knock at the opened door to Resistance Communications, and Commander O’Leary spared a look over her shoulder. Speaking of Tygan! She gave him a “one moment” gesture and turned back to Volk. “But yes, I’d say having the Hunter out of your hair will be a big boon, yes?”

“Of course.” Volk leaned forward, all smiles. “If you ever get the chance, there’s a dinner with your name on it, Eliza.”

She raised her eyebrows, noting the use of her first name. “I’ll take it under consideration, Volk. Don’t worry about the other Chosen—given half the chance, I’ll take ‘em again.” With that, she closed communications, turning to Tygan. “Thanks for knocking, Dr. Tygan. Have some news for me?”

He nodded, gesturing for her to come closer. As he did, he began. “Of course, Commander. I’m also here on behalf of Shen.” He brought up the datapad in his hands as she came close, bringing up a visual of the new room. “Construction of the room has progressed to the point where the Hunter’s cell is largely complete, complete enough to move him into.”

“And the other rooms?”

Tygan nodded. “Work is now beginning, but I would advise us leaving the Warlock’s cell until later. It must be built to withstand his incredible psionic power, and I fear we may lack the elerium compounds to do so.”

The Commander nodded, thinking over just where she’d get some elerium over the next few weeks. Supplies were good, perhaps she could visit a haven or two. “Focus on the Assassin’s cell, then. Anything else for me?”

“Indeed, Commander, we’re coming to the reason why I’m here.” He swiped a page on the pad to the side, revealing a series of numbers, bars, and text. As Tygan spoke, she read through it. The Hunter’s vitals, apparently, though she’d be ashamed to admit that she didn’t have much insight as to what it all meant. “The Hunter’s state is changing. We noted increased neural activity over the past three hours, and we believe he may be emerging from his state.”
“What about Clint?”

He shook his head, looking slightly grave. “No such luck, I’m afraid.”

She straightened. “Keep an eye on his status. If the Hunter’s about the recover, he’s not far behind. Get the Hunter moved to his new cell—”

“Already a step ahead of you, Commander. The Hunter was moved to his cell because of that very reason.”

Eliza offered Tygan a grateful smile. “Thank you for your forward thinking.”

Tygan adjusted his glasses, nodding. “Of course.”

The Commander made to leave, but before she could get out of earshot, Tygan extended a question. “Do you intend to interrogate the Hunter? We have gone through the effort of capturing him alive. As loathe as I am to say it, there was not much purpose otherwise in going through with all of this.”

The Commander stops, thinking. Well, *interrogation* wasn’t exactly the right turn of phrase, but... she’d leave the truth of her plans out of things until the time was right. Tygan was technically correct, anyways. “Guess you could say that.”

With that, she continued her walk down the hallway. As she walked, her feet went on auto-pilot as her thoughts came to the front. “Interrogations” this and “capturing” that... As perhaps fun it was to joke about, Eliza could only explain her true reasons with one sentence: *she was there.*

Perhaps she didn’t express it well enough. Perhaps it was hard to bring across in the first place—not everyone got spend their time in tanks, or indeed have a... Thin Man jump on you...

She immediately angled her trajectory into the wall, thankful there was no one with her around this bend as her breathing sped up. It was bad enough that when Tygan tried to bring her in to look at the chip, she had to have Bradford bring her back a report. The less said about them... *removing it* from her, the better.

Eliza took in deep breaths. *Calm yourself. You’re not here to go through a trauma trip.* She straightened, beginning to walk again. *The Hunter’s waiting on you.*

She eventually reached her destination, ducking around improvised “under construction” signs until she made her way into the room.

Tygan may have been giving the engineers a little more credit than he should’ve. Exposed wiring was everywhere and the floor was half-finished, only the high-traffic areas being fully complete. On one side of the room was one squared room closed off by a sliding door, with two other skeleton frameworks to its right. There seemed to be a panel on the left side of the door displaying some info she couldn’t catch from her distance, and the other half of the room was basically still bare. At least the engineers were in the room, connecting panelling, blowtorching welds, or up to something the Commander couldn’t discern, though they paused to wave at her.

Shen was in the room too, perking up as the Commander entered. She was manipulating a datapad with a stylus, seemingly writing something down. “Heya, Commander. Tygan send you down?”

“Indeed. How’re things going in here?”
“Well, Commander, welcome to the Chosen Holding Cells. Working title.” She pointed the stylus at the mostly-finished block. “The Hunter’s Cell is basically finished, with a few minor touches we can straighten away while he’s in there.” She pointed a bit more specifically at the panel. “Vitals are on that display, and if you tap the speaker on it, you can transmit voice and video into a panel on the other side. There’s a few other options I’m still straightening out the code for, so I’d say don’t touch them for now.”

“Right. Any other plans for the room?”

“Plenty. I’m looking into total lockdown sequences just in case one of them gets out, as well as defence systems to keep them down.”

The Commander looks at her pointedly. “Subduing before killing, I hope.”

Lily shrugs, nodding. “I’ll keep it in mind. Otherwise, a lot of the tech’s just going to be centered around keeping the Chosen in place.” She looks at Eliza imploringly. “Anything you want added, Commander?”

The Commander leaned back a bit, thinking. “If they don’t have beds already, I want them in the design docs. Even if it’s just a raised panel of the floor, I want something. This is less ‘design’ and more ‘decency,’ but I don’t want anyone terrorizing them in revenge, either. I’ll be the one deciding where the axes will fall.”

Shen nodded again at the instructions, writing a few things down on her pad. “Anything else?”

“Think that might be about it. How the Hunter?”

“Awake, actually. And from the looks of it, pretty thrashed. I mean, I suppose I would be too, if a psionic overloaded my brain.” Lily then tilted her head at the Commander. “What are you planning to do in there, if you’re going in?”

“Hm.” She gave the cell a once-over. “According to what I told Tygan, some form of interrogation. How soundproof are those walls?”

Lily shifted in place, eyes darting to the other engineers, who had slowed in their work at the Commander’s words. “Shouldn’t you, uh... shouldn’t you let someone else do that, Commander? With all due respect, of course.”

Commander O’Leary gave her a pointed look, refusing to answer. Shen sighed, using the stylus to flip over to another screen on the pad. “With the compounds we used and how thick we made the walls just in case, nothing short of a jet engine taking off in there is gonna make it out— kinda why I had the panel implemented.”

Eliza nodded. “Thank you for the forward thinking on that—I appreciate ingenuity.” She pointed back towards the door. “How restrained is he in there?”

“He’s got handcuffs of the alloy we use in our armor—behind his back, of course—and he’s got shackles made of the same stuff.” Lily walked over to a nearby stool and picked up a remote, handing it to the Commander. “Here’s the remote for it. Central made a special request, actually, hope you don’t mind. First button can deliver an electric shock, the dial right here adjusts how strong it is.”

_Like a dog collar._ Involuntarily, she tensed up at the idea. That was something she was never touching. If he—or any of the others—were going to act up, she’d handle it herself. Preferably without inflicting pain. “And the other buttons?”
Shen looked over the Commander, frowning a bit. “Well, this one undoes the locks, this one secures the locks, and this is a panic button.”

She nods, taking the remote. “Thank you, Shen. I’ll be a bit.” Eliza turned, walking up to the door. She entertained maybe telling the Hunter she was coming in through the speaker system, but decided against it, unlocking the door and watching it slide open, stepping inside quickly and letting it shut behind her.

The inside of the cell was well-lit, though not to a blinding degree. There was nothing of real note inside of it other than the light embedded in the ceiling and the panel to her right, which looked a bit more reinforced than the one on the outside.

On the far end of the room, slumped against the wall, was Mordenna. Like Lily said, his hands were behind his back, and shackles were around his ankles, the chain just long enough to let him walk a bit, if he were to get up. His eyes were still a bit unfocused even as they locked on the the Commander, a grin twisting his face.

“Oh, hey Commander.” Good god, he sounded groggy out of his mind. Eliza could feel her heartstrings getting pulled even as there was, as always, an undertone of cutting wit to his words. “You wouldn’t happen to have any Tylenol on you, would you? Feel like I’ve been twenty rounds with a Berserker...”

She shook her head, frowning. “Not this time—didn’t think of it. If you’re still feeling it next time, I’ll see what I can get for you.”

He groans, resting his head against the wall. “Fantastic. I’m trapped in the land of the Boy Scouts with my hands behind my back and my head feels like I’m getting continuously slu...” The Hunter pauses for a moment, then gives a tired chuckle. “If this is how I feel, I’d hate to see the other guy.”

Eliza returned the chuckle. “What, your most recent brawl put you on the losing side for once?”

“Hey.” He gives her a pointed look, before his eyes unfocused again. “To be fair, I was certain I’d win this fight... and even if I didn’t...” He trailed off. Eliza waited for him to continue but it looked like she wasn’t going to get anything more out of that particular train of thought. Half of her wanted to press him about what he meant, but considering the questions he’d asked while she was still in the Network? That’d be something she’d have to ask when he wasn’t practically concussed.

Eventually the silence went on long enough that even Mordenna wanted to break it. “Ok, what are we here for, Commander? Torture? Already pulling that off well enough, just standing there and staring at me. Interrogation?” He gave a short laugh. “I’ll put it this way; I’d like to see you try. Genuinely, I mean, I’d like to see what you would do to try to weasel information out of me.”

When she shook her head at that, he hummed in thought. “No interrogation or torture? What, are you just here to crack wise with a handsome devil like me?” He smirked. “Gotta admit, that would be just fine by me.”

“I might take you up on that later, hotshot.” She grinned. “But, killing you would be pointless after all this.” It wasn’t something she particularly wanted to do in the first place, anyway. “Also, after we lost a certain scientist, we haven’t done interrogations. No, I’m just here to offer you something.”

The Commander watched as the Hunter stared at her, confident that even in his current state he could connect the dots. He eventually did, laughter bubbling up as he started to realize, his eyes a bit more focused. “You’re trying to get me to defect!”
“Well, would you?”

His laughter quieted down, though his smile remained as he weighed his options. His gaze shifted to his feet as he thought. Eliza could think of a few good pros if he asked; he could continue hunting big game if he wanted, and she was sure the tense survival of being a part of XCOM in the field would be up his alley. Plus, and this was one she shared, any chance to piss off the Elders was a good chance indeed. Maybe it was a little selfish to think that it could sell him alone, but...

She wanted to be able to help who she could from the Elders. If she was able to escape, why shouldn’t they? But, the Commander knew what she was up against. The Elders made fantastic promises and even seemed to uphold them at times... but she had been there for every punishment for the Chosen. She had been able to temporarily dip into their feelings as part of the data she could gather whenever the Elders were almost killing them. There wasn’t anybody she’d wish that pain on outside of the Elders themselves. If there was some way she could...

“Say I do.” The Hunter’s words brought her out of her thoughts, grabbing her attention. “I take up your colors, march with your boy scouts, yadda yadda yadda. If you somehow do beat the Elders, what then? What’s a hardened killer like me to do when everything is good and happy in the world?”

The Commander thought over that a bit. Truth be told, she was just working to figure out how they could force out the Elders, through bad publicity or otherwise. Everything seemed like such a long shot, and surviving after that? She had plans, but nothing she’d build plans on. “Well... I suppose we’d burn that bridge when we came to it.”

That was enough to earn a genuine laugh out of the hunter, doubling over a bit. He recovered quickly, looking more and more awake. “Thanks, I needed that.”

“So, your answer?”

He hummed in thought again, then shrugged. “Tell you what. Give me, oh, a day or so to think it over. Don’t try to game me—I know what 24 hours feels like even in solitary confinement. When you come back, we’ll have another chat, alright?”

“Deal, and I intend on it being a bit longer than this one. Just didn’t want to boil you too much while you were coming off the psionic equivalent of horse tranquilizers.” She waited for him to stop snickering before she continued. “Suppose that’s about it. See you tomorrow, Mordenna.”

His smile got more toothy, and it was hard to gauge if it was malicious or playful. “See you tomorrow, Eliza.”

Commander O’Leary turned, unlocking the door and walking out, making sure it closed behind her before she gave her attention to the engineers. It looked like Shen had already left, no doubt to work on finishing repairs on SYN. The personnel looked at her expectantly. Might as well tell them the truth, she figured.

“We’re going to be having another little talk tomorrow.”

Somehow, that did nothing to abate their mildly horrified faces.
Preparations

Chapter Summary

Things are made ready for what's to come.

The Commander knew she was in for another stimulating conversation when she contacted Betos.

“I have heard from Volk that your battle against the Chosen Hunter was a successful one.”

Eliza raised her eyebrows. “Volk actually spoke to you about it?”

“He seemed rather... overjoyed, to share this news.” Betos then dipped her head a little bit at the Commander, giving her a pointed look. “He sounded even more enthusiastic about the details of the ‘capture’ you performed.”

Eliza sighed, leaning against the table in the room, supporting herself with a hand. “Knowing him, I’m going to have a lot of misconceptions to clean up...well, what do you want to bring up about it?”

Betos took a moment to think. “You would not strike me as one for interrogation, Commander. It intrigues me that, given the easier option of permanently severing the Hunter from the Elders’ grasp, you chose a more difficult approach.”

The Commander gave an impressed hum. Betos was right—interrogation really wasn’t what she had in mind for him, though the fact that Betos didn’t think her one for interrogation at all truly spoke to how much details of the first contact were erased. That was a little too much to explain right then and there, though, so she figured she’d just concede the point. “You’re the first one to pick that out.” She leveled a careful gaze at the Skirmisher, trying to appraise her body language. She may be former ADVENT but even ADVENT troops had tells. “What’s your point?”

Betos readjusted herself under the Commander’s inspecting stare. “I have always been the first to speak for mercy for ADVENT who wish it. But, Commander... I would not think the Chosen willing, under any circumstances. Nor would I vouch for their reform. The Chosen have butchered us and your people for twenty years.”

“And Mox hasn’t?”

That made Betos sigh. “The Chosen have a far greater capacity for violence than even the most ruthless ADVENT soldier. I have heard tales of horrors from every faction, of how each Chosen would antagonize their soldiers and mine, seeming to take pride in the terror they caused.”

The Commander maintained eye contact through the recording. “Betos, you must remember; at the end of the day, it’s me who’s making the calls out here. Maybe one day I can sit down with you and try to explain just exactly why I’ve taken the Hunter in alive—and will take the others in alive, given the chance—but I don’t think I’ll have the time to do so right now.” Her stare got softer, and she relaxed her stance. “I understand what I’m doing. I understand I’m sparing the most unforgivable of ADVENT’s ranks, right below the Elders. But, I have my reasons, and the means to do so.”
The Resistance leader looked over her a few moments more before nodding. “Very well. I suppose, in the end, your methods do remove the Chosen from the Elder’s control.”

Eliza gave a relieved smile. “Alright. Now, how did that last covert action go?”

“The mission was a success. With the help of your soldiers, we have identified the rough area of where the Chosen Assassin resides. One more incursion, and we would be able to formulate a plan to bring her down.” She gave Eliza a knowing look. “Kill or capture.”

The Commander nodded. “Even if we have some disagreements, I’m glad to see that you understand.” She started tapping away at a datapad next to her. “Who would you need for the next mission?”

“I would like to request Samhien back for this action, as he knows the terrain in the area. I would also need at least one experienced soldier from you, though I would recommend two, in case of an ambush.”

“Can do. I’m assigning you...” She scrolled through her options, nodding as she tapped two. “Herod Ishland and...” Commander O’Leary chuckled. “Vlad Tepes. Don’t ask,” she said to Betos’s inquisitive look, “That’s the only name he’d give us. He’s a fine soldier otherwise.”

“I understand. We will work together in order to stop another one of the Elders’ children.”

The Commander nodded, her hand hovering over the button to end communications before she took in a breath. “Betos. Say at least one of the Chosen is willing to make amends. I’m not asking for a hero’s welcome but... A chance, is what I’m asking. If you’re let down, then I won’t ask for anything ever again.”

Betos clasped her hands together. Her face was firm as she took a few seconds to consider it. “If you can present to me a truly reformed Chosen, I shall not ask anything of you ever again. My Skirmishers might take more to convince than I, however.”

“As long as someone approves, I suppose. Thank you, Betos. Will that be all?”

Betos nodded, and then the Commander closed the connection. Honestly, she was hoping that Betos would be one of the first to come around on the idea. Even if limited, Betos had a bit more understanding on the matter than most people did, so it was a good start. Volk might throw a fit, but that was to be expected, and Geist? Hard to say, but probably not happy either.

With Geist on the mind, Eliza prepared to open up another call when she heard footsteps behind her. She turned around, managing to catch Shen before she could knock. “Shen?”

Lily looked a bit surprised, but recovered quickly. “Hey Commander. Hope I’m not interrupting anything.” When the Commander shook her head, she continued. “I was thinking a little bit more about how you want to capture all of the Chosen and figured you could use some tools to do so.” She waved Eliza over, holding up a datapad so she could see. Two different mockups were on screen—an oddly-shaped bullet and a series of rings.

“I’m pretty sure the Warlock isn’t going to take well to what you used on the Hunter, and you and I both know the Elders have probably safeguarded the Assassin against it in some way. So we’ll throw them a punch from left field.” She pointed her stylus at the rings. “No real name for these yet, but they’re a series of linking cuffs that could snap together on the limbs, preventing them from moving. And this,” she said, motioning to the bullet, “is Riot Ammo. I took a few ideas from old police forces and figured this should be effective. They don’t pierce the skin, but enough well-
aimed shots should theoretically knock anyone out.”

The Commander hummed in thought. “Cons?”

“Well... the cuffs are heavy enough that a soldier would need to forgo a piece of equipment to carry them. The Riot Ammo, though, probably won’t be effective in most situations. I’m sure regular ADVENT would get stunned faster than the Chosen, but with this ammo, whoever’s using it is going to have to rely on everyone else.”

Commander O’Leary looked over the two designs. The Riot Ammo could be interesting, but pound for pound, the cuffs were better, in her eyes. Maybe if Clint was awake by the time they needed it...

“Go with the cuffs.”

Shen nodded, tapping the cuffs with the stylus and starting to type. Maybe a message to the engineers. “Got it, Commander. This is going to be some pretty sophisticated tech, so I’d project about five days for it if nothing major comes up.”

“Understood. Anything else you need from me?”

“That was about it. I’ll leave you to it, Commander.” With that, Shen walked out, taking a turn out the door and down the hall. Eliza watched her go, before turning to her own thoughts. It wasn’t quite 24 hours yet, just a little under that. Now that she thought about it, she should give a little time towards taking down the Warlock—not only did they presently not have the tools to do so, if she took it too fast, they may not have the space to do so, either.

She felt the ship tilt ever so gently and gripped the Resistance table for dear life. When things stabilized and went into the telltale rumblings of landing, she breathed a sigh of relief. Actually, speaking about Bradford, they were probably at their destination. The Commander walked out of the room. There was a mission that needed discussed.

The Hunter was bored out of his mind.

As much of good intentions he was sure the Commander had in mind, she’d neglected to give him much in the form of entertainment, outside of endlessly pacing the square floor of his cell. He’d already tried to finagle the cuffs open, with little success outside of rubbing his wrists sore, not that he cared too much. But, he was a prisoner for now, he supposed. Wouldn’t be too good, image-wise, to be passing out toys to them.

That still did nothing to mitigate the fact that he was mind-numbingly bored.

Well, perhaps his brain wasn’t numbed enough, because it managed to dredge back up the questions he’d asked the Commander, facing him with them. He gave a soft groan, forehead hitting one of the walls. He was lucky that she didn’t seem to remember those at all when she first talked to him. But maybe she didn’t want to bring them up. After all, who would like to bring up that kind of stuff to someone’s face? Oh hey, remember all of those really concerning questions you asked me when I was basically being held hostage by the Elders? Yeah, let’s talk about those. That sounds like a whole lotta fun.

He scoffed, remaining leaned against the wall. If she even remembered. He remembered the connections surrounding her login being damaged by her severance. It took a bit to patch them, but he figured that the damaged versions were the ones she got to keep. His own memory of items on
the ADVENT Network... eh, he’d think about that later. Right now, there was a good 50/50 chance that she even knew half of the “conversations” they had.

But if she was extending this offer to him, did she or did she not remember? If she didn’t, maybe it was just wanting a powerful player like him on her side, personal liking be damned. If she did... he didn’t even want to think about it. He couldn’t. Somebody wanting him around because they were concerned? Because they cared? Because they thought he was worth a damn? The Hunter just couldn’t get to grips with it.

He moved to sit down, facing the corner. Yeah, let’s just try to put any stupid thoughts in timeout. He knew what his worth was—a gun that could plan missions. Granted, a good gun, dare he say a good-looking gun with something smart to say at everything, but a gun nonetheless. Even for as much delight as he took in his hunting, outside of that small rush he got from killing, he was just so...

No, “empty” wasn’t the right word. Not anymore. There was a flicker of something disgusting deep down that he didn’t even want to identify. But it brewed in him still, turning into several things.

He took in a breath, trying to quell the tide, but only ended up fanning the flames. God, what the hell was wrong with him? He hated these thoughts that were bubbling up. They were so... needy.

But... how nice wouldn’t it be, if the Commander liked him? He huffed, still desperately trying to stop this train of thought, but it rolled over him. Not just liked him, appreciated him—thought he was fun to be around. What if she wanted him around? Wouldn’t that be nice? It was something he could barely imagine, with his self-worth being so hilariously low. Somebody who wasn’t a target to shoot, a sibling to mess with, or an Elder to be thoroughly ignored, with the punishments that came with that. Somebody who...

Eventually, an emotion he was fine with harboring caught up to him as he refused to think on it further: embarrassment. “God, Mordenna, you are pathetic.”

The Commander finally found herself back on the Bridge, where Bradford was waiting for her. There didn’t seem to be any personnel in the room outside of the man himself, who straightened when she entered and walked over. “Commander.”

“Central. Got any new info on the mission?”

“Not as much as we’d hope, but more nonetheless.” He tapped a few things on the panel for the Geoscape, bringing up a few documents. “It’s a Blacksite, that much we know.”

“A refinery like the last one?”

Bradford shook his head, bringing one document in particular to the front. “From what we know and have pictures of, it doesn’t look like one. No green ‘caskets’ stacked around it—not much of anything stacked around it at all, actually. It’s heavily guarded, however, and at one point there was a lot of information flowing in and out of it. Activity around it did spike very recently.”

The Commander nodded at the information, but his last point stuck out of her. There was... something bad about that. “How recently?”

Central flipped through some logs. “They didn’t catch exactly when it started, but after we
captured the Hunter.” He looked up, just in time to catch the Commander recovering from going stock-still. “So... that might be a hint.”

“Rightfully, a lot of ADVENT installations are going to light up after a Chosen’s been taken.” The Commander couldn’t help but feel she was talking to herself. “No matter what they are. Rooting out what they can do to prevent further captures and potentially even further incursions into the Strongholds is a task I can imagine a lot of facilities taking up—especially if it’s the remaining Chosen carrying out the orders.”

Central nodded, seemingly convinced, going back to the Geoscape. “Other than heightened patrols, there’s not much we should beware of... that we know of.”

Eliza leaned over the rails. Going by his tone and topic, it was time to start picking soldiers for the mission. “We’ll march in strong. Banel, Leo, and Kalight, for a start. Need a medic—I think Sherry’s still good to go. I think we can help her out on the field by putting March out there with her. Finally...” She took a moment to think. “Put Will out there. Think we could use a Sharpshooter this time.”

“Understood, Commander. I’ll pull them out for the mission.”

Commander O’Leary stood up, mentally checking the clock. “Let me know when everything’s ready—either send yourself or someone else down to the Chosen Holding Cells, I’m going to be in there for a bit.”

She got about halfway across the Bridge before Bradford called out to her, making her turn around. “Commander, I know you want the Hunter with us, and I’m not denying he’d be useful.” At that word, Eliza crossed her arms, but he pushed on. “But from the reports we’ve gotten from the Reapers and the other factions, he seems like a real loose cannon. I know he was working under the Elders, but there’s no telling if he’ll turn on us and strike out on his own.”

The Commander fixed him with a hard stare, hard enough to make even Central falter. After a bit, she sighed, closing her eyes. “I thought you understood, Central. I really did.”

“Eliza.” His tone was soft and cautious. “I do. I don’t want to see you hurt because you tried to extend mercy to someone who didn’t...”

“... deserve it?”

Bradford stopped, mouth closing into a hard line. “To someone who didn’t appreciate it.”

The Commander brewed over it a bit, opening her eyes, looking at Bradford softly. “John. Do you trust me? Not as your superior officer, I mean as a person. Do you trust in my decisions?”

Bradford rubbed his stubble, looking to the side and sighing. “I do, Eliza. You don’t strike me as the type to just make these decisions randomly.” He turned his head back to her. “Does anyone else even know of your plans, at least?”

Eliza deflated, drumming her fingers on her arm. “Betos, and that’s because she gathered it on her own. I was hoping to have him at least decided on it before I did anything. I’m not about to go around claiming I can save him before I’ve even got my foot in the door. God knows it’s going to be a lot harder with the other two, and that’s even if we can get our hands on them.” She runs a hand through her hair, tucking some of it aside. “It’s not news I can break lightly, either. A lot of people are going to be up in arms about it. I mean, I come to you out of the blue one day and say ‘hey, remember that highly volatile alien we captured? Yeah, he’s on our side now, I swear.’
You’d think I was crazy, if you didn’t already.”

“Eliza...” Bradford looked like he wanted to say something more, but couldn’t find anything at the moment. Commander O’Leary took it as a sign to continue.

“I’m sorry. Just, for all of it. I always operate under the notion that people know that I know that I’m taking risks on about everything I do. Then I put a friendly face forward and lead soldiers to possible doom.” She gives a half-hearted chuckle. “You know, a usual Tuesday, right?”

“Eliza, you don’t have to apologize to me.” Bradford walked forward, putting a hand on her shoulder. “If anything, I should be saying sorry for second-guessing you on this so much. I know you make decisions with risks in mind, but...”

The Commander gives a soft, tired laugh. “You’re a chronic worrywart, John. As much as I’m a hopeless sympathetic. The day you stop fussing is the day the Elders give in. I’d hold onto it.”

Bradford settled into the slightly lightened mood, his smile making a few wrinkles appear. “It’s giving me a lot of grey hairs though, I don’t know if I should.”

Eliza returned the smile, putting a hand on his shoulder. “I think salt and pepper would suit you well.”

Was it just her, or was his grip on her shoulder getting a bit tighter? Not uncomfortably so at all, just firmer. “What, and show my age? You’re suggesting some dangerous stuff, Eliza.”

“Please. Me, suggesting something dangerous?” She was glad the lightened mood was doing wonders for them both. “It’d be like you piloting the Avenger well for a change.”

He pouted in mock-hurt. “I don’t see anybody else stepping up to fly this thing, save the autopilot. Maybe if you wanted to try, I could teach you.”

“John, we do not need two people throwing this thing over trees.”

“Oh, come on, it can’t be that bad.”

“The last time you evaded a UFO, you gave Tygan’s whole lab an ‘emergency restructuring.’”

“Look, anything goes when we’re dodging those things, alright?”

She gave a real chuckle, her hand sliding off of his shoulder. “Oh, I love giving you hell. Makes up for a lot of things.”

His smile slightly withered. “Hopefully I don’t make it too much to cover.”

The Commander patted his hand. “You’re good, Bradford, and don’t forget it. For as much hell as I give you, you never give me too much to complain about.”

He took it as a sign to release her shoulder, nodding. “Glad to hear it, Commander.” He gave a slightly awkward cough, looking the other way. “I shouldn’t keep you any longer. I’ve got soldiers to round up and you’ve got a Chosen to talk to, from the sounds of it. By the way...” He looked back at her, back to being professional and serious. “I may not know all of the story, but if you need any help getting the soldiers used to the idea of having a Chosen on the team... I’ll back you up, Commander.”

Bradford could see Eliza visibly relax, turning towards the door. “Thank you, Bradford. It means a
lot to me. I’ll tell you if I need anything, alright?”

“Always a pleasure.” He nodded towards her, moving back to the Geoscape. “Good luck, Commander.”

She nodded back, walking out. It was a little over 24 hours now, but she was sure that the Hunter would make it.

In a cell where you gave him nothing to do for 24 hours.

Well, he is a prisoner, she figures. She was a “hopeless sympathetic,” yes, but even then she wasn’t about to install a TV in there or something like that. Had to express some hardness, at the end of the day.

She chuckled. Maybe if she did torture, she would. From what she heard about ADVENT’s daytime comedies, they were practically infringing on the Geneva Convention.

Eventually, the Commander rounded a corner and ended up in the Chosen Holding Cells. A few more floor panels were in place, compared to last time, but there didn’t seem to be any other changes outside of that. The engineers weren’t even there, most likely having taken a break. Noting that, she picked up the remote and slipped over to the Hunter’s door.

She paused just in front of it, then leaned over to activate the video feed into the cell. The angle seemed to be from one of the top corners of the room, the left one closest to the door, the shot being wide enough to capture essentially all of the room. In the corner sat the Hunter, hunched over a bit, largely unmoving. That was mildly concerning. The Commander opened the cell door and stepped in.

The Hunter remained in his position, not moving a muscle at Eliza’s incursion. She crossed her arms, trying to gauge what was going on. This didn’t bode too well. “Hey.”

“Oh, Commander... didn’t see you there.” His voice was flat, and it sounded like he was half-heartedly trying for his eternally-teasing tone, but not quite making it. “My bad.” Even when he was done talking, he didn’t move. The Hunter seemed determined to stare down the wall.

Eliza sat down behind him, setting the remote at her side, studying his back. She was wondering how to approach this. Clearly something had happened between meetings—whether that be someone visiting him in the cell when they weren’t supposed to, or simply the Hunter being given time to muse over his own feelings, and find them wanting.

Whatever the case, she took long enough thinking that the Hunter felt compelled to fill the silence. “Y’know, I’m thinking that mutual silent treatments don’t really work. Seems like a lot of effort for no payoff.”

The Commander didn’t respond to that. She was still busy thinking, almost sinking into the mood that the Hunter was in. For him to be openly sullen like this without being hostile...

Just as she thought that, he twisted around, just enough to side-eye her, giving her a hard stare. “What’s up with you.”

She closed her eyes, half to gather her thoughts, half to avoid the look she was getting. Eliza took in a calm, deep breath. “Everyone keeps asking why I bothered to take you in alive.” She opened her eyes, greeted by the Hunter raising an eyebrow, his gaze softening a bit.

“Come to think of it, I’ve been meaning to ask the same thing.”
Commander O’Leary took another moment to think. Her mind was on a very sensitive subject, like it had been when she originally thought of the plan to capture him in the first place. Approaching that could very well be opening a can of worms, but she needed to clear the air on it eventually. “Have you ever wanted to die?” She did her best to mimic the very inflection the Hunter used that day, right before he pulled the trigger.

The effect was immediate. He seemed to freeze in place, his eyes darting away from her. Looks like he wasn’t expecting it. Maybe it was the exact thing he was thinking on. After a bit, he recovered, but didn’t meet her eyes, remaining fixed on something else. “So. You do remember.” His voice was low, but no longer flat.

She nodded. “That’s why. Those questions you asked got me thinking... more recently, anyway. Wasn’t much time to do individual thought when I was directing all of ADVENT’s forces.” She rubs the back of her neck, sighing. “My idea on it was that you’ve been with the Elders. You know how they are, you know how they punish. You know how they manipulate. Nobody else can really grasp it without having gone through it.”

The Hunter looked back to her, his face turning hard again. He fully turned around to face her. “I get it. The mighty Commander wants to throw herself a pity party, because woe is her.”

She leaned forward, face set. That wasn’t what she intended at all, but how to say that without looking like it was what she meant? Her eyes flitted downwards and the Commander shook her head while she searched for adequate words.

“No?” He sounded incredulous, but he continued. “What is it then, Eliza? Why bother? Why pick me up when I’m basically nothing good?”

“That’s it. That’s it right there.” The Commander looks back up at him, eyes soft. “You think you’re nothing good, which is far from the truth. I’m always questioning if things would really be just easier if I turned myself over to ADVENT. The Elders broke us. If I were going to be throwing a pity party, if anything else, it’d be for you guys.” She sat back up, her mouth in a thin line. “When was the last time you felt genuinely loved?”

He stared at her a bit longer, seemingly deep in thought. His eyes flitted a bit, as if inspecting her—which, given his modified eyesight, he probably was. “What’s the catch. Gonna shove a modified chip in my brain? Put a bomb collar on me? Kill me when I’ve outlived my use?”

“No catches or strings attached, other than just having to follow orders.”

Mordenna leaned back against the wall. He was still studying her, but his gaze had softened. He was tense, like he was on the edge of being able to relax. “Just tell me. No dancing around it, no trying to sucker me in; what’s your goal?”

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She sighs. Mordenna was, rightfully, hard to convince. She wasn’t aware of everything the Elders did to him, since most of her time was taken up doing simulations and calculating things for them, but she knew there was a damn good reason he wasn’t buying it. “I’ll be honest, then. I’m a bleeding heart for people who have suffered like me. And you... you never deserved what you’ve
gone though. None of you did. My goal is just to right some wrongs, to let you know that love isn’t like that.” Eliza laughs half-heartedly. “I suppose an underlying reason is yet another way to tell the Elders to shove it, but it’s just a happy side-effect. In the end, it’s up to you.”

He tilts his head slightly. His eyes hadn’t left her once as she was speaking. She felt like he was reading her like a book, catching even the most minute thing she did. No wonder so many of her soldiers cracked when he was “asking” information. After a bit, his shoulders slump. “You never did answer me.”

She blinked. At her confused silence, he continued. “You never did. I asked you a question. ‘Have you ever wanted to die?’ I never got your response. Answer me, and I’ll think about it.”

The Commander looked him dead in the eye, hoping he could see she was telling the whole truth. “Yes.”

“When.”

She faltered a bit. Didn’t want to talk about it too much. “You know when.”

“When.” He had a determined look in his eye—he wasn’t going to budge until she answered.

“Whenever I was a subject to the Elder’s false love,” she started, dropping eye contact. “Whenever I saw you guys getting punished and there was nothing I could do.” She runs a hand through her hair, her fingers shaking a bit as Eliza recounted what she knew from what was muddled. “I saw everything. I knew everything. The Elders might have had me all tied up and unable to speak out against them but do you know what? I was fully aware. I couldn’t do anything.” The hand in her hair stopped, gripping it at the root. “I just wanted the reason... I just wanted the reason for why I couldn’t do anything to be because I was dead.”

The Commander bowed her head, breathing deeply. It wouldn’t do her much good to get so worked up in front of him—or worked up at all. Her emotions could not escape her. She rubbed her scalp after convincing herself to let go of her hair.

A tired, hesitant sigh from the Hunter interrupted her train of thought. “Commander, I thought you said you didn’t do torture.”

That got her to look back up at him. The Hunter had an uncertain frown going on, and she got the feeling that if his hands weren’t behind his back, he’d be crossing his arms. “Here you are, sitting right in front of me, having a breakdown—honestly, were I in a worse state, I’d probably be hating myself right along with you.” He stops, blowing a bit of air out of his nose. “Scratch that, always am, but that’s beside the point. Here you are, having me handcuffed so I can’t even so much as awkwardly pat your shoulder. For shame, Eliza. For shame.”

She stared at him for a solid moment, then gave a noise that was somewhere between a laugh and a strangled sob. She let it continue as a laugh, to at least give the Hunter some credit for holding it together better than she just did. “I... I guess you’re right. I’m sorry.”

He sighs, deflating quite a bit. “…you’re supposed to be funny back, Commander, that’s how this works. Here I am, trying to lighten the mood—”

“You don’t have to. You can be sad.” She took a deep breath, gathering herself, sitting up straighter. “You can think of what’s happened and get angry about it. I know I do.”

The Hunter regarded her a bit more. He was slumped against the wall fully at this point, tiredness etched into the lines in his face. She half-wondered if he had gotten any sleep at all during the 24
hours he asked for. Eventually, Mordenna closed his eyes, taking in a breath. “Well... you drive a hard bargain, Commander. I suppose I don’t really have much of a choice after all that.” He opened his eyes, smirking. “I do have one condition upon being freed, though.”

“That being...?”

“I get to slap you. Not even that hard. You said you wouldn’t torture me, and you did! Such a hypocrite, Eliza.” His grin got wider. “How can you live with yourself.”

She returned the smile. “Sounds good to me. Deal?”

“Deal.”

The Commander reached for the remote, grabbing it.

“Commander?”

Shen’s voice came the panel on the wall, stopping Eliza in her tracks. “Lily?”

“The Skyranger’s ready to go, and the squad is too. You’re needed down on the deck.”

“Understood. Give me a minute to finish up here.”

After there was a bit of silence, Eliza turned back to Mordenna. He looked... disappointed, just barely, but he shrugged. “Go. Ain’t like you’ll be any less willing after the mission, I hope.”

She nods, grabbing the remote as she gets up. “I promise—a deal is a deal.”

The Hunter grinned again, though it was uncharacteristically softer than usual. “Be careful. Promises are deadly things to make.”

“I’ve known plenty of danger, Mordenna.” Eliza turned, tapping the panel on the door. “What’s a little more?”

“Your funeral.”
Chapter Summary

The Blacksite is investigated and issues become clearer.

“Menace One-Five, I want one last weapons check.”

Bradford’s voice filtered in through the ship, broadcast to the six occupants, plus Firebrand currently flying the Skyranger. The squad lifted up their weapons, inspecting them.

Banel, near the end of the ship, gently turned the barrel of his Beam Cannon with a gloved hand. He was huge—tall, muscled, and a bit stocky—easily dwarfing everyone else. His face was currently obscured by a helmet fashioned in the image of a demon’s head, complete with metal horns. His WAR Suit’s servos gently whirred as he took the Advanced Grenade Launcher off of his back, opening the chamber to make sure it was empty and ready to go. “Baal, reporting all green.”

Kalight was right across from him. His head was also covered by something that looked like a knight’s helmet, with glowing nodes on the front and a bundle of cords on the top that extended quite a ways down. His Templar armor was a polished white, sleeves covering his arms and a fur collar around his neck, framing the thin tubes. He unclipped the mag to his Beam Autopistol, clicking it back into place after a quick inspection. “Vanguard, optimal shape!”

Next to Kalight was Leo. He took the Alien Psi Amp off of his back, gently running his power through it to confirm that it worked. His dyed-black, short mullet reflected the purple light of his powers, and his equally purple eyes caught it well. The correctional lens on his left eye shone in the low light of the Skyranger. His Plasma Rifle was next, checking it out, finding it adequate. “Tomahawk, all clear.”

William leaned back in his chair, already in the middle of adjusting the scope on his Plasma Lance. The three dark brown, thick braids on his head framed his face, falling around the light blue scarf that hid his chin. He unclipped the Powered Shadowkeeper from his Wraith Suit, making sure the safety was on before he checked the barrel. He holstered it, satisfied. “Davy Jones, looking good, feeling better.”

March was in the second-to-last seat. Her black, but greying hair was twisted up into two buns on the sides of her head, kept in place by lace nets. She popped out the mag of her Storm Gun, putting it back before pulling the Fusion Blade off of her back, glancing over the blade. She returned it to its spot in its sleeve. “Dullahan, ready to go.”

Sherry was in the last seat, watching her wife across from her check her firearm before she did with hers. Her Plasma Rifle remained ready and her GREMLIN hovered near her head, softly humming as it floated. “Cherry, fully operational.”

“Squad’s green to deploy, Central!” Firebrand tilted the Skyranger a bit as she leaned into the destination. “We’re coming up on the drop and everyone’s ready to go.”

“Loud and clear, Firebrand. Menace One-Five, you’re cleared for drop.”
The aircraft stabilized, and Firebrand pulled a switch in the cockpit. The interior of the back lit up red, the gate opening while cords unraveled. “Everything looks quiet on the ground for now, guys. Keep it that way for me, alright?”

Will unhooked his seatbelt, giving a short laugh. “Certainly! I’m sure we can put a suppressor on those explosives, eh, Baal?”

The rest of the squad followed suit, but Banel gave him a friendly whack with the back of his hand. “You know what she means, ‘sailor.’ Let’s move.”

With that out of the way, Banel was the first to slide down the cords, out of the Skyranger, making a heavy landing on the ground. Leo was after him, and soon everyone had their feet on the ground as the Skyranger retracted the cords and flew away.

They found themselves in a lightly forested area, right outside of the facility. The trees were skeletal and the ground was an unnatural hue of purple and cyan. Unfamiliar flora grew at their feet. In front of them was the looming facility, definitely belonging to ADVENT, but had no discernable features otherwise.

William made an immediate point of scrabbling up a tree, forgoing his grappling hook in favor of natural dexterity. Once he found a stable branch, he looked down his scope, scouting a bit further. There still seemed to be nothing distinct about the facility. It wasn’t a forge, indeed. Maybe it was just another Avatar research grounds? “Nothing up here, loves.” He swept his scope while the squad gingerly moved forwards.

Banel led the group. Even if he wasn’t wearing the WAR Suit, he could probably lug around his Beam Cannon with little issue. As it stood, he carried it as if it weighed nothing. Still, there was something off about the area that even he could sense. He looked back to Leo, who seemed deep in thought. “Tomahawk?”

Leo looked to him, and then to the facility. “There’s a heavy concentration of psionic power here. Very heavy.”

“How heavy?”

Leo looked grave as he stared at the facility. “ADVENT either has a lot of psionic units at this area or he’s here.”

Everybody outside of Banel shifted at the implications. Banel himself looked back to the building, seemingly unfazed. “It wouldn’t take the Commander to say that we should stay in range of you, then.”

“Rightfully so.” Leo straightened, gun at the ready. “Still, we mustn’t clump up.”

“Point acknowledged.” He started to move forward, then paused. “Davy Jones? Stop checking out my ass.” Banel said, without so much as turning.

“Hey!” William lowered his rifle, pouting. “I reserve my right to ‘scout!’”

Most of the squad groaned, then moved in step with Banel and Leo. William himself gave a dramatic sigh, pulling up his scope again. What he saw made him jump, then lower his voice and speak on the comms. “Lads, I’m being serious now, there is some heavy firepower coming your way!”

The group immediately dropped into cover amongst the trees and rocks, with Banel being the only
one to peek his head out to confirm what was approaching. A pair of Priests and a pair of Sectoids rounded the corner, and behind them floated a Gatekeeper, the eye-like apparatus on its front sweeping over the area. Banel calmly sized up the pod before ducking back into cover.

“Commander, this is Baal. We’ve got a patrol up ahead. Three aliens, two ADVENT. My plan is to let them get a bit closer before I try to get the Gatekeeper’s armor down while having the rest of the squad fire as they scatter.”

“Good plan, Baal. Keep the Gatekeeper at a distance, however.”

“Roger that.” He hoisted up his gun, casting a glance back. Everyone was getting into their positions, spaced enough that grenades or whatever the Gatekeeper could pull wouldn’t hit all of them. As the aliens got closer, he took the launcher off of his back, loading an Acid Grenade into it. “Wait until I fire.”

“Right on, love.” William smirked, eyeing one of the Sectoids as it drew more and more upon their positions.

When the patrol was just a bit closer, Banel primed his launcher, stepping out of cover far enough to fire it. The pod had little time to react before it landed in their midst, right at the Gatekeeper’s metaphorical feet. The grenade exploded with a hissing bang, and a green compound flew out in controlled bursts, coating the ground and all of the enemy units. It burned the skin of the Sectoids, who desperately tried to brush it off as they pointed out Banel’s position. For the Gatekeeper and Priests, it clung to their armor, quickly eating through it and leaving them more exposed. “Fire, now!”

William wasted no time in firing off a shot at one of the weakened Sectoids, the burst of plasma ripping through it and ending it. He sucked in a breath, already steadying himself for another, but waited for the rest of his teammates to take their shots.

Even as the pod started to scatter, Sherry calmly took aim, capitalizing on one of the open spots the acid had created on the Priests, striking one down with a good shot. Kalight took advantage of the mostly-cleared field, running with confident grace, psi-blades out. Leaping over a rock, his blades found their home in the other Sectoid. As he plunged them in, they reached out for the psionic energy that was plentiful in the alien, adding it to his own, giving a shuddering breath as his body glowed purple.

March took her chance while the noisy din of combat took over, whipping out her Storm Gun and pulling the trigger. The barrage of plasma struck the other Priest head-on, but before one shard of the buckshot could connect and make a killing blow, the Priest wrapped itself in a protective shell of psionics, falling to the ground. March grimaced. “Got one Sustained, over here!”

In the midst of the combat, the battered Gatekeeper slid its gaze over to Kalight, and with an intimidating hum, its burned plates shifted a bit. Kalight turned and raised a shield tempered with the psionic energy he just reaped, just in time for the alien to fire upon him with massive power. The force of the blast was enough to push him to his knees. “S-support requested!”

William cursed, lining up his next shot with the Gatekeeper. “Off of him!” With a kick, his Plasma Lance fired, burrowing into the alien. A bit of its armor still remained, but it was enough to deter it from its current assault.

But, the barrage wasn’t enough to stop it completely. Moving closer to Kalight, its ruined shell opened, revealing the pink innards underneath. Kalight could only watch as the tentacles of its body curled towards him as he recovered from deflecting its first shot.
The whirring of a minigun behind it was enough to give it a moment’s pause, enough of a moment to buy Banel the time his gun needed to start firing, the plasma shredding what remained of the Gatekeeper’s armor. The hail of energy sent orange blood flying.

Beside him, Sherry panicked. “Baal! That Gatekeeper’s too close to—!!”

But it was too late. Enough plasma hit home on it, and the Gatekeeper shook violently, psionic energy coalescing around it. With a mighty roar, it exploded, the back ranks of the squad getting a shockwave thrown over them.

The smoke cleared, and most of the squad looked to Banel. Even with his expressionless helmet, he seemed at ease. Sherry was about to start verbally assaulting him before she looked back to the site of the detonation.

Kalight was enshrouded in psionics, arms raised defensively, and it took him a moment to lower them when he realized he was in the clear. He clutched at his neck, and then the psionics dissipated.

Banel nodded to Leo, who the psionic energy flew to after it came off of Kalight. “Tomahawk, excellent at receiving cues as always.”

March stood up, looking baffled. “You planned that?”

“Baal says quite a bit, if you listen.” Leo straightened, but then his eyes settled on the retreating form of the weakened Priest. “Davy Jones!”

William jumped, having watched the whole exchange. “Son of a—!” He hastily took aim, but the shot went wide, allowing the Priest to escape into the facility. He scowled, sliding down from the tree. “It’s gone into the Blacksite proper.”

“Well...” Banel rolled his shoulders. “We were going in there anyway. Commander, we clear to advance?”

“As far as I can see it, yes. Though, try not to give the squad heart attacks next time. I had a few people panic up here thanks to that.”

Banel’s shoulders rose and fell in quiet laughter. “Sorry about that, Commander. I’ll be more vocal about my calls.”

“I’d hope so.” William hopped over a natural barrier, catching up with the group. “I mean, I was watching that whole thing and I still got jumpy.”

Banel shook his head, motioning forwards. Seems the commentary was done for now. The group moved forward, keeping to cover more strictly now that their cover was blown.

Eventually, they got within the grounds of the Blacksite. Sherry’s GREMLIN flew over to a crate and made a chirping noise. The Specialist bent down, inspecting it. “Commander? Are you seeing this clearly?”

Up in the Avenger, the Commander was getting a clear visual of the crate through the GREMLIN. It seemed to be a standard ADVENT crate, save for the symbol on it. The Chosen’s emblem was emblazoned over it. The pit in her stomach that she felt when the mission was being organized just came back. “... I’m seeing it clearly. Keep moving, Menace.”

Sherry stood back up, face twisted in concern. A Chosen facility? Couldn’t be a Stronghold. Even
then, those crates could probably belong anywhere. The possibilities went through her mind as she followed her squad further into the compound.

They came up to one of the backdoors of the facility, Banel taking his place right beside the door. Everyone else took positions in cover right in sight of it as he leaned over, tapping the access pad. He immediately shifted out of the doorway, trusting his squad to spot anything inside. There was a moment of everyone staring at the door. Sherry was the first to slightly lower her gun, but not by much. “Nothing from here, Baal.”

He nodded, daring to stick his head in. From this angle, there wasn’t much to see, but the inside of the building was slightly different to the usual fare. There seemed to be a few monitors around the place, but they were all turned off. Some machines that he couldn’t discern the purpose of were also around the place. What caught his eye was a trail of orange blood that led into and then out of sight. “That Priest is in here, and probably ran to friends. Guns up, move slow.”

The second Banel laid a foot in the grounds of the facility, a voice came on comms that made Leo jump. “I see the foolishness of XCOM knows no bounds. First to oppose the Elders, then to take one of Their children, and now you trespass here?”

Banel calmly hoists his gun, looking forward. “No time for you, wizard. We’ve got a few things to take care of around here.”

“Hmph. It is typical for the Commander’s soldiers to not know where they tread. To stumble unknowingly upon a birthplace of the children of Gods... and to defile it with their presence.”

“What the hell is he on about,” March mused aloud, keeping close to Sherry as they swept the area.

“Commander, the vulgarity of your soldiers knows no bounds. Perhaps if they knew where they were, they would not be so callous—and you would not be so eager to destroy a cradle.”

The rest of the squad looked either confused or disinterested. A few connections fired off in Sherry’s head, concerning old documents she read and of what the Warlock was saying. She eyed the place before she spoke. “Warlock... was this were you were created?”

The Warlock’s sneer could practically be heard in audio. “To imply that this was my birthplace would be a disservice to the Elders. My own grounds of creation are much more... suited, to me. This is the grounds of the Hunter. Even if it would be fitting for his cradle to fall, I will take it upon myself to purge you from holy ground!”

The Commander sucked in a breath. There were memories she could just about pick out from her time in the Network. Some she’d rather forget, but considering that’s largely what happened with a lot of them, she held onto what she could. A few certain details about this place was one of them. “Cherry, first of all, excellent deduction. Second of all, you have a mission now. Find a terminal or access point, somewhere you can draw files from. I want everything you can take from this place. Menace One-Five, that includes loose datapads. We’re going to destroy this facility once we’re done with it.”

She turned to Bradford, silently asking for any thoughts. He nodded. “You heard the Commander, clear the place out.”

The squad nodded. The feed showed them walking around one of the corners... straight into a pod. An Officer, an Andromedon, and a few Priests, including the injured one from earlier, looking like its wounds had been partially tended to. Menace One-Five prepared to engage, while the Warlock
continued to speak over comms. “Eliza O’Leary. A name the Elders treat with reverence. Do you not know that They are pained by your continued struggling?”

Eliza hummed in thought. Talking with the Warlock wasn’t nearly as fun as banter with the Hunter... but she wasn’t one to blow him off. “They probably are, but I don’t imagine they care for my well-being outside of me just being alive, in their grasp.”

The Warlock’s irritated grunt came over comms, and as he spoke, she couldn’t help but feel he was... envious? “The Elders do care, more than even you could imagine. Their sorrow at losing you is immense. Their greatest tactical mind, stolen from Them.”

She scoffed. “Thought Mordenna was supposed to be that. But, considering we took him too...”

“Ah, yes. My sibling. An interesting avenue of thought—I half wonder what sort of horrors you are inflicting upon him.” His voice was passive, more amused than anything else.

“Oh, more pain than you could possibly imagine. Terror of the fourth kind. I’m pretty sure he’s screaming as we speak.” The Commander couldn’t restrain a grin. “We’re making him watch ADVENT’s daytime comedies.”

There was a moment of heavy silence over the radio on the Warlock’s part. Not on the ground—between gunfire and the occasional curse, there was laughing. But, someone’s radio on the ground did pick up something interesting. If the Commander strained her ears, she could hear the sound of distant, stifled, gruff laughter. It stopped quickly, and the Warlock came back on shortly after. “If that’s your humor, then perhaps he’s enjoying himself, much like I thought.”

Bradford heaved a sigh next to her, and the Commander could just barely stop herself from grinning. Barely. “Enjoying himself watching that slag? Please.”

“I suppose if it makes Ref-Il scream in terror, it is good enough for the likes of XCOM—though I doubt any information you will extract will be of use.” He scoffs. “I would praise your ingenuity in rendering him able to be captured if your methods weren’t so barbaric.”

The Commander took a moment to gauge the situation on the ground a bit more. They were dealing with the last of the pod, which was just the shell of the Andromedon, a little too close for comfort to March. She appeared to have the situation handled, however, and a blast from her Storm Gun was enough to shut it down. Leo had taken a hit or two, but was still soldiering on. Everyone else was fine.

On the feed, Banel walked forward, and then turned his head towards something. “Commander, you might want to see this.”

With a bit of dread in her gut, the Commander switched to Banel’s personal feed. His body was turned towards a segment of the room. In that area was more monitors... As well as an upright tube, with the Chosen logo on it.

Eliza’s hands balled into fists. Already she was getting ghosts of memories, of being still for twenty years, only being vaguely awake, trapped in a nightmare. Guiding troops that were not her own to kill people that were her own.

Bradford must’ve seen her react, as he reached over and swapped back to the overhead camera. “Cherry, find that access point.”

“Roger!”
Bradford’s hand slipped from the controls to the Commander’s shoulder. It was a wordless gesture of security. Eliza unwound a bit, taking a deep breath and nodding at him. Having him was one of the luckiest things that happened to her, and she didn’t take it for granted for one second.

Back on the ground, Sherry was looking in the direction Banel was before. The monitors near the tube caught her eye, and all of them were on. One of the patrols must’ve been in the middle of doing something before they arrived. She glanced at her GREMLIN, then motioned for it to fly over. “Get in there, Pepper!”

The GREMLIN chirped, buzzing over to one of the monitors. Before it could get any progress into the terminal, a nearby window burst into fragments as somebody fired upon it. The ammunition was a deep magenta and rang out as it struck the wall around the robot. The GREMLIN beeped out in error and flew back over to Sherry, who knew by the look of the shots who was nearby. “Warlock, incoming!”

Through the broken window, the sight of the Warlock smoothly holstering his Disruption Rifle was clear. He calmly stepped forward, his eyes meeting that of the squad’s. “Does XCOM’s kleptomania know no end? Will your envy not be satisfied until everything that the Elders have endeavored to create lies bastardized in your hands?” He scowled as he started to step through a hole in the wall created by one of Banel’s grenades. “Well then, come.” He held out his gauntlet, and psionics coursed through it, pooling into his palm. “I shall ‘grant’ you all the power your feeble minds can handle.”

Leo was the first to respond, returning the Warlock’s scowl. “The only feeble mind on this battlefield is yours, Jax-Rai! Appearing here and thinking you or your kind can overturn humanity—it almost makes me want to laugh.”

The Warlock’s gaze focused on Leo, and a cruel grin twisted his mouth. “Leo Cerece. It seems that you require multiple lessons in order to learn your place.” His eyes slid over to Kalight, and his sour face returned in force. “The Commander must have known I would be here to defend this place if she is willing to send one of your kind here as well. This disrespect will not go—”

The crack of a Plasma Lance interrupted the Warlock, and it was only by good fortune that he was able to dive into cover. When his face came back into view to glower at Moody, a plasma burn along his cheek where the beam grazed him was now adorning his face. William shrugged, starting to step behind better cover himself. “Keep flapping that jaw of yours and I’ll shoot it off, simple.”

Jax-Rai spat out a curse, eyes sweeping over the squad as they hunkered into cover. His eyes settled on March as she ducked where she was, on the fringe of the group from having moved up. His gauntlets glowed and his psionics lanced across his crown as he gathered psi energy into his hands. “Fine. I shall grant you no mercy!”

As he finished speaking, he threw it in a bold motion at March. Outside of the ring of Leo’s energy, it hit home right on the mark, wrapping around her head. She convulsed, eyeballs rolling back into her skull. The Warlock was invading her mind, and everytime she tried to shut him out, he breached open another opening in her mental defences, and another, and another...

March hung limp for a moment in her standing position before straightening, looking upon her squadmates with horror. Her body moved unnaturally as she aimed at them, the Warlock’s hold on her established. It was another moment before she practically threw herself over her cover, her limbs moving against her will as she ran from the squad, further from them and closer to the Warlock.

It took all of Sherry’s will to not launch herself forward and try to stop March—and all of her will
to not sprint out and go for the Warlock’s throat. But she couldn’t hold back a cry of despair when she caught her wife’s face, wet with tears, eyes wide with fear. March looked like she was feverishly muttering something, but no sound escaped her mouth.

Jax-Rai grinned with open cruelty, further gathering psionic energy onto himself. With a ghastly roar of psionics, he pulled three Priests from his stronghold, all of them immediately moving to cover—though, one of them spotted Leo and practically hissed, grabbing its psi-amp and starting to channel through it.

Leo saw the action and his hand flew to his own but he was far too slow on the draw, and a surge of psionic energy flew at him, encasing him in an airtight shell. The shell was strong enough to prevent anything from harming him, but the psionics were thick enough to stop his movement. There was also the quickly encroaching issue of suffocation. He squeezed his eyes shut and flexed his own mental strength, surging his own psionics against the coffin he was in.

“Oh, how your soldiers succumb, Commander.” Warlock kept to his cover behind the blasted wall, occasionally peeking to check the field. His active psionics were animating his hair, making it flow behind him, twisting as if it had a will of its own. “The crude psionics of your soldiers stand no chance against my own.”

The Commander’s voice came over comms, steady and strong. “Psionic soldiers aren’t all of my arsenal, Jax-Rai. You’ve already got a wound to prove it.”

His confident smirk turned into a scowl, making the plasma burn on his face shift. His psionics were already at work mending it. “I am aware; their abilities simply escape my notice—when they are not performing underhanded tricks.”

“Call it underhanded all you like,” Will retorted, firing off a shot with his sidearm that landed squarely in the gut of one of the Priests. After the shot, he moved up a ladder, going for what little higher ground the facility offered. “I marred that face of yours!”

Banel revved up his Beam Cannon, the ensuing hail of plasma forcing the Priest to Sustain itself, reloading his gun afterwards. He was in front, and gave the Warlock a passive look; that was all the helmet allowed, anyway. “He’ll do it again if you give him the chance.”

Instead of answering, the Warlock turned his gaze towards March, brow knitting as he sent a command. The captive Ranger shakily held up her Storm Gun and fired at Banel. He was still standing, so he took the brunt of the shot, but he only grunted as his armor absorbed most of the blow. “... gonna have to try harder than that to kill me, Dullahan.”

More tears streamed down her face and she managed to shake her head, mouthing “I’m sorry.” The Warlock was keeping her far enough away from Leo for his Solace to save her, and the Priests stood in the way of Sherry running over to her. Sherry’s grip on her gun got shaky and she turned her head towards the Priest that had put Leo in Stasis. She knew she didn’t have a good shot on the Warlock from here but she could see this one clearly.

She hopped over her cover, dodging gunfire, and got into a better position behind a machine. The ensuing cracks of her Plasma Gun firing matched the noise in her head as she started running through her clip on the Priest. Her first few shots weren’t too accurate but the rest started to line up, and one good beam hit home and killed it.

Warlock cried out in rage as he watched his Priest fall, gathering energy into his gauntlets. “I will not idly sit by and let you slaughter my disciples!” He threw the storm of power forwards towards Sherry...
... and it deflected cleanly off of her head. Leo was closer to her now, the psionics of his Solace having washed over her. The remaining psionics of the now-dead Priest bled off of his form, and he levelled a gaze of tranquil fury at Jax-Rai. “They will continue to die, so long as they stay under you.”

Almost offhandedly, Leo gathered his psionics in his clutched psi-amp, throwing the resulting shell over to March. The thick psionics of the Stasis cut off the Warlock’s link to her and she slumped to the ground, holding her breath.

The force of the Warlock’s glare was enough to keep his hair still flowing, electric energy coursing across the horns of his crown. His gaze was locked on Leo, and he wordlessly pulled out his Disruption Rifle via his psionics. Before the PsiOp could dive back into cover, Jax-Rai pulled the trigger, sending a volley of well-aimed shots towards him.

The pinkish shots seemed to shred right through the light purple aura that Leo gave off, the wispy-like tendrils refusing to cross where the bullets flew. They hit home on his shoulder as he turned in an effort to get back into cover, puncturing his armor and bringing forth some blood—by all accounts, a decent, but not career-ending hit.

The real effect the rifle had was shown as Leo screamed out, threatening to ruin his throat with the volume of it. The psionics resting in his psi-amp fizzled out and he dropped it, clutching his head. For him, the bullets were striking everywhere, making him feel like he was being ripped apart. He tried to summon his psionics for a Sustain and that only made it worse, leaving him collapsing to the floor in agony, blood streaming from his nose.

The Stasis on March blinked out as it happened, leaving her taking in a deep breath and quickly righting herself as everyone recovered, doing a quick hop over her current cover to put herself in a better position against the Warlock and his two remaining Priests. She used her new freedom of mind to perform a gesture that the Commander might approve of in this situation only.

Sherry grinned at seeing her wife back, then got back in her cover. “Baal!”

Banel was visibly the closest anyone had ever seen to “angry.” His hands were shaking and his posture was rigid; he didn’t hesitate to flip a switch on his Beam Cannon, hoisting it up. The barrel spun with a menacing, new hum, and it began spitting out plasma at a high rate. The recoil would’ve bucked the gun out of any lesser human’s hands but Banel kept it terrifyingly steady, guiding it over the standing Priest, eating its cover and gunning it down. He swiftly changed targets, guiding the muzzle of the gun over to the Warlock’s position.

Banel kept the gun trained on him, destroying the wall he was behind and guiding him closer to the squad as Jax-Rai tried to evade. The Warlock—once Banel’s gun ran dry—found himself in a terrible position against Menace One-Five, with little cover to his name.

By the time he gathered his wits and attempted to bring his psionics to bear, he was too late. The remaining members of Menace fired upon him with no mercy; Sherry, March, William, and even Banel after he finished reloading. Jax-Rai cried out under the assault, attempting to shield himself but the constant barrage overloaded his senses, staggering under the hail of plasma, orange blood pouring from his wounds.

When the firing stopped due to spent mags, the Warlock staggered on the spot, clutching his stomach. The gunfire had torn up his armor enough to expose his front, and what was behind his hand certainly wasn’t pretty. His blood seeped at the edges of his mouth and he coughed, bringing more of it up. Jax-Rai opened his mouth to speak, to make some sort of rebuttal.
Sprinting at full tilt, down from one of the balconies, Kalight landed on the ground floor, rolling and using his momentum to launch himself into the air, easily knocking down the Warlock in his weakened state. He sat on his chest, pinning the Warlock’s arms with his knees, and wrapped his hands around Jax’s throat, squeezing.

The Warlock was in no state to fight him off, but he attempted, hands trying to pull at the legs currently keeping him down and feet scrabbling for purchase on the floor, slick with his own blood. He spat it at the Templar’s helmet, to little effect.

The last Priest emerged from its Stasis, grabbing its gun, only to be shot down by Moody, who had an eye on it the whole time. He grimaced watching Kalight choke the life out of the Warlock. “For god’s sake, Vanguard.”

Sherry finished sending her GREMLIN over to Leo to provide what support she could to the downed PsiOp. Making sure the coast was clear, she make her way out of her cover and to her wife, squeezing her hands and wordlessly sharing a moment with March.

Banel lowered his gun. His own opinion on Kalight’s current handling of the situation was... mixed. He glanced up to the balcony he had lept from. Up on one of the columns was an X4 charge. So that’s why he was absent.

Leo, after getting a spray from the GREMLIN, shakily sat up, Banel coming over to assist with the action. He glared the Warlock’s way, watching him getting strangled for a satisfying moment before rubbing his head, muttering about “the lord of all headaches.” His psi-amp was still dark even as Banel returned it to his back.

The Commander, up the Avenger, had a stony face set on the scene before her. The anger at the Warlock was justified, but to have a reaction like this, while cathartic, was bound to send a bad message to anyone who was looking on. She pinched the bridge of her nose with her fingers. “Vanguard. Stop. Just kill him and be done with it for god’s sake.”

On the screen, Vanguard paused in his active choke. He then repositioned one of his hands on Jax-Rai’s throat, his other hovering over the Chosen’s head. With a flash, his psi-blade extended, stabbing the Warlock in the forehead. Kalight quickly rolled off the body, just in time for it to be whisked away in a column of purple light. The stain of orange blood on the floor remained.

Lily was at one of the other monitors in the Avenger. She glanced over her shoulder. “We’re getting no other signatures down there, Commander. The coast’s clear.”

Eliza nodded. “X4 charges are already set... Sherry, get back to that access point.”

“Roger.” Sherry motioned her GREMLIN over back to the monitors, where it began the entry sequence again. With her pad, Sherry passed the hack with flying colors, and data began to stream to the Avenger.

Shen looked over it as they got it, knitting her brow in concern. “Commander... you might want to hear about this.”

Bradford looked to Eliza. Her hands were on the bars again and she was looking down in an effort to not lay eyes on the tube. His mouth settled into a worried line. “Shen, I don’t think now’s the time—”

“It’s alright.” The Commander’s voice was quiet, but firm. She looked to Bradford, then Shen. “Read off what’s in there. I need to know. Everyone does.”
Shen shifted in place, aware that she had just been put on the spot. She turned back to the monitor, tapping some keys to read through the documents they were getting. “... the data here spans about a year. The latter half looks like... field tests? Seems they put the Hunter to work for six months.” She tapped open a particular set of files and worry grew. “A lot of work... apparently he was prone to straight up dying from the strain of how ragged they were working him, if not fainting.”

The Commander’s grip on the bars tightened, knuckles turning white. They were getting to the part that she could vaguely remember. “And the former half?”

Lily scrolled through, and when she pieced together enough info, she took in a soft breath. “Six months of war games with... the Commander. With you. Cramming in the data you had accumulated over nearly twenty years into six months...”

Bradford went to the Commander’s side, putting a hand on one of hers. It did nothing to deter her grip and her face remained dark. He was starting to see why the Commander wanted to take a risk like she was going to—if that was just the Hunter, it wasn’t hard to imagine what the Assassin or the Warlock had gone through.

An air of nervousness was shared by the staff on the Bridge. Eliza eventually worked her hands off of the bars, standing up fully. “The data we have just acquired is open to access, especially if you have some questions about what I’ve been doing recently.” Her voice still retains a professional air but tiredness was evident. “Good work, Menace One-Five. Call in Firebrand.”

She then turned to Bradford, the two exchanging a glance before he rubbed his mouth, nodding. The Commander walked out of the room, leaving the Bridge behind her.

There was no time offered in the loving embrace of the Elders for the Warlock.

He awoke on the floor in front of his sarcophagus, gasping for air as the psionics of his reincarnation bled off of him. He propped himself up with a hand, blearily looking around to confirm that he had been unceremoniously dumped out of the void.

Jax-Rai rose to his feet, wincing as the slight dizziness of living again hit him. He turned back to his sarcophagus. The Elders had not spoke to him whatsoever. Dread began to eat away at his gut.

Surely They were justified in not speaking to him. He did just fail to protect one of Their sacred grounds, so surely this was Their punishment. Silence.

As justified as it may have been, it ate away at him. He almost would have preferred Their anger being expressed directly. At least it could be resolved then... even if it involved...

The Warlock shuddered, the claws of his gauntlets digging into the sides of his armor. No, that was certainly worse. Justified as it may have been, the Elders’ anger was terrifying and left such lasting pain that refused to leave his mind. He could not stand to feel that again—the memories were doing a good enough job of reminding him that he must not fail again.

But even as he acknowledged that, his gaze turned back up to the sarcophagus. What if all he had to do was reach out and apologize first? His willingness to make amends was something They were always pleased with.
“Father?”

There was no response. He bowed his head, turning away and giving a shaky sigh. “I’m sorry.”
The Hunter is made an official part of XCOM.

The Hunter paced back and forth in his cell, his mind moving at a million miles an hour. As it was wont to do, really.

First things first was what exactly he’d be doing now that he was basically a part of XCOM. Honestly, he was mostly in it for the fact of pissing the Elders off—it’d be a real riot for them to see him deployed on a mission, shooting at their own wannabe army. He’d take so much satisfaction in actively dismantling whatever they created when he was still with them. Sure, it would be easy to pass it off into something noble, but Mordenna was thinking more of personal revenge. Plus, his siblings would be viable on the shooting range, more so than they were before. It’d be hilarious for one of them to show up on a mission while he was there.

But, then again... there was a part of his genetic makeup that was screaming to gather what info he could, wait until everyone was asleep, then nab the Commander and steal away into the night. Might not even turn up at the Elders’ doorstep with her. He never fancied ruling the Earth, anyway—the most he’d do with it is turn it into a game reserve. Free to hunt as he’d like... though he knew that, with almost everything, he’d grow bored of it.

So what was stopping him? He stopped pacing for a moment as he thought on that fact. “Can’t be honor,” he muttered to himself. He had a habit of narrating his own thoughts when he was alone. Mordenna had been easing into it while he was in his cell. Definitely couldn’t be honor, in any case. The Hunter would swiftly backstab anybody lesser than him if it benefitted him, and it sure as hell would to jailbreak himself.

“... lesser than me,” he deliberates, going over his last thought. Yes, ultimately this contract he was forging was with Eliza, the Commander of XCOM and whatever other titles had been laid upon her when he wasn’t looking. If he was being stopped by something, the fastest thing he’d admit to it being would be that. “Maybe not equal, ” he said, tilting his head, “but... interesting. She’s the Commander of XCOM, after all. Tactical genius. So coveted that the Elders wanted her in alive and had three specialized personnel sent after her to capture her—and apparently she’s good enough to turn the tables on at least one of them.”

Interesting, indeed. To be interesting to Mordenna was usually a death sentence... but Eliza was different. Killing her would be fun for a bit—to watch XCOM enter a death spiral without their greatest asset, to see the Elders’ plans crumble, to watch the world burn, essentially. But then that would be it. No more Eliza. No more talks. No more debates. Killing her struck him as incredibly short-sighted, and not out of any morals.

“Fuck, she’s a card,” he said, shrugging. “Would be an awful waste to kill her.” Yep, there was a part of him who wanted to be around Eliza, to have her entertain him like few could. But he didn’t like to think on that part long, because it held some rather embarrassing notions. Yet, as soon as he thought on it, those damn emotions came to the surface. He groaned. “Not this shit again, Mordenna. What the hell?”
Yeah, he thought she was interesting. Hell, he knew her dying wouldn’t be fun. That should be *it* regarding his feelings on the matter. But that goddamn talk she had with him just messed everything up. He couldn’t process the fact that she *cared* for him like that. He knew she was privy to a few things that happened while she was in the tank, and that whole six months of info cramming, probably. But Mordenna hadn’t ever accounted for her bringing it up, or for that to be her reaction. For someone else to look at what happened to him and just go ‘that’s fucked up and that shouldn’t have happened to you?’ It was awfully humbling, and the Hunter wasn’t one much for *humble*.

... and he would’ve lost that whole talk if him or his siblings brought her in successfully. A quiet thankfulness for what could have been crept up on him and he tried his best to quash it. He was the Hunter. He wasn’t susceptible to the kinds of emotions that blinded humans, was he? *You were human once*, that part of his mind that was thinking over Eliza tutted, and he was tempted to swear it out of the room. “May have been human once but like any good individual, I got over that.” Yet, wasn’t it that *humanity* that was interesting about Eliza? He’d never seen her so... emotional. Almost all of his interactions with her were when she was in that tank, under the Elders’ thumb.

He stopped pacing again. “Look, let’s just wrap this whole thing up with ‘I don’t necessarily want Eliza dead,’ alright? It’d be awfully pathetic if we thought on it any further. By god, I’ll think of something else you can grill me over if that’ll shut you up on this topic.”

Mordenna didn’t have to—the panel on the wall beeped and he turned towards the door as it opened. Speak of the devil! Eliza stepped in, remote in hand as the door slid closed behind her. Instantly, he was studying her. Her posture was a bit tense and the bags under her eyes seemed to have deepened a bit. Hair was a bit more unkempt, too—must’ve been running her fingers through it. But she didn’t look *too* out of sorts. He judged the mission they went on to be stressful, but successful.

The Hunter grinned. “Commander! I trust the worst hasn’t happened and I’m not doomed to pace this cube forever?”

Eliza’s neutral line of a mouth went more towards a smile, and the Hunter couldn’t help but feel... *accomplished? God, you’re pathetic.* “No, we’ve found no reason to go back on accepting you into XCOM.”

Mordenna nodded at the news, but his curiosity was burning. With the minimal info he had over the mission, he couldn’t speculate over what they were doing. He had to ask. “Excuse me for prying, but you look awfully *stressed*, Commander. What was that mission you just went on?”

Eliza doesn’t answer immediately. Her thumb runs across the remote in her hands and she glances down for a second. Oh, no. That didn’t bode well. But after a second, she seemed to come to some sort of silent decision. She looked him in the eye as she answered. “Our most recent mission was a trip to the Blacksite, a facility that was being guarded by the Warlock. Upon some contextual information and some speech from him, we discovered that we had happened upon your Ascension facility.”

*Oh.* Damn. As if he needed Eliza caring even more about him... then again. He was still working off of hypothetical knowledge of how much she remembered post-severance. “… how much of all that do you remember, Eliza?”

Eliza runs a hand through her hair. “*Enough.* Enough to know they were overloading you with everything I had gathered in nearly twenty years’ time.”

That brings about a heavy silence. For the Hunter, the experience was something he really didn’t
think on, often. It was one of the few spots where his brain actively repressed the distinct memories. All the tactical knowledge and know-how, he retained, but all he could recall beyond that was just the sheer stress and overloading he went under. Even then it was only vaguely. He counted himself lucky... and even then, not as much so. It changed him, even if he didn’t fully remember what happened. Ascension wasn’t pretty.

That final thought stuck out to him... and he felt compelled to share something. Something that he’d been largely keeping to himself, a few files that he was barely able to access even as an administrator on the Network. “… y’know, Liz, you were supposed to be one of us at some point.”

Now that garners Eliza’s attention. She fixed him with an interested stare, wordlessly saying to continue. The Hunter didn’t remember everything about what they wanted to do—all the info he had come across was just in files, and those memories got damaged when he was severed. But he knew enough that some part of him was repulsed at the notion of her becoming a Chosen, and he couldn’t pin a finger on why. “Once the Elders had the three of us under their belt, they apparently turned their sights on you. But, they had to really meter it out. A lot of the planned Ascension required removing you from the Stasis Suit, after all. They did do some prep work beforehand, but...” The knowledge escaped him. It was one of the holes, and he shrugged it off. “Network severance kind of damaged my knowledge there.”

“So,” Eliza said softly, “what happened?”

“Well,” he continued, “they were planning to fully remove you from the Suit and start work, that much was going to happen. Then Gatecrasher happened. The day after was slated for your Ascension to start.” He wanted to gesture using his hands, but he sighed. “You were this close to the point of no return, Commander. This close to becoming, according to your file name, The Siren.”

A quiet horror seemed to overtake Eliza, and her free hand reached for her throat. What an odd gesture. Maybe she had been privy to some of the prep work they had done but hadn’t figured out why it was there. Well, now she knew. “The Siren,” she muttered gently.

“Kon-Hur Dessurik, to be precise. Depthssinger. God knows what they were going to do with you, my knowledge on the file is spotty nowadays.” There was a thing or two Mordenna was holding back... but best to not splay out his knowledge all at once. “So, there’s another Sword of Damocles hanging over your head regarding the Elders capturing you!” He paused. That... actually seemed kind of not funny. “… hate to bring it up, in hindsight.”

Eliza shook her head. “I wasn’t ever planning on returning to the Elders anyway, so that’s just more of an incentive to keep fighting... but, I suppose I should thank you for the knowledge.”

“Of course! You are ever so welcome, Lizzi.” He grinned slyly, bouncing on his heels. “So! Can you release me from these cuffs?”

The Commander smiled and again rose those feelings in Mordenna’s gut. He really wanted that to stop. “Just want to clear a thing or two first, to make sure this goes as smoothly as possible.” She settles her hands in front of her, her free hand grasping her other wrist. “First of all, and I’m sure you know, but this is going to be quite the controversial move on my part, amongst my soldiers and staff. You don’t have the best reputation around here, sadly, so me incorporating you into the crew is going to turn some heads. I will be clearing it with my soldiers before they see you in person, wandering the halls of the Avenger, so there’s no risk of accidents there.”

“Your point being?”
“I want you to be on your best behavior,” she stated simply, “As much as I’m sure you would love to cause even some well-meaning trouble around here, I ask that you lay off of it until everyone’s used to having you around here. Don’t want people fostering resentment over the move. After everybody’s settled with having you here, you can relax a little. But before then? Please keep it together.”

“Oh, me? Cause a little trouble? Eliza, where are you hearing these things?” His tone was innocent but his expression betrayed his joking. “Well, I’ll see what I can do about it.” A nebulous statement. It’d be hard to hold off from even a little mischief, in his mind. Given a ship full of boy scouts and one or two interesting marks? A lot to ask, if you asked him.

“All I ask is for an honest attempt. Second of all, as for right now, you’re going to have to be sharing some space in the Barracks with everyone else, until we figure out a good bed situation for you—”

“Don’t bother,” he cuts her off casually, “Can’t sleep, really. I mean that physically. Elders hardwired my brain that it really doesn’t shut off unless you force it to. Psionically, anyway.” He gave her a meaningful look as he said that and she chuckled.

“Alright, suppose that cuts some hassle.” She straightens a bit. “Finally... and I do specifically clear this with you because I value your feelings on the matter, if I can capture your siblings like I have you, I hope to swing them to the side of XCOM as well.”

That gives Mordenna pause. “Why you gotta do this to me, Eliza,” he deadpanned, shaking his head, “The one place where I was sure I’d never have to collaborate with them again and you’re going to corral them in here? You wound me, Lizzi.”

Eliza seems to sober a bit, and the Hunter’s eyesight picks up on how she slouches almost imperceptibly. “My empathy for you extends to them, Mordenna. I want to give them the chance, like I’ve given you. They’ve gone through what you have—granted, with a change or two here and there, but...”

The Hunter grimaces at that. Yeah, when he stopped to think about it—which wasn’t often—he did realize that his siblings also didn’t escape the horrible, horrible parents that were the Elders. They were still with them as they spoke, in fact. If he knew those bastards well enough at all, they probably pinned the blame on the Warlock and the Assassin for his capture. But, a part of his brain reminded him, the Elders “loved” them much more than they did you. They probably escaped punishment that you would’ve gotten were you in the same situation. That was all it took to suck most of his potential empathy out for them.

He sighed. “I can say that I’ll try to play well with your boy scouts, but my siblings? No promises.”

“Just don’t kill each other,” Eliza said, “but hopefully? I can help the three of you out.”

“Alright,” Mordenna replied. “Is that it?”

“For right now, yes,” Eliza nodded. “We did manage to recover your weapons, by the way. They’re down in the Workshop and Lily will be holding onto them for a bit while she studies them.”

“Lily Shen! I almost forgot she was here.” Lily was definitely a person of interest to Mordenna. Quite the brilliant engineer, though he’d never say that without a qualifying statement or two. Sure, he was somewhat miffed about his weapons being taken and studied, but hell, it gave him an excuse to go bother her. “Fine enough by me. Now can you release me from these?”
The Commander nodded and readjusted her grip on the remote, her thumb hitting one of the buttons on it. He could feel the bonds on his wrists loosen enough that he could slip out of them. The shackles on his feet similarly powered down and he quickly took the second to kick them off. Now was his chance, while he was freed. His left hand flew forward, giving Eliza no time to react —

—as it landed across her face, not even hard enough to sting. Eliza looked stunned for a second before the gears in her head turned. She then promptly burst out laughing, an action that made Mordenna smirk. “Well, Liz,” he began, highly amused, “I wasn’t about to pass up on that slap you agreed to.”

Still laughing, but calming down, Eliza shook her head. “Fuck, give me a little warning next time! I straight up forgot about it.”

He shrugged, hands out to his sides. He was kind of glad he could gesture with them now. “That’s on you to remember, Liz. Now, what next?”

Eliza turned and tapped a button on the panel next to the door. It slides open and Mordenna’s mildly surprised to find Bradford on the other side. Already, the man tenses and his eyes shoot to the Hunter’s unbound hands and feet, as if confirming he was free. Oh yeah, Eliza’s best boy scout. He hadn’t expected to see him so soon, and he looked so tense. When Eliza moved closer to Bradford, the Hunter moved to the doorway, leaning on one side of it. “Oh hello, Bradford. Nice to see you ‘round here. Seems I’m joining up with your little group of troops.”

Bradford didn’t look too amused, but not shocked, either. “I’m well aware, Hunter.”

Hm. He was somewhat, but not entirely surprised. Mordenna was interested that she had managed to clear with plan with anyone at all, but her XO would probably be in the know. Everyone else? It’d be interesting to see the heads he could turn.

Eliza seemed to note the exchange, but ultimately didn’t comment on it. Instead, she turned to Bradford. “Bradford, we’ve reached a complete agreement. It’s time to let the rest of the crew know.” As she said that, her body language shifted almost imperceptibly—but it stood out to the Hunter’s god-given sight. She tensed just a bit and a few of her wrist muscles from the hand holding the remote stood out. Was she nervous? It was hard to imagine the legendary Commander in such a way. But it didn’t last long. She took in a slightly deeper breath and she slipped back into calm. “Gather the staff and soldiers—anyone who’s not urgently working on something. I’ll be making my address.”

Bradford nodded without hesitation, his eyes flickering over to the panel on the wall. The one near the exit door, specifically. “Understood. I’ll make an announcement to get everyone to the Bridge.”

He couldn’t see it because her back was turned to him, but Mordenna supposed Eliza smiled for the way Bradford seemed to relax a touch more. “I appreciate it, Bradford. After you make the call, could you show him the way to the Workshop? Once everyone’s cleared into the Bridge, of course.” Figures. Even if Bradford was with him, seeing the Hunter loose would probably create more of a stir than she’d like.

Her XO nodded to that too, giving Mordenna one last cautionary glance. Still, he looked uneasy. “If you don’t mind me asking—” He held up a hand, presumably as Eliza was about to cut him off, “and I know you don’t, but should we really let him get at his weapons so soon?”

Oh, Mordenna knew he should keep his mouth shut but comments were flowing out of it faster.
than he could stop it. “Bradford, why the concern? You act as if I’m some sort of loose cannon that’s looking for an excuse to give someone a new nose piercing.”

At that, Bradford grimaced and looked back to Eliza. She turned so she could look up at the Hunter and give him a bit of a huff, to which he shrugged innocently. “Mordenna here will be getting his weapons later, once he needs them. For now it’s to familiarize him with someone he might want to work in tandem with if he wants to pursue his less lethal hobby.”

Huh! Eliza remembered that he wasn’t just a killing machine. Neat, and also kind of... something that made those feelings rise again and he hated that. So, just neat. “Engineering, eh? You giving me the chance to work with the legendary Lily Shen of all people, Lizzie?” He savored the look he got from Bradford at the nickname. “Why, you are just the gift that keeps on giving. I don’t know why I didn’t try to join up with you sooner.”

She gave a short chuckle, crossing her arms. “Just play nice, alright?”

He scoffed, putting a hand to his chest in mock hurt. “First Bradford, now you? Does this train of accusations never stop? When will you see that I’m just here for the same kind of fun that the rest of you are—slaughtering hundreds in the name of a movement?”

Now that evolved Bradford’s grimace into something more lined with disgust. That, he was fine with. Bradford was a bit beneath him, in his eyes. The biggest boy scout in Eliza’s crew and probably the most blatant. But Eliza remained relaxed and easily fired off her retort. “If it’s fun and games to you, this war will be over faster than I thought. After all, you like the sport of it all.”

Well, Eliza had him pegged, and she didn’t even seem fazed. Just another reminder of why he was going to enjoy his time with XCOM a lot. “I sure do, Commander. But if it makes things go faster, sure, I’ll try to play nice. Try to.”

Bradford shot Eliza one last concerned look before he stepped away to the control panel, tapping a few options on it in succession. Within moments, the AI of the Avenger’s voice filtered over the intercom. “All available personnel report to the Bridge. All available personnel, report to the Bridge.”

Eliza nodded thankfully. “Alright. The two of you wait for a bit here—I’ve got a whole crowd of people to break some news to.” With that, she strode past Bradford and out of the room, the door closing behind her quietly. That left just Bradford and the Hunter left in the room, and Bradford looked keen on keeping his distance to the loose Chosen.

Still leaning on the door, Mordenna grinned at him, showing off his sharp, pearly whites. Bradford squinted at him in response. It looked like he wanted to fill the silence, as he spoke up. “I’m giving the staff about five minutes to clear up to the Bridge. That should be enough time for everyone to filter in so I can take you down to the Workshop without any interruptions.”

A timer was set off in Mordenna’s head. He’d hold Bradford to those five minutes. Mordenna was very good about keeping track of the time. “I’ll hold you to it, John. You seem awfully calm for someone whose Commander has just admitted a bloodthirsty alien into her ranks.” His arms crossed and he tilted his head up a bit. “You wanted to ask her if it was a good idea or not right there, didn’t you. Probably ‘again,’ for all I know.”

Bradford looked for all of the world like he’d rather be dealing with Mordenna while he was still tried up. Well, they didn’t put a muzzle on him, so he’d have to deal with the Hunter’s tongue regardless. “I’ve listened to the Commander and her reasoning. It’s worth a shot, at the very least. Even if I still have some reservations.” The way he said it, said reservations sounded very justified.
Then again, with the person he was currently talking to, they very much were.

“Oh, Eliza’s opinions and thoughts are all well and dandy,” Mordenna followed, waving his statement off, “but I wanna know what’s going on in your head, Central. What do you think of me joining your merry band of ne’er-do-wells? What’s your opinion?” To him, besides being beneath him, Bradford was a parrot on Eliza’s shoulder. Sure, he might’ve brought up the occasional question to make sure Eliza was still thinking straight, but all he ever seemed to do was agree with anything Eliza wanted, in Mordenna’s eyes. Where was the fun in that?

Bradford straightened. “That is my opinion now. The Commander and I have talked at length and she’s shown me her thinking. I wasn’t for you at first. But she convinced me that you’re worth a chance, at least.” Hmm. Well, of course he wouldn’t want Mordenna on at first. The thought would be hard to swallow no matter who you were. Then again, that led the question back around to Eliza—and Eliza had already told the Hunter why she wanted him around. It still felt kinda humbling, which he didn’t like.

“Interesting.” He held out the beginning of that word, almost in sing-song. “You must think awfully highly of her if you’re willing to let her sway your opinion. Then again, it could be just because she’s your superior officer—in a time where law isn’t backing up her position. You humans cling an awful lot to the old world.” He leaned his head against the wall, looking down his nose at Bradford. “My point being, it must be awfully personal between the two of you. What’s she to you?”

At that, Bradford hesitated, and the Hunter could swear he could spot the whole thought process he was going through. He didn’t fancy himself a mind reader, but he could tell an awful lot about what a person was thinking based on every twitch of facial muscle, every glance of their eyes. Bradford looked like he was on the edge of even continuing the conversation, and rightfully so. This was a mindfield and the Hunter was leading him to the biggest ones. The best move would be to not play, a line from Eliza played in his head, and he couldn’t help but agree.

But, eventually, Bradford seemed to come to a decision—and that was to answer the question. “The Commander’s a forward thinker, to me. Always has the future in mind and takes in account everything from the past. Even so, she remembers the people under her command as she moves forward, and spares her thoughts for their wellbeing.” His mouth pressed into an uncertain frown. “Maybe she’s a bit soft for her own good at times, but she always makes good calls, and doesn’t back down from the more ugly decisions.”

Mordenna grinned. What an interesting character summation at the end, there. Too soft. The leader of XCOM was too soft. It made him wonder if she was always this way. “So, Bradford. You think I’m a good call?”

He sighed at that, eyes flickering towards the door. Their five minutes was nearly up. “We’re going to see about that.

“... and he will be considered just as much of a soldier as the rest of you. Granted, there are still boundaries to be set. But I believe that, with time, he will become a valued ally and a force to be reckoned with.”

Eliza was wrapping up her speech to nearly the whole staff of the Avenger, soldiers included. The
Bridge was big and held all of them with little difficulty, and Eliza knew how to project her voice so it was heard clearly. She had her audience at rapt, but cautious attention. She wasn’t blind. She could see that there was some nervousness among the faces she was speaking to. Eliza didn’t blame them one bit. Breaking this news wasn’t going to happen to 100% smiling faces—news of this magnitude never did. But there wasn’t outright rioting in the streets, so she counted it as a good thing.

She took barely a second to take in a breath. “I value your questions and opinions, as you know. I’d be glad to hear your questions and concerns, even if they seem obvious.” That last part, she felt was needed. Of course someone was going to want to speak up and say “I don’t like this” or “this seems like a bad idea, Commander.” She was fine with it, questions gave her an opportunity to lay down solid answers on topics she might’ve not covered.

A hand went up, and from her place on top of the Hologlobe, Eliza could spot that it belonged to Roland. “Roland, your question?”

“Commander, with all due respect,” he began shortly, fixing her with a hard gaze. His expression was a bit hard to determine past the repurposed Muton mask but she could get a good feel for his mild paranoia. “But this Hunter was one of the Elders’ top lap dogs. Doesn’t he have every advantage of playing along for a bit and then betraying us? Even if not that, we all know how much of—to put it bluntly—a prick he is. What’s to say that behavior won’t continue?”

Eliza nodded as his hand went down, thinking honestly over it. “I’ve talked with him and I’ve had my impressions even before Bradford sprung me from the tank. The Hunter is not the type to please the Elders. He holds a very large amount of resentment towards them and it’s what drove most of his agreement to his defection. He doesn’t have much motivation to betray us for the Elders’ sakes.” As for personal motivation? Far be it from Eliza to make the observation, but Mordenna seemed to be interested in her. In such a manner that killing her was most likely off of his agenda. Couldn’t get much amusement out of a corpse, she figured.

She ran a hand through her hair. “As for behavior, I’m hoping to keep an eye on that and hold him accountable to his actions. I want to make that last part clear, too. This isn’t a ‘he’s here, deal with it’ sort of situation. Things are going to be very touch-and-go regarding all of it. But I have confidence that all of you will handle it in a mature fashion and not give him valid reasons to act out.” Keyword there being valid. She knew he might pick something small, but as long as her troops didn’t feed the fire intentionally? It’d make things easier on her. “Is that clear?”

The Commander got a strong “yes Commander” affirmation from the crowd and gave a solid nod. She could see a few people had some excitement to them. After all, this was quite the asset they were going to have on their side, if things went smoothly. But largely, there was a sense of slight unease. Better than it had been before Roland’s questions, though, and she counted his willingness to question her decisions as a good thing.

She clasped her hands behind her back. “If nobody else has questions, you are all free to return to your schedules.” When there was a pause for questions and nobody seemed to have any, the gathered crowd started to disperse. Eliza watched as they filed out, and when about half of them were gone, she descended from her place on the Hologlobe. Hopefully that had given enough time to Bradford and Mordenna.
The duo of Bradford and Mordenna were just now leaving for the Workshop, thanks to a time extension on Bradford’s part and more probing questions on Mordenna’s part. He had to give Bradford credit, he didn’t crack under the barrage he went under, though after a while his responses started getting more and more clipped. Probably didn’t want to slip so much to him in such a short amount of time. Which, fair. At least Bradford wasn’t stupid. It’d be too easy if he was.

Their tardiness meant that a turn down the hall made them meet up with a group of three soldiers—and Mordenna really didn’t take the time to size them up. He had far more important things on the mind. But, he vaguely registered that, judging on the gear and the species of one of them, that it was a Sharpshooter, a Specialist, and a Skirmisher he was somewhat aware of.

Bradford nodded to them. “Herod, Vlad, Samhien. Embarking on the action?”

The Skirmisher, apparently known as Samhien, nodded chipperly. A bit too chipperly, in the Hunter’s opinion. “Yes, sir. We were all geared up before the Commander called us in for the meeting. We have done our weapon checks and we are fully ready to make the trek to the location Betos specified.”

“Alright,” Bradford nodded, continuing to walk. The soldiers walked with them, presumably going to the same place that they were. Curiosity captured Mordenna and he couldn’t help but ask.

“Now, considering I’m ‘part of the team’ now, you mind if I know what exactly you three are going to be up to?”

The two human soldiers looked at each other uneasily, but the helmetless Skirmisher gave him a warm grin. God, just looking at him gave Mordenna sugar aches. He only could imagine what his sister would feel. “Of course! You are one of us, Eliza said as much. Central, may I explain?”

“... fine, but keep it minimal,” Bradford replied, looking like he was on the edge of saying “no.” But he didn’t, and Samhien continued.

“We are currently going to go scout out the exact location of the Nightmaiden’s stronghold.”

“Interesting! Going to knock on my sister’s front door, are you?” Mordenna grinned, an action that Samhien didn’t seem put off by. “Mind if I join you? I’m already popping by this Workshop to make sure my weapons are in good hands.”

At that, Samhien shook his head. “Sorry, but we are going to be a party of three at max. Any more troops sent with us and we risk increasing our profile as we make the trek. But,” he said, still giving Mordenna that smile, “I would enjoy talking with you when I come back!”

It was interesting to see someone so on-board with him so early on, especially considering it was a Skirmisher he was talking to. It was almost cute. “ Alright, Sammy. Good luck. My sister doesn’t take too kindly to intruders.”

The nickname of “Sammy” made Samhien positively light up, and he nodded appreciatively as they reached a doorway. Sammy took the helmet from under his arm and fixed it on his head, giving Mordenna a thumbs-up. Looks like they were close to their destination.

They all stepped through the door, and Mordenna could definitely see that it was the Workshop. One half of it was engineer tables and equipment, the other, netted-down pallets and crates of supplies. If he knew his ship models correctly, this was the back of the ship—confirmed by the open ramp that led to the outside. The soldiers stepped past the equipment and made their way down the ramp. The Sharpshooter spoke “got a long trip ahead of us” to nobody in the group in
particular, to which the Specialist nodded.

But what Mordenna was more interested in was who was standing in the Workshop. It was none other than Lily Shen herself, who spotted the Hunter coming towards her. Her eyes fixed on him, and beneath her hesitation, there was a kind of excitement. Good, he thought. “Chief Engineer, huh?”

Lily sighed. He was sure she knew this was going to be a long day.
Incursion

Chapter Summary

XCOM scouts the Assassin’s Stronghold, and gets more than they bargained for.

In the evening, almost dusk light, the whole world seemed to be at a standstill. The rocky hills held little vegetation to signal a wind was blowing, and only the occasional lifted pebble told that this wasn’t a picture that the Assassin was walking in.

Of course, to an outside observer, there was no one around. Fal-Mai made sure her psionic cloak was tightly wrapped around her shoulders as she lightly stepped from rock, to hill, to ground, and back again as she traversed the terrain. Her footfalls were so light they didn’t even disturb the very dust at her feet. She thought herself one with the Earth itself—it knew her and allowed her undisturbed passage.

As was opposed to her quarry. She could not see them right now—the terrain offered natural cover for those at far distances. But she could hear them as if she was right next to them. Their rough, occasionally uneven footfalls. The stilled breath as they exerted themselves climbing the rocks. Their chatter. They kept their volume low but it was still enough to hear.

Fal-Mai knew she would have visitors soon after XCOM and the Skirmishers’ last incursion. She had let them go, then. They didn’t seem keen on sticking around. This time, she was intending to show them what they were in for, should they dare transgress after this.

Soon enough, she was properly upon her prey. She had correctly guessed there were three of them—two XCOM, one Skirmisher. They were far from her base at the present, but it was clear they knew where they were going. She roamed her eyes over them, taking in their details.

Leading the squad was a man—gathered from the voices she heard earlier—covered head to toe in armor. His helmet had two vents to filter air, like a gasmask. One of XCOM’s GREMLINS floated close to him, hovering behind him as he scaled another deeper hill. Her eyes picked out the medkit attachment on it and she supposed this was the medical backup for the crew. A Specialist.

Right behind him was another man, his face visible. A scar ran down his right eye, accenting the light blue of his irises. The color of them further stood out against his dark skin, which was nearly completely black in the vanishing evening light. The rest of his head was covered by a netted, tactical hood, but a finely-woven dreadlock or two peeked out of it. A Plasma Rifle hung from his back and a matching pistol was on his belt, signaling him as a Sharpshooter.

Finally, at the back and having little difficulty with the terrain, was the Skirmisher. One of those despicable “redecorated” Skirmisher helmets covered his face and a cape fanned out from his back, both of them and his armor accented with blue instead of the usual red. His Bullpup was on his belt, and the Assassin noted the Plasma Grenade as well. Brought for her, no doubt. The thought made her gut twist.

The Skirmisher looked up and around as he scaled the next hill, stopping where he was in the conversation. The other two looked back at him and he cleared his throat. “Sorry, sorry... um, what were we talking about?”
“Samhien, I’m not even sure how you lost track.” The Sharpshooter paused at the top of the next hill, taking in his surroundings before continuing. “But, hm. I’m sure it was something about the hike.” Looks like someone wasn’t paying too much attention, themselves.

“Sorry, Herod. I got distracted for a second,” “Samhien” replied. If the Sharpshooter was Herod, then the Assassin could piece together the name of the last one based on the conversations she’d heard leading up to meeting them. Vlad. What an odd name. It didn’t strike her as usual, from what she’d heard, which was admittedly little. Still...

“Oh, yeah, distracted by the great big amounts of nothing going on around here,” Vlad said, almost biting back with his comment. His accent was heavily... Russian, if some of her ingrained memory and knowledge served correctly, which the Assassin supposed answered the question of his name. “So enrapturing. Breathtaking. Could really lose whole days to it.”

“Cut it,” Herod shortly replied. “Honestly, maybe it is easy to get distracted. Knowing the Assassin, she’s probably breathing down our necks right now.” If only he knew, she mused. Would he—and the rest of them—be as free with speaking if they knew just how accurate that statement was?

Samhien seemed to put some credibility into it, because when he spoke next, his voice was lowered just a touch more. “Right, right... plus, it is almost impossible to keep an eye out for her. If she does not want to be seen...”

“Then she can sit in that damn cloak all day,” Vlad grumbled. “She can’t attack and stay in her little safe space. She’s gotta become visible somehow if she wants to stop us. Either she stays silent and we complete the mission, or she shows up and we kick her ass.”

“Vlad, we are a squad of three people.” Herod was proving increasingly to be the voice of reason. He helped Samhien up a climb, though it looked like he didn’t need the help. “If the Assassin shows up, the best we can do is convince her to back off. We’ve got the means to do so.”

Samhien nodded at that, his head still on a swivel. “The Assassin is a practically-minded Chosen. She will not engage in a prolonged confrontation if it proves detrimental. That said, we must strike fast when she does show.”

Herod nodded, and the group lapsed into silence, further scaling the cliffs. It seemed their commentary was done for now, and the Assassin was glad for the quiet. She much preferred the natural ambience of the area, even if it was marred by the sounds they were making now.

She followed behind them, easily hopping up and on hills and inclines they had to trudge up or occasionally climb. The hills built up to higher ground steadily, and whatever natural shrubbery there had been before began to be laced with tinges of purple. Some plants were even beginning to mutate from the presence of Elerium. They were drawing ever closer to her Stronghold. Fal-Mai would not allow them to leave with the information unscathed... even if a part of her wished to let them leave with the information. Killing a small search party would not be a challenge. Fending off XCOM’s strongest squad as they sought her out? Infinitely more rewarding.

But she was not soft of heart. One of them might leave alive to pass on the information—but she could not say the same of the other two. Or even perhaps... two could leave. One could “stay.” There was no valuable information to be found from a corpse. Already her eyes trained on Samhien. Of course, she would be drawn to inflicting the most suffering on the Skirmisher. It was in her very DNA. The sight of him almost repulsed her.

Samhien seemed to shudder, but did not comment as the trio scaled the last hill. Two other hills
flanked it, slightly taller on one side and considerably taller on the other. It overlooked a natural basin in the landscape—in the valley of which, sat the Assassin’s stronghold. The group seemed taken back a bit by the sight of it, but Herod wasn’t awestruck for long. He unclipped a pad from his belt and held it up. “Well, here we are. Taking a picture, recording coordinates.”

She waited for the picture to be taken and for Herod to record the info. As she did, she stalked closer to Samhien. A cut at the back of the legs would leave him crippled—and XCOM out a soldier. **Good.** The more of them she could put down, the better. She gently unsheathed her sword, readying it. This deserter would know his place. He had his chance. He threw away his life when he denied the embrace of the Elders. Making him suffer would be a **treat.** With admittedly gruesome thoughts rising to the front of her mind, she drew back her blade—

—and Samhien **tenses,** whirling around. That’s enough to make Fal-Mai take a step back to avoid him, and it garners his squad’s attention. Did... did he **notice her?** How did he accomplish that? He seemed to scan the area around her, but remained near her location, as if he knew her general area. Herod fully turned around. “Sammy, what’s up?”

Samhien swallowed thickly, the noise ringing off of the Assassin’s ears. “We are probably...” He began, but swallowed again and shook his head. “**We are being watched.** I felt a bad omen, just now. A very bad omen.”

“An ‘omen.’ An ‘omen?’” Vlad scoffed. “What, you some sort of **prophet** now? Thought you were a goddamned ADVENT Medic, not one of their Priests.”

“Vlad, **shut it.** Samhien’s always had good hunches, and god knows they’ve saved us a time or two before.” Herod wasn’t having Vlad’s skepticism, it seemed.

“Hunches are **hunches** and I’m not letting some flimsy **feeling** take us off-track.”

“Gut instinct is more valuable than you think. There’s been times...”

The Assassin stopped focusing on the two’s argument, and she supposed Samhien had, too. The two were locked in a stand-off. Fal-Mai was gauging if he could **see** her or not, or if it had been some sort of sense, as the squad was positing. She raised her sword in a striking position as a test, and Samhien did not respond. Not sight. So what was it? He couldn’t be privy to her thoughts—especially not now, with the Elders’ gift.

Samhien shifted on his feet, head glancing back towards his two currently-bickering squadmates. Fal-Mai knew that even if he could sense her by some means, right now would be the best time to strike, as his allies were distracted. Perhaps it would make this more of a fight than she had thought. Her eyes narrowed and dropped to his knees again. If not the backs, then the fronts... and simply removing his legs could work, but the blood loss might prove fatal. **Not if you usher him to a medic fast enough,** a thought said, and that was enough for her. She brought her sword back into a proper position, intending to strike. Her blade rushed forward properly, peeling from the veil of her psionics.

In under a second, Samhien’s head snapped to hers, a half-second *before* she began to swing. He jumped back and only the tip of her katana caught the front of his knees—a glancing blow, but the metal the katana was made of cleanly severed his armor. Samhien was quick to ready his weapon, expertly stepping back. “**Assassin spotted!**”

Vlad exclaimed something she didn’t catch and Herod spat something she definitely **did** but didn’t wish to think over. She was far more concerned with propelling herself into a flip, vaulting over to the highest of the three hills, already hunkering down behind a larger rock. Samhien had done it
again! She could not rely on her cloak to aid her against him this fight—but it was no matter. Already she had made sure she had the high ground, which was always a boon. She would make sure that XCOM knew that they were not safe, even if she did not make use of one of her greatest strengths.

She risked looking out for a quick second to confirm their positions. Samhien had stayed where he was at in the valley, electing to use one of the taller rocks as cover. Herod had moved farther back onto the second tallest hill, with Vlad a few paces in front of him. Herod noticed her quick peek and she caught the rush of air as his arm reached for his pistol faster than her eyes registered his movement, and she was back in cover by the time a stream of plasma was darting by where her head used to be. A close shot, Fal-Mai would give him that. The Commander sent no slackers.

With that knowledge, she knew she had to keep her exposure short—which meant she could not rely on her eyesight, either. Fine by her; her ears were one of her other greatest strengths, and she would use them accordingly. So she did, closing her eyes. The Assassin could pick out their individual heartbeats, the rubbing of their palms on their weapons... and the close shifting of someone slightly repositioning, and the priming of a grenade. Judging by the closeness, it was the Plasma Grenade Samhien brought, and she drew her katana again. Her eyes were still closed as she heard it sail through the air, waiting until the time was just right—then, she stood up. With the flat of her katana, she knocked it out of the air and to the land they had just traversed, putting as much strength into the swing as she could to propel it. The resulting explosion still harshly rang in her ears, but far less than it would’ve if she had just deflected it normally.

The Assassin opened her eyes just in time to spot Vlad making a move up. Him drawing closer was a death sentence, and she was sure to let him know just how much of one it was. With a graceful, clean motion, she sheathed her katana on her back and then used her momentum and flexibility to transfer the action into pulling out her Arashi. A kick from it and Vlad was sent scrabbling back into cover close by as he screamed out—with a new wounded leg for his efforts.

They were all close together. She needed to end this swiftly, and considering how they were lined up? The answer was obvious. Fal-Mai put her shotgun away and pulled out her blade once more, returning to her crouch and stabbing the tip of it against the earth. The blade hummed with power as it began to draw up the energies latent in the ground, combining with her own as she channeled them through the blade. The purple psionics of the Earth floated up in pieces. The Assassin knew she couldn’t channel long, lest she risk bombardment from any devices she didn’t take into account. This Harbor Wave would be thinner, but no more weaker. Sliding the tip of the blade across the ground, she brought the energies to bear, cloaking the katana in them.

In a fluid motion, she stood and swung her katana towards them, arcing the rampant psionics towards them. She focused her fire on Samhien—and as the wave travelled, it struck Herod in the line, too. Both of them slumped against their cover and gripped their heads, the psionic backlash no doubt coursing across their minds. They would be dazed for a good while as they attempted to recover from the crashing of her power.

She watched as Vlad limped over to Herod, letting him practically drag himself. There seemed to be no thought in his mind for his other companion... it seemed he thought as highly of Skirmishers as she did. Perhaps she was doing him a favor, in his eyes. If she further drove a wedge between him and his allies because the Commander chose to trust a Skirmisher on this mission... then that would be how things went.

This time, she caught a muttered “Samhien” from Herod as he was roused. While she was... dare she say, *vindicated* in Vlad’s apparent distaste for Samhien, she also had to begrudgingly admire Herod’s dedication to him. It would be his downfall, however. Vlad hesitated for a long moment
before gesturing to his machine. The Assassin remembered the medkit attached to it and she knew she couldn’t let it reach its destination.

From a slot on her belt, she produced a throwing knife—weighted so that it would travel smoothly in the air, point first. Fal-Mai deftly handled it and then whipped her arm forward as she leaned out. It caught the GREMLIN by its stabilizers and it spiralled out of control, giving distressed beeps as it tumbled to the ground. Not destroyed, but it wasn’t going anywhere.

This was her chance. With two of the squad immobilized and unable to help him, the Assassin vaulted over her cover and landed next to Samhien, who had dropped his weapon in the commotion. She grabbed him and held his weakly struggling form close as her eyes settled on the other two members of his squad.

“Let your Commander know that she is welcome in my Stronghold, if she wishes to test her troops’ strength against me. But if this is how they will perform, my hopes are not high.”

With that, she summoned the psionics she had to bear, and in a column of purple light, she disappeared.

Silence hung in the air. Herod and Vlad were the only two left.

Herod gripped his head. The psionic wave was still taking its toll on him, but he was aware enough to know what just happened. Blearily, he looked into the visor of Vlad’s helmet... then his hands flew to his comrade’s shoulders as he focused his eyes into a stare. “Vlad. Vlad. Why me.”

“Why you? You’re my fucking squadmate, Herod, did you want me to leave you?”

“*That’s not why,*” Herod bit back, his hands roughly gripping the other’s armor. He knew prejudice when he saw it. “I’m just a goddamn Sharpshooter. Another face in the crowd. A good shot, maybe, but another *soldier.* You should’ve went for Sammy.”

“What’s he got that you don’t? Why do you want me to save some goddamn...” Vlad trailed off. He seemed to realize what he was about to say. Herod glared at him, his mind returning in force.

“*Pugface,* Vlad? Is that what you were gonna fucking say?” He shook him, showing his teeth in his frown. “*We’d* be fucking dead if not for him. Several times over. Several *missions* over. People back at base are going to wonder why their favorite Skirmisher didn’t come home and I’m going to look them in the eye and I’ll have the choice of telling them it was *your fault.* You know how O’Leary takes to people like you.”

Vlad didn’t respond. Herod dropped his hands, swearing under his breath. With his senses came a headache, and by god, the psionics-induced ones were the worst. He drew himself up on the rock, grabbing for his datapad. “We got what we need. I’m taking five to regain my balance and then we’re walking home with our tails between our legs. Maybe I can get Firebrand out here if they haven’t moved yet.”

Vlad continued to be silent. Herod used the rock to ease himself into standing, starting to tap a few things on the datapad. He offered Vlad another look. There were a lot of other things he wanted to say... but at this point, it’d all be just coming around to Vlad’s prejudices and Herod’s belief that he was ultimately expendable. In that way, there was nothing more to be said. He clipped the datapad back onto his belt. “Come on. Get your GREMLIN. We’ve got a long hike ahead of us.”
The Assassin finally touched down in front of her Sarcophagus, Samhien still held to her body. The force of the teleport seemed to have amplified the daze her Harbor Wave had inflicted on him and he hung limply in her arm. Fal-Mai saw no problem with that and strode onwards to the pad.

Another teleport and she was in her Stronghold proper. She kept her pace up—best to assume Samhien was going to wake up any moment rather than take her time. The Assassin rounded a corner and waited for a door to slide open. Beyond it was the Cells, rarely used unless the Assassin herself had detained one of XCOM’s or the Resistance’s numbers. Even then, rarely for long. While she was fine with torture, she didn’t want any of them spending long at her own fortress, lest they somehow broke free. It was less potentially messy to ship them off to another of her facilities in short order.

She chose the closest cell and tapped the pad, walking in with her prisoner. Setting him down a little roughly against the far wall, she stepped back. Fal-Mai returned to the thought of how exactly he sensed her. It wasn’t sight, and from what she could tell, he did not possess the Gift. But still, his signature was brighter than most of the Skirmishers she had come into contact with. Little more than a lantern, especially since he was still in some unconscious state. That left one possibility.

As she thought on it, her eyes wandered to his equipment. Best to rob him of it. Thankfully he’d already dropped his gun back in the field, but that left his armor, Ripjack, and any under armor he was potentially wearing. She knelt down and started with his helmet, placing it to the side. He was much like any other Skirmisher—save the circular, ritualistic scars atop his head. She’d noticed many a Skirmisher had them. It seemed they were trying to distance themselves from the circumstances of their creation. The thought of it was... curious, to Fal-Mai. For once, she found herself genuinely wondering, rather than dismissing it. Individuality... something that they could not have, under the Elders? The Elders had made a perfect design. Should they not all be glad they followed it?

She let the thought go. There was no use really thinking over it. Fal-Mai took the dagger out of her katana and worked it under the straps of his armor, leaving him in his under armor. That, she figured, could stay. After collecting his Ripjack, she took his armor and helmet as well, bringing them out of the cell and putting them on one of the tables in the middle of the room. When she walked back in, she caught his fingers slightly twitching—and her ears caught his change in breath. Must’ve been coming to. This was her chance to test out that possibility. She slipped back into her shroud, watching him.

It took a bit, but Samhien’s head lifted and he blinked a few times. His hands sluggishly felt around him, and then felt himself. He looked himself over, squinting. Slowly, realization dawned on his face. Instead of panicking, like she’d seen many do, Samhien slowly drew up his legs, his knees coming to his chest. Then, he hugged them closer with his arms, closing his eyes and resting his head against his legs. A word stuck out at her—resigned. He seemed resigned to his fate. Normally, Skirmishers that had been caught like this fought. They were angry, furious they had been caught, or at the very least afraid. This was a very unique Skirmisher.

But, unlike the feeling in the pit of her stomach might say, she had no sympathetic thoughts for Skirmishers. They chose their fate, she assured herself. That assurance went right into what she wanted to test. She let herself dwell on that thought—they had the ideal life under the Elders. To serve Them was the noblest destiny of all. To go against that was ungrateful. Short-sighted. The audacity of it made her want to forgo holding him as a prisoner at all.

It had the intended effect—as she thought further and her emotions slipped out, Samhien’s head
rose. He looked around his cell blearily, but his eyes eventually settled right in front of him. He hugged his legs closer to himself and his mouth settled into a worried frown. “... Nightmaiden,” he murmured, “are you here?”

That was enough for her. She took a breath to clear her thoughts before she dropped her shroud. Samhien didn’t jump, but he did deflate further at the sight of her. She regarded him coldly for a moment before speaking. “How were you able to sense me?” Fal-Mai already had a hunch, but it was best to confirm her notions. If he tried to lie, at least she would know.

Samhien hesitated for a moment, eyes shifting to the side. “I don’t know.” Fal-Mai’s exceptional hearing picked up on the slight lilt of his voice that conveyed nervousness and falsehood. She drew out her sword and pressed the tip of it against his head.

“How.”

He went cross-eyed focusing on the blade, and he swallowed thickly. “I don’t know. Not... not exactly, I don’t. I get... feelings, from people. ‘Vibes?’ They are like... auras. I can tell their emotions, a bit. You were... angry. And disgusted.”

She held her blade there for a second more before drawing it back. That must be why his psionics were just slightly better than usual. There were cases of those who had just a slight tendency towards the Gift, only enough for parlor tricks, from what she had occasionally read. Samhien was an... empath. His psionics were too weak to read anything else, it seemed.

But the thought process led her back to her cloak. She was used to her emotions potentially affecting the effectiveness of her shroud... but not being read through it. It seemed as if she still had more left to learn. “So you truly do not know the nature of your ability?”

Samhien shook his head, withdrawing a bit. “I do not.”

Her head tilted upwards a bit and she took a moment to look over him again. Her free hand gestured upwards. “Stand.”

He fixed her with a somewhat blank stare for a second before complying. Putting his hands on the wall for support, he unsteadily got to his feet, leaning back to keep himself upright. The Assassin still towered over him like this—he barely met her waist. “What is your name, Skirmisher?” She knew one of the names he carried—but not if it was his first or last.

Samhien wouldn’t look at her. His eyes remained elsewhere, but he answered. “Samhien Kai.”

“Samhien Kai. You are only alive through my good graces. It would have been far less difficult to kill you where you stood rather than to capture you. I am going to ask you questions, and you are to respond truthfully. If you do not, or if you act out, I will not hesitate to kill you. I have everything to gain from doing so, and nothing to lose. Do you understand?”

Samhien nodded shallowly but quickly, eyes shifting nervously. His fear was evident, and the Assassin relaxed. He’d be easy to get answers out of. “What were you when you were ADVENT?”

“An ADVENT Medic.”

Now, that was interesting. The Assassin consulted the Network for a moment. With both the Commander and the Hunter gone, there was noticeably more time between a query and a response. The two of them were the greatest bits of processing power it had, and with their absence, the Elders had to rely on a Commander proxy.
The Network eventually returned with an answer—ADVENT Medics were a discontinued line. Their genetics were rare in the fact that they used one of the races the Elders had uplifted that was not suited for combat directly. It was a more pacifistic variety, which suited the short line of the Medics. Samhien was, at the very least, five years old. A standout age for a Skirmisher, short of the one she had been hounding for almost as long as she had existed. Samhien was almost...

interesting.

With that interest, she continued. “Why did you leave the embrace of the Elders?”

Samhien’s eyes flickered about, but he met her eyes for a second before speaking. “I... was, part of a patrol. It was past curfew. Myself and my Stun Lancer guards. We were on the outskirts of the city and there were... ‘teenagers?’ They had been hiding near the edge of the city for some reason. My guards—they brutalized them. ” His voice took on some conviction, far different than the meek tone it had just before. “There was no need for their Stun Batons. Excessive shocks would only serve to damage their nervous systems when all they needed was a strong reprimand! Not to mention the internal bleeding they assuredly caused from the blunt trauma! What use was there in hurting those humans so thoroughly when the shock of seeing us had been enough to make them apologize and try to leave for home? It wasn’t right, Nightmaiden!”

He finally looked up and met her gaze, eyes firm. But under her own returned stare, he deflated again. “I... pulled them off of the ‘teenagers.’ They wouldn’t accept my reasoning as valid for why I had to stop them. They wanted to turn their aggressiveness on me. So I had to... exploit their physiology. A few pressure points, nothing that would seriously harm them. I told the teenagers to run and they did, but I knew my own actions would put me under potential review for ‘reclamation.’ I had no other choice but to flee, myself. I eventually came into contact with the Skirmishers, and...” He trailed to a stop, indicating the end of his story.

Fal-Mai was lost in thought, afterwards. Most Skirmishers had somewhat similar stories. They didn’t want to partake in their usual duties. But, his own story... He didn’t sound like he was lying. Samhien had witnessed brutality and done his part to stop it... and from the sounds of it, the actions of the Stun Lancers had been unjust. “Teenagers” were hardly people that required the use of violence to get into line, especially if they had been ADVENT-aligned and simply engaging in foolish activities. For once, she found herself understanding of a Skirmisher’s reason for defection.

But, her understanding did not excuse him. He was merely not as reprehensible as his other allies. The Assassin nodded, satisfied with the answer. Her mind searched elsewhere for questions she could ask—and she happened upon the fate of her brother. Her gaze turned harder before she spoke. “What has XCOM done with the Hunter?”

Samhien’s eyes flickered to her for a second before he shook his head. Her lip curled and she brought the tip of her blade to his throat. It was sharp enough that even the tip was enough to draw a bead of orange blood. He swallowed in fear and it made his throat jump forward enough to bring forth a bit more. “The Banehound is with XCOM.” When she squinted at him, his hands shook. “The Banehound... is with XCOM.”

It took her just a moment to pick up on the implication of that stressed word, but when she did, her gut twisted with emotions. Mordenna... defected? He was fighting for XCOM now? Some part of her was... thankful. He was alive. He wasn’t being interrogated. He was simply defying the Elders as much as he possibly could by siding with the enemy. Lest she forget! She scowled, keeping her sword steady. “My brother would be better back in the Elders’ care. Whatever the Commander has done to make him cooperate, They have far better intentions for him.”

“You’re lying.”
She scoffed. “The words of a Skirmisher mean nothing—”

“N-no,” he said, ever so slightly shaking his head. “I mean, you’re—you’re lying to yourself. ”

Now that was enough to stop the Assassin’s current train of thought, and she stared at him. When she didn’t say anything, Samhien continued. “I-I can get a general f-feel for when someone is lying. Not... it’s not as accurate as my other ability... but if it’s blatant, I can tell easily.”

Her grip on her katana began to shake and she pressed the blade against him just a touch further. Orange blood was starting to slide down his throat and he was doing his best to mold to the wall. “You know not of what you speak, betrayer,” she hissed, her gaze drilling holes into him. “The Elders’ love extends even to him as he disrespects Them! Any pain They might inflict upon his return is... purely for the best...”

But even as she said that, the memory that she had been trying to fight down came roaring back, and suddenly her whole body was on fire again and she was squeezing her eyes shut from the sheer pain of it all and why couldn’t she have done better, why couldn’t she just done as They asked?

“Fal-Mai...” Samhien’s voice was soft, and brought her out of the memory, revealing she’d shut her eyes in the present, too. She tentatively opened them to see Samhien recovering from wincing, gingerly looking her in the eye. He seemed... concerned. The Assassin realized he probably just caught the emotions that had run through her. “What did they do to you?”

The Assassin took in a deep, shaking breath. Her vision got blurry and she could feel her blade waver for a second. No. This would not be a time where she would show weakness, especially not to a Skirmisher. Her blade steadies and Fal-Mai glares at him, eyes narrowing. “Do not prey on my emotions, Skirmisher! The Elder’s love is all-encompassing!”

“You don’t believe that.”

In response, Fal-Mai quickly draws her blade away and turns it in favor of a right hook, connecting squarely with Samhien’s jaw. The force of it sends him right to the floor, cradling his jaw, orange ichor flowing between his fingers. The Assassin spun on her heel and started striding towards the door. She knew when she would get no further valuable information, not when she let him speak like this. He would be best elsewhere, pitted against his former brothers and sisters. She would like to see him prey on them.

“It doesn’t have to be like this,” she heard behind her. Samhien’s voice was slightly muffled by the forming bruise, it seemed. Despite her better thinking, she stopped in her tracks, the grip on her katana tightening. Killing him right here and now would be so easy. She did indeed say she had everything to gain from doing it, didn’t she? Yet, something stopped her. When she said nothing, Samhien continued. “Eliza was with you, was she not? In her tank? She knows what happened.”

The Assassin picked up on the slightest wavering of his voice. From uncertainty or fear, she could not tell. Still, his words made her arms tremble. Eliza... “Eliza could help you. Eliza could show you what it’s like to be—”

Before he could speak any further, before could further weaken her with these emotions she was fighting off, the Assassin’s hand flies to her belt and then whips a dagger indiscriminately in Samhien’s direction. Samhien’s ensuing cry of pain at least meant it wasn’t immediately fatal. She offered a short glance back. The dagger had embedded in his hand, and he was clutching it, having the sense of mind to not pull it out. Without another word, the Assassin opened the door to his cell and walked out, making sure it was locked behind her.

She stood there for a minute, reflecting on herself. It seemed that her emotions hounded her
wherever she went. Absence of them at the wrong times was punished. Having them at the wrong times was preyed upon. Was there no proper way for them to exist? Was she doomed to always have this part of herself that others could pick apart and exploit? Her hands tightened themselves into fists and she forced herself to return to the present. Turning around, she tapped the pad next to the door, using one of the commands to summon for medical attention. As much as the Assassin would love to let him deal with the dagger in his hand, she wanted it back. It was a waste to leave it in a Skirmisher, and she would retrieve them when she could.

When that was done, she stalked off in the direction of the entrance to her Inner Sanctum. Killing him would have been best, to just send off the rest of his squad limping home. Perhaps she would gain some info out of this venture when he was sent off, but... meditation. What he said could be thought over in meditation. There was no need to skulk around with these thoughts in her head.

With her stride, it wasn’t long before she reached the room with the teleporter in it. But, a thought stopped her in front of the pad. These thoughts she was about to meditate over... of the Elders’ love for her, of why They did the things They did... these were not things she wanted to entertain in front of her sarcophagus, not when They could be so close without her knowledge.

Fal-Mai turned, closing the door to the room. From there, she walked back to being just in front of the pad and settled into her usual meditative position. She let her thoughts return to Samhien’s words and what he meant. Her mind drifted to her brother, and what him joining XCOM truly meant. A surface level guess was that this was his whole plan—to join XCOM, gain their trust, then take the Commander and bring her back to the Elders, effectively taking the rug out from under her and Jax-Rai. But... something deeper said otherwise. There was no threat of the Elders’ kind of punishment with XCOM. He did not have to work with his siblings at XCOM. Maybe, just maybe, he was fighting for them without any true ulterior motives.

She went deeper. Samhien’s words also stuck out at her. He could have been lying, easily, but she thought on it nonetheless. Was she really trying to convince herself about the Elders’ love? It should be absolute, a guarantee. The Assassin shouldn’t even be questioning this. Did she not believe herself? The Elders always had a reason for everything they did. Their words, Their methods, Their punishments...

Yet she could find no reasoning for the severity. She had more plausible reasons for Ref-Il truly fighting for XCOM.

That was enough. The Assassin opened her eyes, taking in a deep breath and sighing it out, standing up. There were other matters to be attended to. Dipping into the Network, she pinged her head Officer. The send time was noticeably longer. The Assassin half-wondered how else the Network was suffering without its two main power sources.

Eventually, the door opened behind her, and Fal-Mai turned to face her Officer, who was already kneeling respectfully. “Nightmaiden. You called for me?”

Fal-Mai nodded. “I have captured one of the Skirmishers aligned with XCOM. He will be seen to shortly regarding an injury or two, but when that is done, I want him moved to a different facility, as usual.”

“Understood, my Chosen.” The Officer rose to stand. “Is there anything else?”

“XCOM will most likely be moving on our territory soon. That Skirmisher was from their last scouting party, and the other two members I allowed to escape. We shall not run from them—prepare our defences. Bring in our numbers. XCOM may come, but they will not be allowed in so easily. That will be all.”
The Officer nodded, turning away and then striding off. That left Fal-Mai to her thoughts once more.

XCOM were going to come. The Commander was going to come for her. Most likely, the Commander would attempt to capture her. Would the Hunter come as well? She had questions, and not as many answers as she would wish for. She let herself slump, eyes dropping to the floor.

Eliza had been there. Maybe, just maybe... she dare not think it so boldly, but maybe capture would present her with new opportunities.
In the Void, the closest one could get to stillness was with the ever-present, bass-filled humming of ambiance. It shuddered soft but sure, always a present aura even as nothing occupied this particular stretch. But, the peace would not last.

A chorus of four drones started to rise as beings converged unto the area. One was an orchestra—loud, brash, overdramatic. It was emblematic of crashing thunder and pounding rain, and just as likely to knock you off of your feet. There was glory in it, but pride meant it would never achieve harmony.

The next was soft whispers and cutting staccato. A presence one could almost forget right up until you found a knife in your back. Yet there was enginuity to the blend of sounds, frequencies balanced at just the right wavelength to entertain the mind. But only ever in ways that would make your hairs stand on end.

The third was tonally perfect. Instruments perfectly tuned and never going a microsecond over their notes, percussion hitting just as it needed to. It would be almost a delight to listen to—if that wasn’t all it ever was. Perfection without creativity, and to suggest otherwise would be to have it come down upon you.

The final was a soft and calm tone—only a single instrument, playing lightly. There were no faults to be had with the solo performance, but occasionally it ebbed in ways that grabbed your attention. Each note was thought out and stood on its own. There was no room for harmony, just melody.

These wavelengths gathered like at the points of a cube, stopping once they did. Forms took shape more readily. *Four Elders*. Nothing distinguished them outside of the variations of their presences. In the Void, their forms were idealized, standing tall, as equals.

The solo, calm performance spoke first. “As is regulation for these meetings, we will take attendance of who has arrived, even if this meeting isn’t particularly... planned.” They shook their head. “Nevertheless. Elder Argus, in attendance.”

“Elder Cronus,” boomed the orchestra.

“Elder Odin,” hissed the whispers.

“Elder Helena,” hummed the symphony.

“Very good,” Argus nodded, “All Elders seeing over matters on Planet #2845, otherwise known as *Earth*, are found to be in attendance. The meeting regarding the matters of the stolen Chosen, the Network weakness, and the defection numbers will commence.” They rattled off the subjects smoothly, then looked to the other Elders. “Does anybody have any opening remarks?”

“I would,” Cronus spoke, his focus immediately turning to Odin. “We would not be having this meeting if it was not for the *failings* of Elder Odin. He designed and put so much importance on
his Chosen that the Commander would naturally take him. Of course, since he was lauded as one of the batteries of our Network, we are now dealing with the fallout of his mistakes!” His volume and his presence rose, and he loomed over Odin. “Not even to mention what the Commander must be doing with him right now. She is probably extracting every single bit of knowledge he retains! You would certainly know the volume of that, wouldn’t you, Odin? You insisted upon it!”

Odin backed away a bit, but his presence bristled as he met Cronus’s fury. “Lest we forget, we are a united force, Cronus. Even if the pretense of the Chosen’s interactions was competition, ultimately they are as siblings and should have been assisting him!” Cronus’s image faltered and Odin pressed on. “Even if you are to insist that they should not cooperate, then what of your own ‘child?’ If you have not lauded him as our greatest champion, should he not have the Commander back with us by now?” He scoffed. “Of course not. Those pitiable emotions that he felt, along with Helena’s charge, blind them to where the Commander lies.”

Helena huffed indignantly. She would have preferred to not be dragged into this, but she wouldn’t let such a thing go unchallenged when it served to disgrace her. “Yet are we not the ones who had to deal with his childish misbehaving at every turn because you insisted on picking an adult human to contrast Cronus’s choice? Perhaps if you had not merely made your Chosen in response to his, you would have not rushed your choices and left as many design flaws as you have!”

Odin whirled on her. “That’s rich coming from you, Helena, who crafted her perfect Assassin after the two of us were having difficulties instead of attempting to assist us! Claim her perfect all you want—she has failed in the duty you have set for her!”

Before the anger of the trio could reach a fever pitch, Argus forcefully projected themselves as larger. “Elders! This arguing will see us reaching no solutions and will only serve to incense us at one another. Do you believe such back-and-forth mudslinging will bring us to a satisfying conclusion?”

The other three Elders quieted, and everybody settled back into their normal projections. There were quiet nods and Argus straightened, clearing their throat. “As I thought. I do not wish to turn this meeting so sour, so we shall proceed with opening remarks closed. Our first matter discussed civilly will be the topic of the security of the other Chosen. I know that the Hunter was taken via psionic overload. Sadly, I was not able to be present for the meeting held with the Chosen, so I must inquire—have there been steps taken to secure the other Chosen against this method?”

Helena nodded, speaking calmly. “Yes. My Assassin has been mentally fortified against such assaults of that caliber, and shall not fall prey to such barbaric tactics. Her mind is still privy to discipline, however, so that should not be an issue.”

“Understood, and I appreciate your forward thinking. As for the Warlock, I take it he is immune by default to such an assault?” Cronus mutters an affirmation and Argus nods. “Good. However, we mustn’t think that will be the only trick up Eliza’s sleeve.” At the familiarity of her first name, the rest of the Elders stared at them, gaze judging. For that, they withheld their advice on what she could indeed do. “So be vigilant,” they settle on, “and think for yourselves how she might capture your children. Advise them to plan, as well. With that, the issue of the Chosen being captured should be swiftly handled.”

When there was no commentary outside of a few spiteful glances from Odin, Argus continued. “Next on our list is the matter of the weakening Network. Understandably, it has been damaged from the absence of both the Commander and the Hunter, and now is left to operate on a proxy we formed from the precepts we could gather of the Commander. The situation is bleak, but not unsalvageable in my eyes—there can be steps taken to strengthen the proxy until we have secured
One of Argus’s arms came from under their cloak and they motioned, summoning a diagram from the aura of the Void. As they spoke, it animated and gave visuals to what they were talking about. “I believe if we temporarily divert a sizeable number of our Codices to start working on the proxy and making its code more efficient, we can alleviate Network strain and increase capacity once again. This would require a bit of our processing power, however, and can only be enacted if we are all in agreement. Unless anyone else has a more efficient idea, I would like to move forward with it immediately.”

There were nods from the assembled Elders, and Argus’s arm returned to under their cloak, the diagram disappearing. “Excellent. I will move forward with my plan as soon as I am allowed. Now, onto defection numbers.”

Argus would have continued, but Cronus scoffed, his signature turning discordant. “If I may interject, I find it absurd that this is a topic whatsoever. Not in the sense that I do not see it as a problem, but I fail to understand why it is a problem. We have given them the brightest future they could have the capacity to dream of and yet this is how they repay us?”

“You can’t fault them for not understanding,” Argus followed, “They only see the short term pain and refuse to see it as the necessary evil it is. Excusable, no. Within character? Yes. I understand your confusion, Elder Cronus, but since they will not see, it is why we must see to taking countermeasures.”

“If I may?” Helena began, brimming in her presence. Argus nodded to her. “The rate of defections is indeed starting to become a concern. We have seen turncoats in even our most unshakeable units.”

“Ah, yes.” Argus inclined their head. “Most recently, a lone Codex taking the name of ‘Wiki,’ correct?”

“Yes! The no good...” Helena trailed off, shaking her head. “As I was saying. I believe I have a rudimentary, but effective way of decreasing these numbers. We may start imposing quotas on our forces. We can require monthly numbers of soldiers ‘reclaimed’ in order to incentivise our forces seeking out traitors in their ranks. Presenting proof of turncoat takedowns would also be sufficient.”

The two Elders aside from Argus seemed uncertain at the idea. Cronus’s signature stilled with feigned disinterest. Meanwhile, Odin’s hummed with barely-disguised spite. “That doesn’t sound like the most waterproof of plans, Helena,” he began, eyeing her through his helmet. “For someone known for her perfectionism, you haven’t considered a thing or two. What would we do if they didn’t meet those quotas? We couldn’t slaughter them indiscriminately and we hardly have the time to check over each and every outpost, however you cut it up.”

Helena scoffed, energies turning haughty. “Firstly, we have accumulated enough a presence that when we do hand down this order, they will imagine the repercussions to be far greater in their feeble minds. Secondly, if you have so many problems with my plan, I would like to see you formulate a better one! Enlighten me, Odin, if you have such grand ideas.”

Odin, tellingly, looked to the side, quieting but still remaining malicious. Argus sighed. “It has flaws, yes, but nothing that would break the whole plan in half. I believe it is a good solution... for now. I think the most optimal way forward would be to tighten up the chips, but such a task may take longer than we would like, and we would need a temporary plan in place while it is worked on. The quotas would do nicely. Are there any better plans out of the two of you?”
No response. Helena straightened, superiority bleeding off of her form. Cronus kept quiet, even if he had wished to speak something about her attitude. With Argus backing her, he was outnumbered—and he wasn’t about to rely on Odin for assistance. He saved his anger. He would have an outlet for it yet...

Argus, meanwhile, hummed with satisfaction. “I would call this a satisfactory meeting. We have addressed the problems at hand and found serviceable solutions to all of them. Helena will handle organizing the exact numbers and details of the quotas and I will begin to divest my time into gathering our loyal Codices into strengthening our Commander proxy. Do we have any closing remarks?”

Helena shook her head. Cronus and Odin remained silent. Argus nodded again, their robes starting to fan out as the singular instrument of their signature started to rise in volume. “I hereby declare this meeting adjourned. You are all free to your duties. The Empire, Eternal.”

“The Empire, Eternal,” the other three Elders returned, and soon their signatures peaked, and then closed out, leaving the Void back to its low hum.

For just the slightest second, the Warlock could feel the very Void shift, as if suddenly unbalanced. It drove him off his current line of thinking, and Jax found himself wondering if the Elders had just performed some grand act.

When the Void continued to be undisturbed outside of that, he returned to his meditation. Time had passed and while he had still heard no word from the Elders, he knew it was no reason to stop his search of the Commander. After all, what better way to earn Their good graces again than to find her and bring her back? They would look upon him favorably again... and it was all he wanted. Their love was a tidal wave he could barely fight, and yet he was fine if he drowned in it... but. But was he?

He grimaced and shook his head. Such thoughts were beginning to sneak up on him recently and he wished them gone. Of course Jax took great satisfaction in the Elders’ love! When it was taken away, it was for justified reasons. He had failed, and so it went—he could understand that. He could understand being... punished. Jax’s hands shook. He could... understand seeing the Assassin quiver and shake under the onslaught—

The Warlock immediately shot into standing, hissing as he tried to chase the thought off. It was... it was justified! She had failed as he had! No doubt she had already moved past it and was plotting her next move against XCOM or the Skirmishers. Surely she wasn’t wallowing in the feeling and pain of it all...

Before he could stop himself, the Warlock’s feet were marching forward and he was already sending off a message on the Network, summoning his Archbishop. Jax was already justifying the action to himself—they were lead into the punishment because the Hunter had been kidnapped. He was not one for working with his siblings, but if he could escape that by preventing her from being taken? He would avoid punishment and when it came to light that it had been his plan in the first place, he was sure the Elders would look upon him favorably.

That’s all it was, he reassured himself. They were siblings in name only. This wasn’t some sort of protective instinct rising up in him. He didn’t want to be punished again, either. This was merely to
As he was busy justifying things to himself, the Ascension Pad activated, and from the column of energy appeared his Archbishop: *Saint Maria*. She was tall, taller than any Priest or human—just a few inches shy of Jax’s height. Her armor was colored as his was, with more gold gilding and hanging sashes, giving her the air of a true Saint. A Priest tailor-made for him, and a symbol of his power. Her genetics were more advanced than other Priests; along with the precious Gatekeeper strain, she also held the unique distinction of having a noticeable amount of *Berserker* DNA in her system, and it showed in her physique.

She did not remain still for long, and approached her Chosen, bowing before him. “Warlock Tessura. To what end do you require me?”

Jax calmed a bit in her presence, allowing him to gather his thoughts. If the Assassin did not want to be found, this plan was as good as delayed until she wanted to be. But, this was the best shot he had, in his mind. “I require you to establish contact with the Assassin’s Stronghold. I wish to speak with her regarding a few matters.”

“Yes, my Chosen,” she affirmed.

But before she could do that, the air around them hummed and vibrated until it reached the power of an orchestra. Jax was nearly knocked off his feet and at the familiarity of the presence, Maria almost instantly dropped into a deeper kneel. Jax followed suit, his heart swelling. He knew who this was. It was his father—*Cronus*!

“*My dear son... I see you are busy. However, I must stop your business for a moment.*” His words reverberated in Jax’s mind and he found himself drinking in His presence.

“It is no trouble, Father. I am humbled you would personally visit me. What do you require?”

Cronus hummed a moment, analyzing the two of them. “*I must ask you, my son—were you attempting to contact your sister just now?*”

Jax nodded without hesitation. He... knew he couldn’t express truly why he had been doing so. Something in his mind screamed about the danger in it. So instead, he went with a tangentially related and still true reason. “Yes, Father. I wished to establish cooperation with my sister so we could pool our strength into capturing the Commander. I believed we would meet our goal faster if we did so.”

Cronus tutted, and the action immediately made Jax’s heart sink. Was... was it not a good idea? Was cooperation not why they had...? “*Do you not believe the strength I have given you is enough, Jax-Rai? Do you believe you must make up for your ‘weakness’ by allying with your sister?*”

“No!” Jax immediately said, but flinched at his delivery, lowering his head and withdrawing into himself. “N-no. You have given me all the strength I need. I can accomplish the task on my own, and I mean not to imply you have done me wrong. I was just...” He couldn’t finish.

“*My son... Fal-Mai would only serve to hinder you.*” Cronus’s signature was one of fatherly concern. “*She is young! She would only dismantle your plans with her naivety. She is not as experienced as you are with a duty of the caliber, and she would only serve to slow you down.*”

Beside him, he could feel Maria twitch, but for what reason, he could not discern. Jax kept his own thoughts on hold as Cronus was so close.

“*Do not cooperate with her. That is all.*” With that, His signature lifted, and Cronus was gone as
soon as He came. The brevity of His visit left Jax wavering on his feet as he rose into standing. He
didn’t even get a chance to ask if he had been doing well, and Cronus did not seem pleased nor
angered at him. He had only been here to dissuade him from working with his sister. Dread still
gripped his heart... but he would not disobey Him. Not when it would assuredly bring punishment
—and perhaps even punishment unto Fal-Mai for being a part of his plans. He shuddered, shaking
his head. He would not have that, though he dare not think why. He will simply have to plan on his
own.

Jax could feel Maria’s stare burning into him, and he opened his eyes to meet it. Her look was one
of concern, and she took a single step closer. Before she could speak, he held up his hand. “If you
had established any contact with the Assassin, I want it terminated. It has been made clear I am not
to cooperate with her. I have... other plans, that do not involve her.”

“I understand, my Chosen,” she returned, standing up to full height. “No contact has been made.”
She hesitated, and then placed a hand on his shoulder. “My Chosen... are you alright?”

Jax said nothing for a while. He offered Maria a glance before his gaze turned to his Ascension
Pad. “Irrelevant,” was the word that finally came out, muttered without conviction. He began to
walk forwards, leaving Maria behind as he lumbered to the pad. His thoughts remained somewhat
related to her. After his losses in his last battle, he could not, would not summon her or any more of
her sisters to battle. He could not stand to lose another—XCOM did not understand who they were
slaughtering on their quest to see the world burn around them.

But Jax... Jax had a choice, here. He could directly make sure that they did not perish on the field
of battle. Their talents... their creativity, their crafts when left to them, were far too precious to be
squandered in death. He could call it “reinforcing his Stronghold.” Yes, that would do. He could
keep the Priests from battle. The Warlock could simply summon his other guard to his aid; perhaps
not even that, in hindsight. Did he not have his own spectral army he could summon if pressed?
They were free to die. He was free to die a thousand times and more. He could wage this war
against XCOM without losing important... assets. Just assets. Nothing more.

He stopped on the pad, half turning back to Maria. “If XCOM wishes to blindly raid our most
sacred sites, I will see to it that they will get more than what they are wishing for.”

With that, the pad activated, and Jax disappeared in a column of purple light.
Rescue

Chapter Summary

The Hunter is sent out on his first mission for XCOM.

Mordenna, naturally, found himself walking back towards the Workshop.

Truth be told, there wasn’t many other places he conceivably lurk that interested him. He’d had his time to introduce himself to the soldiers over the past week or so, and hell, he was playing nice for now. Which meant that said soldiers were no fun at all if he couldn’t get a little rough with them. So it stood to reason that there were only two people on this ship that caught his interest in this sort of scenario—Eliza, who had been busy, and Lily Shen, who he was going to go see.

Wasn’t like the trip took him long at all, anyway. Being ridiculously tall lent to his strides. He opened the door to the Workshop and ducked under the low doorframe. “Shen, dearest of all the Avenger goons,” he called out as soon as he came in, “Like a plague upon your house, I descend upon you once again.”

“You’ve got one thing right there, at least,” Lily replied, looking up from her work. Said work was SYN’s new leg—a quick glance over at the deactivated SYN himself told the Hunter that this was the last part in the process before the robot was fixed entirely. Satisfied with the damage he’d done, Mordenna sauntered more forwards.

“A new blunt weapon for the sword-slingers, Lily? My, my, you always continue to impress.”

She scoffed, continuing at her task. “’Y’know, it’s thanks to you that I have to fix this in the first place. The caliber of the bullets you use is, quite frankly, ridiculous.”

“I take pride in my work, thank you.” Mordenna grinned. “Hell, you’d be surprised how necessary it is, sometimes. No greater intimidation tactic than seeing your buddy’s head disappear into a fine red mist right next to you. Maybe not the most subtle approach, but when you don’t know where I’m firing from? Hardly have to be.”

Lily’s face barely twitched at the description, but she seemed to latch on to a part of that sentence. “I’m honestly surprised you got the thing so quiet. I checked out the barrel and the built-in suppressor you’re using is... something else.”

A part of Mordenna’s brain perked up, one that hardly saw any fun. His engineer side was happy with these accommodations, at least. “I know, right? Took a lot of balancing to get that to work without sacrificing more firepower than I was willing to. Of course, also without making the barrel any longer than it already is. It’d be a little ridiculous if it was taller than me.”

“Dude. That thing is already taller than most humans. Heavy to boot.” The Hunter knew that. Apparently, they had to attach the thing to two of the Skyranger’s cables just to lug it up when they went back for his weapons. “What kills me is that you are a stick. I’m surprised you can carry it at all.”

“Hey.” Mordenna jabbed a finger at her. “I’m strong enough to lift that tin can over there. The
Elders didn’t make a slacker. In some aspects, anyway.” God knows he’d proven to be one to them several times over. *Good,* he thought.

Lily rolled her eyes, setting her tools aside and leaning against the table, giving him her full attention. “So, Hunter. How have you been behaving?”

Mordenna slapped a hand to his chest, pretending to be scandalized. “Why, Lily! I have been on my *best* behavior, thank you! The Avenger loves me. Who wouldn’t want a murderous alien on their side, Shen?” Past his joking, he really had been keeping it together so far. He longed for being able to mess with his siblings, however. Ah, but if the Commander ever put him into the field... a thought struck him and his smile somewhat faltered. “I know Sammy did.”

Lily deflated a little at that, looking to the side. “Yeah... that was some news to break for the two of them. Probably feeling like shit that they had to admit that Sammy got captured on their watch.”

Mordenna shrugged, but some part of him... mourned? Sammy had been one of the ones to accept him with open arms readily. It was weird not meeting such instant hostility, and that part of him seemed to linger on it and his most likely fate. “God knows what’s happening to him. Sister never takes lightly to Skirmishers. He’ll be lucky if he makes it to next week.”

Lily grimaced. “Not the most pleasant subject... Something tells me Sammy will make it, though. He’s survived a while.”

At that, the Hunter decided to not bring up the fact that he was probably being interrogated for information at this very moment. Sammy was a viable target, too—knowledge of XCOM and the Skirmishers? He was a high-value prize. Mordenna went for something more tangential. “Heard one of the bastards got pulled aside. Vlad, was it?” He knew the soldier’s name. Eliza had been rather thorough in using it in the talk she had with him. It was funny how nobody really considered the maintenance vents, but that just meant that Mordenna could use them to move about and keep up to date on what was happening in the ship. “Parrently the capture had largely him to blame. Something about going for his human buddy first when Sammy could’ve been saved if he went for him.” The bias of humans never failed to amuse him, especially when the victim of it was Sammy of all people.

Her face twisted into quiet anger and she crossed her arms. “I could’ve accepted it if it had just been bad luck or them getting outmaneuvered, but Vlad throwing Samhien to the wolves? Bastard should get court martialed, or whatever Eliza can pull.”

Well, that had happened to an extent, the Hunter knew. Vlad had been suspended from combat missions until further notice, and Eliza was still figuring out what to do with him, judging from how the talk went. Vlad also owed an apology to Sammy, if he ever made it back. Emphasis on *if.* “Yeah.” Onto the next topic. Mordenna was getting kinda bored regarding this way this one was going. “Honestly, you let me have my guns and set me off into the wilderness, I’d have him back here in three days, tops.”

Lily resolutely shook her head. “Not until the Commander says you can have them back. Even if you could track him down with them, I’m not about to go behind her back.”

Mordenna sighed dramatically. “Of *course* I can’t have any fun around here.”

As if to fly in the face of that, the intercom on Lily’s terminal pinged right before it spoke. “*Lily.*” Eliza’s voice filtered through it. “*Is Mordenna with you?*”

Lily looked mildly surprised by the development, but shot the Hunter a glance before she spoke.
“Yeah, he is. What’s up?”

“Send him to the Armory.” A pause. “And give him his guns. He’s going to need them.”

Mordenna grinned widely. “Oh, Commander, have I been a good boy? Giving me my toys back... you really are the best, you know?”

Eliza scoffed in good humor. “You have, and if you continue being a good boy, you can head out on this mission I’m about to debrief. Get up here quickly.” With that, the terminal went silent.

Lily looked to the Hunter, exasperated. “Alright! Alright. You can have your guns back, just let me get the key to the locker.” Once she was done talking, she rummaged in one of the drawers of her work table, coming up with a key that she tossed to Mordenna. “Here. Try not to kill any of us.”

Mordenna caught it smoothly, still grinning. “Oh, I will try my best, Lily.”

With his Darklance slung over his back and his Darkclaw on his hip, the Hunter felt like he was in for some fun, today. The sheer coincidence of the situation wasn’t lost on him, but he didn’t dwell on it much as he made his way to the Armory. There were other things to think on, after all, such as what exactly Eliza had in store for him with his first mission for XCOM.

He got his answer when he entered the room and the gathered people were Eliza, Bradford, and then two soldiers he hadn’t really bothered to remember the names of. One of them was a Templar in white, the other a female Ranger. Figuring he was going to be working closely with the Ranger, he gave her a split-second once-over.

Long brown hair, a green eye with the other one covered by an eyepatch, and a military beret decorated her. She had dark skin and what the Hunter recognized as a plasma burn covered the quarter of her face with an eyepatch. Already she wasn’t very interesting. Just another one of Eliza’s soldiers.

Eliza nodded to him as he entered, and he walked further in. “Hunter,” she began. “Now that you’re all here, Bradford and I can begin debriefing.” When he took to standing next the the Templar in the lineup, she continued. “Menace One-Five, members Kalight, Rozen, and Mordenna. The three of you are gathered here for an important mission. It wasn’t long ago that one of our two Skirmishers, Samhien, was captured while out on a Covert Action. But thanks to a tip from a trusted informant of a nearby Haven, we have reason to believe we’ve found where the Assassin is keeping him.”

A ‘trusted informant,’ hm? That vaguely earned the Hunter’s attention. He wondered what would classify them as ‘trusted’ and why they would be distinguished from the Haven itself. But miraculously he kept silent, and Bradford continued where Eliza left off. “The three of you have been chosen for your abilities at infiltration and protecting high-priority targets. Needless to say, we’re expecting all three of you to do well on this mission.” Mordenna couldn’t help but feel that latter statement was especially pointed at him, but he just gave a lazy grin in response to it.

Eliza nodded to Bradford, then looked to the squad. “As always, I will be backing the three of you. Your mission is simple, but not easy. Infiltrate the compound, find Samhien, and then exfiltrate. Don’t try to attract too much attention and keep the body count to a minimum. We attract enough attention as is.”
Now the Hunter couldn’t help but speak up. “Eliza, are you sending me on a mission and telling me to not kill things? You are a very curious Commander, and I must say—”

“Do well on this mission,” she said, holding up a hand, “and I’ll authorize you to be a part of our engineering team, with all the resources that comes with that.”

Mordenna didn’t like being interrupted, but an offer like that wasn’t one he’d refuse. His grin settled into something more catlike. “Alright, Lizzie. Consider me on my best behavior.”

Bradford, as always, seemed unsettled by the nicknames, but he didn’t comment on it. He straightened. “Menace One-Five, you are clear to leave. Check your gear, then move out.”

Out of the corners of his eyes, he spotted Kalight and Rozen doing once-overs. Mordenna, himself, didn’t bother. He knew he had everything on him. Why wouldn’t he? Now that he was allowed his guns, they weren’t exactly going to leave his side for a while. Besides, with that lucrative offer from Eliza on the table, he supposed he could do a few tune-ups while he was here.

The other two members of Menace One-Five finished their checks and turned around, stepping onto the platform. Mordenna was soon to follow, and once he was on, it started to lift. The ceiling opened, and the dropped hatch of the Skyranger was waiting for him.

The walk-up to the mission area gave the Hunter ample time to his thoughts.

The Skyranger had dropped them a fair distance away, in the interest of not raising attention to Menace. Which meant that they had a long walk through the woods to do, but personally, the Hunter relished in it. It reminded him of the many long treks he’d do to track targets and take them down.

The other two members of his squad walked ahead of him, more focused on the mission than any idle chit-chat. Occasionally, Mordenna would watch them walk and scrutinize their gaits, how exactly they stepped around and climbed over the occasional log in the path. But they didn’t hold his interest for long before he went back to his thoughts.

Chiefly, he was wondering if his sister would show up if they aroused enough attention. After all, this was a prison in her territory, containing a captive that she had just recently gotten her hands on, from a high-risk mission. A fight with his sister while he was on his last life would be exhilarating. After all, there was no fun in the hunt if there either wasn’t effort or risk involved. Plus, the chance to show his sister that he had all the excuses he wanted nowadays to kill her? Good by him. Death was just a slap on the wrist for her, after all...

He narrowed his eyes as his mind jumped to the next avenue of conversation. If Eliza had her way, apparently there’d be a time where the Assassin, too, would be operating on her last life exclusively. The Warlock as well. Working on XCOM’s side too, god forbid if that was going to happen, but if it did... Where was the fun in all of it? He wouldn’t be allowed to kill them anymore, and if there was one thing he was going to miss, it’d be that. God knows they’d have to learn to work with each other, and he almost wanted to laugh at that. Him and the other Chosen, cooperating? Acting like a family?

Some part of him reminded the statistical chances shot up if they weren’t under the eyes of the Elders and it soured the whole joke for him. But yet...
Thankfully, his train of thought was interrupted when his eyes rested on something... unusual. A raven was perched high up in a tree, observing the gathered party. In itself, not usual. But what interested the Hunter was what his god-given sight could perceive. Bleeding off the bird was a distinct psionic aura, enough to indicate it was probably Elerium-irradiated. That happened occasionally when unsecured or broken containers of Elerium got lost to the wild and wildlife set up near them.

His eyes scanned the surrounding area, and they picked up more ravens. A practical omen of them, all irradiated. Some were observing him, the others were focused on the sight of the compound ahead. Mordenna focused ahead and, through the gaps in leaves, caught the sight of one of them perched on a turret, tapping it with its beak. A whole gathering of the things... must’ve been all nesting around the same cache. But for there to be such a large group? A normally-useless tidbit of knowledge in Mordenna’s brain informed him that ravens most often came in pairs, or were solitary. For there to be such group around here... and were those iron talons on some of them?

Surely he couldn’t be the only one seeing this. The Hunter moved up to Kalight and tapped him on the back. “Templar. You’re not blind, right? You see all these ravens?”

Kalgut and Rozen’s heads inclined upwards, studying the gathered birds. Kalight remained silent while Rozen shrugged. “Yeah, that’s a lot of them. But what’s your point?”

The Templar, on the other hand, kept studying them. “... I see that. The trails leading off of all of them...”

“Exactly.” Mordenna glanced at them again, then pulled out his pistol, aiming it at one of the birds. “Well! Might as well take one back for study.”

As he did, he watched as the bird focused on him... and ruffled its feathers, hopping back in panic, as if it knew what Mordenna intended. Its eyes glowed a shining purple.

“Halt!”

Before the other two could even look at the source of the voice, Mordenna already had his pistol aimed at the source, just a hair’s breadth away from firing. He took his time to analyze the figure he ended up pointing his gun at.

The guy couldn’t have been more than 5’7”. He had white, curly hair, and something in the back of the Hunter’s mind tipped him off to the fact that, by the looks of it, he cut it himself when it got too long. Most of it was pulled back into a ponytail, exposing his ears. A black blindfold covered his eyes, but through the sheer fabric, Mordenna could spot milky white eyes, tinged with purple, currently glowing. He wore a heavy, cotton coat, feathers sticking out of it here and there, custom stitch jobs and patches visible on parts of it. Well-maintained, but noticeable. The Hunter’s sight could pick out the aura of his psionics, and how it vaguely pointed towards every bird in the area... including the one on his shoulder.

Mordenna had seen Elerium-irradiated animals, but rarely nothing quite so mutated as the raven that sat on the man’s shoulder. The thing was about as big as a Steller’s eagle, and it was a wonder how this dude was keeping it up on his shoulder. The beak on it was much too sharp for any natural occurrence. Its plumage shone purple wherever the light hit it, and several feathers were elongated and glowing the particular purplish-pink of psionics. Speaking of, psionics bled off of it just as much as they did the bloke it was perched on.

Once the man had been spotted by the whole squad, he gingerly stepped forward, a hand up to show he wasn’t going to try anything. The Hunter kept his gun trained on him still, watching him
as he approached. Eventually, he came to a stop. He cocked his head. “... now,” he croaked, sounding every bit like the ravens in the area, “what’s the Chosen Hunter doing with XCOM?”

“Oh, you know,” Mordenna easily rattled back, “killing ADVENT, taking revenge on the Elders, hunting... the usual. What about yourself? The hell are you doing here?”

The man smiled gently. Mordenna’s gun didn’t waver. “I’m the man who sent the tip about where your friend lies. After all, I’ve quite the quarrel with ADVENT myself. Please, let me introduce myself. My name is Edgar.”

Mordenna looked to Edgar, then the gathered ravens, and then back to Edgar. A smirk worked its way onto his face. “Oh, that’s rich. Edgar! The fucking ravens! Next thing you’ll be telling me is that the bird on your shoulder’s name is Nevermore!”

Edgar, tellingly, chuckled. “I’m well aware of how cheesy it all is. But this sort of life chose me when I stumbled upon Nevermore here and his flock. Isn’t that right, my friend?”

Nevermore readjusted, cocking his head at Mordenna. “... Edgar. It’s a Chosen. Do we trust this?” Mordenna knew that ravens could mimic speech, but for one to ask questions and cast doubt? That Elerium certainly did him favors.

Edgar’s smile faded, and he turned to the Hunter again. “If the legendary Commander of XCOM has captured and turned a Chosen to her cause, and trusted him enough to send him on a rescue mission, I believe we can. Now, what’re your names? We introduced ourselves, after all.”

Finally, Mordenna lowered his gun, shrugging. “Well, you know me. Chosen Hunter, but everybody calls me Mordenna nowadays.”

“Vanguard to you,” Kalight said, and the Hunter got the feeling he was still eyeing the birds behind that helmet.

“Thorn,” Rozen replied, easing up a bit. “Are you going to be joining us for this mission, then?”

“If you will accept my help, of course,” Edgar nodded, then swept his hand out, gesturing to the omen of ravens. “My court are my eyes, as well as my ears. ADVENT do not suspect their presence to be suspect, foolish as they are, and I am well used to sticking to shadows. Not as well as a Reaper, but better than most that are trained to do so.”

“So you’re blind,” Mordenna said simply.

Edgar nodded again. “A gradual condition. I believe my powers brought it on. But I am able to see through my court’s eyes and see what they see, so it isn’t so bad. They are also more than intelligent enough to be excellent scouts, and some are armed in case of a fight. But, with luck, it won’t come to that.”

“With luck.” Kalight turned back towards the path. “We should get going, and not rely on something as ever-changing as luck. Commander?”

“ He seems like a fine recruit to me. Let him come. ”

Kalight’s expression was unreadable, but he looked to Edgar and gestured forward.

Seems Edgar didn’t need to be told twice. Nevermore’s eyes began to glow and he strode forwards, joining Menace. The ravens all around started to move, as well—a few took flight from the trees and settled in various spots in the compound, a few buddying up in an uncannily human way as if
to not appear suspicious. Some of them even staggered their approach, as if to not look organized. The last parts of the omen stayed with the group, hopping along on the ground as they moved forwards. All of them were the ones with talons on their feet, Mordenna noted. Whoever this Edgar guy was, he must’ve been at this for quite a while to have them all so organized.

As they came up to the facility, Edgar took the lead, keeping well to cover. Mordenna knew the man was blind, but to see him swivel his head so little as he went was a bit interesting. Granted, he did move it at times, but only ever in response to sounds he could hear.

Mordenna took his own time to scope the place out. A few guards were patrolling, some alone, some in pairs, but largely the security detail was minimal. A shame—he’d been hoping for more of a challenge. He offered a glance or two Edgar’s way as he went, but largely, the Hunter wanted to rely on his own pathfinding to get through.

But even if there had been more bodies around to dodge, it seemed being blind was no challenge for Edgar. Soon the rest of the squad was following his lead, running along behind him as he confidently darted from cover to cover. Occasionally, he’d stop in his tracks, holding up a hand and backing up as a patrol came up right where he was going to be. All the while, his eyes were aglow. No doubt, getting a constant feed from his ravens regarding what was going on.

With the kind of breakneck pace he was setting, it wasn’t long before they were on the building, all staged outside one of the doors. Closed, naturally. Before anyone could say anything, the Hunter snuck up, parking himself right at the pad to open it. But, like a wise predator, didn’t yet. His eyes shifted to Edgar, concocting a plan in a snap. “They’re gonna get suspicious if this door opens on its own. Seemingly, anyway. I’m gonna open it, but mind having one of your birds crash into the pad at about the same time? It’d at least drop most of the suspicion, and unless you’ve been here before, they’ll come to investigate with their guard down.”

Edgar was silent, seemingly considering the plan. This time, Mordenna could pick out the aura around his head growing stronger, and a mote of power being sent out, tracing it to one of the ravens on the ground with them. It paced on the spot for a second, and a mote was sent back. Then, another from Edgar. Seems they were having a conversation, as absurd as it was to watch.

Whatever Edgar last said, it did the trick. The bird hopped back, and then took off. Mordenna watched as it did a slow loop in the air, keeping its speed slow as it came in, aiming for the pad. Just before it hit home, Mordenna tapped the access button, and jerked his hand back in time for it to brace itself for impact, hitting the pad on the mark and tumbling to the ground, in vision of the opening door. It even offered a convincing squawk of disgruntlement. Other than a few ruffled feathers—which it went at work correcting right in view of whoever was in the building—it was no worse for wear. Too smart for their own good, Mordenna thought, and waited.

He caught a bit of ADVENT speak in the building; generally amounting to “what was that?” The Hunter bided his time. Soon, there was a single set of footsteps approaching. He looked to Edgar, and Edgar held up his index finger, using the other to point inside. One guard. Mordenna almost chuckled. The Assassin must’ve not thought they’d be coming this early. Her loss.

Mordenna held himself until, in the dim reflection of the doorway, he saw a Trooper nearly on the door. With speed he’d imagine would look terrifying for someone of his size, he lunged forwards, grabbing the Trooper and pulling them close, his arm tight across their throat. Before they could choke out a scream, his other arm went to work, grabbing their head and jerking it far to the side. With some snapping, the guard went limp. Another kill to the pile. The Hunter kept holding the guard, and motioned to move inside, already moving in.
The inside of the building was quiet, with no guards in sight. Just the row of prison doors, and even from this distance, Mordenna could spot that one was occupied. Placing the body in a corner, he skulked up, to the panel with an indicator on it.

Right on time, he heard Eliza in his ear. “That’s the cell with Samhien in it. I assume you know your way around the security, Hunter?”

“You’re asking the former Network admin this, Liz? Oh, Commander, Commander...” He chuckled softly, tapping a button on the panel. Already his fingers were at work on it, entering passcodes. If his memory served correctly, and if he was lucky enough that some outposts hadn’t stricken his access codes from the record, yet...

“Hey,” he heard Rozen quietly interject behind him, “aren’t you going to need the data—”

Before she could even finish speaking, the door slid open without any bells or whistles. There was a heavy silence for a second. Then, the sound of Kalight chuckling. “‘Former Network admin,’ Thorn.”

“I’m glad one of you is listening.” With that, Mordenna padded into the cell proper.

The inside was standard fare, and wasn’t what Mordenna was looking at. No, what he was interested in was the crumpled form against the wall. Samhien was a shadow of how the Hunter saw him when they first met. He was fitted into the basic prisoner’s outfit, some spots of it stained with orange. Judging by the bleed pattern, the spots were both from wounds underneath and splatters outside. Sammy himself was sporting a few new cuts and burns across his head—and there was a scarring wound on his hand, like something had been stabbed through it. Typical, really. *Sister never takes kindly to Skirmishers.*

Sammy’s eyes were closed, but they sluggishly opened, probably in response to the door opening. His unfocused pupils rested on the form of the Hunter... and he broke out into a warm smile. “Hunter Mordenna...” Samm’s voice was hoarse and quiet. The Hunter could imagine why it was that way. “The Commander sent you on a mission? You must have been doing so well. I wish I had been there to see it...”

At that pride in him, something in the Hunter’s heart throbbed. It hadn’t happened before because he could buy into the fact that it was a gig Sammy did with everyone. Nobody could be that nice, constantly. But to see him so low like this, on the tail end of being tortured... and his first thought upon seeing the Chosen Hunter was how proud he was...?

Mordenna had been searching for a feeling like this for a long time. Something that penetrated the choking mist that had wrapped around him—and when confronted with it, he had no witty commentary. He simply nodded, stepping further into the cell.

“Hunter,” he heard behind him. It was Kalight. “I can carry him if you need.”

“Nah,” he replied, crouching down and helping Sammy over his shoulders. “I’ve more than got him. I’m certainly strong enough to manage him and a gun.” True to his point, the Hunter pulled out his Darkclaw, readying it. He backed out of the cell with Sammy in tow.

He spotted Nevermore’s head angling towards the other door of the building. “... the Court sees company. Two soldiers, coming in through that door.”

At that, a need drilled into the Hunter by his Ascension made his trigger finger itch. One body hadn’t been enough, and as much of a rush as that earlier feeling had been... He was a Hunter.
There was no denying his nature. Killing was a short, but satisfying pleasure. Satisfying in the moment, anyhow. He eyed the rest of the squad. “You goons, go clear out a space for our own bird to land. They’re gonna be on alert as soon as they come in here and spot the body and open door, so I might as well eliminate them.”

Edgar’s brows furrowed. “There’s a clear area back the way we just came. We could use that.”

Kalight hesitated, but began to move out. “Fine by me. Follow behind us when you take them out.”

“Ordering a Chosen around, Templar? You’re braver than most.” Still, he noted it, holding up his pistol to the door and sucking in a steadying breath as he heard the rest of the squad traipse out the door. He kept his aim steady, and he waited.

He didn’t have to wait long. As soon as the patrol stepped in, before they had the chance to look to him and become alarmed, two gunshots rang out. Two perfect headshots, but unlike his sniper rifle, his pistol wasn’t exactly silenced. He knew the jig was up now. Mordenna looked outside, spotting Rozen throwing a signal flare and the rest of the squad hunkering down in cover.

Quick as a whip, the Hunter broke free of his own cover in the building, sprinting out into the open. He hopped over one of the barriers defining the end of the facility grounds and took cover behind a large container. Judging by the company outside, they’d heard the gunshots and weren’t exactly fond of it.

“This is Firebrand,” filtered in their ears, “I see the flare. Coming in for evac!”

Kalight held up a tower shield made of psionic energy, deflecting shots from a turret. “Gonna need to take out that turret so it doesn’t eat her up!”

Mordenna waited to hear another volley of shots, to confirm its position. Then, keeping Sammy in cover as he leaned, he calmly took aim. He knew every nook and cranny of those turrets. If this shot hit home...

With another crack from the Darkclaw, it certainly did. Right through the aiming system. Technically, the turret was still active, but it whirred uselessly, unable to get a bead on any of them. “The thing’s useless,” he confirmed, then smirked. “More than usual, anyhow.”

Kalight nodded, getting his Autopistol out and providing covering fire as the security detail of the compound advanced on them. “Alright, Firebrand’s going to be a while. Hold them off!”

Edgar and Nevermore looked to each other, and Nevermore nodded. He hopped off Edgar and spread out his wings, taking to the sky. A few shots flew his way but Mordenna watched as they missed the mutated bird. Psionic energy coalesced around Nevermore’s head, and with a terrifying cry, wicked lances of psionic energy rained from above. Two Troopers and a Shieldbearer couldn’t handle the onslaught and crumpled, reeking of the aftermath of the psionic energy. The rest of the security detail on site—an Officer, a Priest, and a MEC—were buffeted and worn down.

Mordenna figured such a trick was taxing though, and he figured right; Nevermore sailed back with a lot less grace, ending up in Edgar’s arms rather than on his shoulder. “Nevermore’s spent,” he said, “but that should’ve done the trick.”

Rozen fired off a shot, glancing the MEC. “They’ll have more reinforcements soon, but for now? Congratulate your bird for me.”

Edgar chuckled. “You hear that, Nevermore? You did well.”
Nevermore didn’t reply, and remained somewhat slumped in Edgar’s arms. The rest of the omen were converging around them, gathering at their position. The rest of the security would be a joke with a few more shots from his guns, Mordenna figured. Everything would be grand. Boring, but grand.

Until Sammy tensed around his shoulders. It was quiet for a second until he heard the Skirmisher’s low murmur. “The Assassin is here.”

Oh, lovely. Perhaps that was the reason for the low security. Well, if Fal-Mai wanted to dance with him, he’d gladly show her up. He edged over to Kalight between gunfire, laying Samhien at his feet. He could hear the roar of the Skyranger on approach behind them. “Here, you can have him now.” Then, his eyes flickered upwards, just long enough to catch a deadly detail.

He pulled his pistol. He could register, out of the corners of his eyes, the squad tensing. After all, he was in close proximity to Kalight. He took aim...

... and fired, just above Kalight’s head.

His sister dodged to the side, dropping her cloak as she rolled into cover. “Assassin spotted,” he deadpanned. “The rest of you jokers get on the ship. I think I’m going to spend some quality time with the family.”

He heard footsteps as Menace got the idea and backed off, Sammy in tow. The rest of the security detail had been taken down in the time it took for Fal-Mai to show up. It was just him and his sister. He glared at her, and she returned the stare, though he could tell there was... hesitance, behind it. He barely wanted to think on what it meant—but he knew why. She was still immortal and he was not, after all.

He spread out his arms. “Surprised to see me, sister? It’s a lovely gig, working for XCOM. No Elders breathing down my neck, and I get to kill you and Jax anytime you show up!”

Fal-Mai snarled. “Is this your idea of a game, Mordenna? To turn your back on Them and wound Them so?”

“Yes, actually. God, I’d like to see the looks on their faces, come to think of it. Bet they’re smarting just seeing this, after all.”

The Assassin’s hand, planted on her cover, tensed up. “You left Jax and I behind. Do you not spare a single thought as to what happened to us when the Elders found out you had been captured?”

He did, in that moment, spare a single thought to it. His grin dropped. “... if they punished you guys because I got captured, I think that’s their fault. Not like you could’ve done anything—not like I would’ve let you goons do anything. Don’t go blaming me for them being fuckin’ terrible parents.”

She screwed her eyes shut, shaking her head. “The Elders are without fault! They would not—They were justified—”

“They were just angry and wanted to take it out on someone, you gullible fuck!” He spat, gesturing wildly. “Y’think it’d be any different if you got taken instead of me? You think they would’ve been any less angry at the rest of us? It just fuckin’ chaps me that you and Jax can’t get your heads out of your asses and see how much they suck!”

“Then what do you suggest?! Question Them? Defy Them? Earn the same fate you did, countless times?” Fal-Mai shouted right back, but Mordenna could spot her shoulders beginning to shake. If they punished her like they did him, chances are, she hadn’t gotten over it yet. “Surely your pride
wouldn’t dare let you suggest that we come to XCOM and work with you!”

In response to that, he quickly whipped his pistol up and shot her. She twisted and it landed in her shoulder, and she clutched the wound. It was always easier to fight than to talk. Always easier to just pull the trigger. Wasn’t like she was going to get punished again, anyways. She was the youngest. She actually did right by the Elders. It wasn’t like him, where nothing he ever did was right. They shouldn’t have even bothered if he was going to be this much of a fuckup. Odin shouldn’t have even bothered—

Ok, he hated being distracted by his emotions. The Assassin was on him now, tackling him to the ground and holding her Katana to his throat. If this had been one of their many physical quarrels, she would’ve swiped that across his throat and this would have been over. But no; he still saw that hesitance in her eyes, that conflict. She bared her teeth. “Why. Why work with them? Why join XCOM?”

Mordenna locked eyes with her. “You know how much it hurts, when they punish you. You think I didn’t try, at least once, to avoid it? By then, they’d already marked me as the troublemaker. I was just a fucking pincushion to them. Faced with that, and a few people who actually give a fuck about what happens to me? Yeah. Yeah I’d work with XCOM any day of the week. Think about that when Eliza comes knocking on your door and I’m there with her.”

The Assassin could only stare at him dumbly, her eyes flickering about as she considered surely a thousand retorts... or maybe, indeed, how much it hurt. Well, it was enough of a distraction for the Hunter, and she hadn’t exactly pinned his arms. With a quick snap of his wrist and a pull of the trigger, he sent a shot sailing right into her head. The look of shock as she slumped off of him, and then disappeared... wasn’t as satisfying for once. Taking little satisfaction in killing his siblings... well, maybe he would’ve had more if she hadn’t gone and said the things she did. It was supposed to be cut and dry. So, why was he conflicted on so many topics?

The sound of the Skyranger hovering behind him brought him out of his thoughts, and he scrambled to his feet. He turned to look at the gathered squad. Kalight had Samhien now, and all of Edgar’s ravens were gathered around him, still clutching Nevermore to his chest. They were all staring at him silently.

Desperate for something to fill the silence, he holstered his pistol and gestured to Edgar. “So! Obvious Poe! Are you going to join us officially or continue to be a cryptid in that godforsaken forest?”

Edgar regarded him through the eyes of one of the ravens for a bit, then cracked a grin as the cords from the Skyranger started to drop. “I think it’s time I joined up with something greater. I’ll be coming with.”

“Perfect!” Mordenna clapped his hands together, running forward and grabbing onto a cord. “Another lunatic to the pile. Off we go, I suppose!”

The rest of Menace nodded, and grabbed onto their cords. Edgar’s court either clung to him, clung to the cords, or simply flew up and into the Skyranger. Soon enough, they retracted, bringing Menace One-Five up into safety.

Mordenna was the first to swing into the ship, ducking his head as he walked through it and coming to his spot at the front, dropping into his chair. Things got muted for him after that, barely registering the others as they came on. His thoughts instead went to what his sister said, as much as he had wanted to dismiss what she brought up.
XCOM was a better environment for him, yes, and at least two people genuinely cared about him. Not because he was an asset, but because he was a person. There was no threat of scarring punishment... and Eliza seemed far more likely to talk things out rather than blindly use her power to shut him up. He could see himself... getting more relaxed. Improving? That was yet to be seen. But, sharing it with his siblings...

He scowled. “Suppose it’s up to Eliza,” he muttered to himself.
Mordenna had to guess that he’d done something wrong, that mission. Why else would he be getting called up to the Commander’s Quarters?

As he paced down the halls of the Avenger, subconsciously ducking through doorways, his brain had already been thinking on why from the moment he was asked to come up. Maybe it was staying to kill guards while he had Sammy on his shoulders. Maybe it was being intimidating to Edgar? Truthfully, Mordenna knew the most likely reason... he just didn’t want to think about what it’d mean if Eliza brought it up.

After all, he was pretty much sure that the conversation he had with his sister had more of an audience than just the rest of Menace One-Five. The Hunter was now acutely aware of the things he had said to Fal-Mai, and just how angry he had started to get. Not the aloofness he usually put forward, or even the smug satisfaction that she was in that situation and he wasn’t. He was driven almost entirely out of spite, after all. To see the Assassin still floundering in the Elders’ “guidance” should’ve left him laughing in her face.

But she had to reveal that she and Jax had been punished after he’d been kidnapped.

He’d initially kept himself distanced from the idea of them still suffering at the Elders’ hands with the thought that they’d never flay the other two alive like they did him. But if Fal-Mai was to be believed, they did just that, and based on her reaction, it must’ve hurt in more ways than one. If Fal-Mai was like that, god knows how Jax felt, such a punishment coming down on him.

Mordenna scowled. More and more unwanted emotions had been coming to assault him with his short stint at XCOM so far. Why was there a knot in his stomach as he thought over all of it? Well... he said it himself. The Elders really had no justified cause to punish them. Even if his siblings had come to his aid, Mordenna wouldn’t have let them. Pride, for one, and still just hating them, for another. They were just puppets for Cronus and Helena, after all. Not so much “children” as they were ways to prove superiority. So why was he still hung up on this? Was he starting to consider them...?

“God,” he said to no one in particular, “I’m starting to re-think this whole ‘joining XCOM’ business. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say it was making me grow a conscience. ” The Hunter, with a conscience? Hardly a Hunter at all, in his eyes. “I’m not the Hunter anymore. I’ve been changed. Morphed, against my will! Curse the Commander and her wiles.”

Oh, god, no thinking on the Commander’s charms. Mordenna swiftly clamped his mouth shut and resumed his silence just in time for him to end up at the door to her quarters. He tapped the access panel and stepped inside when the door opened.
The Commander’s Quarters were a pretty cushy operation, considering everything. A bed, a desk with a huge screen, an upright dresser, and a door to what Mordenna could only guess was a personal bathroom. There were even displays in the walls near the door—mostly pictures and models, but in one of these displays, there was a coat. It looked like it hadn’t been worn in a while, but kept in good shape regardless. Mordenna wracked his brain for what military outfit it belonged to, but came up with nothing in his database. Maybe it was for her time during the First Contact.

In the center of the room was a table surrounded by two loveseats and two chairs, and on one of the former sat Eliza. She nodded to Mordenna as he entered, gesturing to sit down. “Mordenna. Glad to see you, and nice work on the last mission. Things went a lot smoother thanks to you.”

Huh. Recognition for his skill? The Hunter was almost surprised. So almost-surprised that he didn’t notice he’d complied with sitting down until he was reclined in the chair across from her. “Well, well, trying to butter me up, Eliza? I’m flattered, but I’m pretty sure you didn’t come up here to compliment me and give me a congratulatory snog.”

Eliza chuckled, leaning back in her seat. “Catch me when I’ve had a few and we’ll see about that.” Now that made some of the emotions Mordenna wished he could shoot take note and he internally sighed. Thankfully, Eliza moved on quickly and she cleared her throat, straightening. “I must also commend you for your efforts against your sister, and for fighting her off at a close-range disadvantage. But, you’re right, I’m not here to compliment you all day.”

Mordenna immediately clued into what she wanted to discuss and he held up a hand, shaking his head. “Y’know that was just to distract her,” he excused himself with, hoping to get Eliza off this topic. He knew that one of the things Eliza wanted to do was help him out in this area, sure, but actually letting her help was a different shooting range. “Meant nothing to me, really.”

The Commander fixed him with a look that screamed she wasn’t buying it. Still, when she spoke, her voice was gentle. “Mordenna, based on previous observations, you aren’t one to get agitated like you did within visible range of anyone. You obviously meant what you said to her.” Her face softened further. “Do you want to talk?”

Honestly, Mordenna couldn’t look at her. Not when she looked so concerned. Yeah, she had shown this level of concern and care at the start, but for her to actually follow up on it? To not just use it to sucker him in and then treat him like any other soldier in her command? It threw Mordenna’s brain for a loop. He was already trying to justify it to himself. Of course, the Commander was smarter than that. She’d just continue to pretend to care for a bit before she actually dropped the act, to convince him it was real before finding reasons to wean him off of it.

But even so… there was a part of him that wanted to believe she was being truthful. He hadn’t talked to anyone about what the Elders had done to him for fifteen years. Maybe a barbed, vague remark at Jax or Fal-Mai, but that was it. There was a lot inside of him that was screaming to be let out, and if Eliza could help…?

His silence must’ve spoke volumes, because Eliza leaned forward. “It’s alright if you don’t want to talk about it right now, but it’s something I want to cover eventually. I care for you, and I want you to know that.”

Eliza offering that he didn’t have to talk about it right now could go one of two ways in his mind. He could take the offer and kick this particular can down the road, or he could talk about it now and… his mind didn’t really want to approach that possibility. Actually talking about what happened with him and the Elders? Unheard of. But the same part of him that seemed to look upon Eliza a lot more fondly than what he was comfortable with nudged him to take this time with her.
Of course, just to be contrarian, he managed to think of something that would neither take nor deny her offer. “Well, Eliza, I can’t help but be hesitant knowing that you’re going to do this spiel with my other two siblings. After all, I can only imagine looking after me is gonna put a few more gray hairs on that head of yours. What do you think looking after Fal-Mai and, god forbid, Jax as well is going to do to you?”

Eliza raised an eyebrow at that, which immediately made Mordenna suspicious. “It sounds to me that you’re concerned about my health, Hunter, which I nevertheless appreciate.”

“Hey,” he said, pointing at her, “don’t you get me marked as the caring type. I’ll leave that to you if that’s your angle. I’m just saying you’re gonna do a piss-poor job if you’re trying to divide your attention between no less than three Chosen.”

The Commander smiled kindly. “And you think I haven’t been dividing my attention since day one? Factions, my own soldiers, resources, and keeping tabs on that Avatar Project... I’ve had my hands full for as long as I’ve known, and I’d like to think I’ve proven I can handle it. If you not getting enough care is your concern, please don’t worry. I fully intend on giving you the attention you deserve.”

Something seemed lacking about that whole plan, and it seemed like it was Eliza’s plan for herself. Mordenna couldn’t help but think that it all left so little room for herself at the end of the day. Then again, she was XCOM’s Commander. Perhaps she made it work. So the Hunter sighed, conceding the point. “Alright, alright. Let’s say I believe you for now. At the very least, I guess I’ll be having fun hunting down my sister for the last time.”

At that, Eliza’s mouth settled into a worried line, an expression that practically read “about that.” “Mordenna, I would highly value your expertise on the upcoming Stronghold Assault... but I don’t think you should be going, in the interest of your sister’s life. I know you won’t hesitate to pull the trigger while her sarcophagus is in one piece, and I appreciate that. What I worry about is you not hesitating to pull the trigger when it’s not.”

Well, Mordenna couldn’t accuse Eliza of being unable to predict him... as much as her saying that hit right home. Yeah, he probably would at least give a lot of thought to killing off Fal-Mai for good. More attention for him, didn’t have to deal with her on the Avenger, and it would be the best revenge. If Eliza had sent him out there without taking that into consideration... then again, she is the Commander. Her taking it into account just further reinforced that.

Still, he couldn’t let it slide so easily. He didn’t have the pride of his brother, but he had some. “Eliza! One of the few reasons I join up with you and your kindergarten class and you take it away from me? Again with these trust issues... what’ve you got against me, Lizzie?”

“After last mission, where you opted to stay and fire on security personnel with the VIP on your shoulders? I’m sorry to say that in regards to being bloodthirsty, I trust you in that department.”

Ooh. Damn, Eliza was good. “Alright, damn, Commander. Hit me right on the mark. Got another question for you, though.” He gestured at her. “Why didn’t you stop me?”

Eliza responded smoothly. “Would you have listened?”

The Commander had him down two to zero, and the Hunter never liked being down in score. Granted, it was all fair points she was making, but that didn’t make them sting any less. His mouth settled into a line. “... what if I said ‘yes’ to that, Eliza?”

At that look, Eliza clasped her hands, straightening up again. “Then I would apologize for
misreading your character as such, and work with you to be more proactive about giving you orders in the future. But if your answer is no, I’ll explain that instead of potentially losing time trying to order you from your spot, I moved to the communication channels of the others to guide them out and into position.”

As always, Eliza’s way of approaching things was intriguing, and a bit impressive. Instead of wasting her breath on him, she opted to communicate with the people who would listen, and arguably who needed it a bit more. That first part got his attention, too... Actual apology on the part of a authority figure? The Hunter could hardly believe his ears. Then again, it could just be hot air. It was one thing to say something, another thing entirely to actually do it.

But before the Hunter could press anything about it, he watched as Eliza ever so slightly looked to her right, brows knitting. “From who?” She asked, and the Hunter supposed she was communicating through an earpiece or the like. After a moment, the Hunter spotted Eliza go through all five stages of grief, before sighing and standing up. “I’ll be heading down shortly.”

Mordenna quirked an eyebrow, moving to stand. Curious. “What’s got your attention, Liz?”

“That was Bradford. I’ve got a call in Resistance Communications—from Volk. ” She looks at him pointedly. “Assuredly about you, considering the Reapers have eyes everywhere.”

At that, Mordenna couldn’t help but grin. “Oh, what, Lizzie? Didn’t clear me hanging with your crew with everyone?”

“Just not Volk,” she said, walking past him, “or Geist...” That was definitely resigned dread in her voice, which was morbidly amusing. The Hunter supposed he’d be seeing more stuff like Eliza trying to juggle everything at once, if he was staying. He didn’t want to think too much on it, though—because his next line of thought was how much it must be wearing her down and that would imply he cared. Couldn’t cop to that.

Discarding his thoughts, he walked along behind her. He hadn’t been dismissed, so he figured Eliza either was fine with him following or wanted him to. “Oh, this’ll be fun,” he joked to fill the silence, “Can’t wait to see the look on that old bastard’s face when he sees me looming behind you.”

“Assuredly it’ll be hilarious,” she quipped right back, pleasing the Hunter, “for all of three seconds. I’m sure you’ll get at least six out of it, but sadly I have to deal with him being angry about all of this, and Volk kicked up enough of a fuss about me working with the Skirmishers.”

“I’d like to see him look Sammy in the eye and tell him he ain’t no good. He’d probably manage it, but still. Would justify the resulting asskicking.”

“Oh, get in line, Mordenna. Both the line for kicking Volk’s ass and the line for appreciating Samhien.”

Eliza rounded a corner and Mordenna followed. “And what about Geist, Liz? I can only imagine you’re going to immediately lose those Templars over this, especially when you reveal that you’re going to do this spiel with the Warlock.”

She waved it off, but his eyes could pick out how tense her neck was. “Implying I’m not always wrestling with him regarding his support? If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he was wanting us to fail.” Eliza nodded to some passing soldiers, waiting until they were gone to resume speaking. “If he wasn’t such a pretty face...”
Hmmmmm. Her saying that... didn’t sit the best with him. The Hunter knew exactly why and hated that it did. Eliza was human. Visually, at least—the Elders had gotten some work done on her. Point being, he shouldn’t be thinking about what he was at all. Mordenna let out a short “hmph.” “Letting your worldly attractions influence your choices of allies, Eliza?”

She laughed, shaking her head. “If that’s your angle, you’re going to have to catch me out on all three of them, and plenty of others. I’m a sucker for a pretty face.”

Assuredly, his wasn’t in the mix. He crossed his arms, and was he getting a bit testy? God, you’re a child. “Good to know the commander of XCOM can let her lust influence her decisions.”

The Commander shrugged, stopping in front of a door. “I wouldn’t put it that way. I can appreciate a nice person while also separating their actions from them, and judging how I want to proceed. Lust almost never comes into it.”

Still, Mordenna found himself fixating on it, and he didn’t particularly like that. It wasn’t like Eliza would like him like that anyway, right? He was a Chosen, after all, and he was the Hunter. Then again, Betos was apparently on her list of attractions, which gave him hope he didn’t want. He let the topic go as Eliza opened the door, stepping inside.

Ducking under the doorframe, the Hunter could pick this room out as the Resistance room. The banners of all three factions hung on the walls, and in the middle of the room was a planning table. On the far wall was a giant screen, which was currently tuned to Volk’s very tense face.

“Eliza.” He began, and the Hunter got the firm impression that he was staring at him. “Why is he free? I thought you told me you had him under wraps. And what the hell was he doing in the field?”

Eliza walked up to the table, taking a place that the Hunter could see was ever so minorly worn down. “Volk, if one of your scouts in the field saw him, then assuredly they also saw how he didn’t hesitate to kill his sister and rescued our second Skirmisher operative himself, yes? Or did your scouts decide that not important enough to share?”

Volk rubbed at his face, still eyeing the Hunter. Tellingly, he said nothing on that. “You’re still letting an alien run around your ship. I can deal with Skirmishers, Commander. They’ve proven themselves.”

Oh, the Hunter couldn’t help himself. An old memory was calling to him, one he couldn’t quite grasp—but it leaned him into quipping. “My, my, Konstantine Volikov? Accepting Skirmishers? Who are you and what have you done with Volk since I’ve been gone?”

The familiarity of his tone no doubt was what set Volk’s face further into distaste. “Unlike you, who’s been barking as the Elders’ dog, the Commander’s been busy fighting a war and showing who her worthy allies are.”

Volk never lost his ability to bite. Though why Mordenna was familiar with that, he couldn’t say. But hey, if it annoyed Volk? Good enough for him. Still, being accused as a dog of the Elders didn’t exactly make him happy. “And so, by recruiting me, Eliza has declared me as an ally, hasn’t she? Sounds like someone has me mistaken for my brother—if anybody, you should be calling him the dog.” A wicked grin grew. “Oh, but something tells me you won’t be happy to hear what Eliza wants to do with the Warlock and the Assassin, either...”

Volk looked back to Eliza. “Eliza.”
Eliza was currently facing the screen, but Mordenna could tell by the way she set back her shoulders that what he said wasn’t exactly welcome. “He’s right, Volk, and while I would’ve like to explain that myself, ” no doubt aimed at Mordenna, “It’s true, and something I wanted to bring up sooner rather than later.”

Volk gestured to them. “I would’ve thought ‘sooner’ would be before you’re letting that maniac run amok.”

Eliza sighed, but kept her posture straight. “I realize that, and I apologize. I was hoping to do this on better terms, but Samhien was kidnapped, and we got the tip fairly early, and Mordenna was one of the best men for the job. I would’ve sent Wukong, but... he’s still recovering. And you are still in possession of Outrider for right now.”

Volk didn’t look like he was happy with that still, but some tension left his face. Eliza certainly was good at this whole “apologizing” bit. “Well... better than me thinking you weren’t thinking, which I wouldn’t put you up to.” Then, a bit of worry slipped into his expression. “Are you really going to do this with all the Chosen? Him, sure. But the other two seem less likely to play nice.”

Eliza swept her hand out, leaning over the table with the other. “Yes, and I understand that. But there is room to negotiate, and talking is one of the things I do best, Volk. Mordenna stands behind me, doesn’t he?”

Volk simply regarded her and the Hunter for a minute. “What was the deal you two came to, exactly? I can’t imagine you can offer him much that he can’t just take.”

Hm. The hand that was supporting Eliza on the table tensed up. Mordenna joined her in the mild abrasion, but shrugged it off, as he was wont to do. “As much as I would absolutely love to,” he began, “I can’t take on the Elders alone, y’know. And I’ve got a lot of pent-up hate for those bastards. It’d be more satisfying to one-man army them, and sure, maybe I could pull it off! But working with XCOM makes it easier, and maybe a touch more fun. I’m allowed to design my own toys here, of course, and I get to shoot game the Elders didn’t want me to. For now, it’s paradise.”

“And when the war’s over?”

Mordenna grinned. “We’ll burn that bridge when we get to it.”

Volk looked at him for a moment longer before sighing, rubbing his forehead. “Fine. Alright. If anybody has it handled, I guess it’s you, Eliza. God knows it would’ve been easier to just off him, but...”

“Konstantine Volikov, I don’t know if you know,” Eliza said, and her smile could be heard through her words, “but I am Eliza O’Leary, Commander of XCOM. My portfolio includes surviving for twenty years in the Elders’ drunk tank, converting a Chosen to my side, and never taking the easiest option.”

Now that was enough to earn a smirk out of Volk, but it settled into something more neutral quickly. Eliza pressed on. “But, to sum it up: yes. I am prepared to face the consequences if things don’t go well and I am fully ready to issue kill orders if things get hairy—but not without having tried everything within reason, first. I ask for your patience for a bit, and if I miss my mark critically? I invite you to lead XCOM in my stead.”

He leaned back in his chair, a fair bit more relaxed than he was before. A smile worked its way back to his face. “Leading XCOM? Me? I think I’ll pass, Liz. I’ll be willing to go along with all of this... provided you give me a definite date on that romantic dinner.”
Mockingly, Mordenna gagged behind Eliza. The Commander herself laughed, straightening back up. “Oh, alright. I need to drop by your headquarters for some business, anyhow. We’re planning to assault the Assassin’s Stronghold within the week, so... I would estimate about a week out, depending on where you guys have set up shop.”

Volk nodded, grabbing a pen and paper and jotting something down. “I’ll have one of the gammas send you our latest coordinates.” Ah, the paperwork jockeys of the Reapers. Every faction needed them. No, the Hunter didn’t know exactly why he knew that. Perhaps it was a tidbit he had picked up on a hunt, once. “I’m holding you to this, Eliza.”

“So long as you’ll give what I’m doing a shot.”

Volk stopped writing, seemingly fixing them both with a serious stare. “So long as you remember the death on his hands, Commander.”

There was a moment of silence. Eliza had gone still. Then, she spoke. “Is the death on my hands any different?”

He shook his head sternly. “Aliens don’t count, Eliza.”

“I wasn’t talking about the aliens.”

Now that... that stopped Volk up, and the Hunter too. Right. Eliza, despite everything, had been a battery for the Network for twenty years. Not just that—the Elders’ main computational lead. The one guiding their soldiers through every raid, every pull of the trigger—and this wasn’t even counting her previous military experience, which led her to this point. No doubt, the Commander had seen even more death than the Hunter had. It was a pretty serious subject... which, naturally, meant that Mordenna didn’t like thinking over it.

Eliza, apparently, didn’t like lingering on it either. She cleared her throat. “So long as you know that, I think we can reach a mutual agreement. Is that all?”

Volk shifted in his seat, nodding shallowly. “That’d be it. Volk out.”

With that, the connection closed, and the feed cut. That left Mordenna and Eliza standing in the room, silence growing. Mordenna didn’t like silence he didn’t have to keep up. When he was hunting? Count him at a hush. Otherwise? “So, Eliza, by my recounting? You still have a ‘Prophet’ to call, and what fun that will be.”

Snickering, Mordenna started to pace, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Oh, Commander. You’re an awful riot to hang around, you know that? Makes playing for the good side fun.”

“Hey now,” he said, pointing at her, “baby steps. We’ll see if it’s ‘worth it’ if I survive my siblings living here. Still not thrilled about that, by the way. You get on me for my willingness to kill them, but what’s to say the two of them won’t jump me the first chance they get? Hell, what’s to stop just Fal-Mai from murdering the fuck out of me?”

“Negotiations, naturally,” Eliza began. “The fact that I’ve successfully talked with you will help in the end, and things will go a lot better if you at least don’t attempt to kill them first. The first thing
is showing them that things are safe here.” Her gaze softened, and she clasped her hands in front of her. “None of that punishment to be had.”

At that, the Hunter’s jovial mood soured, and he looked to the side. “Yeah. Sure. Don’t forget you’re going up against the Elders here, Eliza. They can offer a lot more.”

“The very same Elders flaying them alive in the first place, and cultivating such neglect that one of their children was easily willing to join the fight to kill them?”

Mordenna scowled. “You’re missing something, Eliza. Those two are indoctrinated. I missed the mark because I was Ascended while I wasn’t so impressionable, unlike Jax. Definitely not vat-grown, either. I was easy because I actively hated those bastards. The other two? Probably thinking they deserve that punishment. Probably thinking it’s just their faults the Elders are hypocrites and don’t know what they want out of kids.” His voice dropped. “Probably happy that their ‘miscreant brother’ is out of the picture.”

He could hear Eliza stepping closer to him and he tensed, waiting for some sort of reprimand. After all, it was pretty non-conducive to what she was trying to do by listing off everything against her. That was just fostering resentment. Eliza should be getting angry at him that he’s being unhelpful, right?

Something touched his shoulder and he whipped his head back, eyes wide. Eliza was withdrawing her hand, looking at him with that soft expression from earlier. Was she... trying to comfort him? What...? “Well, I’m happy you’re in my picture. Hopefully, I can get others to see that, too.”

He... didn’t have anything to say to that, for a moment. He really, really wasn’t expecting that. Yeah, maybe Eliza had said she cared, maybe she said she wanted to show him what actual love is about, but he still wasn’t thinking she’d follow up on it. His brain scrambled for something, anything to say. “You’ll be fighting an uphill battle there, Lizzie.” That’d do. More being difficult!

But, Eliza nodded sadly. “I know. Nothing’s ever really easy. But I’m willing to work for it, like I’m willing to work with you.”

Goddamnit, Eliza. You’re supposed to give up. You’re supposed to decide it’s not worth it. Ain’t nothing good can come out of me. After all, if she didn’t care, it’d be easier to leave. Or, “leave,” whatever happened first. He looked away again, mood decidedly somber. But... as always, the prospect of actually talking out his problems? Almost frightening, but under that fright was a certain willingness. The hope that maybe, just maybe, things could get better.

But this was a place too open. The communications channel could open. Somebody could walk in from outside. There were so many things that could go wrong and the Hunter’s brain was happy to supply him with all of them. He shrugged, mostly to himself. There was always “later.” “Guess we can trash that bridge when we get to it,” he muttered.

“Later,” Eliza said firmly. “Somewhere more quiet, more private. I really would like to talk seriously, Mordenna.”

Shrugging again, he looked back to her. Thankfully, instead of setting a definite date for that, he remembered what she was supposed to be doing. “So. Calling Geist?”

Eliza looked back towards the monitor, and there was definitely a lot of hesitation on her face. Eliza, Commander of XCOM, unwilling to “face the music.” She sighed. “Geist can know later. I’ve only got so many hours in the day and I can always call him up tomorrow, when we’re gathering things together for the mission. Need a few days for Shen to finish fixing up SYN,
A thought occurred to him and Mordenna was right back to grinning. “Oh, yeah, Commander. I’d say I did well on that mission. Where’s my all-access pass to the Workshop?”

Now that brought a smile to Eliza’s face and Mordenna found himself relaxing. “I’ll let Shen know of your upgraded status, and one of your first orders of business can be helping her fix up SYN. You were the one who shot out his leg, after all.”

“Yes! Shot him right on the mark, too. If you ask me, I’ve got about ten different ideas on how to piece those robots together better.”

“Then by all means, share them with the Chief Engineer.” Eliza gestured vaguely. “She’s always looking for ways to improve our arsenal. I think she’ll like your suggestions.”

Honestly, Mordenna was pretty jazzed about getting an opportunity to do some personal projects that the Elders wouldn’t let him do—as well as making changes to guns that would be mass-produced. They wouldn’t let him change up any of the weaponry, supposedly because it’s mean he was a better creator than they were, and they wouldn’t have that within their increasingly short lifetimes. So hey, even if it meant fixing what he’d broken in the first place, he was a happy camper.

Eliza turned back to the table, accessing a panel on it and starting to navigate menus. “I’ve got a thing or two to handle before the day’s out. Calling Betos, for one. I’m sure she’ll want to hear of our success in getting one of her best Skirmishers back.”

Mordenna looked towards the screen as it displayed “Connecting...” in the center. “Sure she’s gonna be happy I’m in here with you? You’ve already gone and worried one faction today.”

“Betos caught on quickly what my intentions for you and your siblings were, though maybe she was a bit inaccurate in coming to her conclusion. Nevertheless, I think she’d like to see you here and hear about how you played an integral part in rescuing Samhien.”

“Somebody liking seeing me? Eliza, what notions do you have in your head?”

“Good ones, namely,” she said, casting a smile his way. “After all, I’m pretty happy to see you here.”

Goddamnit Eliza. He sighed. “This ‘love and support’ thing is giving me second thoughts,” he shot back, decidedly joking.

Before Eliza could continue the banter, the screen came to life, showing Betos sitting at a table, the feed crackling for a bit before stabilizing. Her eyes came upon the Hunter and she looked rather surprised for a second, but the expression died quickly. “Commander. Hunter.”

“Betos.” Eliza nodded at her. “I’m here to report that the mission to rescue Samhien was an overwhelming success. Did more than rescue him—we got a new operative out of it and Mordenna here was the one who sprung Samhien from his jail.”

That got a look of pleasant surprise out of Betos, and she smiled. “I see your efforts, as always, show their worth, Commander. To see one of the Chosen acting against the Elders will no doubt shake the faith in the False Gods.”

“One of many benefits, I assure you. Now,” Eliza said, “We’re soon going to have a full squad ready for the mission of capturing the Assassin. Samhien is too injured to participate, but rest
assured, Mox will be on the mission.”

Betos chuckled. “I find that well! He will no doubt revel in the chance to prove his skills against the Assassin.”

The Hunter couldn’t handle being silent any longer. Quipping it was. “I’m pretty sure he’ll also appreciate the chance to turn the tables on her and show her what being captured is like. Maybe it’ll fly over his head, maybe it won’t, but I’ll laugh at it.”

“All very good reasons,” Betos grinned, “and I have confidence that Eliza will be able to guide her soldiers to victory.”

“Vote of confidence accepted and appreciated,” Eliza said.

Betos clasped her hands together on the table. “As always, Commander. I must take a moment to thank you—and the Hunter—for rescuing Samhien from the Assassin. For a Skirmisher to endure the Assassin’s captivity and live to tell the tale will be a great boon to morale. The fact that he was rescued by the Chosen Hunter will also do wonders for Hunter Mordenna’s image amongst the Skirmishers. Actions speak the loudest, after all.”

“Hardly need to tell me twice.” Eliza stood up straight. “Thank you in turn, Betos. I appreciate your assistance at every turn. I always count getting to discuss things with you as a good thing—you tend to understand.”

Now, the feed wasn’t so good on color definition, but Mordenna could swear he spotted a hue of orange coming to Betos’s face. Well, if it did, it was gone as soon as it came. She nodded. “Your appreciation is noted, Commander. Will that be all?”

“That’d be it.”

“Understood. Good luck, Commander.” With that, the feed cut once more. Eliza gathered a paper or two on the table.

Mordenna couldn’t help but still feel disappointed that he wasn’t going on the action to perturb his sister. But, then again, there was always the option of poking at her when she was in her cell aboard here. If the Commander allowed that, mind, but he felt like if he could eke in a talk with her, he might be trusted enough to go annoy his sister unsupervised. Then again, that meant having a talk with the Commander, and wouldn’t that be fun?

Eliza finished gathering a few documents, turning to leave. Mordenna watched her go for a bit before the silence got to him. “Now, where ya jetting off to, Lizzie?”

She looked back, smiling at him. “With luck, to your sister’s doorstep.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey, all. As of time of writing, I’m going to be having a two-week vacation in October. I was glad I was able to finish at least Ch11 before then! I’m going to be working my hardest to get another chapter out before I head out of the country.

As a reminder, if you want faster updates about what’s going on, you can track me on my Tumblr over at grace-kohai.tumblr.com/tagged/sftd-update. I’ll try to get more in
the swing of updating on progress regularly if there's interest shown--my ask box is always open and Anonymous questions are on.
Breach

Chapter Summary

XCOM invades the Assassin's Stronghold.

Chapter Notes

Hey all! Thanks to the wonderful Jack_Kellar, we now have a TV Tropes page! You can find it at https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Fanfic/SympathyForTheDevil and while I'll be updating it while I can, contributions are very much welcome! Like the story, have already kudos'ed but are too shy to comment? Contribute to the TV Tropes page!

Once the dust had cleared from the blast charges, five soldiers and a SPARK descended into the Assassin’s Stronghold.

Pratal Mox led the squad at the front. Behind him, Sherry and SYN took point, while Banel kept his head on a swivel. Moody was behind all of them, keeping to the back and in cover for lack of high ground.

Finally, descending from above as Nevermore fanned out his wings, Edgar touched down, clutching a Powered Shadowkeeper on loan from Moody. The “Alloy Cuffs” Shen had made were hanging off of his belt, and his usual coat had an armored undersvest underneath, similar to what the Reapers wore. The rest of his omen, he had decided, should stay in the ship. With an entrance like that, there was no room for stealth—and ravens wouldn’l blend in well in an underground structure.

Gingerly, the squad moved forward. Practice guided Sherry and SYN’s steps, but the rest only had their wits to go on. Mox reached the first set of doors, sparing a glance beyond. He spoke softly into his helmet. “I’m seeing no less than three ADVENT—a Stun Lancer, an Officer, and a Priest. They are all alert.”

“Roger that,” Eliza replied, eyes scanning the feed they were getting from above. Hopefully, they weren’t in for any surprises compared to last time. Though, with the guard being father up... maybe it was catching the patrol at a different time. Or maybe...

She looked to the Hunter, who was standing behind her and similarly keeping his eyes trained on the screen. Though, when Eliza looked at him, he cast his gaze to her and grinned. “What? You don’t let me on the mission, fine, I get that. But I’m sure as hell gonna backseat command this shit. If Bradford can do it, so can I.”

Bradford, beside her, looked for all the world like he’d rather be down there himself than having the Hunter’s commentary over his shoulder. “I thought one of the points to taking down the Chosen was to silence banter like this.”
“Jonathan Bradford, like you have room to complain,” Eliza shot back, looking back to the screen. “I firmly have the notion that the aliens are continuing progress on the Avatar Project in my head, thank you.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Bradford grinned. “And if we’re going to slow them down...”

“You’ll need to move. Quickly? Hm, something like that.” The Hunter seemingly always had to have a word in. Wasn’t like Eliza was complaining... too much. There were times where she wished he’d put a lid on it. “Anyway, Commander, I could’ve just told you where my sister was hiding out. No need to play coy with scouting.”

Eliza thought for a moment. “So. Does that mean you know where your brother’s Stronghold is?”

Eliza got the distinct impression that the Hunter was smirking. “Oh, I don’t know, Eliza... never visited him as often, don’t have his address memorized, I guess I could be convinced to think of it...”

Oh, the Hunter sure knew how to play hard-to-get. But, that was distracting from her main focus. She shifted her attention proper back to the screen, watching as the squad tentatively advanced. A few options ran through her head and she decided on a course of action. She wanted to save all of her explosive ordinance for the fight with the Assassin. “Mox, if you can get the angle right, I want you to bring that Priest over to your position and take it out. Davy Jones, your angle is good, I want a potshot on whoever moves into view after that. SYN, Cherry, overwatch. Baal, suppress whoever’s left. And Raven King? Stay low, keep an eye out, manage a shot if you think you can make it.”

She got various affirmations from the squad, and watched as Mox leaned out into the open, just far enough to get a good angle. Then, his ripjack’s cord lept out and snagged the Priest, dragging it in full view of Menace. Death was quick after that, and the rest of the pieces she had set up fell into place.

“Brutal efficiency, Commander,” the Hunter commented, assuredly watching it all go down. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’ve done this before.”

“The Commander has, and I do not intend to let her be as successful this time.”

That was the Assassin on general comms, and down below, the squad wasn’t too distracted by it. Mox had taken the lead after dispatching the first squad and was navigating through the labyrinth that was the Stronghold. Eliza focused her attention on that this time, but offered some of her attention to the Assassin. “My track record is good, Assassin. I’d say I’m going to give myself at least a fighting chance.”

“A fight is what I wish for, Commander. Anything else would be spitting in my face. But, I cannot let you win. There is far more at stake than even you realize, and in order for us to avoid utter destruction, you must be returned to the Elders.”

“Oh, really, sis?” She could hear the Hunter’s sneer in his voice. “Do you even know what’s at stake, here, or have you just been blindly believing everything the Elders have been throwing at you again?”

The Assassin’s response was swift. “I know more than enough to realize that with XCOM’s actions, they doom the universe to destruction! The Elders have a solution against total annihilation. The tragedies and losses faced in the wake of that are nothing against oblivion. Brother, why do you not understand?”
Eliza furrowed her brow. She’d absolutely love to be a part of the conversation, really, but matters on the ground required her attention—like the next squad Menace was encountering. There was a lot more security this time around, and more organization, from the looks of it. That brought up a... concerning line of thought, regarding the Hunter. Combined with the things he’d said in the past, Eliza half-thought he had wanted XCOM to get to him as quick as possible, while still under the impression that they were out to kill him.

She really, really needed to get that talk with him scheduled.

“Oh, I understand alright, but the Elders lost my sympathy from day one, Fal-Mai. They can fuck off and die for all I care—and I care a lot about them dying, you see. I care that it’s me pulling the trigger when they do.” Seems they were still going at it.

“After all They’ve done for you, Mordenna? They made you greater, offered you a purpose! Why would you turn your back on that?”

Mordenna’s voice had more than a hint venom when he next spoke. “Don’t you fuckin’ play dumb with me, sister. It ain’t what they’ve done for me. It’s what they’ve done to me. If you weren’t lying earlier, you know how it feels. You want me to come back and feel that? Huh?”

There was a moment’s pause in the banter, and Eliza almost thought the Assassin had given up trying to convince her brother entirely. More focus for her, she supposed—

“You... you disobeyed, brother. That’s why you were punished—”

“Bull. Fucking. Shit, sis. I guess you weren’t listening to me before and wow, thanks, that’s nice to know. I tried being the poster child well before you showed up, and you know what that got me? Nothing. I slipped up on accident for once and the fuckers thought I did it on purpose. So there went that. So stop trying to school me on what I could or couldn’t have done. Believe me, I’ve tried. Now are you gonna keep dragging the rest of XCOM in on our family drama or are you going to let Eliza kidnap you?”

The personnel on the Bridge were silent, including Eliza. Down on the ground, there wasn’t any friendly banter outside of shots called and reloads. Eliza’s worry for the Hunter—and all the Chosen—grew. There was another period of no talking from the Assassin, like she was trying to come up with alternate routes and failing.

Eliza watched as Mox capped the last Officer of the pod. He’d taken a grazing hit to his side and Banel had taken a few direct shots—but Banel was hardly any worse for wear. The squad was still green. Eliza took her chance to speak freely. “Squad, reload, proceed forwards.” She thought for a moment, then decided to take pity on the Assassin’s silence. “Nice place you got here, Assassin. Such a shame we’re rummaging through it, but I’m not keen on you dropping in on my missions and scaring the daylights out of my soldiers. I’ll definitely try to give you a good fight.”

It was a moment, but the Assassin responded. “It is not ‘you’ who will be fighting me—simply the soldiers you send to shed blood in your name. I have become a nuisance; therefore, you send your soldiers to put me down. I understand why you do not fight for yourself, Commander, but I will not have you speak to me as if you do.”

All that got out of Eliza was a short chuckle. “Two things about that—firstly, I suppose you’re right. Shouldn’t be taking credit for the work my soldiers do in the field, but it’s a style of speaking I lapse into often. Don’t think for a second that I’m trying to take all the ‘glory.’ Secondly, murder is so barbaric.” She knew full well the context of that against everything, of course. “XCOM offers a health benefits program, you sure you don’t want to at least give our brochures a look?”
Behind her, the Hunter snickered. “Yeah, sis, at least give it a shot. I’m hooked, after all.”

“Your manner of joking about forcefully taking me from my masters does you no favors, Commander,” the Assassin returned. “I cannot let you capture me.”

“Cannot? Awfully different from will not, sis.” The Hunter, as ever, picked apart everything. “You might want to be careful about your language. Once the Elders have smacked you around, they’re a lot less hesitant to do it again.”

“They would not punish me for such a small slight.”

“Uh-huh. Yeah. Tell yourself that now, bet it helps you sleep at night.”

“Kids,” Eliza interjected, watching as Menace One-Five hit their next pod close to the Ascension Pad by her guessing, “could you lighten up a little? I’m trying to lead a squad here.” Speaking of. Mox was pinned down under suppressing fire from a Muton and the rest of the squad was engaged... but it looked like SYN could spare a moment. “SYN, fire on the Muton pinning Mox.”

“Affirmative.” SYN wastes no time in lining up a shot, downing the alien and freeing Mox. He nodded appreciatively to the SPARK, then pulled a Shieldbearer to his position and showed it the sharp part of his Ripjack. Things were generally proceeding well, and if the layout of the Assassin’s Stronghold was anything like her brother’s? This was the last spot of resistance they would face.

“Eliza, Eliza, you askin’ me to lighten up regarding the Elders? Rather short-sighted for a Commander of your caliber.” She could tell that Mordenna was joking, but it was a fair point. “Besides, she started it.”

“Oh, no, certainly not. The bastards deserve it, but I think I could also accuse you of dredging out your own family drama for all to see.”

“Once again, Lizzie, she started it, and I’ll sure as hell respond to shots.”

Eliza sighed, eyes regarding the screen a moment longer. “And then Fal-Mai will shoot back, which will prompt you to return fire, and thus the cycle of revenge continues until everyone forgets what they’re fighting about in the first place.”

“As much as I disagree with you, Commander,” the Assassin cut in, sounding softer, “your wisdom is not to be dismissed. I see how you sway others to your side.”

“Well, I appreciate the acknowledgement, Assassin. If you’ll allow me, I’ll thank you in person as well.”

“We shall see, Commander, but I do not intend on letting you win.”

Hm. Maybe Mordenna was right—it did sound like the Assassin was stepping around her words a little. For all of her loyalty to the Elders, she wasn’t as adamant about chasing XCOM out... up until Mordenna pointed that out, of course. But, if she herself was to be believed, she was flayed just as the Hunter was. Perhaps she wasn’t as willing to serve under those who would do something so harsh. If she failed here, if Eliza was unable to secure the Assassin, she would no doubt be forced to serve under the Elders forever.

Eliza really, really needed to talk with all the Chosen. That, or cap the Elders. Whoever came first. Especially that bastard Arg—
“Commander O’Leary.” That was Mox. “We have successfully neutralized all resistance. The Assassin’s Ascension Pad is within sight, and we are ready to move on your order.”

Eliza blinked, clearing her thoughts. Well, enough thinking on that. Back to tactics. “Understood. Menace One-Five, make sure everyone’s on that pad—otherwise, you’re green to go.”

Mox nodded on the ground, and she watched as the squad advanced forwards, into the final room of the Stronghold. Eliza straightened, looking to the Hunter. Mordenna was still watching the screen raptly, and looked like he was lost in thought. Not for long. He noticed Eliza looking at him and shrugged, expression going neutral. “Well, Commander, you’re just about on the Assassin. I’d pop off a champagne bottle, but I’ve come down with a terminal case of ‘cannot be assed.’”

Eliza shook her head, grinning fondly. “Shen?” On the other side of the Bridge, at her own console, Lily looked up. “The package ready for prime time?”

Lily nodded. “I added in a few things after I presented it to you, but based on testing, it should work as intended. With maybe a surprise or two, but surprises in our favor.”

Satisfied, Eliza turned back towards the screen. “Fal-Mai. I hope you won’t find my soldiers wanting.”

“I as well, Commander.”

Dimensional shifting was a hard thing to get used to, as it turned out. Even if Sherry had felt it before, it still didn’t make her nearly fall on her ass any less.

The rest of the squad had a similar experience, outside of SYN, who passively observed the area. It was much like the Hunter’s Inner Sanctum—but it lacked the raised platform in the middle. Instead, two braziers burned with spectral, purple fire. Chest-high decorations were spaced out like the pews of a church, six in all. Without the middle platform in the way, it gave the area a very open feel...

... and allowed Menace to quickly lay their eyes on the Assassin.

She sat, lotus-position, at the same raised platform her brother had before. Her Sarcophagus loomed behind her, still cloaked in purple energy. Fal-Mai herself opened her eyes as Menace saw her, moving to stand. “At last,” she breathed, looking them head-on, “a true fight. You will not find me as a prize to be taken, XCOM. Instead, you shall find my blade at your backs. You will not be successful today.”

Mox, at the front of the squad, stepped forward. “Assassin Neylor. I believe you will find us as harbingers of justice—and takers of the Elders’ children.”

Fal-Mai’s expression twisted into disgust. “Pratal Mox. The Commander has saved me the trouble of hunting you down personally again. When I purge all of you, I will find Betos and let her know how her Champion failed her.”

With that, the Assassin faded from sight, leaving no more room for commentary. While the squad scanned, Mox kept a level head. “Menace One-Five, assume cover.”
“Mox is correct.” The Commander came in crystal clear. Seems the communication channel the Hunter had opened for her was still up—or maybe Mordenna had worked some magic. “Stagger yourselves. Loose circle—and have SYN stand in the middle.” When the squad went to cover, Eliza came in again—over Banel’s headset exclusively. “Baal. Prime and throw a grenade a safe distance from the squad. You don’t have to prime it through the launcher, necessarily.”

Banel immediately clued into what the Commander intended, and took his grenade launcher off his back anyway. Wordlessly, he loaded it with one of his Plasma Grenades, primed it, and shot it towards a good guess of where the Assassin was.

The grenade exploded, the sound reverberating through the area. To the right of it, in cover, the Assassin’s cloak peeled off her as she clutched her head. Banel holstered his grenade launcher and lugged around his minigun. “Assassin located,” he deadpanned.

“Menace One-Five, engage!”

“Dirty, Commander.” Mordenna, providing the running commentary as usual. “But effective.”

Moody was the first to pop off a shot, and Fal-Mai twisted almost unnaturally to avoid the lance of plasma that screamed towards her. She molded to her cover afterwards, now having a bead on the squad’s sight. Gathering what psionic power she possessed into her hands, she called to the fold of the Void and the Network—reinforcements.

Three Stun Lancers appeared next to her in her cover, and judging by the decorations on them, they were a cut above the rest. Wordlessly, they peeled out of cover, employing some of their own flexibility and swiftness to avoid the incoming fire from SYN. Two settled into better cover, still near their Chosen. The third, instead, set its sights on Edgar and his position on the side of the group. It charged at him, baton brandished and crackling with voltage.

Edgar listened as it sprinted for him... and calmly stood, even as it bore down upon him. As it moved to jab him, he stepped to the side, grabbing its weapon arm and twisting it. “I’ve fought you lot before,” he croaked. “You’re all so predictable. Someone as blind as I can read you.” With that, Nevermore lunged forward and proved how unnaturally sharp his beak really was, jamming it right through the Lancer’s throat. It crumpled to the floor, and it wasn’t long before it stopped moving. Edgar went back to crouching in his cover, with his front and Nevermore’s beak painted orange.

Sherry, meanwhile, had her sights set on the other Stun Lancers. She wasn’t about to have them knock out any of her squad. Nodding to her GREMLIN, it flew off... and dipped sharply, just in time to avoid a thrown knife from the Assassin. On it went, unimpeded, until it reached one of the Lancers. With a shuddering discharge, the trooper was shocked into standing—right in time for Sherry to shoot it clean in the head.

With two out of three down, SYN instead opted to focus on the Assassin herself, still glued to her cover. He leveled his gun and the barrage began. If she wanted to move, she’d have to chance moving between the gunfire, even with her cloak up.

Mox nodded to Banel, and Banel fired on the last Stun Lancer. Only a few glancing shots hit off it—but the distraction was what Mox wanted. He reached forward and fired off the grappling hook of his Ripjack, nailing the Stun Lancer’s side. With a yank, he dragged it towards him, and a swift downwards flourish of his blade was all it took. The Assassin’s guard was eliminated.

Another measured peek out of cover was seen from the Assassin, managing it through the plasma streaking around her. That man that had been identified on cameras... there he stood. The Raven King, as she’d overheard. As interesting as he was, she couldn’t let him live. If he were allowed to
temper his powers...

In a split second, the Assassin made her decision. Doing an acrobatic roll from her cover—moving between the beams of plasma—she then broke out into a sprint, peeling her katana out of its sheath. As quick as she ran, she left Menace scrambling to provide reaction fire, and soon she was upon Edgar.

Edgar himself was desperately backing up, but he could hear the alien metal of her blade cutting through the air towards him. He’d be cut diagonally in half—and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Nevermore, on the other hand? With a flap of his wings, he dismounted from Edgar, the force of his takeoff pushing Edgar off-balance. The Assassin’s blade cut across his front, tearing clean through his armor and coat; but it was far from the lethal blow it would have been, and Edgar fell to the floor as he let out a yelp of pain. She’d still gotten him, as the quickly-seeping blood attested.

The Assassin turned to the mutated raven just in time to see him glow, and feel a point-blank Soulfire scorch her. Quickly resuming her wits, she darted from her position, leaping into some high cover and disappearing behind it. Nevermore was at Edgar’s side again, wings raised threateningly as Edgar scrambled back into a better position, wincing as he disturbed his wound.

Sherry made short work of recalling her GREMLIN and sending it back over to Edgar, the healing spray stopping the bleeding and even starting the scabbing process. SYN’s sight remained trained on the Assassin’s column. They couldn’t see her from this angle, so rest of the squad reloaded as Eliza’s voice came in. “SYN, bomb her position. She’s being awfully quiet.”

“Affirmative. Launching BIT.” As directed, SYN took ahold of his BIT, and with a mighty lob, sent it careening towards the pillar. Once it hit the ground, it exploded—non-lethally to itself—eliciting a ghastly scream out of Fal-Mai. Purple wisps of psionic energy bled out from behind the column. No Harbor Wave was to be summoned today.

Clutching one of her blast wounds, the Assassin weighed her options. The constant abuse of her weakness was going to prove fatal if she did nothing about it—but if she attempted to gun for the Grenadier, it would merely send her back to the void by the rest of the squad’s hands. Her other hand moved to a grenade on her own belt. Perhaps now was the time to test out her new gadget.

A moment passed, during which Edgar looked over his wound. God, it smarted... but it could’ve been so much worse. Once again, he found himself owing more and more to his companion He offered an appreciative nod to Nevermore... and too late, heard a clink nearby—a small object hitting the ground. He scrambled back. “Grenade!”

Before the squad could react, the device exploded—into smoke. It blanketed the area and was thick to an almost choking degree. SYN wheeled around, knowing this was the moment the Assassin would strike. Over his comm link, he heard the voice of the Hunter, declaring that someone was going to perish. His processes went at work, calculating the most probable squad member the Chosen would target. He turned towards Banel, who was staggering out of the smoke. Of course. Explosions, her weakness. She would want to dispose of the specialist.

That was when the Assassin struck.

The screeching of bending metal and grinding steel ripped through the air, followed by warning blares. SYN cast his optics down, and there the Assassin was, with her sword lodged to the hilt in his chassis. She regarded him and his new structural deficiency coldly. Systems were failing, his circuitry was frying, and she had scored a clean hit to his main core. He wasn’t long for this world.
Streams of data flooded him and amongst them, he issued one final command.

The Assassin had no time to react when SYN’s arms flew at her, hands clamping around her neck and immobilizing her as he dropped his cannon. SYN was shaking violently, but the hold around her throat remained firm and strong. Nearby, Nevermore was putting his impressive wingspan to use and dispelling the smoke, one gust at a time. Suffocating, the Assassin withdrew her blade, coughing and trying to gingerly work her weapon to cut open the SPARK’s hands.

But the process was far too slow and she was making too much noise. Through the smoke, Sherry saw her hazy outline and heard her gagging. With a cold, critical eye, she took aim. Her weapon kicked, plasma shot forward, and the Assassin was down one life, up one hole in her head. Her body teleported out, and not a second too soon—SYN, with a mournful groaning of metal, collapsed to the floor.

The smoke cleared fully, revealing the scene to the rest of the squad. There was no banter to be had—just the grim realization that they were now down one member of Menace One-Five. Sherry’s face dropped from the cold visage she had put forth. SYN had been in close scrapes before, and he’d saved or protected the squad countless times. Just a SPARK, yes, but a member of the team.

She didn’t hang on her melancholy long. Sherry let her anger come forth and she wheeled around to the Assassin’s Sarcophagus, which was now bare and gathering energy. “Squad, fire on the slab!” Without waiting to see if everyone else would, Sherry buried her last few rounds in her mag into the smooth metal.

The rest of Menace One-Five wasn’t far behind her, though. Banel switched to his full-auto and unloaded. Mox and Moody peppered it with the last rounds in their guns, and even Edgar took a few carefully-aimed shots.

The Assassin’s voice filtered into their ears. “A good effort, XCOM, but without one of your greatest assets, how will you fare?”

Just then, one of the platforms in the room lit up, and an organized guard came through—a Heavy MEC, an Officer, and two Stun Lancers. Both parties scrambled into better positions.

Up in the Avenger, Eliza watched the whole scene with a grim gaze. To lose SYN was a heavy blow. They had a backup SPARK in Julian... but to lose a face of the team like that would no doubt weigh heavily on everyone. Rosa especially. Hopefully they could do something with his parts... not to mention that without his firepower, it was unlikely they’d destroy the Sarcophagus in time.

“Y’know, for a bucket of bolts, I think SYN was pretty neat. Probably didn’t deserve getting impaled like that.” Eliza turned towards the Hunter, who was similarly watching the scene as she was, his previous levity gone. He locked eyes with Eliza. “It’ll be interesting to see how you pilot around that, Commander.”

“There’s hope,” Lily interjected from the other side of the room, “I’ve got a backup data core in SYN for a reason. If the one in his head managed to get enough of the transfer before he... got deactivated, I might be able to restore a previous version or the like.”

That took a weight off Eliza’s chest and she looked back towards the screen. Another wave of ADVENT forces had come to face Menace One-Five—and the energy around the Sarcophagus was closing fast. SYN could be rebuilt, but if she let anyone else die this mission, it’d seriously hurt the idea of turning the Assassin... as if it didn’t have enough against it already. The Commander saw Edgar aim at the Sarcophagus. “Menace One-Five, prioritize taking out those forces over shooting the Sarcophagus!”
Edgar’s arm faltered, but then he aimed over at an Officer, eyes glowing behind the blindfold. A crack of the Shadowkeeper later and there was one less ADVENT to worry about. With luck, she could have the squad dispatch the guard by the time the Assassin came to life again.

“So, Eliza.” Once again, the Hunter caught her attention. “Off the books. Which means don’t scream the answer into your mic, but what are you doing to capture Fal-Mai?”

Eliza kept watching the screen as she muted her comms, making sure the situation on the ground didn’t get out of hand while she was talking. Things were progressing well—Banel was now substituting as squad tank and thus attracting attention and taking hits, but his armor was holding. “The Alloy Cuffs Edgar’s holding. Shen could probably explain them better than I could.”

Lily took the hint. “Basically, they’re handcuffs—but the instant they’re slapped on the Assassin, an interlocking mesh will spread over her body and immobilize her. There’s... a lot of specifics to go through, and it’s the project I was handling yesterday, if you remember that.”

“Sure do!” The Hunter replied chipperly. “Still should’ve let me look at it. Would’ve put in a thing or two to really make it effective against her. Because, come to think of it—”

“Before you ask, yes. There’s measures that, theoretically, should counteract her cloak. The cuffs themselves can light up pretty brightly and even emit sound to disrupt her invisibility.”

The Hunter gave an impressed hum. “Lily Shen, you never cease to be interesting.”

“Should I be worried about that?”

“Yeah, probably.”

Eliza shook her head, returning her attention to the action. The Commander watched as the Sarcophagus became bathed in the purple light of psionics once more—and as the last ADVENT of the guard fell. “Good work, Menace One-Five, prepare to re-engage.”

Sherry looked to the sky, seeing the psionics from the Assassin’s Sarcophagus coalesce above a certain platform. Her head snapped to the Alloy Cuffs, then to Mox. “Mox, toss a grenade at that platform!” She pointed to make her call clear.

Mox hesitated for just a second, only enough to ensure it would go off on the right timing. With a pin pulled and an expert lob, the Plasma Grenade settled on the middle of the platform. The energies grew brighter and landed, and in a column of light, the Assassin descended once more. The grenade went off.

The scorch of plasma and the sound of being at ground zero of the blast sent the Assassin staggering back, giving another ungodly scream as her armor shredded and melted. The window it created showed just how adverse her body was to explosives—something Banel grimly noted before he lifted up his Beam Cannon and fired on her with the last of his mag.

Back Fal-Mai went to the Void, and back the psionic energies of her Sarcophagus retreated. Menace One-Five reloaded—except for Edgar, who dashed up and unclipped the Alloy Cuffs from his belt, handing them off to Mox. “‘ere. I think you’re better at close range with the Assassin, anyhow.”

Mox nodded, taking them and clipping them where his grenade used to hang, before firing on the slab of metal. The percussion of plasma rang through the air—and soon, the onslaught proved destructive enough. Once again, cracks formed on the surface of the object, each successive splinter echoing louder and louder. Pinkish-purple sparks flew between the lines of light the
fractures made, and the pieces of the Assassin’s Sarcophagus shuddered violently, but held.

“Excellent work, Menace. Now, look sharp, and take the Assassin alive.”

Mox nodded again at the Commander’s instruction, and once more he looked for the gathering energies that foretold Fal-Mai’s return. The squad backed off of the platform she then reappeared at. Her armor was fully repaired, but Mox’s sharp eyes could spot the waver in her stance as she regarded XCOM. Her blast wounds must’ve not entirely healed.

She took a tentative step back, eyes on Mox. “XCOM. You have accomplished severing me from the Elders—and to what end? To capture me? To lord me over Them as your new prize?” She stopped, hesitating in her commentary. When the Assassin next spoke, her voice was softer. “They are no longer speaking to me… by choice, or otherwise. I cannot help but agree. One last battle, XCOM. One of us shall perish this day.”

Staggering back one more step, she dashed at Mox. No acrobatics. None of her wicked speed. Just her brandished katana and a sight trained on the Skirmisher. With such telegraphing, Mox found it suspiciously easy to parry her resulting swipe—disarming her with his right arm, holstering his gun and grabbing the cuffs with his left. He lunged forward and spun her, using her momentum to do so. With a quick flourish, the cuffs locked on her wrists.

A spider web-like mesh started to spread over her body, hardening as the filaments connected. Mox forced her to her knees in time for it to reach her legs, locking her in a kneeling position. Her burning gaze bored into her captor as the coat stopped just shy of her face.

“A mission well-done, Menace,” Bradford chimed in. He’d seemed to have been keeping quiet during the running commentary. “Be wary of the Assassin—otherwise, bring her in.”

Eliza nodded to him, straightening. “Whoever has arms free, bring in what you can of SYN. We might be able to bring him back yet. Get the Assassin’s weapons, as well.” As the squad on the ground prepared to haul, she looked to Mordenna. He looked like he was juggling something in his head—likely the same thing Eliza was. Which was, when faced with a squad with a member down and starting to run on fumes… the Assassin chose to openly, clumsily charge the one person holding the key to her capture. It was almost as if…

The Hunter’s expression darkened, right up until his eyes flitted to Eliza. He shrugged, looking to the side. Eliza wasn’t about to talk about any of it here, or anything else she had been thinking over. That could be saved for later, at a less populated time.

“Two down,” Bradford muttered, “one to go.”

For a second, Eliza could swear she heard Mordenna whisper “they aren’t going to like that.”
Punishment

Chapter Summary

Jax is summoned to the Meeting Hall in wake of the Assassin's kidnapping.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: This chapter has very heavy depictions of abuse and the beginning of PTSD. This chapter is not ESSENTIAL for understanding the rest of the plot moving forward, but it is important for understanding why Jax does what he does later on in the story. I'm sincerely sorry to anyone who has suffered abuse and cannot read this chapter for their health.

When the Warlock was called into the Meeting Hall, a storm of emotions brewed inside of him.

He had felt, not long ago, his sister die. Twice. With them spaced in such quick succession, he could only imagine what had transpired—and why he was alone, and called here today. But fear still gnawed at his gut, and he dipped into the Network. Fal-Mai had died twice. He had no true attachment to his siblings, he told himself. He just... had to know. He had to know if they had really killed her.

It took a minute, but a video feed played back across his mind. Once again, the sight of the storage room, light filtering in from the ceiling and debris scattered on the floor. Menace One-Five, marching in, the various members hauling their destroyed SPARK, Fal-Mai’s weapons—and Fal-Mai herself, bound. Into the sky and out of view, they ascended on black cords, and Jax stopped viewing the feed. That was all he needed to know. She was alive. Captured, yes... but alive.

... but why did he care so much? At least he could justify it for the Assassin. For all of her naivety, for her occasional mistakes and misconceptions, she had been loyal in service to the Elders. If pressed, Jax would regard her with respect. To lose her... and to be left alone with the Elders? This was a dream Jax had before, to be the sole recipient of the Elders’ attention. To show that he alone was worthy. But, now? When the Assassin had been taken, and he knew what had happened when his brother had been kidnapped?

The fear in his stomach was swiftly being replaced by a heavy sense of dread, and he tried to shake it off. He’d attempted to help the Assassin, after all—and Father was witness to that! Father had stopped him. Father would understand, and he would not be punished... right?

Maybe he could still do something. If XCOM could take, so could he. The plans for the cannon Mordenna had wanted to employ still existed. The design could be used. He could siege the Avenger and rescue the Assassin, at least!

His train of thought was interrupted as he felt the Void swell with sheer power. The Elders were approaching, and shortly, the psionic flames burned brighter at Their coming. Respectfully, Jax assumed his usual bow. They would understand. He could leave today, unmarked.
The presence of the Elders reached a crescendo, and Jax could feel Their very being washing over him. But... there was not as much comfort to be had, as he had felt before. Even at the first... *punishment*, They had been comforting at first. *It is alright*, he assured himself. He had this.

“Our child... you must understand why you have been summoned here today.” The bass-filled thrum of Father’s voice led the Elders, and the Warlock took solace in it. “We see your grief for losing your sister... and your plans to rescue her?”

At the Elders’ question, he nodded. “It is a great tragedy that XCOM has taken no less than two of Your children. I would like to remedy this and—”

The voice of one of the Elders burned in his head—Helena. They... were no longer speaking as one? “Warlock. Why did you not prevent such a thing in the first place?”

Jax looked up, confusion evident. Did She not know? “I... I attempted. Did Father not tell you He stilled my hand?”

The very air in the Meeting Hall came to a sudden stillness. Jax could feel the signature of the Elders quiet to a deathly hush. The dread that had come before returned in full force. He shouldn’t have said anything. He should have kept quiet and let the Elders speak, he should’ve never—

Cronus took over once more—overbearingly so. The orchestra of His signature swelled and rang off Jax’s mind. “*Jax-Rai Tessura, do you take enjoyment in defacing me?*”

Jax’s heart seized inside of his chest. That was an *accusation*. The Warlock would never seek to deface the Elders, and surely Father knew that. Then why was He asking such a damning and demeaning thing? Jax shook his head, balling his hands into fists nervously. “No, Father! I do not mean to insult You, nor would I like to do so.” But... even as his fear tried to withhold what he said next, Jax had to know. Surely the Elders were unified, yes? “But... You did not tell the others—?”

The image of the Elders split, a second coming forward and bearing down upon Jax. The sheer magnitude of Cronus’s power forced him into bowing his head, and he found himself trembling under the wrath He was exuding. “*Dare you lie to my face, wretched son?*! I owe you no explanations! You should be glad I do not unmake you on the spot for your ignorant presumptions! *Do you know how easy it would be to let you rot?*”

The Warlock could only shrink away at the onslaught, fear overtaking him as he started to curl inwards on himself. He was so, so frightened. This... this couldn’t be happening. Father *loved* him, and this could not be any shade of love. Did he really step so far in asking a question? Did Father hate him now? So frightened was he, in the moment and at that prospect, that past his squeezed eyelids he could feel a tear form and drop to the floor.

Suddenly, hands made of burning psionics gripped his shoulders, and Jax’s eyes flew open. Cronus was forcing him to kneel upright with two of His hands, and a third shot out from under His cloak and clamped down on Jax’s chin. The seething resentment from Him only blazed harder as Jax was regarded with fury. “*What. Was that.*”

Jax found himself lifted from the floor by his chin, dangling limply as he trembled hard. The grip on his shoulders and chin was crushing, but he knew he could not lift a single hand against Cronus. “*WEAKNESS, I DID NOT TEACH YOU SUCH PATHETICNESS! YOU HAVE NOT LEARNED ANYTHING FROM YOUR LAST PUNISHMENT. DO YOU SEEK TO ANGER ME?! HAVE YOU LEARNED SUCH MASOCHISM FROM YOUR HEATHEN BROTHER?!”*
Jax squeezed his eyes shut again, desperately trying to stem the tide of tears that threatened to drown him. He had never cried in front of the Elders before—just in the safety of his Priests, or Maria. But even as he tried to stop himself, his throat constricted and his next breath attempted at being a sob.

Cronus shook him, His grip burning harder. “**ANSWER ME!!**”

The Warlock could only shake his head under the bare wrath of his Father, words failing him. It wasn’t enough. Jax was lifted a bit more before being hurled forcefully to the ground, face pressing against the writhing, alien metal the floor was made of. He could feel the swell of power before it happened again.

The pillar of flaying energy hit his back in force, and quashed any notion of him even supporting himself under the barrage. It was hotter, *tens* of times more burning than the last time, feeling like it was searing him to his very soul. Jax’s clawed gauntlets scraped against the ground, leaving nail marks around his emblem on his podium. He let out a guttural cry with the air that was being forced out of his lungs, tears drying up on his face from the sheer heat of the psionics bearing down on him.

Then, it split. One main pillar remained on his back—but sections of it parted, arcing around and striking his sides, his arms, his legs, even the back of his head. It was too much, all at once, so *overwhelming*. At this point, the scattered remnants of his thoughts disappeared from his mind, and the only thing he could process with clarity was the *agony*, of how each strike felt even worse than the last. His chest heaved, trying desperately to bring in air, his insides feeling like they were being scorched from how hot it was around him.

It was too much. It was *too much*. All Jax could do was desperately babble pleas to *stop*, to *please stop*, devolving into cries of *it hurts*. There was nothing else he could do; his muscles would not cooperate, and he couldn’t even manage the stance he had before under the power of it. His back burned, so much, to the point that Jax was convinced that Cronus had burned right down to his bones.

All at once, it stopped. The power against his back dissipated. The hall was silent once more.

But Jax would not rise this time. He could still feel it, on his back. His skin still felt like it was cooking, almost bubbling from the aftershock. Jax took in a shuddering breath, silently sobbing it out. He pressed his gauntlets to his face, to hide the tears that once more came—but he knew that Cronus most likely saw them again. Punishment would come. Punishment *was* coming.

Yet... it did not. Jax waited for it, spurred into muteness. There was no more flaying, simply the silence of the hall and the vague register of the presence in front of him. He chanced, just for a second, to not perceive only his own pain. He could pick out... *four* distinct signatures in his mind’s eye: Cronus, Odin, Helena, and Argus. Cronus’s was still loud, still quaking with fury... but it was decreasing by the second. Argus seemed to be currently engaged with Him, the lone presence of Their signature standing out amongst the rest of the Elders. Were They... calming Him?

He did not have to wonder long. The focus of the Elders’ presence shifted to him once more, and it was *comforting*. The sheer relief flowed through Jax and his next sob was *audible*, and he flinched, waiting for *some* kind of punishment.

Nothing. The Elders spoke—lead by Argus. “**Warlock Tessura. Stand, if you can.**”

With shaking limbs and downcast eyes, Jax trembled into his usual kneeling position. He had to
restrain every urge to hug himself for comfort, and kept his head down.

“Elder Cronus is only angry because He loves you, Jax-Rai.” Argus’s tone was soothing, and Jax found himself taking in the inflection of Their voice. They were a rarity among these meetings. Was the force of Cronus’s punishment enough to draw Them here...? “Weakness is easily exploitable on the battlefield. XCOM would not hesitate to punish such, and it is why He becomes so heated. He does not wish to see you suffer at their hands! Do you understand?”

He didn’t. He didn’t at all. He did not understand how such a brutal display would at all fortify him against XCOM. It only seemed to exist to hurt him. Jax couldn’t understand why Cronus would even do such a thing if He claimed to love him. But to say he didn’t understand... that would undoubtedly seal his fate. Elder Argus was extending a chance, a rare moment of even interacting with any of the Chosen. If Jax chose to bat away this olive branch...

Jax nodded, and when he spoke, his voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper. “I... I u-understand, Elder Argus.”

The signature of the Elders further calmed, and there was silence. More comfortable, this time. Again, They seemed to be talking amongst Themselves—or maybe simply Argus to Cronus. Jax could only timidly wonder what was taking place. Until the Elders wished not to speak with him anymore, he was trapped where he was. But still, he found himself mulling over what They might be speaking about. Anything to forget...

He felt Their attention turn to him once more. “Your intentions to rescue your sister are noble, Warlock Tessura. If it further motivates you into reclaiming the Commander, consider it one of your goals. As for your brother...” Jax waited for Their tone to shift, but no such thing happened. Elder Argus remained level-headed. “I do not imagine he will be as privy as to returning to Our embrace. But, knowing his machinations, this may be a heavy smokescreen. Capture him, learn of his intentions, but if circumstances prove dire, do not hesitate in ending him. Is this clear?”

Jax nodded again. He did not think about what Elder Argus was saying. He merely heard, and nodded. He could not think. He had to forget.

Argus continued. “We shall begin looking into a method of preventing the device XCOM used on Assassin Neylor from working on you. We love you, Jax-Rai, and to see you fall as well to XCOM’s prying hands would break Our hearts. Each meeting, each talk, every word We speak is Our love for you. You are Our eldest child, Our first blessing upon this Earth.” The Elders’ signature reached out and soothingly caressed him. Jax merely let Them do as They wished. “You are gifted. You are Chosen. You cannot fail.”

The Warlock inclined his head in favor of nodding again. “You may go. We have much to discuss.”

With that, he felt the pull of the Void. Much like the Elders’ attempt at affection, he let it happen, feeling himself shifted and ushered away from the Meeting Hall, through the Void. The trip was short, and left him in his exact position, in front of his Sarcophagus. Silence hung in the air.

“Warlock Tessura...?”

That voice. Jax’s eyes focused as he looked up, and at the end of his room stood Archbishop Maria, with more than a few Priests huddled around her. Though her face was covered by her helmet, her signature rang of concern that was matched by her sisters. She could probably feel the stress rolling off of him in waves. Perhaps she even felt his... his...
Punishment. Jax staggered into standing, trying desperately to walk forwards before collapsing to his knees, trembling. What had just happened hit him in force. The boiling, the flaying, the punishment.

There can be only one reason.

ANSWER ME!!

Both phrases screamed across his consciousness and he was there again, under the fury of the Elders, his failures, his regrets, his wanting to do better, his pain his hurt his fear—

Signatures that were not the Elders crowded around him, with a brightly shining one right in front of him. Jax couldn’t see for a moment or so, but when he regained his vision, Maria was in front of him. His other senses began to return; there was a pressure around his body—Maria was hugging him. His Priests were hugging him. His face was hot, his face was wet.

No. No more tears, tears were weakness. He wanted to wipe them away, do something to dispel them, but the Priests around him had hugged his arms to his sides. All Jax could do was mouth a silent “no” as more formed, streaming down his face. Why was he so weak? Why did he have to disappoint Them so? Was there nothing he could do right? Who was he if he could not do right by the Elders?

It was only then that he could feel his followers’ psionic signatures pressing against his own, practically begging for access. Maria’s Solace was washing against him, unable to calm his own signature with the walls he was putting up. To let them in... to let them know what had happened in the Meeting Hall would further disgrace himself to Them, wouldn’t it? He couldn’t handle being more of a failure. The tears surged. But he couldn’t handle being alone even more. A childish part of him cried out at the thought of pushing them away, of telling them to leave him in peace.

He wanted comfort. He wanted somebody who would hold him and say it was ok. He wanted something the Elders would not give him.

Jax sobbed, and his walls came crashing down. He leaned forward, slumping into Maria, feeling as his gathered Priests—herself included—dipped into his signature, sampling the memories that threatened to consume him. He could finally hear the soft gasps that rang around him as his followers found out what had happened no less than five minutes ago.

Then, for the briefest of moments, anger flashed through their signatures. Jax tensed up and another sob wracked his body. “I’m sorry—!”

The group hug around him tightened and his Priests whispered hurried assurances that he hadn’t done anything wrong, no, they were just... They couldn’t complete the statement. To be angry at the Elders as one of their servants... It was unthinkable. Then again, Jax had thought cruelty of such magnitude was unthinkable, and he saw and felt what that had earned him.

Maria squeezed him in her embrace, one of her hands moving up to his hair and petting it. “Jax-Rai. You are here, you are safe. We want to help. Nothing bad is going to happen.”

No. No, that was a lie. Bad things had happened, bad things were happening, bad things were going to happen. “Then why,” he choked out, worming his arms free and clutching her, “why would Th-They do that? Wh-why would They hurt me? I didn’t—I didn’t do anything bad.” His eloquence was gone, and he hadn’t the mind to bring it back. “I just... Maria, it hurt, why...” Jax choked back a sob, giving up on speaking. His signature was a storm of negative thoughts and he fully collapsed against his Archbishop, shoulders heaving.
Maria’s Solace pulsed, and he hiccupped, a bit of the edge being taken off the storm. He just
wanted to be alright. This was terrifying. But... He had his Priests here. Maria moved her hand to
the back of his head and pressed him against her chest, where Jax could hear her strong heartbeat.
He focused on that. He was not in the Meeting Hall. He was here, surrounded by love. Love that
was different than what... what the Elders had claimed They felt for him. This love was soft.

His next sob was quieter, and his hug on Maria went from less crushing to more self-reassuring.
Maria carded through his hair. It was a while before she spoke, as if she was considering her words
carefully. “You didn’t,” she decided on, softly. “You did not deserve such a thing.”

Jax stopped in his sobbing. Did... Maria just speak against Them? At his silence, she continued.
“To be flayed so brutally... your back is still searingly hot! Your armor has been warped!” Her
heartbeat was speeding up. “Your skin... oh, by the Elders!” She reached out to the other Priests.
“Sisters, please, forgive my heretical speaking, but this was not warranted! They know how badly
it hurt him and yet... and yet They performed such cruelty again!”

The Priests were silent... but there was no dissent in their signatures. Jax felt a hand or two probe
his back and quickly retreat. The burning hadn’t stopped. “Archbishop Maria...” One of them
began. “He... he might be wounded, we have to check the site. If They truly used such force against
him...”

The other members of his congregation rallied around that. Jax was still hung up on what was
happening—his tears were still flowing, but he’d stopped sobbing. Were the Priests—not only
them, but his Archbishop —speaking out against what They had done? The storm was starting to
break, but it still went on. His shoulders heaved and he took in a quick breath. “I... surely I deserve
it if They did such a thing...”

He could feel Maria shake her head. “From what I— we have seen? You have done nothing but
your best as one of the Elders’ Chosen. I will not speak long on the topic if you do not wish me to,
but...”

Jax didn’t say anything to that, but he felt like he had to. The Elders had to do it for a reason. Now
that the storm was clearing, rationality returned. Maybe... maybe it was a bit overkill, but he had
spoken out against Cronus. All he had to have done was stay silent, and the meeting would have
been short, and without punishment. There was still the matter of his back, and if the Elders’ rage
had been bad enough to warp the astral metal his armor was made of? “... my back.”

“Right!” Maria held him closer, sending a short pulse to the other Priests. Soon they were at work
undoing the clasps of his armor, peeling it off. He winced as the motion of pulling it away brought
pain, and the Priests gasped once again. Maria tensed up. The room was silent.

Jax’s breath stilled. It... it couldn’t be that bad, yes? He was Chosen. Surely it was just mending
before their eyes and they were marvelling at it, right? “Priests. What... what is the matter?”

Maria’s signature thrummed with righteous anger. “... They have branded you. There is a wound
covering your whole back and it is not regenerating. It is not bleeding, thank... thank the heavens,
it’s cauterized.” One of her hands moved and swept aside his hair. “I and my sisters will do what
we can, but...” Her anger cooled, replaced by quiet horror.

She spoke no more, her other hand pressing ever so lightly against his back. More joined it in
various places, and he couldn’t help but suck in a breath at the stinging. Their signatures swelled
brightly and their psionics hummed as they were put to work. Led by Maria, they bound
themselves together into one force, and Jax could feel the burning sensation beginning to abate, his
skin crawling not unpleasantly as they were supposedly mending it.
He simply remained limp against Maria, closing his eyes and taking in deep breaths. The Elders... had done enough damage that his regeneration was, at the least, having trouble fixing him. It was taking the force of outside psionics just to make it right. *But it wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t spoken out against Them,* he reminded himself. The Elders had Their reasons, and the prophecies he had heard in whispers in the past had spoken of a world-ending terror. Anything the Elders did was justified against total oblivion.

Anything They did was justified. He would simply have to bear the marks of his insubordination.

Eventually the calming tide of psionics over his back stopped. “We’ve done what we can,” Maria began, “but... They have severely burned you. I do not think it will fully heal.”

“That is understandable,” he murmured flatly. “I acted out against Them. I spoke out of turn. I was lucky that They did not unmake me where I stood.”

“Jax-Rai...” Maria swallowed. “My Chosen.”

“I deserved it, Archbishop.”

The room was quiet once again, none of his followers willing to speak out against them. He took in a calming breath, and sighed it out. “Bring me my lounge clothes. My armor is likely still scorching... but I shall still use it, as a reminder of my mistakes. I will wait until it has cooled.” He gave Maria a weak squeeze, then uneasily moved to stand. The Priests backed off around him, rising as he did. He wasn’t meeting anyone’s gaze. A thought occurred to him, and he closed his eyes. “... if the Hunter is working with XCOM, it is likely that he will be sharing the location of my Stronghold with them. We may not get forewarning in the form of XCOM’s scouts. We must prepare for an incursion at any moment.”

He opened his eyes in time to see Maria nod. “What would you have of us, Warlock Tessura?”

He finally met her perceived gaze. Jax’s shoulders slumped. “... you, and your sisters, will be somewhere safe when they invade.”

Maria’s postured stiffened. “My Warlock, surely you are not suggesting we are to sit on the sidelines as XCOM comes for you?”

“No, I am not suggesting it.” He set his shoulders back and his gaze hardened. “I am commanding it. I will not have XCOM senselessly slaughter you all on their warpath to kidnap me. You have my expressed permission—and my orders—to hide.”

“And if they take you?”

Jax looked past her, eyes unfocusing as the tension left his shoulders. “I would rather have all of you alive than dead. Understandably, my severance from the Network will affect every living Priest on it. You may seek to rejoin the Elders again, if you wish.” He chuckled bitterly. “Or, if you seek capture to remain with me, approach XCOM if I have been taken.”

Maria started to say something quite a few times—but then, all at once, she was calm, as if something occurred to her. Similarly, the Priests around her relaxed. She bowed deeply. “As you wish, my Chosen. We will stay safe when XCOM comes. If you have no more need of me, I shall go to making evacuation plans for when XCOM arrives.”

“Other than my robes? You are free to leave, Maria.”

She nodded, rising from her bow. Maria took the chestpiece of Jax’s armor from the three Priests
that had been holding it and walked back towards the platform, the rest of his followers trailing after her. He watched them leave, thoughts at a low hum.

He’d been punished. Branded. His Priests, his *Archbishop* were speaking heresy. Now, they were suddenly calm at being told to stand aside. Jax turned back towards his Sarcophagus, the otherworldly energies bleeding off of it, the ghost of his own form hanging in front of it. Something only his gifted senses could perceive, he knew. Even if he wished to leave...

He dashed his thoughts. There was nothing more to be done.
Eliza meets with the Assassin and has a chat with her.

Thanks to the circumstances of her capture, the Commander was able to see the Assassin a lot sooner than she had her brother.

Instead of waiting on her to come out of a psionics-induced coma, all Eliza had to wait on was them securing her inside of her Holding Cell. Progress was going at a breakneck pace on the room; the Assassin’s Cell had been done in time for her to be captured, and the framework was started for the Warlock’s Cell. The room itself had some defence systems installed in case of emergency, as well. Eliza had to thank Lily when she got the chance. That girl was an absolute wiz at this.

With that in mind, as soon as Eliza got word that Fal-Mai had been moved to her cell, she had started making her way to the rooms. After all, no time to strike like when the iron was hot. She could get some initial things out of the way now and then leave the Assassin to meditate on them when she left.

But even so... that led Eliza into thinking about what she would cover. Undoubtedly, Fal-Mai wouldn’t be as open as her brother was, as weird a statement as that was to the Commander. After all, the Assassin, by all accounts, was more fanatic about her support of the Elders. Not to the Warlock’s extent, but it would undoubtedly make this take longer than it did the first time around.

Yet... Eliza had heard what she had said on the field, had seen her reactions to seeing her brother on XCOM’s side. That punishment... Eliza only had vague recollections of it, as part of her time on the Network. As the Network’s main Admin for quite a while, Eliza had been allowed to dip into feeds where she pleased, all in part of gathering info for her simulations. One of Tygan’s logs on the chip had further reinforced that. What she could recall was a column of burning, searing, psionic power, always bearing down on the Hunter.

She grimaced, still walking. “Overkill” was too light a word. Psionics of that power would undoubtedly leave scars, and with how many times Mordenna had been under that? It was a wonder he still functioned. Perhaps he’s not really functioning, a grim part of her mused. Well, hopefully she could get that talk with him over with sooner rather than later, when more damage might be done. Maybe a few follow up talks, as well. Her plans needn’t be rigid, and she knew that none of them 100% survived being put to action. I’m used to adjusting on the fly. It should be fine.

Eventually, Eliza finally made it to the Chosen Holding Cells once again. The door slid open and on the other side was Shen. She was doing some of the work herself this time around, working on a floor panel by the looks of it. She looked up as Eliza came in, setting some of her tools to the side.

“Hey, Commander. Here to see the Assassin?”

“Indeed I am,” Eliza replied, walking to her. “Anything I should know?”

“Well, she’s in there, for one, and she wasn’t too happy about being captured.” Lily stood up. “Not full on ‘trying-to-escape’ levels of struggle, but a few token ones, you know?” Her eyes narrowed. “She’s been a bit quiet now. You’d almost think...”
“... she wanted to be captured?” Eliza finished for Lily. The two exchanged a glance, and it was Lily who backed down first. The Commander continued. “Regardless, as long as she’s disarmed of her main weapons, I’ll cover talking to her right now. I figure there’s a remote to go with her restraints?”

“Yep.” Shen passed Eliza a similar remote to the one that had been connected to the Hunter. “‘Disco Mode’ is still implanted in her cuffs, and just to be sure, I’m locking the doors to the room while you’re chatting with her.”

“Good thinking.” Eliza accepted the remote and turned towards the Assassin’s Cell. “You impress as always, Shen. I’ll be talking with the Assassin if you need me.” With that, Eliza stepped forwards, entering the door to the Assassin’s Cell. She made sure she took up the whole doorway as best she could without leaving gaps—she wouldn’t put it past Fal-Mai to try to escape even in her state.

The door closed behind her, and Eliza was greeted by an empty room. Well, the Commander had more sense than that to think the room was truly empty. Fal-Mai must’ve been hiding in her cloak, waiting to see what first move the Commander of XCOM would make. To that end, Eliza picked a corner of the room, walked to it, and sat herself down. She cleared her throat before she spoke.

“Fal-Mai, I just want to talk. I’m willing to sit here until you want to.”

There was silence for a while. Eliza didn’t have much else planned today, other than a conference with Geist. She could afford to wait here. She’d already managed to squeeze in her first talk with the Prophet a little bit before she embarked on the mission to kidnap the Assassin and... that went over as well as one would expect, but Eliza managed to keep things together by the end of it. Today’s follow-up talk would hopefully go better.

Just then, the air at the opposite corner of the room shimmered, and split, revealing the Assassin. Her arms were bound behind her back and her ankles were in shackles. She wasn’t looking very pleased about her condition as she stared down at the Commander. “If your intentions are for a ‘friendly chat,’ you must excuse me if I am not so willing, over my own arrangements.”

Eliza gestured to her, more pointedly to her bindings. “If I took off the cuffs, would you go for a weapon we didn’t account for? After all, I know you had knives hidden in your belt. What’s to say you don’t have others stashed?”

Fal-Mai faltered at that, but she remained firm. “You have bested me, Commander. I would not go as far as to murder the person my masters so desperately seek, or so much as harm you.”

Desperately? That was a funny word to describe any effort of the Elders, from one of their Chosen that wasn’t the Hunter. But, a thought occurred to Eliza, one born of a few... old world traits Fal-Mai seemed emblematic of. She crossed her arms loosely. “Alright. I trust you on that. But what about harming yourself?”

Fal-Mai didn’t respond to that. Her gaze flitted to the side and stayed there, her expression softening in uncertainty. Seems she’d caught her there. The thought of what would’ve happened if Eliza hadn’t considered that and let her out of her bonds on trust...

The Commander didn’t dwell on it, but it spurred her voice into becoming softer. “Fal-Mai. I really do want to talk and help you out.”

The Assassin shook her head, gaze trained on her again. “I cannot allow you to do that. I will not fall prey to the same brainwashing you subjected my brother to.”
Eliza quirked an eyebrow, but put it back down quickly. “‘Brainwashing?’ How do you think I’m going to brainwash you?”

“Simple. You will put the idea in my head that the Elders are my enemy and turn me against Them. I imagine my brother did not need much help with his process, but I shall not let you sway me so easily.”

Eliza shakes her head. “I can’t say I’d ‘put the idea in your head’ so much as I’d just... talk with you, and if you arrive at that conclusion? So be it. It’s the same deal I offered Mordenna; it’s the chance to fight for somebody who cares on a personal level what happens to you.”

“And further shame myself in the eyes of the Elders? If They did not wish to reclaim me now, surely They would after such heresy. They... They care for me.”

Eliza sighed, thinking on how to approach her next point carefully. “... would a kind, caring parent want to ‘reclaim’ one of their children because they were taken from them? Would a good parent want to ‘reclaim’ one of their children at all?”

Fal-Mai’s brows knitted, and she stepped further into her corner. “You could not understand Their reasons, Eliza.”

“I was a battery in their Network for twenty years, Fal-Mai.” Eliza’s expression darkened. “I don’t want you claiming that I don’t understand. I do. I know how the Elders think.”

“You...” Fal-Mai turned her head to the side. “You may have spent longer in Their service than I, but not as one of their children. You had never done wrong.”

“Maybe I didn’t. Maybe that was because I was hooked up and brainwashed to the point where I couldn’t have acted out if I tried.”

Fal-Mai closed her eyes. “Perhaps that is more of a blessing than you may think...”

Eliza’s fists clenched and her breathing stilled. No. No, it wasn’t a blessing, she wanted to say, *I was locked up for twenty years on my back, running simulations, killing my own people. That is the farthest thing from a blessing that it could be.*

But, Eliza understood what Fal-Mai was getting at, more than anything else. Her anger cooled and she took in a deep breath, relaxing her hands. The Assassin was actually getting at some of what the Elders treated her like. That was good. “For you to consider my situation a potential blessing speaks of what the Elders did to you. You shouldn’t be considering a situation like mine was a blessing, if the Elders were such good parents.”

Fal-Mai grimaced for a second, before opening her eyes and looking to Eliza. “I will not let you brainwash me.”

“You were the one who considered a totally inert, submissive state to be a good thing. Wouldn’t being brainwashed also be one?”

“That was different.”

“How so.”

The Assassin shook her head again, standing up straight. “I will tolerate this interrogation no longer. This conversation is over.” With that, her shroud came over her, and the Assassin was gone from sight.
Eliza took a moment to collect her thoughts before she sighed deeply, standing up. Well, that could’ve gone worse. As it stood, she’d managed to wheedle out an admittance from Fal-Mai. She did a lot of question-dodging too, which was a hopeful sign. Maybe next time Eliza could be more gentle with things, invite some questions of herself. But, that would have to come later.

Turning to the panel on the wall, Eliza stopped before she pressed anything. She looked back towards the corner the Assassin had been in. “Fal-Mai. I’m going to leave the room. I ask you; please lower your cloak long enough for me to leave.”

Silence hung thickly in the air. Eliza half-thought she was going to have to employ the measure bound into Fal-Mai’s cuffs. But then, the air in that corner shimmered. The Assassin did not become visible again, but judging by the distortion, she was partially peeling back her shroud, just enough for something to be seen. Eliza nodded, and let a smile come to her face. “Thank you.”

Eliza tapped a button on the protected panel, and the door slid open. The shimmering did not move. The Commander stepped out of the Assassin’s cell, the door closing behind her. Lily was still outside, now operating a datapad. “No luck?”

“All lucky.” Eliza stepped away from the door, back over to Shen. “Maybe not as much as I’d hope, but it’s something.”

“Well, if anybody could pull it off... it’s probably you, Commander.” Lily looked back down to her datapad. “God knows I wouldn’t have the patience or the know-how to convince any of them to work for us.”

Eliza tilted her head. “You’d have the best chance with the Hunter, I’d think. He’s of the engineering sort.”

Lily scoffed. ‘Yeah, you could’ve fooled me, but he sure as hell is. One of his first orders of business was taking the plasma blueprints from me and furiously re-working them to re-balance the Elerium. I mean... I’ll give him credit, all our plasma tech is now a whole lot less likely to blow up in our faces and I can now do some things I was meaning to with them... but he doesn’t exactly strike me as the kind of guy to do that out of the good of his heart.” She stopped in whatever she was doing with the datapad. “Mordenna seemed almost... relieved when it was done, like he’d been meaning to do it for a long time. I’ve seen the way the Plasma Rifles the aliens use are built. I don’t think the Elders let him have any input, considering how poorly they’re designed and what he just did to all our weapons.”

The Commander nodded all that, perhaps a little grimly. “Because if the Elders let him make changes, that would be an admission of fault in something they created. I’ve known the Elders a while, Shen, and the last thing they want is somebody showing them up on creating something.”

Shen’s face twisted. “God, of course they’d hate that. Even if it would literally involve a drastic improvement to their design, even if it was from the mind of one of their best engineers, it would mean that they were wrong and obviously we can’t have that.”

“Perish the thought!” Eliza placed a hand to her chest. “The Grand Elders, making something as human as a mistake? I ought to throw you in the prisons for heresy, Shen. To insist such a thing is rather deviant!”

Lily laughed, shaking her head. “Commander!”

“Can I not indulge in theatrics, Lily?”
“No, no, you can, Commander,” Lily said between chuckles, face a bit red, “I don’t think I have any authority to tell you what you can and can’t do. I’ll leave all that to Bradford.”

“And let him have all the fun?”

Lily sighed dramatically. “I suppose he can have it all, and all the gray hairs that come with it.”

Eliza chuckled, shaking her head as she clasped her hands in front of her. “I’m sure he treasures every single one. Now, is Mordenna getting on well otherwise?”

Nodding, Lily resumed working on the datapad. “Yeah, past all the ribbing he does? He’s actually pretty nice to have around. Like I said, I didn’t expect him to be as knowledgeable as he is. He’s already in the Workshop, starting progress on getting SYN’s core data de-compressed.”

Ah, yes. That reminded Eliza. “Hopefully one of our favorite robots can be salvaged?”

“With Mordenna’s help? It’s very likely. I’ll spare you the details, but the way SYN’s backup works? At worst, we’d have SYN with no memories and none of the extra programming I did. Still functional, but it’d be like he was first built. At best? We get a version of him right before the Assassin stabbed him.”

The Commander nodded. “I may not get more of the technical aspects, but I can hazard a guess as to how you set it up, and I have to commend you for ingenuity.”

Lily smiled, looking down at the datapad. “Thanks, Commander. I just wanted to make sure that if anything ever happened to him, we’d have a good chance at getting him back, you know?”

“Of course. I’m glad for your thinking.” Another thing came to Eliza, and she sighed. “Well, the day is still young, but it won’t be that way forever. I need to go place a few calls in the Resistance now that we have the Assassin. Is there any projects you want me to clear before I leave?”

Shen shook her head. “Rebuilding SYN is gonna be our top priority for a bit. So, unless you need something else urgently? You can go, Commander.”

Eliza grinned. “Am I free to leave, Shen?”

“You... you know what I mean!”

Eliza chuckled, turning towards the door and walking. “It’s always a pleasure talking with you, Shen. Best of luck on your work. I’ll be in the Resistance Ring.”

“Good luck, Commander!” Lily called after her.

The time it took to walk there gave her time to think over what the Assassin had said, as well. Her insistence on not letting Eliza “brainwash” her gave a bit of insight into her thinking of what happened to the Hunter... or whatever she was trying to convince herself happened. It seemed Fal-Mai was trying to convince herself of a lot of things, come to think of it. Still, Eliza needed to approach all of it carefully. This wasn’t something she could brute-force by insisting, without sensitivity, that the Elders were bastards and everything she knew about them was wrong. Like many plans Eliza had made, it’d take time, and most importantly, care. If Fal-Mai could see that
it’s not so much that the Elders don’t care—it’s more like the Commander does? That was probably the better way to go.

Her heart sunk at the next topic her mind moved to, and one of her hands traced the wall as she walked. Denial was denial, and god knows how hard she had been indoctrinated in order for her to uphold her beliefs, even if shakily. Mordenna had been truthful—Fal-Mai was made in the Elder’s care. Not uplifted like her brothers. But, if what she had implied on the battlefield was true, and that she had been punished...

Eliza’s face set in quiet anger. What... what kind of parent would do that? To punish their other children because they, what, “didn’t do enough to save him?” It made her sick, and it also made a kind of protectiveness rise up in her—which only further strengthened at the thought that she had just taken the Assassin. If trends continued, that meant that the Warlock had been punished no less than twice now.

A fury burned inside of Eliza, and made her start walking faster. No place for this anger of hers but to channel it, she knew. She could put it somewhere useful... but maybe not let it bubble so closely to the surface, considering who she was about to talk to. She took in a deep, steadying breath, and opened the door to the Resistance Ring.

Things were quiet on the inside, outside of the low hum of the machinery. The screen at the far end of the room displayed a map of the world and where the current headquarters for the three factions were, updated to the most recent coordinates of the Lost city that the Reapers were in. Eliza relished in the quiet for the moment it took to hail Geist.

Well, she could still relish it for a while more. Geist always took a bit to pick up, undoubtedly being a very busy man. Running a whole temple of acolytes and Paladins probably didn’t leave him with too many hours left in the day to himself. In that aspect, Eliza could find a quiet companionship with him. She wasn’t lying to Mordenna, either—Geist was handsome. Such a shame that they had to clash pretty often. Eliza, at her heart, could understand why. To have shaky or uncertain allies in this war was most often death. Still, Geist was a strange man. Saying at the start that his help would be limited, and then sending one of his most skilled Templars to assist XCOM? Perhaps he, too, had a face to maintain...

Eliza heard the telltale crackle of the connection going through before Geist appeared on the screen, seated at his desk as always. His face was as hard to read as it usually was. “Commander. Good to see you again.”

The Commander nodded. “Geist. I’ll cut the small talk—I’ve just captured the Assassin within the day. The only thing that now bars me from going after the Warlock is the Elerium needed to construct his cell.”

Geist settled his hands on the table, maintaining eye contact. “Eliza, your victory over the Hunter I will grant, you have shown that much. I will also admit that it is too early to judge for certain, but you have not yet swayed the Assassin and yet you proclaim your plans to hunt the Warlock. If you cannot turn the Nightmaiden, what hope have you for the Mindbutcher?”

Ah, straight to the point. Eliza at least dryly appreciated that. “Time, Geist. You even admit that ‘it is too early to judge for certain.’ Things like this definitely take time. I’ve already talked with the Assassin today shortly after her capture, and there’s some promising progress to be made. But I’m going to need more time to space out my talks and convince her.”

Geist didn’t back down. “Fair. But my primary concern is of the Warlock. Lest you forget, you are against the temptations and promises of the Elders in trying to convince him to join your cause.
Not only that, but there is also the matter of his misuse of his own psionics.” His face did change a bit—enough to set into a hard expression. “He is, in a word, deranged. Drunk of his own warped powers. He has been as such for twenty years. There is the very real chance he is beyond even you, Commander. Would you be willing to admit such a defeat?”

“The way I see it,” Eliza retorted, “I have two outcomes; either I am able to convince Jax of the true nature of the Elders and have him fight for our side... or I have contained the Warlock and he is no longer a menace to anyone, perhaps more importantly your Templars.” She levelled a meaningful look at him at that last point. “So, if I have to admit defeat, I’ll gladly do so. In a way, I’ll still be the winner.”

Geist maintained his stance a bit longer before nodding shallowly, unwinding just a tad. “I will concede that. You have proven your ability at taking down Chosen, this is true, so your ‘two outcomes’ hold water. Indeed, your disposal of him would also be a boon to me and mine. I would, however, advise temperance in overzealousness. The Elders will take any advantage you hand them.”

Eliza raised her eyebrows, and she couldn’t help a small joke. “The leader of the Templars, speaking against overzealousness. I’m not saying your advice is a joke, not at all, but you’ll have to forgive some levity on my part.”

Was Eliza hallucinating? Did Geist’s mouth budge into a smile? “Times such as these lend to odd circumstances, I understand.” If it did, it was right back to the stern line it usually was. “Regardless. Your explanations sway me, Commander—I cannot have uncertain allies in this war. I would be willing to aid you in further seeking out the Warlock’s location—and perchance, I may do more than leading your operatives to where he nests.”

Eliza tilted her head a bit in interest. “Color me curious, Geist. What could you do?”

Geist straightened, slightly moving his gauntlets. “I wish for your mission against the Warlock to succeed, regardless of what you do with him after he is in your custody. It is also to my understanding that I am the lone faction who has not sent you a second operative. I’ve heard of the injuries sustained by ‘Wukong’ and ‘Prince.’ If Kalight were to be injured himself, you would have no recourse against the Warlock, and it is time I rectified that.”

He clasped his hands on the table, in a focused position. “If allowed, I would like to send my Seer, Marlene Kara. I think you would find her an excellent addition in seeking and defeating the Warlock.”

A “Seer?” Sounded less like a combat type than Kalight “Vanguard” van Steele, but Eliza wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth. She nodded. “I would very much appreciate the additional help—never can have too many hands around here.”

“Very well. Now, of finding the Warlock.”

Eliza held up a hand. “You might not need to bother—and I mean that in a good way, let me explain myself. I’ve got it on good info that the Hunter, and most likely the Assassin too, know the location of his Stronghold. Mordenna dropped the hint during the assault on Fal-Mai’s Stronghold, and considering how he behaves? I’m fairly certain he knows where his brother lives.”

“Can you trust such info, Eliza? I also have the knowledge of his behavior, and he could very well be deceiving you for little more than a jape.”

Eliza nods again. “I’m willing to trust it—but I’ll still be cautious. Scouting the location, for one,
before showing up in the party bus. Once Fal-Mai is more keen to work with us, I can ask her as well. But, as always, progress towards him is dependant on getting more Elerium. Which, don’t worry about that being a thinly veiled request for some—I’ve got a solution to it coming up.”

“If you are certain,” Geist replied. “I will enter discussion with my own in regards to sending the Seer with you, but she should be ready to convene with your soldiers by the time you can touch down at our temple.”

“Sounds good to me. I’ll be able to manage that...” Eliza took a moment to go over a schedule of events in her head. “... next week, at the earliest.”

“At that time? Certainly so.” Geist cleared his throat. “Have you anything else to declare, Eliza?”

The Commander shook her head. “I’m ready to call this a done deal if you are, Geist.”

His hands unclasped, one of them moving to something just out of sight. “As am I. Good luck, Commander.” With that, the connection closed, leaving Eliza in silence.

Silence was fine. Kind of. It depended on her mood at the time, but after a bit of talking? Eliza was fine with it. At any other time...

She shook her head, letting herself pace as she sorted her thoughts. That “solution” she mentioned to Geist was a tip on a supply raid she’d gotten during the planning out of the Stronghold mission. A fairly standard one—a disabled ADVENT train out in the middle of nowhere, plenty of materials on it, and only a security detail between her and the Elerium she would need to fashion Jax’s cell. Perhaps it would be a good second mission for the Hunter... as much as Eliza didn’t want to feed the fire of his bloodlust, the alternative was worse.

But, sending the Hunter out on that mission? Eliza was a bit uncertain, and she wasn’t much one for uncertainty she could deal with. She’d already gotten interrupted when she was trying to talk to him the first time in her Quarters. It was high time for another attempt, preferably before she sent him on a mission where he could kill as much as he wanted. Plus, her heart wouldn’t allow her to let too much time pass between talks. It smacked of leaving him hanging.

Soon, she resolved. Very soon. Tomorrow, maybe. Her word was law around here, after all. While she’d hate to interrupt his new line of work down in the Workshop, this was pretty important, going forward. It was less “factual concern” regarding his “viability in missions” as a detested but needed part of her brain posited. Mordenna needed someone to talk to, in her eyes. Someone that wasn’t himself. It was more “worry” and... perhaps the need of someone like him. Someone who had that connection. Someone who had also been under the Elders.

Eliza blinked. There was something else too... but dare she even consider it? With the way his mind was most likely set up, it wasn’t worth even thinking over. She sighed. “‘Letting your worldly attractions influence your choices of allies, Eliza?’” She echoed to herself. She shook her head. Best to focus on just helping out Mordenna and letting him see that things didn’t have to stay as they were before.

She stood up straight, stopping in her pace. Then, she set her shoulders back, let her gaze cool, and took in a soft breath. Eliza was the Commander of XCOM. She could handle this, and not be a cold, emotionless machine as she did. Clutching that notion close, she strode out of the Resistance Ring. There was much to be done.
Chapter Summary

Mordenna and Eliza meet for a talk.

Chapter Notes

Back from vacation, finally! Keep an eye out for an eventual, dedicated blog for SFTD!

Walking was such a bore, compared to scrabbling in the vents.

The Hunter mused on that as he leisurely strode towards the direction of the Lab, eyes glancing at the ceiling. Already he’d mapped out the whole network of passages through the ship. They were supposed to be maintenance ducts for reaching critical areas of the ship, sizeable enough that even he could maneuver around them. Mordenna had taken to using them as quick transportation… and also a way to spook the hell out of whoever was below. He’d already heard a few cries of “Chryssalids!” during his many journeys and the thought of it made him smirk.

So why not drop on Tygan like that? Well, firstly, Tygan struck the Hunter as the type to lay out a tailor-made trap for the “Chryssalid” in the vents to land in once it exited them into the Lab. Knowing the physiology of the bastards, the Hunter didn’t doubt that such a thing would probably take a limb off, and he knew for a fact that loss of an extremity was something his regeneration didn’t cover. He’d need the Elders to patch him up in the Void in that case, and considering his status now? He’d faster kill himself.

Secondly? The ceiling of the makeshift Laboratory was really, really high up. Higher than what even Mordenna wanted to game. He’d just have to drop in on Tygan metaphorically rather than literally, which took a bit of the fun out of it for him. But, he’d been meaning to talk to the scientist for a while. The man was high up on his interest list—below Shen and O’Leary, but above a lot of others. After all, he knew Tygan was second fiddle to Lily in reverse-engineering everything the Elders put out, and if he recalled correctly? The man had been chipped before. Either he’d managed to get it out himself… or him and Mordenna were about to have a very interesting conversation. Either way further stoked his interests.

Such reasons, questions, and ideas were running around his brain as the door to the Lab slid open, and Mordenna ducked under the door. Tygan was setting up… a centrifuge, it looked like, gently placing vials inside of it. His back was to the Hunter, and it was then that he could spot the series of scars on the back of his neck, where his spine met his skull. Ah, so he did remove it himself. Or, at the very least, made a convincing effort to look like he did.

Tygan must’ve heard the door slide open, because he carefully placed down the last vial on the counter and turned towards the door. He didn’t seem too surprised to see the Hunter at his door— but Mordenna could pick out a muscle in his neck tensing ever so slightly. “Hunter. Is there anything I can assist you with at the moment?”
“Oh, at the moment? Maybe.” Mordenna’s eyes shifted to the vial on the counter. It was yellowish, with flecks of orange in it. *Ah, Meld-infused blood and he’s trying to extract the plasma from it.*

“Whatcha separating alien blood for, there?”

At that, Tygan looked mildly impressed, but the expression passed quickly. “It’s Samhien’s latest blood samples. He said there was a special sedative agent they used on him to move him from the Assassin’s Stronghold to the compound you recovered him from, and at his request, I’m doing tests to determine if some of it still remains in his bloodstream.”

“Oh, that stuff?” Mordenna gave a short chuckle. “It’s an alien compound. It’s extracted from a race of aliens the Elders never adapted for planet-conquering. If you’re looking for it, I’d recommend looking in his lymph fluids. It pools in the glands after going through the blood—only in humans and anything that shares enough genetic similarities, mind.”

Tygan raised his eyebrows, looking back to the centrifuge. “I... see. I will have to contact him later about another extraction...” Tygan was silent a moment, then he looked back to Mordenna. “Might I ask how your knowledge is so extensive?”

Mordenna shrugged. “I use a modified dose of it for my darts. Also I got curious what the exact effect of it was when I extracted the first test subject of it.”

Tygan’s expression didn’t change. “You dissected them.”

“Sure did!” Mordenna replied chipperly. “And hey, to the aliens? What you guys are doing ain’t any different.”

Tygan replied smoothly. “If ADVENT had not taken tens of thousands of my own kind in to be experimented on and refined into vials, perhaps I would be more hesitant. As it stands? It is a necessary evil in order to gain every edge we can against them.”

Mordenna nodded. “Good answer, doc. All for revenge, and all that. Pretty easy justification.” He grinned. “Maybe a bit too easy, eh?”

“If you are here to discuss the ethics of my work,” Tygan said, levelling a calm gaze at Mordenna, “I cannot help but think you are the last person to be questioning me, short of the Elders themselves. As you have previously mentioned, you yourself are not above experimentation on humans. With the specific of noticing the serum ‘only spreading in humans,’ I can only assume your own experimentation has delved into the aliens.”

Well! If he was here to shake Tygan to his core, it looked like the Hunter was beat. He shrugged. “Anyone can ask questions of anyone. But hey, I’ll take that as a sign to back off... for now.” His eyes slid over Tygan’s setup... and settled on a container on the far end of the counter. It was suspending a control chip inside of it... a *very specific one.* He kept staring at it as he resumed speaking. “Now, doc... that’s a very unique chip you’ve got over there.” Out of the corner of his eye, he could spot Tygan tensing. “Only one kind of it in the world. Supposed to be in one specific person at all times, conditions being optimal. How’d you get that?”

He watched as Tygan seemed to deliberate over even telling the Hunter about it, before he sighed, adjusting his glasses. “You... most likely know where it came from, with the way you worded yourself. Regardless, yes. That is the chip extracted from the Commander when we recovered her from the Stasis Suit.”

The Hunter kept fixating on that chip. His mouth ran without him thinking about it. “Those chips are planted at the base of the brain stem,” he muttered, “and I saw those scars on the back of your
Eliza’s hair was long enough that it could hide such a thing. “I imagine you did the same to her to get it out?”

Tygan was tellingly quiet. The Hunter finally tore his eyes away from the chip to look at him, and the good doctor wasn’t moving. His next statement came quietly. “No. I did not extract the chip from the Commander the same way I did mine. I instead used an extractor device.”

Mordenna eyed him, drawing up to full height. Subconsciously, his eyes flitted about before he spoke—his mind was racing as it made connections and drew conclusions. “... you re-tooled a chip implanter—the same kind used on her twenty years ago—and just... Shoved that in her mouth?”

Tygan nodded, looking decidedly grim. “Had I known at the time that her PTSD extended to situations such as that, I would have worked for an alternative method.”

*PTSD.* It didn’t really strike the Hunter as surprising that Eliza had it, but it felt a bit odd to consider nonetheless. The Commander of XCOM, suffering from something the Hunter really only considered soldiers themselves to harbor. Truthfully, he knew all kinds could have it, but that still didn’t chase off the peculiarity of it in his head. A few *emotions* were also squirming in his gut, but he was having a hard time identifying what they were.

Nevertheless, he wouldn’t let the silence extend for long after that. “Well. The Elders are bastards,” he stated definitively. “I’d almost ask ‘how were you supposed to know’ but I feel like that won’t change a thing anywhere.”

Tygan nodded again. “I concur. The Elders... leave much to be desired.”

Wanting to still discuss the chip, the Hunter mentally skipped past the implications of it. “Alright, enough of that. Truth be told, I never had the chance to really check out the specifics of the chip itself. Mind indulging me?”

The scientist’s expression returned to a calmer neutrality. “The chip, for all extents and purposes, is a modified design on the one we’ve found in Officers. Perhaps the more accurate way to state it would be to call the Officer chip a derivative of this one.”

“Built to withstand hundreds of gigs in data streaming at all times, yeah?”

“Indeed, and with capacitor limits of up to several petabytes. Truthfully, at that stage, I would expect a complete Network overload, and I shudder to think what would cause such a surge.”

Mordenna shrugged. “It’s never come that close, but there’s been surges before. Usually upon mass Codex connections or several thousand queries building up in reference to an event. Plus, that’s just what the Commander herself was contributing to the Network with her processing power. Lest we forget, I was on there at one point too, and all the Codices and Specters contribute their own bandwidth.”

Tygan seemed to study the Hunter for a moment. “Does a chip of your own still exist?”

Mordenna shook his head. “Nah. Odin—the bastard responsible for me—was confident I could maintain a link to the Network via my connection to my Sarcophagus and the processing power he’d shoved my skull full of. Come to think of it, I don’t think either of my other wayward siblings have them, either.” It was probably a matter of pride for the other Elders, too. To have to shove a chip in their heads was an admittance that they couldn’t really control their own children on by themselves. *Their loss,* he mentally bit.

“All without a chip-monitored connection?”
“Yep! Turns out that six months of cramming they did to me along with all the horrible genetic experiments was useful for something.” That being a lot of things. “Can’t sleep now, but eh. Got better things to do, anyway.”

Before either of them could continue the conversation further, a datapad on the counter rang out. Tygan put a finger up to the Hunter and walked over, tapping a button on it. “Commander?”

“Dr. Tygan. Would you know where the Hunter is?”

“No,” Mordenna answered for him, “have you tried asking the Elders? I think they wanna know, too.”

There was a short laugh from the datapad. “Implying I want to speak to them, Hunter? In any case, please report up to my quarters as soon as you can. I want to speak with you.”

Oh, boy. The Hunter’s mind was already at work trying to think of what Eliza wanted now—but all answers pointed towards that “talk” she’d been trying to secure. Still, he kept chipper despite the unspecific dread that was rising. “Oh, sure, Liz. I’ll be there when I finish up with the good doctor here.”

“Alright. Wrap it up, and I’ll see you soon.”

With that, the screen of the pad went dark. Tygan turned to the Hunter. “We’ll have to continue this discussion at a later point. Despite... some avenues of the conversation, I think you and I have much to share.”

“Of course!” The Hunter clapped his hands together. “Maybe I can wrangle you into some mad science. Lily’s a hell of a lot of fun but when it comes to compounds and anything of a more biological nature? Seems like I’ve got a lot of talking to do with you.”

Tygan’s mouth moved into a dry smile. “I look forward to our talks, in many ways. Now, the Commander wishes to see you.”

“Right, right.” The Hunter spun on his heel, heading towards the door. “Don’t do anything fun without me!”

“I’ll certainly try my best, Hunter.”

The trip up to the Commander’s Quarters was uneventful, though Mordenna’s brain had been going over every negative possibility.

He knew, rationally, this probably wasn’t over anything major he’d done wrong. No, this was just going to be about the Elders and what happened to him and if that wasn’t a can of worms to open, the Hunter didn’t know what was. He’d thought over it, occasionally, only ever in a self-pitying way, right up until he ended one of his countless lives himself. Then came the embarrassment and self-loathing, then the status quo... up until he had one of his pitiful “episodes” again.

He couldn’t have any more of those, he knew. Well, he supposed he could, and he probably would, given him, but there would be no more capping himself in the head or taking a dive off a sniper’s nest or what have you to punctuate it. Just... having to deal with it, as unthinkable as it was. Yikes, he mentally noted.
Mordenna’s head was still running circles like that when he finally made it to Eliza’s door. It slid open uneventfully but with a certain dread to it, and revealed the room beyond. Eliza was in the same place she was last time, and nodded to Mordenna. He walked in and found his place on the couch opposite of her again, his nature leading him into being the first to start the conversation. “Alright, I’ve gotta be in the doghouse this time, Liz. What’s my charges? How long am I serving?”

The Commander did not laugh, but she smiled and shook her head. Her smile was less “happy” and more something else, but the Hunter was trying to figure out what. “No, no trouble.” Her smile fell and she regarded him seriously. “But I will be clear about my intentions. I’ve called you in here to talk. Not idle chit-chat, either—I want today to be the start of you and I talking over what happened to you. I’ve made the time in my schedule, and as long as you have the time in yours? I would like to get into things.”

It was so tempting to say that he had other things planned just to worm out of this and kick it down the road again. God knows he’d stalled enough before to manage to get interrupted... but something told him Eliza would look into whatever he had “planned.” She had to keep track of her soldiers, after all. But wasn’t Eliza just trying to help, god forbid? Wasn’t she interested in what was bothering him? The thought was still hard to grasp.

Not hard enough to grasp that it prevented him from accepting, though. Plus, he knew what he thought earlier. If he got this talk with Eliza out of the way? He could go bug his sister in her cell with the newfound trust. “I’ve got nothing but time nowadays, Liz. Let’s see you play therapist.” How bad could it really be, anyway?

The Commander nodded, sitting up and clasping her hands in front of her. “Firstly, there’s something I want to clear with you, Mordenna. Do you remember, almost a week back, when I tried to touch your shoulder?”

That was one way of putting it, he supposed. The Hunter nodded and Eliza continued. “I’ve got the habit of trying to reassure people through touch and physical affection. It’s a bit of a recent one, but nevertheless? I wanted to ask you if it’s ok that I did that with you.”

Hmm. Establishing boundaries before anything else. Eliza was a card. Though, something stuck out at him in that sentence, and he leaned back in his seat, crossing one of his legs over the other. “’A recent one?’ I mean... depending on how physical we’re getting, I suppose I could get used to it, but I’m more interested in that qualifier. If you’re going to ‘care for me,’ you might as well let me learn about you.”

Eliza’s eyes flitted to the left for a second as she considered something—god knows it was if she really wanted to reveal more things about herself to the Hunter. Her caring nature must’ve won out, as she looked back to him and nodded. “I’d be willing to answer questions, yes. As for that? Twenty years in a tank does horrors to you, Mordenna. I was never a touch-starved person before, but you can imagine that twenty years with little to no physical contact would create such a trait in me, if not make an existing one worse.”

Geez, was this a pity party for him or Eliza? It could always be for the both of you, his mind reminded him, and he crossed his arms. “As far as he’d want,” he replied, “but as a baseline? Up to and including hugging, you’d be surprised what a good hug can do for you.”

“At far as you’d want,” she replied, “but as a baseline? Up to and including hugging. You’d be surprised what a good hug can do for you.”

“As far as he’d want,” hmm? He cursed himself for even lingering on that and instead opted to
continue with the conversation. “Alright. Think I can do that, though excuse me if I’m a bit weirded out at first.” He didn’t crave touch, he thought. Wasn’t repulsed by it, either. But getting touched—getting hugged by Eliza? Perhaps he shouldn’t have agreed to it.

Nevertheless, Eliza moved on. “Right. Now, there’s something I want to ask about first. Mordenna, why would you say you’re ‘nothing good’?”

Oh, boy. That was a whole can of worms Eliza wanted to open there and from the looks of it, she may not have even known it. Well, Eliza at least looked serious, but... that whole “self-worth” thing was something Mordenna had been dealing with during his entire run with the Elders... and was still dealing with it, come to think of it. He sighed, straightening. “Eliza, you and I know I look at things based on thousands of variables. When I calculate, my mind’s on ten different things a second. So when I say I’m ‘nothing good,’ you can know I damn well mean it.”

“And?”

“What ‘and’ is there?”

“I know you mean it, and you say that there’s ‘thousands of variables.’ But what are those? What’s just a few of them?”

He lidded his eyes at her. To be difficult, or not to be difficult... “One of them is my unwillingness to work with my siblings, which is pretty counterproductive to you wanting to help all of us. Fuck, Eliza, I want to kill my siblings for various reasons. But they’re alright with each other, Jax and Fal-Mai are. Cutting me out of the equation would only be a benefit. Why have one that murders two when you could have two?”

Eliza kept her gaze firmly on him. “Because I haven’t worked with you yet. I haven’t tried with you yet. So I’m not going to throw in the towel before I’ve even started. I will deal with absolutes, but only when I have proven such things are absolutes. You’ve shown you can work in a small squad, and it’s been a week or so with you on the Avenger. Lily’s taking an interest to you. There is promise; hence, why I brought you up here to talk.”

Mordenna’s lidded eyes moved into a squint. “You stick your neck out pretty far with that kind of attitude, Eliza, and one day someone’s gonna carve your head clean from your shoulders.”

“Is that person going to be you?”

The Hunter was quiet at that. The truth was, he didn’t want to be that person. He’d already decided he’d much rather have Eliza alive than dead. He got the strong feeling that it wasn’t a rhetorical question, so he answered. “No.”

“Then I will continue to stick my neck out for you. I don’t think you’re worthless. You have to remember, Mordenna, I was also hooked up to that damn Network for my brains. I’m taking everything into account, here, too. So when I say I want to keep you, I have my reasons as well.”

“Name a few,” he replied.

Eliza rattled off the list in short order. “From a completely tactical standpoint? You’re the Hunter, a master tracker who is good at taking down priority targets and stalking VIPs for days on end. Stealth is your element and I can always use more stealth operatives with the skill of the Reapers. Not to mention your engineering skills—I heard from Lily herself what you’ve done to our Plasma weapons, and let me say that it’s greatly appreciated, your work is.

“From any other standpoint? My biggest reason is that I simply want to help you, Mordenna. There
is enough injustice in this world. I can’t stop and hear the life story of every ADVENT soldier, no. I’ll let the Skirmishers handle that. But when given the choice to kill a major figure without a second thought or to capture them and hear what they have to say? I’ll gladly choose the second. Yes, it’s more work out of me, and yes, it’s more risky. But I would prefer having to work harder to never having tried.”

His eyes scanned over her for a minute. “You want to try.”

“Was that not what I said? Yes. Before I declare anything a ‘lost cause,’ I like to try, first. You’d be surprised how much works when you have that line of thinking.”

She wanted to try with him. Even if he was difficult? Mordenna was used to the one being that “tried” with him having given up at the first few early signs of resistance, and it had been all downhill from there. He had the scars to show it. Maybe there was hope—he could certainly feel his want to be needlessly difficult going down. That was something. He sighed again, closing his eyes. “So you’re serious. You want to take me, the Chosen Hunter, in. You wanna care. You wanna make me part of this little family you’re running.”

“Absolutely.”

He let that answer hang a bit. “And if I’m difficult with my siblings?”

“Well, we’ll build that bridge when we get to it.”

Her sheer optimism got a single laugh out of him, and he relaxed his arms on the back of the couch. “Alright, Liz. You’ve got me. I’m well and truly convinced.” That... may or may not be actually true. He had yet to see if it would be true.

Eliza smiled, a genuine, warm smile, and Mordenna felt glad he’d said that. She regarded him well as she spoke. “And I’m happy to hear it. Happy to know this talk has gone so well, too.”

He grinned slyly. “So, Commander, am I out of the doghouse now?”

“If you want to be. I think we’ve accomplished a lot with this talk and I’d be fine with letting you go... for now.”

Oh boy. “For now.” She did have other talks with him planned. Thankfully he’d managed to divert a lot of the talk about himself and learn a bit about Eliza—hard to say if she realized that, but knowing her? The Commander was likely fine with the result either way. Now, it looks like he was free to go. He stood up, stretching. “Alright then, good ol’ Commander. Riot of a talk we had. Most of ‘em are!”

She nodded, leaning over and grabbing a datapad. Seems like it was back to business as usual for the busy Commander. “Glad to hear it. Where you off to next?”

Oh, right. He was intending to head off to the Workshop to lose himself in a project or two but he’d almost forgotten to ask. “Oh, mischief as usual up in the Workshop. Say, mind if I ask you something?”

Eliza nodded, putting the datapad on her lap. Mordenna continued. “Your talk of helping me with my siblings got me thinking. More than usual, anyway. I ain’t gonna do it soon, but do you think it’d be too much trouble if I went and bothered my sister in her little cell? Not like nobody but you wants to talk to her, so I figure she’ll... think something about the company!”

Eliza’s brows furrowed in thought and she considered the Hunter for a bit. “Are you actually
intending on having an honest talk with her or are you intending on antagonizing her when she can’t fight back?”

“What, me? The poor old Hunter? No, not at all!”

Eliza gave him a particular look that said that he wasn’t helping his case. He shrugged. “I just wanna talk, see how she’s holding up. You’re the one who put the idea to rebuild bridges with my siblings in my head.”

To be truthful? He’d decide what he was doing as he felt like it. He was just gonna enter that room and see what he’d get up to. If he actually ended up doing something constructive with his sister? Hey, what happened, would happen.

Still, Eliza seemed to give him the benefit of the doubt. “Tell me when you want to go see her and I’ll see you beforehand. No guns, of course.”

“Our of course, of course! Would hate to shoot my sister, after all. I’ll let you know, Lizzie.”

After a bit more thinking, she nodded. “Sounds good. You can head out to the—ah, wait.” She spotted something on her datapad and gave the Hunter a knowing smile. “Actually, one more thing. You interested in a more... loud mission, Mordenna?”

He fixed her with an intrigued look before he grinned right back. “Ohoho, wanting me to tear it up out there, Liz?”

“In essence, yes. Got a supply raid on a train some Resistance contacts are about to stop. Need to clear out the area first before we take anything off of it. What do you say?”

Mordenna could feel his smile turn a bit darker. “You hardly need to ask, Liz. I’d be happy to thin the ranks.”

She nodded, tapping away on the pad. “I’ll have you in the mission and let you know if anything special comes up. Now you can head out.”

He gives Eliza a two-fingered salute and turns on his heel, sauntering out. As he walked through the door and heard it close behind him, he got thinking.

Eliza cared. Least, she said she did. Odin said he cared, those first few months. Yeah. It was easy to believe when it happened, but as soon as the curtain was drawn and Mordenna was left to think to himself? Things got a lot more muddled.

He kept walking, feet on autopilot as he headed down to the Workshop. Eliza herself seemed to have a big thing about trying before giving up, supposedly. “Odin tried, I’m sure,” he muttered to himself. “Fat lot of good that did him.” Then again, even in those early months, the way he looked at Odin was different. Mordenna had only respected him at first out of fear and the feeling that there was nothing else he could be do without potentially getting killed off permanently. With Eliza, those worst he could see her doing is locking him right back up in his cell and dealing with him after the war was over. There wasn’t a Sword of Damocles over his head...

But depending on his behavior, there sure as hell was one over hers.

“Like I’ve said,” Mordenna remarked as he reached up and undid a vent latch, crawling into it and closing it behind him, “I’d want her alive rather than dead. Maybe to the point of stopping her from dying if I can help it. Nothing more than that, of course.” But was he being truthful with himself? All he had to do was think of her smiling at him again to make him question that.
He scowled. “Elders never smiled at me. Maybe if they made some sort of proxy that could I wouldn’t be pathetically clinging to the first thing that showed any inclination of actually giving a damn. But they didn’t, so here I am, feeling like a fucking fool because she cares. God.”

Mordenna took a turn in the vents. “She wants to try. She sees my merits. Fuck, it would have been a lot easier to kill a sorry fuck like me when she had the chance. But instead she decided to take one of her operatives out for—fuck, over a week now, and take me in. She cares.”

His crawling slowed down. “... Not like it’s gonna be worth it in the end. I’ll hurt her, I’ll hurt someone she cares about, I’ll hurt somebody and then I’ll no longer be worth it. Just a ticking time bomb and she wants to ignore it.” But was she? Was she ignoring it when she brought Mordenna into her Quarters specifically to talk about that?

“Better yet... maybe it’ll be just me I hurt. And I never hurt myself just a tad. Maybe it’ll be one bullet short from a gun, maybe it’ll be a long walk off of the short deck of the Avenger, maybe...”

He caught his line of thinking and it made him stop in his tracks, both physically and mentally. He scoffed, disgusted with himself. “Fucking yikes, Mordenna, you ever wonder why nobody wants to hang out with you? Pathetic.”

With that, he resumed his trip to the Workshop. At least there he could just lose himself to his projects.
The Hunter was sure he could stay out of sight on this mission until he was needed to open fire and start racking up the body count. His new allies? Not so much.

About the only one he could even somewhat trust on this mission was Kalight, and that was because he was the only bloke the Hunter had ran with before. That pearly white armor still wasn’t doing him any favors though, and didn’t he know fur was so last year?

Plus, he had to wonder what Eliza was thinking, sending another robot this mission. Julian, was it? Lily had brought him up a few times. Apparently they had installed him into a backup SPARK they had in case SYN ever got taken out. Instead of the sleek head SYN had, though, Julian’s was more like a skull, with red LED-like lights for optical sensors. Yeah, he had a distortion field up at the moment that the Hunter could see right through, but how ADVENT didn’t hear him clunking in from a mile away was beyond him.

Then there was the first face of two jokers. Dark, with a bandanna covering his mouth and sunglasses covering his eyes, toting one of their redesigned Plasma Rifles. Mordenna thought his name was something to the tune of Ben. Oh yeah, there was the Psi Amp on his back, too, and his short afro looked like he’d been dying it to keep it black.

The other face was Pattie. Her, he remembered. Along with her voice. How could he forget when she was yammering on even as he looked at her? Without glasses, he could see she had those signature purple eyes. Long, dyed brown hair tied into a short ponytail at the bottom, with a matching bandanna with Ben around her head like a hairband. Just a few shades lighter than Ben, too. If he didn’t know any better, he’d say the two were related, but too much was different about them physically to make the connection. It would at least give a good reason as to her having a Psi Amp on her back too.

Finally, at the back of the squad and with a GREMLIN hovering behind her, was their resident Specialist, Mary. Here more for the healing than the hacking—if anything like that came up, Mordenna had it handled. Messy, black hair, hazel eyes, pale skin, and thick, rectangular glasses were about all that stood out to the Hunter.

Quite frankly, none of the lot of them really earned his attention, but he figured he should at least acknowledge them if he was going to be working with them from now on. He only really was
interested in a few people on the Avenger, and most of Eliza’s boy scouts didn’t fall into that narrow category.

All he cared about at the moment was maintaining his high ground on the lead up to the mission area. The area around the disabled train was mostly dusty, dry hills, and Mordenna could spot one or two of them in the distance near their destination that he’d be inclined to use. Rocks were scattered through the area, some big enough for people to hide behind—but it seemed like ADVENT were just clustered around the train. Fair enough by him. Just needed his perch and then he was all set for this mission.

But of course, that would involve the two troublemakers shutting up. That didn’t seem likely to happen anytime this century.

“—and look, Pats, even if you turned a Berserker around I’m pretty sure you aren’t strong enough to hit that ‘paralysis point.’”

Pattie jabbed a finger at him, the other hand supporting her gun. “That’s because I never have tried! Imagine being able to take down one of those things by just smacking it hard enough.”

Well, technically Pattie had a point, but that spot wasn’t just exclusive to Berserkers. Hit hard enough on anything whose nervous system ran down the spine and you could paralyze it pretty quickly. But considering Berserkers had plates along their spine for just such an occasion? Unlikely. He wasn’t about to disillusion her, though. That would give off the implication he was invested in their conversation, and he wasn’t about to have that.

Thankfully, Julian had it handled for him. “There’s no magic paralysis spot on Berserkers,” he snidely replied, “but most flesh-based lifeforms like yourself have a central nervous system along the spine. Apply enough force to damage the endings and, yes, you can paralyze a Berserker.”

Pattie socked Benald in the arm. “See, I was right. Kinda. You owe me a week’s chores.”

“Pats, your argument was based on it being exclusive to Berserkers. I don’t owe you shit.”

“Do too!”

“Do not.”

“Augh,” Julian cut in, “we are trying, horror of horrors, to be stealthy here! The both of you need to stop flapping your jaws like the hunks of meat attached to your skulls they rightfully are.”

As much as Julian’s overt snarkiness grated on Mordenna, at least someone remembered they were trying to sneak this for as long as possible. Rolling his eyes, Mordenna hopped over another rock and stuck to cover, peering his head out.

Ah. Finally, company. Mordenna held a finger to his ear. “Hey, chucklefucks. Got eyes on ADVENT. Two Vipers, a Stun Lancer, a Trooper, and—ooh, is that an Andromedon?”

The pod he was describing was over the crest of the next hill, on a low alert near the disabled train. They really were out in the middle of nowhere with this one—the Resistance operatives said it was their only chance without offing themselves in the process. Fair by Mordenna—he could do with what little cover was offered. The evening was still young.

Amazingly, the twins immediately shut up as soon as Mordenna had alerted them to the squad ahead. Everyone bunkered down and stuck to what cover was offered, though Julian remained still and standing. Had to, if he wanted that field around him to work. Mordenna watched out of the
corner of his eye as Pattie wiggled up, right next to Benald. They exchanged a look, then nodded.

Benald spoke over comms. “Commander? You heard Mords.” Huh. Nice nickname. “Pats and I want to try out our deal on the Andromedon. Might be best if someone else opens the fight, though. We’re gonna need a second or two to pull it off.”

“Understood.” Eliza’s voice came in, and goodness, Mordenna found himself another project. The communication systems left something to be wanted. Looks like he had some work in sharpening them up. “Mordenna?”

“Considering the cover around their position? Best I dome one of those Vipers. I want whoever’s aim sucks the least to gun for the other. Pats, Ben, do whatever the hell you’re doing, Julian, I want you to take out the Andromedon shell if/when they kill it. Kalight? Cleanup duty.”

“Commander,” Julian came in, already sounding like he had a problem with those completely reasonable orders, “am I supposed to take orders from a Chosen?”

Oh, how predictable. The snarky robot had a problem with him. God, if anything was so stereotypical, it’d be that. He opened his mouth to respond.

“Yes, Julian.” Ah. Seems he didn’t need to. The Commander sure was neat! “Mordenna’s tactical mind is equal to my own, and he’s also the one responsible for helping SYN get rebuilt. If you don’t want to risk death on the field anymore than you have to, listen to him.”

Julian was quiet for a moment at that, but eventually he gave a robotic sigh. “Fine. I suppose if it gets me out of combat quicker so that tin can will get shot at instead of me, I’ll comply. For now.”

“Grand. Any other objections?”

Didn’t seem to be any. While Julian had been saying his bit, Mordenna had advanced to the perch he had spotted ahead earlier, taking out his Darklance and nestling it between the rocks. “The peanut gallery’s silent, Lizzie. For once, god help them. Can I please shoot some people?”

“Squad, move to your positions. Mordenna, once they’re good, you’re cleared to fire.”

Trigger finger itching, Mordenna monitored the squad out of the corner of his eye as he lined up his sights on the first Viper. She wasn’t even aware of him... though the movement from the squad caused her to look over. If she saw any of them moving, she didn’t act on it—though she kept her sight to the squad. Mordenna’s mouth moved into a concentrated line. “Goons, stop moving. One of the Vipers has almost cottoned on to you lot.”

At his command, the squad wisely stopped. He supposed they figured that, even if he was Chosen, Eliza trusted him enough to be the de-facto squad leader. Well, he wasn’t out here to get them killed, anyway. If they died, oh well, but might as well not let Eliza think he was incompetent. Besides... he could get used to field commanding. Technically that’s what he was supposed to be doing during his time at ADVENT, but Mordenna? Behaving with Odin’s will? There was a time that you did, you know. You listened to his every beck and call... as as much as you tell yourself otherwise, it wasn’t out of fear.

Mordenna pulled the trigger and watched as the Viper’s head simply ceased to be amidst a cloud of orange blood. The small rush he got staved off his thoughts just a bit. Just a bit. “Get moving, boy scouts.”

On cue, Julian lowered the distortion field and opened fire—pretty indiscriminately, it seemed, but Mordenna could see he was doing a sweep of the squad, gathering their ire. For someone who had
been complaining earlier about being shot at, he was sure trying to make himself the center of attention. A few of his shots did land, Mordenna would give him that much.

That distraction was just what Pattie and Benald needed. While Mordenna hadn’t been watching, they both had stood up and taken the Psi Amps off of their backs, standing together and pooling their powers between themselves. Now Mordenna was watching as, in united synchronization, they flung their powers towards the Andromedon. Pattie’s psionics lanced out like fire, curling around Benald’s more solid, physical psionics, like ice.

The beam struck the Andromedon and all at once it was lifted, dropping its weapon. The psionics seeped through its shell and reached the rider inside, covering it and then blossoming out. Though lacking a visible mouth, Mordenna could tell it wanted to scream, judging by the way it withdrew its hands from the suit’s arms and clutched its head, spasming violently. Benald’s blocky psionics encased its head while Pattie’s more fluid ones coated its body and appeared to burn. To Mordenna’s gifted sight, he could see how the two signatures were affecting the Andromedon—most likely, that thing felt like it was encased in ice and getting burned alive at the same time.

But, something else developed. As this happened, Pattie’s psionics flared around its head and bloomed out like a corona. A very far-reaching corona. It seems the Trooper and Stun Lancer had made to run, but once that psionic bloom hit them? They shuddered violently and could only manage backing up in pain. Huh. Pattie—or Benald, or any mix of the two—seemed to be projecting the Andomedon’s pain out radially.

All in all? Pretty neat. Pattie and Benald might’ve just stepped up on Mordenna’s interest scale. He saved the Stun Lancer the headache and parted his skull clean from his shoulders.

Meanwhile, Kalight siphoned some of the excess psionic energy coming off of that corona. If he was any worse for wear for encountering it, his helmet wasn’t very telling. He pooled it into his gauntlets, and with a mighty fling, sent it right at the Trooper. That psionic feedback must’ve been enough to kill her, as the soldier slumped over and didn’t move again.

From there, the bolt of psionic lightning hopped over to the Andromedon. Once Kalight’s psionics hit the mix of Benald’s and Pattie’s, the whole union collapsed in a violent, twisting storm of psi energy. With the sound of a lightning storm close enough to make your hairs stand on end, the whole turbulence winked out. The Andromedon pilot, too, slumped over. Like clockwork, the AI in the suit took over and reanimated the chassis... just in time for Julian to shred it with plasma and expose a weak point in the armor that Mordenna happily took advantage of.

Three shots. Mordenna’s sniper rifle generated its own ammo... but he did have to cycle the chamber every so often to generate more. He pulled back a lever on the side and the gun hummed with new energy.

Over his Darklance, he watched as the bolt of lightning made a final jump to the last Viper, making her double over... just in time for Mary’s shot to go sailing right over her head. Whoops. Well, Mary couldn’t have accounted for that. She’s just human, after all—Mordenna would have waited to see the chain reaction resolve, then take his shot, but oh well. The Viper rose back up.

ADVENT, overall, may have been dumb, but the individuals? Not so much. Mary was obviously their medic, to the Viper’s eyes. Taking her out first and then backing up for more support seemed likely. The Viper locked her eyes on Mary, and with a lunge, her tongue telescoped out and wrapped right around the Specialist’s neck. Mary was yanked screaming from her cover—still clutching her rifle, impressively—as the Viper flew into the encompassing cover of one of the train cars, out of sight. Her GREMLIN uttered a beep of alarm and flew after its operator.
Well. She’s dead, was his first thought. All the Viper had to do was sink her jaws into her—or squeeze hard enough, and Mary would be gone. Still, might as well try to do something about it. Mordenna got as far as climbing up on the rock he was using as cover before a shot of plasma rang out.

Nearby, the squad seemed torn between responses. Julian merely shook his head while Pattie very loudly cussed. Kalight was rushing up to get a good bead while sticking to his cover, and Benald wasn’t far behind.

But... Mordenna knew that exact shot, the frequency between bursts and the sound of how the Elerium was exactly un balanced. That was a Codex rifle. Must’ve been one behind the train. Mary was very dead.

Well, if the universe had decided the funniest course for Mordenna’s life was to work with XCOM, it was still a hell of a jokester. Back into sight, Mary scuttled, scooting herself back with one hand and her legs as her rifle was shakily pointed at something in front of her, still behind the train. Her front was coated in orange blood.

Before Mordenna got too far in running situations on what happened (his first guess was a hilarious miss), a very distinctive, electronic voice rang out. “Don’t shoot I want to help!”

That. That was a Codex. The Codex that had fired. If Mordenna remembered voices correctly—and he usually did, then that Codex was... “Mary. Mary tell that Codex to stand in sight of the squad if she wants any chance to speak.”

From where he was, he watched Mary swallow, nodding. “Y-you. Come forward. They want to see you.”

From behind the train car, a Codex stepped out—her hands above her head and rifle hung at her hip. She turned towards the squad, as if about to speak—and then her head snapped over to Mordenna. The two exchanged a long glance before she spoke. “You! Ref-Il Mordenna! I’d heard through my network that one of the Chosen had defected, but this is—”

“A sight for sore eyes?” He tried to finish for her. “A pleasant turn of events? You better not say a surprise, Wiki, or I’m going to shoot you right now.”

Wiki, the renegade Codex, scoffed. “Of course not a surprise. Why do you think I’m here? Because I loved Odin’s coding language a whole bunch?”

“If the answer isn’t ‘fuck no,’ you’ve disappointed me.”

“Fuck no.”

Mordenna clapped his hands together after putting his Darklance on his back, grinning. “Fantastic! Commander, I’ll give you the low down. This is Wiki, a rogue Codex—apparently. When didja spring loose?”

Wiki rolled her hand, no longer raising them in a pacifying gesture. “After you got disconnected. The Network took another major hit and the protocols that were keeping what little loyalty and blindness I had in place got overloaded and I was officially liberated. Took a sizeable chunk of data, then went on my way out in a pretty spectacular fashion.”

“I hope you know that’s a story for later you’re going to have to describe,” Mordenna replied, hopping down from his rock but remaining on his hill.
“Does that mean that, if I asked, I could join you all?”

“Hold the phone, sparky. That depends on what the Commander thinks.”

Wiki nodded, though by the way the streams of data coming off her head sped up? Someone was excited at the prospect. “Well. Ask her? Or hook me up and I will.”

Mordenna shrugged. He’d handle it himself. “So, Commander. You heard her. Wiki’s a known troublemaker with the Elders and ADVENT, so her story checks out to me. Codices also literally can’t lie, so she’s definitely telling the truth in all aspects. I don’t think I need to tell you why having a Codex on your side is a good idea.”

There was a bit of silence over comms for a second, like Eliza was considering the idea. Didn’t take her long to reply, though. “I’d like to further discuss arrangements when you guys aren’t in a live fire zone, but for now? Tell Wiki she’s cleared to join up with Menace.”

The Hunter spread his hands out, grinning. “Welcome to XCOM, Wiki. Don’t fuck it up.”

Wiki flickered a bit in this dimension—Mordenna could see her passing into a closer one for a few split seconds. Must’ve been some expression of excitement, as she fell in with the squad. Mary trailed after her, fruitlessly trying to wipe some of the blood off of her armor. “Happy to be here, everyone,” Wiki began, “You heard Mordenna. Call me Wiki.”

Mary, meanwhile, pushed her glasses back into order. “—Wiki. Firstly, thanks for saving me. Thought I was a goner. Secondly, Wiki like ‘short for Wikipedia’ Wiki?”

“The very same,” Wiki replied, “and hey. No problem. Wouldn’t exactly endear me to XCOM to let one of their operatives die and then try to be allies.”

“First I’m listening to the Hunter for orders,” Julian grumbled, “and now we’re letting a Codex into XCOM? I almost prefer the towers.”

Wiki cocked her head at him. “A SPARK, right? You don’t look like the one XCOM usually fields. Different neuroptics style.” She paused. “Different personality, too.”

“Yes!” Mordenna finally chimed in, though his gaze was elsewhere. He was scanning the rest of the battlefield to see if they should even be having this conversation. “My sis shanked our other one. He’ll be fine. Probably. We had a backup for him.”

“A shame. I wanted to talk to him.”

“Might still get your chance, if you play your cards right.”

Wiki nodded to that, then snapped her fingers. The sound was like multiple static shocks at once. “Right. I love some small talk but you guys have a few pods on your hands. They sent this team to deal with any interference and there’s another team coming to repair the train and get things moving again. Second team will be a while—you clear out this area fast enough and take the supplies? You’ll never have to deal with them. You just took out the heaviest firepower of the ‘insurance’ team so the rest should be easy. Just protect your medic and you should be fine.”

“Amen,” Mary concurred, “I’d like to go at least the rest of this month without getting grabbed like that again.”

Julian scoffed, but didn’t say much else. Looks like he didn’t appreciate Mordenna intervening before he could speak, but hey. If Julian said less? Fine by Mordenna. The Hunter kept his eyes
“Sounds like you’ve scouted the place out yourself, Wiki. Got any enemy numbers on your databanks?’’

“Sure do, and their rough positions as well.” Wiki gestured north of their position, fairly dead ahead. “Squad of three over in that direction. Two Stun Lancers and an Officer.” She then moved her hand slightly to the right. “Squad of five. Two Troopers, a Shieldbearer, a Sectoid, and another Officer. Nothing more outside of that.”

While she had been explaining, Mordenna had taken the sniper rifle off of his back and angled it on the rocks again. As good as the scouting info was, that *was* a lot of noise they had made just now. One of those squads of goons should be running towards their position while Wiki exposited. Running. He strained his ears. No hyper-sensitive hearing like his sister, but he wouldn’t be lying in saying he could pick out a bit more than usual.

**Running.** Ah, there they were, the sounds of scuttling footsteps. Just a few stone throws to the northeast. Mordenna eyed through his scope. Yep. Two Troopers, with the Officer a few paces behind them. The Officer said something to the effect of “move on, I’ll get a distress flare ready.” Couldn’t have that. The Troopers moved on. Now, if he was getting a flare ready, he was about to stop, yes? Against the dry tree near him.

Mordenna acted on his predictions and pulled the trigger. True to form, there was one less Officer to deal with, the Troopers wheeling around at the sound of his body hitting the ground. To the right, the sound of alarmed shouting. To the left, Menace One-Five (plus one Codex) getting into cover.

He could feel that primal compulsion that Odin drilled into his head rear its horns into his consciousness. Mordenna *had* to drop a few more bodies. The momentary release of dopamine was fleeting, but *there*. In a forced life like this, where all the Hunter knew was either the thrill of the hunt or the cold, choking mist that was everything else... he’d scabble for every happy feeling he could manage. It just also happened that he was fighting for the “good guys.”

Another trigger pull. Another dead body. Another rush so quickly taken by the next moment. This is just how life had been for him, for fifteen years. He pulled the trigger and found joy in a well-aimed shot, even if it was his norm. His mark fell to the ground and the mist closed in again, leaving him scanning for the next target. Kill, rush, icy fog. Squeeze, happy, sad. The Hunter could mouth along the words.

Another trigger pull. Well, the cold fog wasn’t everything. There was the little thrills he got from annoying his siblings. There was the resigned dread and *pain* whenever Odin or the other Elders brought out the metaphorical belt. There was the mounting gloom and pointlessness that all lead up to the conclusion of one of his many eternal lives. Formerly, anyway. Then there was the shame afterwards. Mordenna supposed he felt. He just didn’t like how he felt.

Reload. This probably wasn’t the best coping mechanism. But hey, no therapists for Chosen.

Another trigger pull. He was so used to the Network in the back of his head that would quash thoughts like this. Mordenna didn’t like thinking over himself often, but here he was, contemplating himself even as he was trying to find some form of *escape*. No rest for the weary, and he couldn’t seek the brief embrace of death anymore. Really, had anything changed? He was killing again, seeking that dopamine, losing it the second he put his hands on it. Different side, sure. Different person slinging the orders, yes. But when you got down to it?

*What was the point.*
“Nice work, Mordenna. Don't think I’ve seen a cleanout like that in quite a while.”

The voice of Eliza over comms was what broke him out of his trance, and shook off a bit of the fog. He blinked, looking over his rifle. It was a pretty grisly scene—all of the enemies Wiki had scouted were accounted for and dead on the ground. The Hunter could most definitely identify a few as his kills, judging by the bullet wounds or occasional lack of heads. He hadn’t moved from his spot, though his own squad was dotted here and there. Kalight was walking back from the Sectoid while Pattie and Benald exchanged some secret handshake.

Over as quickly as it began, to him. Maybe that was a good thing. If he’d been left to his thoughts any longer after he thought that... no telling where he could have gone. But, it had passed through his head. It was on the table now. This was always how things started. How was he going to even work through this, considering his answer every other time had been to kill himself?

Still. The Commander had just talked to him. Better respond. “Of course, Commander, just doing my job as a cold mass-murderer. I bet you can hardly ask for a better serial killer on your side, yeah?” That... probably didn’t inspire confidence. It didn’t inspire confidence in Mordenna, who was already regretting it.

Thankfully, Eliza didn’t leave the silence there for him to mull over. “More than that, Mordenna. Check the crates, make sure everything’s there, then pop off a flare for Firebrand.” Her tone definitely implied she had more to say to him outside of three assuring words. Another talk. Grand.

He kept a sigh to himself, rolling his shoulders. “Fine. Hey, goons, handle that. I’m going to stay on watch. Wouldn’t want that secondary squad shoving their rifles up our asses.”

“Delegating your tasks, oh mighty Hunter?” He really wished Julian would cram a sock in it. Now wasn’t the time. “Here I thought you lived for field work.”

“And here I thought I’d stop shooting SPARKs after I shot out SYN’s leg joint!” Mordenna replied, chipperly but with a definite threat behind what he was saying. Julian certainly got the threat, and it stuck—the robot fixed his gaze on the Hunter and then backed off, directing his attention elsewhere.

It seemed at that point that people got the gist that Mordenna didn’t want to be messed with—Kalight set about cracking off the flare while the rest checked through the supply boxes. Meanwhile, Mordenna slunk behind the rock he’d been using as cover and dully stared into the sky.

No death of his own to find solace in when the world became too much. Some self-aware part of him once again pipped up about the questionability of his coping mechanisms, and he easily shooed it off. What was he to do, open up? That was invitation for “you’re a Chosen. How hard your life has been doesn’t mean anything compared to the thousands you have killed in the name of the Elders.” It was an inevitability. Soon, Eliza would see that too, and he’d be alone again.

She just needed to see it.
Revelations

Chapter Summary

Eliza learns something new from the Templars, and Fal-Mai learns something new from Eliza.

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year! Now no one can come after me with jokes about not updating SFTD this year.

A certain bite of cold was in the air around the temple that hosted the Templars.

Not that it was nearly enough to dissuade Eliza’s current trip outside, accompanied by Kalight on her left as she made her calm walk up to his headquarters. She had finally, finally gotten around to landing here so she could discuss business with Geist—and the concern of the new recruit he wished to send her way. Hopefully, the time she had provided would be enough for him to handle what he needed to with his own members in order to send Marlene.

The temple in front of them was, admittedly, impressive. Eliza didn’t know if Geist had sought out an old stone building and restored it or rallied his followers into building one from the ground up. It seemed very fitting of an order like the Templars—though Eliza also wondered as to how it hadn’t been found. Over her time of knowing Geist, she hadn’t found answers to either question, and supposed she might never. Well, they weren’t particularly critical questions to her, so she only saw fit to muse on them.

About the time Eliza and Kalight entered the courtyard, Geist stepped out. He had his armor on but the helmet she occasionally saw him wear to the personal meetings was off. As to why, she could only guess. Regardless, Kalight kneeled into a bow next to her, and Eliza nodded respectfully. “Greetings, Geist.”

“Commander O’Leary.” Geist nodded to her back, and then addressed his Paladin. “Paladin van Steele. Wonderful to see you once more.”

“As it is you, my Prophet,” Kalight said, moving to stand. “How fares the temple?”

“As the months grow colder, the warmth that the summer brought evaporates... but you very well know how some of your fellow Knights will take the adversity.”

“With a song in their heart and frostbite in their fingertips?” Eliza interjected.

Kalgard held a hand over where his mouth would be in his helmet, and Geist’s mouth twitched. Somehow that told Eliza they’d tangled with that happening more than once... more than enough to joke about, at least.
Still, Geist looked like he wanted to focus on business. He straightened, drawing their attention back. “Nevertheless, I would like to focus on why you are here today, Eliza. I appreciate the ample time you have given me to ensure the Seer’s passage into your ranks would be largely unobstructed.”

Kalight and Geist seemed to share a look. Eliza’s skin pricked peculiarly, then Kalight nodded in some unseen understanding. Curious, but Eliza wasn’t about to stop the conversation for that. “Only ample through outstanding missions, I assure you, Geist. Glad you enjoyed your extra thinking time though.”

“As always, Commander. Now, as for the Seer—”

Geist didn’t need to explain much longer. From the temple doors, out stepped one of their own—clad in green armor with a sash in front that held up an uneven cape in the back. Their gauntlets seemed more inscribed than standard fare, with glowing inscriptions of perhaps Elerium origin pulsing as they walked up to the group. Their head was completely covered by a silvery, skull-fitting helmet—four lights arranged in a circle in the front with an additional one in the middle, all pink. Three very long, floating tubes extended from the relative back and sides of the helmet, trailing behind them as they moved. As they got closer, Eliza couldn’t help but think they were awfully tiny, maybe reaching 5’4” with the help of their boots.

They reached the group and bowed to those gathered. Geist gestured to them. “Eliza. This is our Seer—Marlene Kara. She will be assisting your efforts for as long as she is needed upon your ship. I firmly believe you will find her talents well.”

“I can vouch for that,” Kalight added. “Our Seer is a formidable psion, even amongst Templars and what users you have in your ranks.”

Marlene drew up from her bow... and though she was wearing a helmet, Eliza couldn’t help but think she was looking directly at her. Rather intently at that. Eliza’s ears pricked with the sound of whispers and she turned to Geist, eyes sliding to the side for a second to try to determine the source. Maybe best not to bring up that she was hearing whispers... “I’m glad that you’re sending an apparent prodigy my way, Geist. The help is very much appreciated, and I’ll remember it whenever you need something out of me.”

He nodded, face softening a touch. “It is noted, Commander.” His eyes then slid over to a point just above Eliza’s head, then to Marlene. “Seer? Do you have something you wish to impart?”

Marlene was quiet a moment longer before she spoke. “Holy Father. Surely you see that which cloaks this... Commander?”

Oh, man. Eliza didn’t think she’d be getting ominous predictions from prophets within this lifetime, but here she was. Geist looked to Eliza for a bit, then back to Marlene. “What do you see?”

“Her psionics.” Marlene was stock-still as she spoke. The whispers hadn’t stopped. “I have no doubt in my heart as to your knowledge that she possesses them... but do you see their nature? Their color? I would not have imagined that light blue would be a possible hue... until I had forseen it myself.”

... what? Well, Eliza was vaguely aware she might have psionics. That whole Siren business Mordenna had dropped on her seemed pretty indicative of that. But... light blue? Eliza was pretty sure only the pink to purple spectrum of psionics existed—and then the weirdness that was the Warlock’s, a blend of purple and red. Her gaze flickered between Marlene and Geist. “... Geist? I
would... assume since she’s called ‘the Seer’ that she can pick out things others wouldn’t necessarily notice, but?” That also raised the question if Mordenna had ever seen them.

Geist looked at Eliza intently. Then, he stepped forwards, towards her, until there was barely a foot of space between them. He squinted, and before Eliza could say anything of personal space (though Geist was enough of a looker that she held her tongue longer), he backed off. “My Seer speaks the truth, Eliza. Not only do you possess the Gift from the Earth Herself, your expression of it is... highly different from what even I have seen. Light blue, yes.”

Eliza gave herself a minute to think over that before she replied. Light blue psionics. Surely Tygan was going to have a field day with that... assuming this wasn’t just news to her. Had anybody been hiding it in fear of what might happen if she knew? Eliza... didn’t like considering that. She moved from her thoughts and back to the conversation. “Alright. Thus having established that I have some abnormal psionics... should there be anything done about them? As you two have said, light blue doesn’t strike me as a ‘correct’ color.”

“It may not be ‘correct,’” Marlene began softly, “but nor is it ‘wrong.’ Not now, in any case. All psionics may trend towards perversion or ascendance—it merely depends on the user’s psyche and intent. Yours... I have the impression that they are soft. Weak now, but with time and patience, they could grow to considerable strength. While still retaining their ‘soft’ signature, of course.”

Eliza nodded. “That... sounds reasonable to me. Best I get a handle on my psionics before they do anything to me yet, anyhow, or get out of control.”

“Indeed. And if you would allow me...” Marlene paused. When she resumed speaking, her words were careful. She seemed to be picking them wisely. “I... would be accepting of teaching you. I am of good knowledge of the mental aspects of psionics—but I am not the most skilled teacher you could have, of course.”

“But a fine one nonetheless,” Kalight countered.

Marlene seemed to acknowledge it, but move on regardless. “‘Monitoring’ would perhaps be a more accurate term. They should not come to harm you of their own accord, but understanding them is key.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Eliza turned to Geist. “I assume the terms of Marlene’s stay are going to be the same as Kalight’s?”

“Correct.” Geist gestured to Marlene. “With additional details to be determined as the Seer’s discretion.”

That didn’t seem unreasonable. Kalight hadn’t made any unsightly demands thus far and she saw the trend continuing with Marlene. She clasped her hands in front of her and then addressed Marlene. “Welcome to XCOM, Marlene. We’re glad to have you.”

During her time in her cell, the Assassin kept coming back to the same thing—she let herself be captured.

Yes, she had her justifications. She had seen the rather irrational, emotion-driven behavior of the Elders. Of Helena. The punishment she had received... Fal-Mai found herself initially unable to
really justify it. The brutality she and her brother faced was beyond unreasonable.

Or... was it? Perhaps the punishment itself may have been slightly extreme, but that was one black mark on her relationship with the Elders. They must have been justifiably angry—it stuck Fal-Mai as natural to hurt over a child’s first major failing. Especially considering her previous ongoing efforts to root out the Skirmishers not going as fast as she would have hoped for. Helena must have had Her thoughts about it, but held Her tongue to see if Fal-Mai could pull it off. With that most recent transgression...

She had punished you for your emptiness, a nagging thought went. That, too, Fal-Mai could start to understand. Emptiness itself could be an emotion. The Elders could grieve at the loss of a Chosen—that was Their right. Emptiness gnawed at Fal-Mai’s gut. Emptiness made her squirm with the feeling of it. Emotionlessness was a calm state of mind. If she had been truly passive to it, she may have escaped punishment and remained in Helena’s good graces. As for Jax-Rai...

His failings were his own, she thought, closing her eyes as she sat cross-legged on the floor of her cell. To be arrogant in the face of the Elders is a mark of ignorance. If he had practiced mere reverence, he would not have found himself in his position. That seemed to be solid logic to Fal-Mai. It placated her a bit. Having something even as small as that to hold onto when she could not think of a better reason was all she could do.

Undoubtedly, Mordenna would only have found satisfaction if it was either of them vanishing instead of him. Her brows twisted together as the thought of her other brother entered her mind. He was on this ship... lurking somewhere, undoubtedly. Surprisingly, he had not paid a visit to her yet. Either Eliza had him on a surprisingly secure leash or it was just a matter of time before he descended upon her, teeth bared.

They were just angry and wanted to take it out on someone, you gullible fuck!

His words flashed across her consciousness and she almost winced. They had also shaken her in the moment—considering it was simply his nature to bruise with his words, she had thought she could brush them off in time. But still, they stuck with her... as did Eliza’s. The reasonings she had put up to her troubles and the things that had happened to her groaned under the weight of what they had said.

But if what the Elders had did was reasonable, why did you let yourself be taken? Simple. She had been too emotional in her response to Their judgement, and perceived Them through that critical lens. Her emotions were once again proving to be her downfall...

... so why? Why did she have them in the first place? Surely it would have been easier for Helena to simply make her incapable of emotion. The reasoning of “you developed them against Her will” came to her mind, but that hit another barrier—was that to imply that Helena’s craftsmanship was lacking? Was that to imply that She had made an error that made Fal-Mai this way? If she was truly made perfect, as Helena would have her believe... then she shouldn’t have emotions. She shouldn’t feel.

So she let XCOM capture her. Helena’s flawless design, committing imperfect actions. Thinking against Her. Fal-Mai’s hands balled into fists and she fought off a tide of frustration and discontent. It had to be her fault, right? Helena said so. Helena made something imperfect. Either the reality was that Helena truly had made something perfect and Fal-Mai had found a way to fail... or Helena had made her capable of emotion knowingly. Then She had instructed her to not feel. The Assassin did not know which reality was worse.

If she was imperfect, what that it? Was that just a black stain on the rest of her eternally young life,
to be doomed to fail because of Helena?

No. There had to be a reason, *any* other reason for it. Maybe it was Helena’s plan all along. Maybe she had intended it as a learning experience. Maybe there was going to be a point along the way where Helena would have revealed her grand intentions and told Fal-Mai it’s *ok now*. *It was to teach you strength. You can rest, you do not have to put yourself up to this any longer.*

Maybe. For better, and for worse, she would likely never know now. Not though her own eyes, anyhow. Her hands relaxed back into loosely hanging fingers, and she breathed a deep sigh. Her fate... was now in Eliza’s hands. Eliza did not seem to want to harm her... even if the things she had said stung. But they didn’t hurt like what Mordenna might say—there was *something* to be gleaned from what Eliza had tried to talk to her about. It had left her with introspective questions, not stinging wounds.

Would a kind parent even give her the *impression* that she would be reclaimed once she was safe within Their embrace again? Why did she consider Eliza’s former state to be such a blessing? Was the notion of being dead to the world and unable to act for one’s self truly an ideal? So many questions, and few she wanted to ruminate over the answers about. Despite herself... Fal-Mai wanted to speak with Eliza again. Maybe then she could glean some answers she actually wished for.

Fal-Mai was so lost in thought, she nearly didn’t catch the featherlight sounds of footsteps outside of her door. Whatever material the walls were made of, it was impressive—but still not enough to outmatch her hearing. When she registered the footprints, her shroud covered her—for comfort, and for concealment. She moved to stand, pressing herself against the wall.

The door opened... and, what was that human phrase? “Speak of the devil?” Eliza appeared, closing the door behind her as fast as she had walked in. The soft smell of earth and grass came in with her—which struck Fal-Mai as odd. It was... interesting to think that Eliza would ever set foot off of the Avenger. Was that a danger she was willing to handle? Fal-Mai seemed to be left with more questions by the minute.

Eliza’s eyes scanned the room, completely missing Fal-Mai as cloaked as she was. As far as she knew, her cloak was unique—her brother possessed a variant, but it was less “true invisibility” and more “distraction filter.” Capture devices did not seem to be able to record him when he didn’t want them to, either. She only knew this because he had used it once or twice to get into her Stronghold just to torment her, and he *deigned* to tell her.

Discarding those thoughts, an impulse led her to dropping her cloak—just as Eliza opened her mouth to speak. Presumably to call out for her as she did last time. The Commander closed her mouth, gesturing to Fal-Mai to speak. After a second, the Assassin chose her words. “Your confidence in assuming that I would like to speak after what we had *discussed* last time is a curious sort, Commander.”

To that, Eliza replied quickly. “Two things—one, if I don’t try, I damn myself to fail regardless. Two? Well, you dropped your cloak without me saying a thing. Presumably you *do* want to speak.”

As always, Eliza was sure in her speech. Still, Fal-Mai had to probe at her. “And what if I had dropped my shroud merely to tell you that I never wished to discuss with you again?”

Eliza’s mouth settled into a line, but she ended up calmly shrugging. “Then I would have tried. Perhaps I’d give it one more shot at a later date, but if you didn’t want to talk... well, interrogating you wouldn’t strike me as wise for several reasons. I’ve effectively taken you out of the running. After the war, I could further decide what to do with you, but considering I have you safely locked...”
up? I would consider it a general success.”

Fal-Mai studied her a bit more. There were many things she wanted to ask of Eliza... but if the Commander was here, she was here for a reason. “What do you want of me, Commander?”

In response, Eliza moved to sit on the floor. “While I do want a thing or two out of you, that’s not why I’m here today. Fal-Mai? I want you to ask questions about me. Anything you’ve got.”

That... caught Fal-Mai off-guard. Eliza wanted her to ask questions? To probe into her and withstand whatever inquiries the Assassin had? Eliza was a very interesting human being. Perhaps this was one of the reasons Mordenna was playing along with XCOM... Fal-Mai ended up humoring Eliza, moving to sit back in her lotus position on the floor, with her hands still behind her of course. “Let me clarify this to myself; you want questions to be asked of you. Right now.”

“Yep. Ask away.”

“Anything?”

“I’ll try to answer within reason, yes.”

Fal-Mai studied her for a second. “Elizabeth Rosetta O’Leary. Your full name was accessible on your file when you were still in service of the Elders. When that man—Bradford—took you, why did you not come back? You would know no suffering, even if your life would be... rather stationary.”

Eliza seemed to consider her answer carefully before she gave it. “Because I didn’t want to be there. I didn’t want to be a vegetable in a tank, serving a bunch of aliens that had never asked if I had wanted to command for them. No, they showed up one day, warred with me for half a year, then stormed my palace and kidnapped me by force.” She chuckled humorlessly. “I do realize I’ve done much of the same to you, but I’d at least like to make it your decision if you want to work with me. There’s also a lot more in the fine details regarding it all, but I’ll go into them as you’re curious.”

Fal-Mai squinted at the Commander. It was... admittedly still hard for her to consider someone such as Eliza not wanting to serve under the Elders. Her grasp on it was slowly getting better... and now that she could ask questions? Perhaps she could get a better understanding. “But Commander? It all would have made sense in time—the Elders make no moves without heavy consideration. Was some part of you not wanting to return and see what They had in mind for you? Surely you know They would happily accept you back and most likely spare those you cared for...”

“Well...” Eliza set the remote in her hands down, lacing her hands together and pressing her index fingers against her lips, thinking. “Let me put it this way: imagine if, after I had kidnapped you, I put you under. I got my scientists to put a device in you that would make you obey my every whim, no matter what you wanted to do. Imagine I did this without asking, without even stopping to consider what you might want. Let’s say I then put you on the battlefield and had you massacre ADVENT by the hundreds, the thousands. All in pursuit of some larger goal that you’ve never been told.” Eliza spread her hands out. “But then! The Elders free you! You’re back in safety...” She then gestured to Fal-Mai. “But don’t you want to go back? Everything would have made sense in time. Maybe you were one more killed ADVENT away from securing the future for everyone. Maybe you’ve just doomed us all. Why don’t you just go back to your abusers, Fal-Mai?”

That... gave Fal-Mai something to think about. Her eyes closed as a greater understanding came over her, of just what she was asking Eliza. True, the Elders... may have been the aggressors, twenty years ago. Fal-Mai truly did not know the details. At least, nothing outside of what she had
read from files. To be captured, and put to work against your will, to be kept captive for twenty years? Fal-Mai could see herself despairing. She wouldn’t want to go back if she was freed. She’d very well fall into the Elders’ arms if They so let her and not leave until They cast her out.

She opened her eyes and looked at Eliza again. Had Eliza done just that? Had Eliza sought comfort in the likes of Bradford and the rest of her staff, once she had woken up? It was another question she could ask, but she left it to the side for now. “I believe I understand more now, Commander. Though I do not agree with your views... I see where you formulate them.” Thinking on her next question, her face grew somber. “How much do you think you know about what the Elders have ‘done to us?’”

“More than enough,” Eliza began softly, “to know that I need to get all three of you out of there. I’ve seen Mordenna get punished before, once or twice. Judging by what you said in the field, it happened to you and Jax once he was kidnapped. If trends continue, god knows Jax has been punished a second time for your kidnapping. None of you deserve that. None of you deserve abuse.”

Fal-Mai winced in pain at the memory. Not just of her punishment—of what she could only presume was Jax’s punishment, and his feelings on the matter. At some level, she knew the Chosen were linked—only just enough so that if one of them was experiencing an extreme emotion, the other two got ghosts of it. Questioning, terror, child-like fright... that and more was what she had experienced quite soon in her cell. She could only think on what Mordenna felt and how he had dealt with it.

But even so, to think of anything the Elders had done as abuse? It was alien to her. Surely They only had the best in mind... but she knew that was flimsy. More and more of what she had seen and experienced was starting to lead her to a different conclusion, and she didn’t like the looks of it. The Elders were gods. More than gods. They were beyond reproach. But They were the ones who told you that They were. Eliza’s mere existence outside of the Tank seems to prove that wrong, yes?

To press those thoughts out of her head, she sprang for another question. “Why are you doing this?”

“... in general, or?”

“This. Letting me ask questions. Questions you should not answer. Even after I made you angry by insisting it was a blessing you were in the Tank.” Fal-Mai had noticed the way Eliza’s hands balled into fists; could hear how her breathing stilled. Fal-Mai knew she had crossed a line there—and the fact that Eliza had not gotten furious or so much as raised her voice stuck with her. “You should have been angry with me. You should not be condoning this. Why?”

Eliza looked at her softly, with a kind of sympathy that just made Fal-Mai want to ask why again. When the Commander spoke, her voice was low and gentle. “Fal-Mai. If I don’t let you ask questions, how will you ever learn what you should and shouldn’t do? How would you know anything about me? How would you ever have the confidence to ask? I want you to ask questions so you know who I am. I want you to ask so you have the chance to be comfortable with me. I’m not angry at you. I was upset because it reminded me of bad memories, but not angry at you. There’s a world of difference between the two. Do you understand?”

Truthfully, did Fal-Mai? Her world was turning itself inside-out over these past few... weeks? She didn’t even know how much time had passed, how long she had been here exactly, wondering what the Elders really were to her. She could not ask Them questions of Themselves. She did not have the confidence to even try. She was not... comfortable with Them. She was not comfortable with her “Mother.” They had tried to comfort her. They had been comfort ing, at one point. But that was
gone, now. They had done something painful, hurtful to her. They did not apologize. They only justified the punishment she was made to endure.

She wanted comfort. Physical comfort. Her heart craved to be held and uplifted and not merely assuaged of worries that could not be spoken away. They could not, would not give her that. For one who had slain ADVENT’s enemies for over a year with only thanks to go by... Fal-Mai did not think she was entitled to anything. But, maybe a hug would have made everything the Elders did easier to stomach...

Eliza was still looking at her, waiting patiently for an answer. Fal-Mai opened her mouth to reply... then closed it slowly a second later. Did she understand something as simple as being able to ask someone in authority questions? Especially of themselves? She lidded her eyes. “... no, Eliza. I do not. The Elders... did not leave much room for understanding.” She closed her eyes, unable to look at the Commander any longer, especially with her next question coming. “Would you want me? Not as a weapon, but as a...”

Fal-Mai trailed off, unable to finish the question. When it became clear she wasn’t going to finish it, Eliza took in a breath to respond. “Yes, Fal-Mai. As an ally. As a valued operative. And if you’d allow me... as a friend. ”

A friend. The closest thing Fal-Mai would have called a friend was her head Priest. Considering she had fought and died valiantly at her Stronghold, she was certainly alone now if she wasn’t before. She was quiet for a moment longer. “If I asked you to leave, would you?”

“Yes.”

“... then will you? You... have given me much to think over. I would like my privacy as I do so. Allow me to meditate for a few days.” She would have no way of telling if those “few days” had passed, of course, but she would like to think she could take Eliza on her word. “I will give what you have said—and your standing proposition —serious thought. But I must make sure I am making the right decision.”

“Of course,” Eliza replied. Fal-Mai opened her eyes in time to see the Commander rising, grabbing the remote as she stood. “I’m glad you’re receptive, Fal-Mai. I hope you got to ask some of the questions you wanted to, and if you missed a few?” Eliza smiled. “You can always get to those later. Have a good... meditation, Fal-Mai. I’ll check on you in a few days.”

With that, Eliza tapped the pad... and this time, she kept her back to Fal-Mai, walking out the door normally and not checking over her shoulder or obstructing the whole doorway. Maybe she had forgotten. Maybe it was a gesture of trust. Whatever the case, the door closed, and Fal-Mai listened as Eliza walked away from her cell.

It was a second or so longer before Fal-Mai allowed herself to slump back against the wall. Friends. With Eliza. The Commander of XCOM and wayward soldier of the Elders. Something in her gut burned at the thought of it... but the burning was not unpleasant. It spoke of a need, one her heart had craved. A friend. Friends under the Elders? Impossible. Certainly not possible with the atmosphere she shared with her siblings. Being friends with Eliza... seemed like a far-off good dream. Could she achieve it? Would it be viable? Did she really want to?

Fal-Mai closed her eyes once more, slipping deeper into her thoughts. She... wanted to be comfortable with someone. Wanted to trust them. Wanted to know that they were there for her and would be there for her. Would Eliza do that if Fal-Mai joined with XCOM? She, undoubtedly, could never go back to the Elders if she did such a thing, and yet the more she thought on it...
She didn’t know if she wanted to go back to them.
Two Elders convene as Jax takes a walk, finding and discovering more than he thought he would.

As a place of in-betweens and great power, the Void could be regarded as an entity unto itself—breathing, pulsing, even moving on occasion. The ephemeral fog and foam that defined its boundaries shifted and twisted. Without warning, to most.

To an Ethereal such as Argus? It was a reluctant home.

Argus had been traversing the vast expanse of the Void manually for a little while now. Teleportation was entirely possible for them and by far the faster way to go anywhere, but... There wasn’t much to do, for them. Being the Collective’s greatest geneticist meant that they had dabbled long into the work on their sacred Project... but it was hard to make any progress when they were getting stonewalled again.

They sighed gently. Red-tape was a staple of the Collective and they knew half of it was out of spite at this point. The Collective would agree eventually to the changes Argus had proposed, but for now? They were left with nothing but to wait.

So a short “walk” it was. The humming of the Void and the gentle, but encompassing vibrations that reverberated endlessly was the only thing outside of power-based sight that Argus experienced. The Void was nothing more than a temporary safe haven as their bodies decayed. Even Argus’s rotted as they traversed, a constant clock over their head.

Well, that and the physical clock of their Phantom. Argus cast a look back up at it, and it to them. It had been their companion for as long as they could remember—a ghost of their own power and even an extension of it. Its form... varied, but the state of it now, Argus thought fitting. A shortened, grandfather clock for a head, multiple disembodied arms ever-changing in number, and a lower body that split into twin tails, helixing around each other. All purple, of course, formed of their own psionics. Phantoms were an extension of the subconscious and Argus knew much of it. Argus knew much of time—their plans, long-winded but effective. But of course—

Ah. Who else to interrupt their thoughts than that orchestra? The sensation of high-pitched trumpets of irritation were particularly evident in Cronus’s signature as Argus observed him teleporting in from afar. Perhaps if Argus acted fast enough, they could escape this. If Cronus was angry, this wasn’t going to shore up well for them.

No escape, however. Cronus turned—Argus was surprised he could hear their signature under the crashing cymbals—and glided towards them with clear intent. His own Phantom trailed after him, now out and free as opposed to the meeting, where they had all hidden theirs. Argus would liken the form of it to a Berserker—made as “masculine” as possible while maintaining the distinct outline and muscle-like plates. It did not hunch—rather, it kept a straight back that gave it an uncanny air compared to the usual leaning of a Berserker. Robes much like the usual Ethereal ensemble clad its body, and it, too, had four arms. Wicked, jagged horns as well. “Argus! I knew you would deign to stalk this particular plane of the hellscape.”
Argus straightened, preparing for a long conversation. Their Phantom retreated behind them, in an effort to avoid confrontation. Cronus seemed to be practically... what was that human phrase? “Chomping at the bit?” Something like that. “Elder Cronus. I’m surprised you deigned to remember my habits.”

“Easy to gauge you when you stalk the same space,” Cronus returned. “Your habits and your plans share one thing—they’re tiresomely predictable.”

Goodness. Only a few exchanges in and Cronus was hitting the easy notes. Judging by the swell of the brass and the chuff of his Phantom, he was pleased with that little observation. Grand...

“Predictable as we all know I am,” Argus carefully responded, “surely you know my next question is ‘why seek me out?’”

Cronus huffed, but got to it. “As estranged as you are from our affairs, I cannot trust talking to the others privately. Helena harbors no kind will towards me and I’m sure you understand that Odin seeks to undermine us all.”

Oh, wonderful. Argus had heard this wind-up before a few times. Cronus was about to use them to just talk at something for Void knows how long. Still, they kept their back straight. No use complaining too much or trying to deflect him too hard—Argus had seen where that had gotten them before. They could only try to get this over with quickly. “And your grievances, Cronus?”

“Firstly, that ignorant ‘son’ of mine.” Jax-Rai was getting the short end of the stick recently. Argus counted themselves lucky they were able to intervene when they could. The Chosen didn’t deserve even half of the abuse that came their way, but Argus’s hands were largely tied in trying to help them. Only outstanding incidents like the flaying Jax-Rai got were major enough to stop. Void help Ref-Il... “Talking back to me?! And daring to try to deface me in front of the others! I still cannot understand how you were able to stop me from wiping him off the face of this pitiable planet. Useless.”

Was that “useless” at them or the Warlock? Could be both. Still, sensing that they were expected to chime in, they shook their head. “As I said then—he may be your ‘child...’” Didn’t want to say this next part. Their Phantom’s hands fidgeted out of sight. “... and you may be free to punish him but you know how the Collective would look upon destroying your own creation in such a manner.”

Cronus flicked his wrist in irritation, disturbing his robes. “Of course—and Void knows you know what gains their ire. You’ve been the cause of every rule in the guidelines by this point from your behavior, and I would not be surprised to find you making more.” He scoffed, and his Phantom crossed its arms. “Why, I would almost go so far as to say it was your doing that has me in this loathsome situation. One of your typical ideas...”

All blame seemed to fall on Argus. They were used to it by this point—was easier to blame the odd man out. “I simply drafted the concept of the Siren, Cronus. You were the one who decided to do something of your own with the knowledge within the file.”

Hmmm... bad nerve to hit, or maybe they just grazed one. The orchestra quieted down, and Argus could practically feel Cronus evaluating them, looking for some way to repay that observation equally. Finally, he hit upon something, Cronus’s Phantom staring him down. “That was the truth, was it... if you’re so partial to telling the truth, enlighten me, Argus; why did you delay so long with the Siren? Twenty years ago you drafted the concept, and just on Unification Day you finally decided to act. That’s an interesting gap, even for you.”

There... seemingly would be no good way out of that one. Argus was silent for a moment, their singular instrument slowing tempo and growing softer. Cronus—nor the others—could know the
truth. An expert excuse it was. “Truth be told, it was still usual for me. You seem to know much about me, so you would know I go through several concept phases, even if I have a definite outline. The observation of how you and the others’ Chosen were shaping out was part of my process—and the reason I took so long. On the Collective’s urging is when I finally decided I had seen enough and could move on what I had gathered.”

It was a while for Cronus to digest that—but Argus could tell they had him hook, line, and sinker when the orchestra resumed its usual volume and his Phantom relaxed. “Hmph. For as much as I know you, I hadn’t considered that you were including the Chosen in on your experiments. It really is typical of you, Argus.”

Argus’s signature returned to normality. Might as well include some “humor” to really hit it home. “While my plans have ample time behind them, it is always for good reason, Cronus.” Still, didn’t want to stick on this subject, or just have Cronus vent at them for who knows how long. “Speaking of delays—how fares your progress on subverting those cuffs?”

Cronus waved a hand dismissively. “Please. I hardly require you to monitor my progress—and even if I did, you would find the job already complete. I have a solution in mind to deter XCOM’s attempts to capture our last Chosen, and I think all involved will find the method especially effective. No need for you to interfere anymore.”

Cronus’s tone made it clear he wasn’t leaving any room for discussion. Even then, Argus wanted to probe further... but knowing Cronus like they did? That was a recipe for disaster. Best to leave it for now. “Well, grand of you to have found a working solution yourself, Cronus.”

As always, Ethereals dealt in subtext, and Cronus seemed to catch a hint of it. “I ‘appreciate’ the ‘praise,’ Argus. You are ever so eloquent when it comes to laying on compliments.”

Well, with the way that was going, Argus didn’t see this going anywhere but down—a constant exchange of thinly-veiled insults, to be exact, and Argus wasn’t feeling it. “So, Cronus. Anything else you would have out of an Ethereal such as myself?”

Argus could almost hear Cronus’s sneer. “Considering your condition, calling yourself that is frighteningly accurate.”

Ouch. Out of low blows, that was the lowest—and easiest, considering it had been an active choice on Argus’s part. Still, not as if the Collective could contest it, with the leverage Argus had... “—My question remains, Elder Cronus.”

Cronus turned their head. “Nothing else, Argus.” Surprising, but welcome. Argus must have put their opinion out enough to convince Cronus it wasn’t worth it. “Go about your delays.” With that, the orchestra crescendoed, and then diminished to silence as the Void transported Cronus elsewhere.

When they were sure he was gone, they went back to their somewhat dread-inspired slump. Their Phantom gently rose behind them, planting one of its many hands on their shoulder. A nigh infinite expanse of Void and Argus still couldn’t get away from the others. Some days, they were convinced it would be only the Pit to ward them away...

Argus knew well the Collective would only ever get close enough to throw them in there themselves.
The quiet, shuddering towers of a civilization lost echoed something in Jax.

It was as if their presence held a mirror up to him—looming over him and threatening to cave at any moment as he walked among them, peering into dusty windows at the featureless visages of the still-standing mannequins. Snow fell behind him, already sticking to the ground and blanketing the world in a cold embrace.

A “Lost City,” if he remembered some of the human terminology he had heard correctly. Filled with the shambling husks of twenty years time. Jax found himself contemplative amongst his melancholy as he went on his “patrol.” A “walk” was more apt—Jax had to get out of his Stronghold. He had asked to Void to deposit him where it may, and this was where he had ended up. He couldn’t face his Priests anymore—not after what he had asked of them. He knew what he had done; he had asked them to abandon him when he would need it most. Denying them that... was most likely making them suffer.

But he far preferred it to the alternative—having XCOM slaughter them by the masses as they did naught but their duty. He knew the identity of every felled Priest that had been in his care. Jax had been determined to make sure that number did not rise any further from where it stood. They deserved far more than death at the hands of the pitiful resistance. Perhaps far more than him...

He lidded his eyes, sweeping them over the ground. The alternative there wasn’t any prettier either. If he wasn’t looking after them, who would? The Elders would doubtlessly send them to “fulfill their duties” and he... understood Their intent. But the Priests were his. He would not see them massacred.

The Warlock’s eyes and thoughts stopped once they rested upon some fresh tracks in the snow: bare feet, moving out of an alleyway and towards some unknown destination. Curious, Jax broadened his gaze. More and more footprints were in this area than he had thought—and they were all leading towards the same general direction. From what he had seen of the Lost, they only traveled in small groups when not otherwise frenzied...

Jax’s intrigue spurred him into following their trail deeper into the city. There were far too many tracks to suggest an entirely quiet atmosphere in the city; Jax was surprised he wasn’t hearing anything. Then again, with the snow? It was likely muting any sound of commotion.

Well, he was not his sister, nor his brother. He could not hear through the dampening effect the snow created, and he could not peer into the far distance and look closer at the tracks. But, the Warlock had talents of his own. Closing his eyes, he stilled his breath and fanned out his signature. Sensing was one of his specialties—all living things, and some unliving, possessed a psionic signature. Even those who lacked the Gift had psionics cling to them like wisps.

There, in the distance. A horde of weak motes were advancing on a group of slightly stronger embers... with a bright, recognizable beacon in the middle. Suddenly Jax understood—that signature belonged to Iris. One of his Priests, sent on a mission he had deemed safe! The motes were slumping over at a reasonable rate, probably gunned down by the troops that surrounded Iris. Their squad was the only one for a long while... but what was—

Jax doubled over, coughing despite himself, lungs burning. He had once prided himself on his deep-search ability and how long he could stay within Stasis as he summoned his armies, both depending on his ability to breathe slowly and shallowly or simply hold it. Ever since Cronus had... marked him, his lungs protested at such extremes. A sense of mourning took over him for a second—but it was quickly washed out by purpose. Iris’s squad was getting overrun by Lost. He had to do
something. Jax couldn’t sit there and lament.

Leaning forwards, Jax broke out into a sprint. The image of where the squad was was still imprinted onto his mind and he moved accordingly, weaving through buildings. To the alleyways on his sides, he could hear more movement—undoubtedly the Lost, hurrying to the same destination he was. As he got closer, the commotion was finally proving too much for the snow to mute; mag fire and the dying wails of Lost were filling the air.

He knew he couldn’t stick to the ground too much longer, lest the Lost see him as a viable target and converge on him. His eyes locked on the building to his right as he ran and he stopped. With a mere flex of his psionics, a pillar of psionic energy rose under him, lifting him higher and higher. This building was one of the shorter ones, and he reached the top quickly, stepping off and looking over the scene below.

The squad was typical for one traversing through a Lost City—a few Purifiers and some Troopers, with a Shieldbearer to protect the squad and an Officer to direct it. In the middle of all of them and taking shots with her own rifle, Iris stood. It was clear a few of them were injured, but they couldn’t stop to tend to the wounded—the Lost were hounding them even as they swept their weapon fire over them. Jax watched as a Lost with green, cyst-like growths over its body broke free of the horde and scrambled under gunfire, making a beeline for a terrified Iris.

No. Never again.

Jax could feel his consciousness roar as his psionics flared to life, the world slowing down as he focused on that Lost. The Void overlayed on the area twisted around him as he willed it, and he leapt forward. The Void carried him in its embrace and ferried him faster than sight to a quickly-shrinking space between the husk and Iris, landing on his feet. With a swipe of his gauntlet, he snatched the offender off the ground. It flailed in his grasp right up until he clenched his hand and crushed its neck, snuffing it out.

He could hear Iris gasp behind him as he dropped the corpse, and the rest of the squad near him pause and turn. Jax stood tall and quickly cast a glance over all of them. “No shepherd in their right mind would abandon a flock in need. Fight! I will see you out of this city yet!”

The sight of most of them breaking out into grins and cries of victory warmed something in Jax’s heart and cut through his earlier melancholy. He focused back onto the hordes as his squad did. The problem was the sheer number of Lost descending upon them—there were almost far too many to even shoot, and Jax knew how... lacking of a shot he was. It certainly wasn’t the only offence available at his disposal, of course.

Psi-energy lanced across the horns of his amplifiers, and he gathered his power into his gauntlets. He could see every weak spot of light that made up the Lost’s signatures. The fact that there was any at all didn’t surprise him, but it meant that they could be exploited. Flinging his right hand into an extended, open palm towards them, a bolt of energy lancing off it. It connected with the closest Lost, lancing to another, and another, and another... Some stumbled over and collapsed from the sheer friction and burn his psionics caused against their unprepared minds.

Some, however, stumbled... and stayed put. Jax could feel that familiar connection opening, the one that always did when he surged into the mind of another and took it over. The Lost were so vacant, and lacked any willpower to fight against him. Normally he would find it challenging to maintain two controlled soldiers, but the Lost? The Lost were nothing. Jax could see what he could do.

With a swift command, the mind-controlled Lost surged against their fellows, grappling them and struggling to hold them in place. A Trooper to his right saw the opening and took aim, getting a clean shot on the trapped husk. His satisfied grin told of an opportunity taken, and the rest of the
squad followed suit. Jax occasionally took the momentary breaks in the wave to control more Lost when his own numbers thinned, the horde slowly retreating under the new tactic.

As they fought, Jax looked over his shoulder at Iris. “—This was supposed to be a simple scout mission, was it not?”

Iris fired on a shambler. “Yes, my Chosen! Midway through, we had received a message from a nearby detachment—they had reportedly found the Reapers’ headquarters. They stopped responding soon after an explosion from their direction, and we were left to deal with these.”

Jax turned back to the hordes, sending a thin lance of psionic energy towards a Lost that was giving the squad trouble, watching as it crashed to the ground. “Our wisest course of action would be to retreat—your squad is not fit as is to handle the force of the cornered dogs that is the Reapers.”

“Precisely my thoughts, Warlock Tessura,” the Officer spoke up. “There is a docks area three minutes behind us that I can call down an evac from—the problem is getting there. We’ve got multiple wounded, some able to run, some... less so.”

Jax got the implication there, and looked from her to the squad. He could see who fit that bill—a Purifier and a Trooper in particular, propped up against an abandoned truck, bleeding but still firing on the horde. He... admired their dedication. The numbers of the Lost were thinning out, enough that they could make a break for it, provided they abandoned their most wounded. That would be the wisest course of action, yes? They were expendable—the Elders could make thousands more.

They could make thousands more Priests, as well.

Jax found himself striding through the squad. “As I have spoke, only a shepard out of his mind would abandon a flock in need. The Lost are thin enough—I will turn their brethren upon them. We shall make for the docks as a unified force.” As he spoke, he ended up at the two wounded soldiers, who both looked up at him. After a moment, he crouched down, arms out. “When I speak unified, I mean it heart and soul. Come. If it means I must carry every last one of you out of here, let it be so!”

The two of them could hardly believe their eyes and ears—but they weren’t going to leave an offer like that from the Warlock hanging for long. He reached forwards as they reached out, clutching them to him as they adjusted over either of his shoulders. Jax stood and nodded towards the Officer. She nodded back, taking one last shot at a straggling Lost. “—You heard our Chosen. Disengage and follow me!”

The Officer turned and dismounted from her perch on top of the truck. Soon enough, the rest of the squad followed after ensuring their retreat wouldn’t be impeded—some soldiers even supporting others as they ran after their Officer. Jax himself willed his controlled Lost to shove down whoever they were engaged with and follow after them, a fair distance to the sides and ahead. He’d use them to scout for danger as he fell in line. He could work without his hands.

The blitz through the desolate city was accented by the thudding of footfalls and the crack of magfire. Each time one of his Lost scouts encountered more of their numbers, Jax would call out the direction—and soon the threat would be handled. Subconsciously—on his part and the squad’s—Jax found himself drifting to the front of the group, easily keeping pace with the Officer even with a soldier slung over either shoulder. They were almost nothing to him; he estimated he could pile on several more and the only thing he’d have to worry about was balancing them. The only thing that was threatening to slow him down was his own lungs, and he grit his teeth and took deep breaths, willing them to cooperate. He couldn’t show that kind of weakness in front of all of them.
As they sprinted through the city, Jax contemplated. The Trooper and Purifier on his shoulders were nobodies to him. He didn’t know who they were in the slightest—about the only person he had any attachment to here was Iris. So why did he bother? It was just as likely that the next encounter they would be in would be their last, and it wouldn’t have mattered if he had left them to die here. But as Jax thought of leaving them behind, something in him recoiled at it. They were nobodies. *Nobodies.* An earlier version of him wouldn’t have hesitated to lead the rest of the squad on without them. So why?

He felt the Purifier’s *shaking* grip on him tighten, and it twisted his heart. Echoing the action, he held them both tighter. The answer hit him: because they *were* somebody. Maybe not to him. But in their squad, to their Officer, to *Iris.* Leaving them behind would hurt them. Plus, leaving them said, in a way, he wasn’t confident enough to get them all out alive. Of course his pride wouldn’t have that! He was a *Chosen.* He could save all of them and have them live to fight another day. He could... recruit them. Invite them to his Stronghold. There, they *could* be somebody to him.

*What if XCOM comes?* The answer was simple—the very same he offered his Priests. Run. Hide. Escape his fate.

A cry to his left alerted him out of his thoughts. One of the injured Troopers must’ve had a worse injury than she initially thought and was on the ground, the Shieldbearer of the group trying to get her back on her feet. If she was falling down now, it’d keep happening. No problem to Jax. He halted in his tracks and ran over, the Trooper looking up as he arrived. “My Chosen, please, go on without—”

“*Nonsense,*” Jax cut her off firmly. “Dare you insist I could not save you, too?” As he said that, he twisted his signature, the purplish-reds of his power solidifying and manifesting at his sides as another pair of arms that reached out for her. He supposed she didn’t have an answer to his question, as she simply leaned into him as he lifted her up, slotting her between the other soldiers.

That handled, he turned back to the squad, expecting to have to cover some ground to catch up—just to find out they had stopped for him. Some were regarding him and the now three passengers he held, others were still on watch and shooting down Lost. He nodded to them all, and when he sprinted back to the front of the group, they were all on the move again. Once again, his lungs cried out in protest, but he further grimaced. *Not yet.*

A few crash courses through buildings and a duck through a warehouse later, Jax and his group came across the docks the Officer had mentioned. The Warlock stopped and turned. They’d keep a good enough pace that the Lost were far behind them—even farther with the interference he’d ran with the ones he’d controlled. With a mental flex, he found it easy to fatally sever the connections, feeling the lights in his mind’s eye darken and fade.

Meanwhile, the squad was preparing for evac. The Officer was cracking off a flare and speaking into an earpiece while the less injured were keeping watch for pursuers. Jax watched them go about their work until he could feel Iris at his side, psionically pinging him. He turned, nodding. “*My Chosen.* If... if you would please set them down, I can see to some rudimentary first aid until the transports arrive.”

She bowed, slightly out of breath. “*My Chosen.* If... if you would please set them down, I can see to some rudimentary first aid until the transports arrive.”

That was a good idea to him. Stepping to the side, he kneeled down. First he sat the Trooper down, then the other two that had been slung across his shoulders. He got a quiet “thank you” from each of them, and he could feel a smile tugging at his lips. Jax stood, backing off as the extra arms at his sides dissipated. “I wish you—”

That was about as far as he got before the coughs he had held back came to him in force, making
him bring a fist to his mouth as he delved into a fit. Squeezing his eyes shut, he wheezed for breath between hacks, hand shaking as he tried to reign it in. Eventually, eyes watering, he took in a deep breath and straightened back up. Desperately, he tried to play it off. “I wish you the best of luck, dear Iris. I will keep my sight trained firmly behind us, to ensure we will have little trouble.”

Iris... seemed highly concerned, as did the soldiers around him. Luckily, none of them apparently had the confidence to bring something up that Jax seemed very firm to brush off. “Of course, Warlock Tessura.”

That handled, he stepped past them and back towards the warehouse.

“My Chosen, wait.”

The Warlock looked back as the Officer called out to him. She was jogging up to him, weapon at ease and flare burning behind her. “You... you did not have to carry them. Or stop for our newest member. Yet... you did.” Now, was that a smile she was showing? “Thank you. It is comforting to know our last Chosen still looks after his ‘flock.’”

There was a time when that statement wouldn’t be true, and Jax... rued it. Still, to the Officer he offered a softened expression and an incline of the head. “I would be a far lesser Chosen if I did not care for even the lowest of my ranks.”

“Forgive me for saying this, but we do not even belong to any legion under you.” She jerked her head at Iris, currently tending to the wounded. “I can only assume you were in the area to monitor Iris.”

He... did not want to disclose the real reason he had been out of his Stronghold and in some Lost City. Plus, to say he had only been here for Iris... not true either, but not unexpected of him. Jax waved it off. “The reason I was lingering in the area matters little. What concerns us now is that you all are safe.” He gave her a knowing look. “The fact that the lot of you are not in any legion directly under me... can always be changed.”

She opened her mouth to respond to that, then closed it. Then she began again with a barely-restrained smile. “It... it would be an honor, my Chosen. Thank you.”

Jax’s chest warmed and he nodded to her, looking to the distance until he heard the roaring of engines behind him. He turned, and three transports were coming in, doors opening on their descent. Cords unraveled from within, dropping to the floor. Those who could stand on their own around him started making for the ships, some even carrying those unfit to walk.

He regarded the Officer a moment longer. “File in—I will have the appropriate proceedings done to incorporate you into my Stronghold done shortly. You have done well today, even if you were required to retreat.”

One more smile from the Officer, and a salute. “Thank you, Warlock Tessura. I and my squad will be awaiting our reassignment... eagerly.” With that, she marched off to be with the rest of her detachment.

Iris joined him at his side as the numbers on the ground became fewer and fewer. “There was a time,” she quietly began, “when I would not have imagined having anyone but me and my sisters at your holy Stronghold.” She looked up to him, and smiled softly. “I think it is a good change. You have done them a great deed today, my Chosen.”

He nodded. The last Trooper was being helped on, giving the Warlock a salute before she was
lifted up. The transports full, the Officer waved them on, the sides closing. Dispersing the snow through force of lift, they sped off into the haze of the night.

Iris looked after them, too. There was silence between them a moment longer... broken only by a cry from a Lost in the distance. She cleared her throat. “Back to your Stronghold, Holy Father?”

Jax nodded again, turning to her. Technically he didn’t have to do what he was about to do, but... He reached down and brought Iris into his arms, more intimately than the way he had carried the Trooper and Purifier. He’d just intended to carry her—but he ended up holding her closer and longer than he had meant to. A hug? Yes, it was a hug by most standards. Iris didn’t do anything for a second, but quickly snatched the chance and returned it. He sighed gently and peacefully.

He’d done good today. He’d saved people. It wasn’t the begrudging satisfaction of a haven overturned. This was a warmth that burned out the cold of the snow. Jax closed his eyes, feeling the thrum of the Void around him as he called to it.

Warmth, closeness, affection. All things he could not find in the Elders...
Mordenna's mind drives him to show Eliza he's not worth it.

WARNING: This chapter contains heavy suicidal themes and much more. Please be cautious in your read if suicide, the mention or heavy consideration thereof, is one of your triggers.

It’s been a real garbage week.

Well, Mordenna supposes, just for him. Really, it had only been a matter of time before his mood swung down again. That much he knew. Good things lasted for such a short time, and it was just only ever so perfect that the little happy place he was beginning to construct be shot down by none other than himself. God knows he didn’t deserve it in the first place. It was only a devil’s miracle that he’d been granted it, and the universe had a more cruel sense of humor than he did.

“Because who likes happy endings, right?” He entertained to no one in particular, in the vents. The ship’s walls were thick enough and his location far enough away that he was dead certain no one could hear him. “Especially not for the serial killer—no no no. Who in the everloving fuck would actually take a look at you, Mordenna, and actually see something worth salvaging? You actually believe Eliza when she said that shit? Pathetic.”

He scoffed, face twisting. “Pity. Like a wolf in a beartrap, that’s all she saw you as. ‘The poor thing’s hurt. I ought to do something.’ Then when she gets bit she’ll see it’s just the farmer trying to warm the formerly-captive viper. Too soft for her own good.” He’d taken Eliza at face value, then. Not so much anymore. He didn’t take her for a liar—just took her as a fool. A well-intentioned fool, but a damn fool nonetheless. She would see in time that she made a bad call. She’d see that he wasn’t worth it. She’d see that she should have just let him kick the bucket.

Mordenna balled his hands into fists. “Ain’t like this wasn’t coming. Old man was right—I’ll fuck up eventually. I’ll do something wrong and then suddenly everybody’s not so goddamn keen on me. It might not even be his fucking fault!” He slammed his fist against the vent. “For all I know I was a fuckup in the Reapers too and that’s why I got taken! Sure I’m a ‘valuable asset’ but how fucking valuable am I when I’m just gonna do something terrible eventually?”

He sat there, breathing a bit heavily, before closing his eyes. “Not like it wasn’t gonna happen eventually. Poor old Lizzie just needs to see. Let’s make sure she realizes that sooner rather than later, yeah?” That was it. A rather regrettable aspect of his thinking had taken over, and soon he was quietly, but quickly, crawling down the vents. Mordenna wanted the hallway outside the Chosen Holding Cells. Lily was probably in there, finalizing Jax’s cell. As tight as he could wind his distraction field around himself, he didn’t want to test if she wouldn’t notice an opening door.
Gently, he opened the hatch—not before listening for anyone walking around below him of course—and dropped, field closely wound around himself. He closed the vent opening behind him and looked to the door of the cells. Right—there was *that* door to surmount, too. How to go about this...

Of course, Mordenna being Mordenna, he found an answer quickly. The other engineers were off on break now, the Hunter having memorized most everyone’s schedules. It was just Lily in there, and he knew how to draw her out. Stepping up to the datapad, it was easy to bypass the typical interface with the knowledge of ADVENT systems he had. Lily seems to have *defanged* a lot of the more hostile elements... but if anything, that made it easier for him to infiltrate unseen. It was just a tiny edit, after all—the sender’s address. He changed it from “the terminal outside of the Chosen Holding Cells” to “the terminal in the Workshop” and that was all he needed to do, save populating the message field with the request for Lily to come down. He “needed some assistance, a second pair of hands.”

Mordenna hit send and closed the window. He waited.

Sure enough, the door opened and Lily emerged. She didn’t seem all too annoyed to be interrupted—more concerned than anything else. She passed right by Mordenna without sparing him a look. Not like she was expecting him to be right there, after all. Before the door closed, he slipped past her and into the room.

Nothing too exciting inside. Just the in-progress state of Jax’s cell, Lily’s tools, and the other two cells. He entertained leaving something in his as a joke before his thought process yanked on his choke chain and he was striding towards Fal-Mai’s cell, opening the door without hesitation.

For the briefest of seconds, he caught a hint of purple, but it was gone as soon as he entered, the door closing behind him. To anyone else, it was an empty room. Sans him, of course. To him... He squinted, letting his field drop. Still empty. Fal-Mai was *deep* in her cloak. But! Unfortunately for her, he knew she was there... and he knew what would bring her out.

He crossed his arms, leaning against the wall. “Oh, poor, poor Fal-Mai. Retreating into her cloak because she can’t handle the thought of a little reunion with her brother. Always a coward, never a warrior, eh sis?”

Nothing. He needed to turn up the intensity. Mordenna scoffed. “Guess it’s usual for you to hide away into your little blankie. Never figured out how to handle things like an adult... least of all your poor, pitiable *emotions*. You think it’s a coincidence your dear old mum gave you them and then told you to never use them? Hm?”

Aha. A shimmer in the corner, a sign of a very distressed Assassin. Mordenna had found his mark. He grinned wolfishly. “*There you are.* No use hiding, sis. I can sit here alllllllll day and throw harsh truths at you, and they’re only gonna get *worse.* Might as well placate me by returning some ‘banter.’”

It was a moment more before Fal-Mai dropped her cloak entirely, staring him down and pressed as far into the corner as she could manage. Her face spoke of rage, but her body language said she wanted to be *anywhere* but here right now. “You act as if you know me at all, brother, when it is well known you only concern yourself with matters relating to you!”

He wagged his finger at her. “Almost! But a terrible misconception. Two out of five. Nothing wrong with focusing on yourself, dear sister—but there’s even *less* wrong with doing a bit of *observing* of others. Fantastic, the stuff you learn!” He turned up his nose at her, and his smile fell. “*So.* How’d it feel, getting the belt? Horrible? Like you were getting disintegrated? Can only imagine Helena whipped you in front of Jax, too.” Jax *also* being victim to that... twice... he
wouldn’t mention.

Fal-Mai winced, squeezing her eyes shut. Soon, she shook her head and looked him back in the eye. “You do naught but reaffirm why I made the decision to leave the Elders. I suppose I would have been more hesitant if I had remembered someone such as you would be awaiting me.”

He shrugged, hands out. “Your fault on that. I’ve been here for... what, a month? A month and then some? You’ve had plenty of time to know I was batting for the other team, numskull. Then again, you were always kinda slow on the uptake. Learning the Elders were hypocrites must’ve been a blow.” Mordenna tossed his head back, pressing the back of his hand to his forehead in mock woe. “Oh, the tragedy! The all-powerful idiots and psychopaths have conflicting ideas they want their ‘children’ to accomplish all at once! Who could have seen this coming?”

Fal-Mai grimaced and bared her teeth. “I was as you said—a child of the Elders.” Her brows knitted together in further fury. “And you, too, as much as you detest it!”

“Oh please, don’t come at me with the ‘oh, let Them back into your heart—’”

“Do not mishear me!” She cut across him. “You were a child of the Elders! They indoctrinated you as much as they did the rest of us! I would not imagine you would have many reasons to leap off a building were they not a damning force in your life!”

He froze, regarding her icily. She shouldn’t have known about that. She shouldn’t have known about it at all. Mordenna usually made sure he was isolated before he let himself die. Usually. It was a while before he responded. “You do realize the situation you’re in, right? You’re in handcuffs. I’m not. You’re bound. I could strangle the goddamn life out of you.”

She faltered, but a thorn in Mordenna’s heart told him she knew she had the advantage now. He reacted. Fal-Mai had hit upon something useable. “Worthless. Is that what you see yourself as, now? They had more of a grasp on you than you think. Odin had more of a grasp on you than you think. Try as you might, you are affected by what he says, brother.”

His upper lip drew back at the corner, revealing his own pearly whites. “You’ve got one more shot, sis.”

“What? Kill me as a tied up animal?” She spat out. “You and I both know you would find little satisfaction in such an easy kill. You live for each hunt. It is the only thing that gives you happiness, yes?”

Conflicting ideas raged in Mordenna, and he locked eyes with her proper. Kill her, something in him spoke. Her fault. She’s shown she hasn’t got two wits to live. You’d get rid of her for good and give Eliza a reason to throw you out.

Eliza.

Something in him, silenced in his self-destruction, roared at the thought of Eliza finding out he’d killed his sister. That would devastate her. Isn’t it the point? Kill. Kill. It would tear her apart. She wouldn’t be able to forgive him. Eliza, the one person who gave him a shot after all that time. Introduced him to Lily, to Sammy. Kill!

His fist collided with the wall, and he closed his eyes. Mordenna hissed. “You’re damn lucky, sis, that you’ve got a guardian angel. But I’ll come back for you. And when that comes around? I’ll have a bullet with your name on it and the key to your cuffs. Just so I don’t have to get my hands dirty.” Waving at her dismissively, he turned his back. “Go. Hide away in your little comfort zone.
But watch yourself—next time the door opens, it could be the last thing you see.”

All lame. All empty threats. He’s spared her and he knows she knows it. He doesn’t hear anything more out of Fal-Mai, and he doesn’t bother to check to see if she’s in her cloak when he opens the door and steps out.

What Mordenna doesn’t expect is Lily and the Commander coming in at the exact same moment he left the cell.

The two of them instantly lock eyes with him, and he’s the first to engage. “Liz! Lily! Oh, yeah, as it turns out? Didn’t need that help after all. Managed it myself! Surprising what you can finagle when you just really put the ol’ noggin to it!” Eliza wasn’t supposed to be here. Eliza was not supposed to be here! Did Lily run right to her when it turned out he wasn’t in the Workshop? Did she encounter her on the way? Didn’t matter now, really, but this wasn’t how it was supposed to go.

Eliza crossed her arms. “Mordenna. I made it clear you were supposed to tell me before you went and talked to Fal-Mai, yes?”

Any pretense of levity dropped, and he scoffed coldly. “What, do I gotta ask you permission to fuckin’ breathe around here, Eliza? I ain’t some dog—I’ve got free will. Or was how the Elders treated me suddenly looking real nice, hmm?”

Lily opened her mouth to interrupt, but Eliza was faster. “No. I only asked for you to ask me because if you went off on your own you might do something you’d regret.”

“Me? Regret?” Mordenna laughed incredulously. “Ohhh, Commander, you’ve got it all wrong. I told you—you’re the one who’s gonna be regretting this arrangement when all’s said and done. I let you know I couldn’t work with my siblings! But here you are, acting all peeved that I went and antagonized my sister a little behind your back. I coulda killed her, y’know. She had the cuffs on, wouldn’t have been hard for me to just *wring the life out of her.*”

Eliza fixed him with an unreadable stare. “So why didn’t you? She’s your sister, as you said. You gave off the impression that you would kill her, given half the chance. Yet, judging by what you’re saying, she’s still alive in there. You stand only to benefit from her not existing anymore—even if killing someone in her state isn’t your style.”

Why did Eliza ever so consistently have his number? He couldn’t admit the real reason, and that real reason was sapping some of his more barbed answers, too. Mordenna flicked his hand, dismissing it. “Whatever. Not like I can’t just do something later, because Lily knows I’ve proven I can stand right by her and have her walk past me.” At that, Lily seems rather confused, but still frustrated. He moves on. “So, what are you going to do, Commander? Punish me?”

She shakes her head, still maintaining eye contact with him. “No. The blame only falls on me for not talking with you more extensively than I did. It’s clearly a bigger problem that has you seeking out your sister to get yourself in trouble. Do you think I’m going to change my mind because you’re ‘proving difficult?’ Are you underestimating what I thought I had signed up for?”

This... all was having the precise *opposite* effect he had hoped for. Eliza was seemingly *more* determined to work him out. She was going to regret it. She definitely didn’t know what she was in for. “You’d best be prepared to work on a project like me 25/7, Eliza. Considering you’ve got the Assassin here and are planning to take the Warlock under your wing, too? I somehow doubt you can pull it off.”
Eliza’s mouth further pressed into a line. “I’m going to be doing what I can, Mordenna. I’m only human—”

*There it is. Capitalize on it. Make her regret this.* The words raced from his mind and to his mouth so fast he didn’t realize what he said until after he said it. “Only human? Bold of you to assume that when Argus had you for twenty years, Chosen Siren.”

Almost immediately, he wished he could have taken it back. His chest ached instantly and all he could do was watch Lily and Eliza’s faces turn. Lily went from momentary surprise, to morbid, horrified curiosity, then to anger as she looked to Mordenna. Eliza, meanwhile, had that temporary shock, too... which turned to an expression that was her trying to hide a distinct hurt and self-doubt.

“Does it matter?!” Lily was already hopping to Eliza’s defense, trying to brush off what Mordenna just said. “She’s got more than enough humanity to be a better person than you are—”

“Lily,” Eliza eked out. Lily stopped in her tracks, face going to concern as she turned back to Eliza. The Commander’s posture was stiff, and her fingers were pressing into her arms as her gaze flickered downwards, but still in Mordenna’s direction. “Mordenna. I... I won’t lie. What you said... cuts deep. But—But I’m sure that was your intention.”

Oh, no. This... wasn’t what he was ready for. Anger, definitely. Dry disappointment, he could handle. Eliza looking like she was ready to start crying, to his observant eyes? It felt like something was squeezing his chest, leaving it throbbing dully. A softer, quieter thought process came back. *You hurt her. Why would you do this? What has she done to deserve your ire? She just wanted to help you. Was her care and attention not enough?*

Too late to say he was sorry. Too late to try to take it back. He’d stuck his knife into Eliza and now she just had to deal with the wound he had dealt. He didn’t even want to continue the conversation, for fear of saying something else that would sting her. *Their eyes are off of you. You know what you can do.*

Mordenna sucked in a sharp breath and brought in his misdirection field—an unseeable force that quickly seeped into his pores and made it so that they would have the inclination to just not register him if they weren’t looking hard enough. True enough, Eliza seemed to gather herself enough to look back up to continue—and then she did a double-take, eyes searching around the room. Lily joined her, whirling behind her. To their eyes, he was as good as gone.

Mind running at a million miles an hour with unreadable thoughts, Mordenna hastily made for the vent, popped it open, and crawled inside, shutting the hatch behind him and making for some spot deeper inside the ship. He didn’t even care if they saw the entrance opening as he made his way in. He was gone, vanished from the scene, and that’s all he had been aiming for. He didn’t give his thoughts any attention as he scurried, movements near silent as he focused on moving unheard. Deeper. He needed somewhere isolated.

Eventually he reached that spot—a particular bend that led up to the very top of the Avenger. There, he slowed down and eventually slumped against a wall in the vent, starting at his own warped reflection in the ladder rungs.

He’d... out and out, to Eliza’s face, said she wasn’t human. Not fully, anyway. Judging by her reaction, that was something she was going to be wrestling with long after he said it. Why? Why did he have to come out and say that? He thought he had been ready for the repercussions of even hypothetically killing his sister. Hell, it was what he had been aiming for. But seeing Eliza like *that* made that horrid part of him that had *feelings* for her twist up and drive knives into his gut. *Why, why...*
“You know why,” he countered, voice dead. “To justify it. You know what I’m talking about. Why do you think you crawled to the vent leading up here specifically, huh Mordenna? You wanted a good reason. Can’t go throwing yourself off of tall buildings without some justification to it. You’ve proven you’re a walking thornbush when you get in a bad mood, and Eliza knows it now. Do you honestly think you could carve some life for yourself out in the woods were Eliza to throw you out? Pathetic. ”

He slammed the side of the vent in a short fit of frustration, but it died quickly. He knew the exact kind of mood he was in. It had a finality to it—right now, everything he said was just bluster up until he did the act. It was a weak performance on his part to vaguely entertain the fact that he might talk himself out of this.

He knew he wouldn’t. He never did.

Mordenna’s eyes locked onto the built-in rungs that led up to the exit hatch, right to the top of the ship. They were landed right now. He was sure they wouldn’t mind one more body to clean up—god knows they did it all the time. You’re leaving a body for Eliza to clean up, his mind spoke back. Do you really want to do that to her?

“If she’s really as observant as she’s proven herself to be,” he softly replied, “then she knows I’m a suicidal loser by now. Hell, I won’t do what she said I was doing and underestimate her. Maybe she was ready to clear out my dead body when she signed up for this. Maybe.”

“You don’t have to do this.”

The response came across his mind so fast he was almost surprised. He sighed.

“If you care so much, stop me. ”

No response. No messenger on high. Nobody stopping him. Mordenna leaned forward and gripped the rungs, pulling himself up.

One undone hatch later and he was on the top deck of the Avenger, up in the open air. Wind whirled around him at this height, and the air bit at his exposed fingers and face. Still not enough to stop him. Like a dead man walking, he slowly and painfully made his way to the edge of the ship, feet stopping and hanging over the side a bit. Wouldn’t take but a powerful wind to knock him over now.

His eyes stared at the ground below, far enough to be fatal for even a Chosen. Especially for him and his brittle nature. “That just makes it better, doesn’t it?” He spoke to the wind. “No chance of survival, no chance of having to awkwardly explain yourself in the Infirmary. Just you, a long walk, and a short cliff. You’ve always wanted this. A final death. So why are you hesitating? Just. Lean. Forward.”

But he didn’t. He continued to watch the swaying grass on the ground, fingers twitching occasionally out of nerves. He knew why. It was his final death. Every one before then had been nothing. A bit of wasted time, and that was is. This was the one that would truly end him. He’d get there eventually, he believed. Might as well take a moment to listen to the breeze, the whispering grass below, the frenzied thudding of footsteps behind him.

Wait.

There... There was someone up here. Running towards him. To push him over? No? He didn’t know. He had to see. Mordenna turned—
—and one of his feet didn’t quite connect to the Avenger.

He lurched backwards. Before the rapidly-ascending metal of the ship overtook his vision, he thought he saw a flash of dark brown.

Mordenna got another as Eliza dove over the edge of the ship and quickly caught up with him mid-air.

Her arms wrapped around his chest as the two of them tumbled in open air, sailing towards the ground fast. Why did she do that? Now there were going to be two dead people on the ground shortly, one vastly more important than the other. Eliza... had either guessed or been directed, and made her way to the roof. Judging by what she just did, she had wanted to probably pull him back, but this is where they both were. Sailing to certain death.

He was going to die. Eliza was going to die. Eliza didn’t freeze up at the edge. She... jumped after him. The wind pulled his hood off his head and he looked to Eliza, glued to his chest. No. He... he could give her a fighting chance. He might be able to save her, at least.

Mordenna’s own arms wrapped around her and he righted himself in his flight, making it so that he was the one with his back facing the ground. With the cushion of his body, she might yet live. Arms and a few other bones broken, but her chances were now far better.

Was this what he was going to do? Die in an unintentionally-successful suicide attempt while ensuring the safety of the Commander? It was his fault she was in this situation to begin with. If he’d just stayed, if he’d apologized, if he had sat it out...

Too late now. He saw the lower half of the Avenger pass him by and screwed his eyes shut, waiting for the sudden stop at the bottom.

To his credit, it came. Softly. Even with a little bounce.

Was this death? Would he open his eyes to see his own body with the possibly-dead Commander on top of him? There was only two possibilities—either he was dead and the afterlife was far weirder than he took it (or he was in Limbo)... or he was alive.

His first clue was when he realized he was still holding his breath. Mordenna gave a shuddering exhale. Ok, maybe alive? Maybe this was an afterlife where he was still aware of all of his necessary bodily functions. He needed more answers.

His second clue was when he opened his eyes and his vision was tinted light blue.

The Hunter was staring right up at the sky, the dark metal of the Avenger now a turquoise. He blinked. No change. His head rolled to the side. Grass for as far as his eyes could see, frozen dew clinging to the individual blades. Nearby, a spider was repairing its web, preparing to start anew in the hazy, overcast light. All through a filter of sapphire. He looked to his chest.

There was Eliza, hair floating like she was underwater, eyes tightly close as sweat beaded on her forehead. Where her form stopped, even more of the light blue coalesced, pulsing over her form. They both were on the ground, no worse for wear.

Eliza... Eliza had put a Stasis around them both. It explained why he wasn’t catching his breath, at least, and a hand flew to his throat. That was about when the Stasis wore off and he felt the grass for real against his coat and armor, the cold ground sending a reality-affirming shock into his spine. Perhaps what further grounded him into reality was the warmth of Eliza, on and around him.
He propped himself up on an arm, dumbly staring down at Eliza. Almost-invisible, light-blue, psionic wisps were floating off of her, and Mordenna now saw more than ever the signature that clung to her for dear life. *Psionics.* Eliza had psionics, and had saved them both. Did she know about them? Had she leapt over, intending to save him with them?

It didn’t matter, now. Eliza took in a gasp of air and breathed heavily for a bit, catching her breath. Once she did, she blinked a few times and angled her head upwards. She locked eyes with Mordenna... and her own started to glisten. “Are...” she began, “are y-you alright...?”

Only Eliza. Only Eliza would jump after him after he had *tripped* over the edge of the Avenger, tumble with him, and then save his life... and then try to ask if *he* was ok. Only her. *She saved your life, twice now. Look at her. She’s crying for you. Answer her.* He swallowed. No dry wit came to mind. His fingers began to shake. “... no. No, Eliza. I’m not ok. I-L...” No. Not like this. He forced down his emotions, but they swelled beyond his fingers. “I *wanted to die.*”

That response just brought tears to Eliza’s face, and she climbed up on him, now hugging him more properly. “I-I understand now. I’m—I’m s-sorry. I’m so sorry. I should h-have known.”

He didn’t know how to respond to that. He couldn’t. Even if she *should* have know, was it really on her to tail him everywhere on a suicide watch? He certainly wouldn’t have wanted it. “Why,” he started, softly, “why bother? Why jump after me?”

“*Because you’re worth it,*” she choked out, squeezing him. “B-because that isn’t h-how—how it should end for you. *Please,* Mordenna. I-I can’t let it end like that.”

She didn’t want him dying like that. Eliza had been willing to put her own life at risk just to save his. He further stared at her, the realization that she was hugging him sinking in properly. How many years had it been without contact like this? Longer than he could clearly remember, no doubt. Slowly, he slumped to the ground, mindful of Eliza’s arms... then wound his around her, returning the gesture. “You... you really care.”

“O-of course I do.”

He was silent a moment longer. Then, he closed his eyes. His face felt awfully hot. “I’m sorry. You don’t deserve someone like me.”

“Maybe...” She hiccuped, taking in a gasp and sounding like she was trying to get control of her voice. “But... but I chose this. I signed up for this. W-with all that entails. I don’t want to give up on you, Mordenna. Please, give me the chance to help.”

“And if I hurt you?”

“I hurt. It’s proof I’m alive. It’s... it’s not like it wouldn’t happen eventually.” She sniffed. “Best to get the healing done now...”

Eliza... thought so similarly to him, yet so differently at the same time. Whereas he saw the hurt as inevitable and thus he should eliminate the future hurt, Eliza also saw it as inevitable... and resolved to speed along the recovery for it. How could he cope with someone who would stick around after he’d done things that shoved everyone else away? *You know the answer to that. Stick around, yourself.*

He opened his eyes again, looking at Eliza. His chest still ached, but with her hugging him... it wasn’t so bad. It seemed to free his chest, almost. Maybe... maybe he could stick around for this. If not for anyone else, if not to kill the Elders, if not to off Odin? Then for what Eliza could do for
him. His thumb idly stroked against her back. “—Thank you. Didn’t have to go sailing over the Avenger for me, but... you did. I’m pretty sure it’s obvious, but that—that means a lot to me.” He took in a deep breath, then sighed it out. Now or never. “I’m sorry for what I said to you. I just wanted to say whatever would cut to make you realize I’m not worth it. Even if you’re not fully human... you’re human where it counts.”

Eliza shook her head, bringing it up from his chest. Tear tracks ran down her face, but she seemed to be over the worst of it. “It’s ok. I understand now. It hurt, yes, but I want you to be around so we can help each other through it. I don’t want you gone because you said that to me, or antagonized Fal-Mai. When I said I would help you and talk with you, I meant it.” She gave him another squeeze. “Even... if it’s the heavier stuff, like this. I want to prevent this. I want to stop you from ever being up there—or at the least, give you the tools and thought processes to talk yourself down.”

Mordenna regarded her a moment longer before nodding. “I... I owe you that much, at least. Just... sorry. And thanks. Can’t say either of those enough.”

The Commander nodded right back. The two shared a moment of silence, the underlying hush of the grass whipping against itself the only noise that came between them.

Soon, however, Mordenna was compelled to break it—and he was feeling good enough that his humor was returning. “Now. I’m off the edge, at least. We’re both safe. Should we skiddaddle soon so someone doesn’t take our positions out of context?”

That was enough to earn a tired laugh out of Eliza, and his heart lifted at the sound. “That might be wise. I...” She sobered back up quick. “I want to do some more talking. You, me, my Quarters?”

“Yes ma’am,” he readily agreed. The two untangled from each other and Eliza was the first to start walking, though making sure Mordenna was following behind her before she really started making her way to the open landing gear of the Avenger.

It was a fresh start, in a way. Maybe he could do things better this time around.
Forgiveness

Chapter Summary

Eliza and Mordenna talk about what’s happened, then Fal-Mai is confronted with new ideas.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: The beginning of this chapter deals with themes of abuse and the elements of suicide from last chapter. It is only talked about, not shown explicitly.

Out of all the things he had done in his life, Mordenna considered what just happened to be pretty up there.

What was the scale, though? Absurdness? Yeah, it was pretty astounding for Eliza to just pull off a dual Stasis like that, but Mordenna understood. Under stress, psions could pull off some very interesting tricks, even if they weren’t entirely aware of their Gift. So, how about regretfulness? Maybe, but then again... it had earned him the first hug he could remember in a long time. One you could’ve gotten at any time. Remember Eliza’s offer? Yeah, but. That would imply straight up asking and Mordenna can’t do that.

Tenderness. Mordenna settled on a scale of tenderness on the back of that. Which... was a scale mostly Eliza occupied. Damn. Maybe there was a bit of bias, there. It was looking like he was in for more entries, too, if this talk with Eliza was going to pan out well.

At the moment, he was just... numbly tracking along behind her. A lot better than he had been, just thirty minutes or so earlier, but he was avoiding eye contact with anyone they passed. Hopefully he didn’t have any grass stains on his back. The silence of the walk was still getting at him, and when they entered a relatively desolate hallway, he decided to spring a question that had been eating at him. “... Liz? How did you know I was up there?”

“Commander’s intuition,” was what she first fired back with, and Mordenna could sense the cop out in it. In a few moments, though, she sighed gently and responded. “Wiki. I... had her tail you. I’d seen your expression after you said that to me and could only wonder what you were going to do, considering questions you had asked me in the past.”

Of course. Leave it to the dimension-hopping spark to track a Hunter—and the Commander of XCOM to send her after him. He rubbed the back of his neck. If they hadn’t picked up Wiki in the field... Mordenna tried not to think about it, and moved on. “—Can’t imagine psionics on such short notice is doing favors for you.”

It was then that Mordenna actually picked up on the stiffness of Eliza’s neck and how she carried herself, like she was tensed. “Yeah. Dealing with a headache now. But I’ve had worse. The banger I had coming out of that twenty year sleep was one for a lifetime.”
“The Elders were never ones for friendly user design, huh?”

“Could say that again—the amount of times I’ve heard Lily bring that up...”

At that, Mordenna winced. He’d nearly forgotten he’d slung that barbed remark Eliza’s way with Lily right next to her. Or how he’d deceived Lily just to torment his sister. *Gotta start watching what you say, Mordenna. Sensitivity 101.* Hopefully Eliza might be able to help him along there.

Eventually, they made it back to her quarters. Eliza stepped in and took her usual spot at the couch. Though Mordenna knew the unspoken implication was to sit at his usual spot across from her... something in his heart guided him to walk past “his” couch and sit beside her. Eliza looked mildly surprised at the development, but a smile was quick to work its way onto her face. It didn’t last long—as she looked at him, her expression dropped. “Mordenna. Do you really feel like you have to prove you’re not worth it to me?”

Even despite what had happened, there was a part of Mordenna that was debating answering. Opening up about that and giving her the real reason would involve talking about Odin, and about what Odin had done outside of just lashing him. *But,* Mordenna reminded himself, *Eliza said she signed up for everything.* *Plus, she saved your life—probably twice now, considering you didn’t have much of a life with the Elders. Be forward with her you goddamn hooligan.*

After a bit of silence, Mordenna broke eye contact. “That’s... a rabbit hole, Eliza. One I’m about to get into, don’t worry, I’m just warning you about what you’re in for.”

Eliza reached out and put a hand on his shoulder, which made him feel a bit better. “If you tell me, it helps me to help you. Even if it’s a rabbit hole, I mean it when I said I signed up for everything.”

Mordenna nodded. “Right...” How to start this. His fingers nervously smoothed across the material of his pants. “—All starts when I got nabbed, really. I don’t even remember much of what Odin—the Elder responsible for me—did to me... just what I’ve got to deal with now. Sleeplessness. Occasional overstimulation. That’s not even going into my various personality defects. Bastard erased my memory, too. As much as he could of my former life, anyway.” Mordenna blew some air out of his nose. “Only that I was from the Reapers, a bit of how they work, and a few details about the more prominent members.”

“Explains your familiarity with them,” Eliza replied softly.

Mordenna squinted, focusing on nothing in particular as he moved on. “I’m sure you know this, but the Elders were never cut out to be parents. Odin treated me like I was a thing. Good for him when it was early on and I was obeying. Not so good for me when I cottoned on to the fact that my whole situation was fucked.” A memory surfaced and he balled his fists. “Y’never forget your first lashing, Eliza. Or how much regret comes after. They just... kept happening. Eventually... I just came to terms with the fact that I’d always be a disappointment. That I wasn’t worth shit but the processing power my brain offered and the pull of a trigger.”

“To him.”

Mordenna blinked, then took in a steady breath. “Yeah. To him.” He got the implication that Eliza was throwing at him. He felt her squeeze his shoulder and his face softened. “But I just got so used to it, Eliza. I mean, fuck Odin. When I get to him, I’ve got a case of bullets with his name on them. But...” If someone like Odin, the one he’d inadvertently imprinted on during those first few years, was insisting he was nothing? When he couldn’t find any other support around him for fifteen years? “... it just, made me think, Liz. What was the point. I mean, eventually ‘spite’ became my answer, but you’ve seen it’s a piss-poor motivation when my thinking just dips.”
The Commander nodded, and she leaned more towards him. “I’m sure you know this, Mordenna, but regularity does not constitute acceptability. Just because you became used to it doesn’t mean it’s what’s normal.”

“I know that,” he tiredly replied, “I’ve never thought for a second I ever deserved those lashings.”

“But other punishment was seen as acceptable?”

Mordenna shrugged. “There was no in-between. Either it was getting told off—something Odin did less and less as it was clear I didn’t give a shit—or it was the belt.”

He watched Eliza’s eyes soften. “Then why seek out punishment here?”

The Hunter was quiet for a moment. He closed his eyes, his response coming gently. “Because... because I was convinced I was going to fuck up the one good thing that had happened to me, and you were going to throw me out when it happened. I thought ‘why not get it done with sooner. Why not justify dying.’ But I...” He squeezed his eyes further shut. “I don’t want to lose this. I don’t but I fuckin’ resigned to the fact that it was inevitable. I knew I was going to hurt you. And that always brought out the belt before.” Only when he realized how much it hurt him to watch Eliza react like that was when his thought process was shaken.

“Mordenna...” Eliza seemed to be considering her words. “—do you want a hug before I continue?”

Well. To hear her just ask like that was... amusingly simple. He got the reason for it—he knew he reacted kinda weirdly to the first sign of physical contact, and it wasn’t like she could’ve asked about the last hug. Mordenna drummed his fingers on his thigh before nodding. Just like that, he felt the couch shift as Eliza moved closer, felt the pressure and warmth around him as she brought in her arms, felt that pleasant burning in his chest. Before he knew it, his hands were awkwardly feeling for her, and he was returning the embrace. Eliza continued. “Like I told you on the ground—hurt happens. People will say things they don’t mean because they’re angry. Preferably we try to avoid it, but sometimes you’ll say something you don’t even know will hurt someone else. It happens—and removing yourself permanently isn’t a way to help prevent future hurt. It’s just going to make that person ache whenever they think about what they could have done. The best solution is to stay and work out that pain.”

The best solution being to stay? Earlier he would have laughed. Why stay and help twist the knife in. Then again, if Mordenna had died and gone to hell... his circle was probably going to be agonizing over the fact that he called Eliza the Chosen Siren as his last words to her for all eternity. He could get what Eliza was saying. He was... starting to see how Eliza had rallied a resistance this long and this effectively. Probably helped twenty years before, too. He just... had to make sure it was absolutely clear. “So even if I say some nasty shit to you, because I’m frustrated or think I’m not worth it or what have you... you want me to stay. And talk it out.”

“Yes. Absolutely.” She took in a deep breath before she continued. “Because you deserve a second chance, Mordenna. And I’ve got an eye for people who are actually trying to turn themselves around, and you’re one of them. Whenever your bad mood strikes you, whenever you think that there’s no way you deserve a loving environment... come talk to me. I’ll set you straight. I may be busy sometimes, but I’ll always have the time for anyone who needs me. However long it takes, I’ll sit down with you and reassure you, and work with you, and do whatever I can to help you.”

Eliza was something. He relaxed and opened his eyes, looking down at Eliza. “Ok. I’m... I’m trusting you, Liz. I don’t want to lose what you gave me. I’ll try my best to work with you—and I
mean it, this time. It’s just hard to get my brain to work with me sometimes.”

“I understand. Fifteen years with the Elders... couldn’t have done the best for your psyche.”

Something occurred to him and it took a bit of wind out of his sails. “—You’ve got five years up on me, Liz.”

“And?” She looked up at him seriously. “The fact that either of us spent even a year with them is the tragedy. Just because I’ve suffered for longer doesn’t invalidate the suffering you went through. Don’t shove yourself to the side.” She patted his back. “I’m here because I want to focus on you and help you as much as I can.”

Wasn’t that the truth. Mordenna leaned against Eliza, thinking a moment more. “… to answer your question straightforward-like, Eliza? Because, through a long history of physical and emotional fuckery, Odin made me think I wasn’t worth shit outside of him. If I wasn’t his son, who was I.”

He sighed, then took in a calming breath. “I know now he was just saying that shit because he wanted to keep what control over me he could. But it happened, Lizzie.”

“Yes. Yes it did. And it sucks.”

To hear such genuine sympathy out of Eliza like that... yeah. It was pretty cathartic. The situation he had been in was fucked up and Odin was a lying bastard. “It fucking sucked, Eliza. Get your facts straight.”

The bit of humor wasn’t lost on Eliza, and she offered him a smile. “Alright. It fucking sucked. But you’re out of it now, and we can help you heal. You can vent, you can ask for advice, you can mess up and not have the hammer come down on you. I want you to know that. And maybe, just maybe, you can patch things up with your siblings.”

Mordenna raised his eyebrows at that. “Woah, Eliza, I know you’re a miracle worker but I think that might be beyond even you. Maybe Jax and Fal-Mai can bury the hatchet, but they’ve both got firm reasons to hate my guts.”

“Firm reasons brought around by the Elders, mind you.”

His mouth pressed into a line. Truth be told... what would it even be like, to have proper siblings in Fal-Mai and Jax? To have an older brother who wasn’t feuding with him? To have a younger sister he could actually navigate a conversation with?

Oh, yeah. Him and Fal-Mai’s little “conversation.” The line of his mouth tugged into an uncertain frown. “... I should probably tell Fal-Mai I’m sorry, right? Is that a good first step?”

Eliza nodded. “A very good first step. Apologizing—whether she accepts it or not—does send a message if you mean it and want to take steps to make sure you avoid doing it again in the future. Do you feel up to doing that right now, or do you want to talk a bit more?”

He considered it as he re-adjusted his grip on Eliza. He’d gotten to why he was acting the way he did, and outside of just yelling about Odin for an hour and a half? He’d said what he wanted to say... but he didn’t exactly want to stop hugging Eliza. Great. Hello, desperate feelings. Thought maybe you’d crawl off and die eventually, yet here you are. Eliza probably won’t let us carry her there and probably won’t ever look at us like that. Just let it go. She cares, but not like that.

Slowly, Mordenna withdrew his arms. “Yeah. Think I can stand getting punched in the face by my sister. And before you say she’s in cuffs; trust me. She’ll find a way.”
Eliza chuckled and put a hand on his chest. “Hey, I’ll be there to moderate.” With that, she also disengaged from him and got up. “—And, Mordenna? Thank you. For letting me talk with you. I care about you a lot, and I want to see you live. Not just survive. I think you deserve it.”

Those feelings of his twisted in circles and made him smile involuntarily. “Appreciate it, Liz. I’d like to live it up a little, myself. Speaking of which, after we talk to Fals... you, me, and an amount of alcohol Bradford would disapprove of?”

The Commander straight up laughed, shaking her head. “Rain check? I’ve been trying to keep away from the hard stuff ever since I made Bradford stop drinking. Best on the both of us.”

Mordenna shrugged, getting up after her. “Fine by me—probably best Bradford doesn’t give himself stress-magnified cirrosis.”

“Is that care for Bradford I hear?”

“Pfft, you wish, Lizzie.”

Fal-Mai would have never guessed she would be feeling regret over her brother.

She’d thought that the way she had retaliated was so cut and dry. He cut to her core, she aimed for his. He had clearly entered her cell in order to antagonize her and thus, he had gotten what he had wished for.

But that link... Despair. Hopelessness. The feeling as if she would never do anything right. *Panic.* Then the wisps of regret that quickly morphed into something more of her own. That cycle was recognizable to her by now. How she had known that Mordenna had leapt off a building once... well, morbid curiosity and pattern recognition. But, did she cause it this time? Was he alright? Was she caring?

It wasn’t that she didn’t care for Mordenna. He just frustrated her and it seemed as if he was set in his ways—something very much confirmed by his interaction with her and what she had heard outside of the bounds of her cell. It was hard to think that he would ever change if those were his actions. Fal-Mai had given up ever trying to change him herself; she merely resolved to become stronger for whenever he came to antagonize. Though, it was always hard to keep a stony face when she felt that despair set in...

The soft reverberation of footsteps outside of her cell didn’t escape her. They sounded somewhat familiar at this point—but Mordenna’s threat rang in her ears. Standing up, she cloaked and pressed herself against the wall.

Of course, when the figure beyond was none other than the Commander, she quickly dropped her cloak. Eliza looked... tired. Her hair was slightly out of place and her eyes looked a bit blotchy; outside of that, Eliza seemed the same as ever, carrying herself well. She looked to Fal-Mai and smiled. “Good to see you as always, Fal-Mai.”

Fal-Mai nodded. “A pleasure, Commander.” Even still, Mordenna’s words rang in the back of her mind. *Chosen Siren.* She blinked a few times and a concern came to her. “... my brother did not harm you extensively, did he?”
Eliza shook her head, standing up straighter. “Not at all. We talked things out, and you’d be surprised how effective that is if you do it right.”

“With my brother?” Fal-Mai responded incredulously. “I have tried, Eliza. He only seeks his own entertainment and amusement. Finding himself in trouble is but a game.”

Eliza’s face did set a bit at that. “You’ve... got the wrong end of the stick there, Fal-Mai. If finding himself in trouble earned that psionic punishment, do you think he intended it?”

Suppressing a shudder at the memory, Fal-Mai’s eyes flickered downwards. Admittedly, the Elders’ form of punishment had not been... pleasant. Ever since she had been at the brute end of it, she had wondered just why Mordenna acted as he did if that was what awaited him. Upon further meditation, Fal-Mai wondered if it was the Elders who were looking for the excuse, not Mordenna. “… and you were able to talk to him?”

Eliza’s face softened at Fal-Mai backing down. “Yes. Long story short, Fal-Mai, Mordenna wants to do better by everyone. And he wants to start by apologizing to you.”

For all of her supernatural hearing, Fal-Mai had to take a few seconds to make sure she wasn’t mishearing Eliza. Mordenna wanted to apologize? What reality was this, where the Elders had turned and the Chosen Hunter wanted to make amends? Some part of her wondered if it was something Eliza had put him up to. “You’re... serious.”

“Absolutely.”

“He wants to say sorry. And mean it.”

“That’s the case, yes. I’m going to be in the room while he does it so the two of you won’t have to worry about being alone with the other.”

Reasonable, but was Eliza ready to play mediator between two Chosen, should it escalate to that? Then again, Fal-Mai... did hold respect for Eliza, and part of that respect was not underestimating her. Her eyes looked to the closed door, and she took in a breath. There was a part of her that spoke to reject Eliza. Surely she would respect her decision, but... the knowledge that she may have been the catalyst for Mordenna’s most recent episode? Though he had wronged her, guilt festered in her gut. “As long as you remain here...”

The Commander nodded, tapping the pad on the inside of the cell. From there, she leaned outside of the door and motioned for someone to step in—it being made clear shortly that it was Mordenna she was motioning to. Admittedly, Fal-Mai would never have expected awkwardness to be something she ever saw out of the Hunter. Maybe this wasn’t some twisted dream.

Still, neither of them moved to engage. Mordenna was looking everywhere but at her, drumming his fingers on his thigh. She was staring him down, wondering if she should make the first move. Thankfully, Eliza cut through it. “Mordenna. I hate to interrupt, but you did come here to say something.”

“Riiiiight,” he replied. Eliza seemed to ease him up a little—but did Fal-Mai’s ears deceive her, or did his heart race just a little? Mordenna, being nervous? This day was full of firsts and oddities. “Alright. Yeah.” He clapped his hands together, rubbing them and finally managing to look at some spot just above Fal-Mai’s head. “Sis? I know you probably won’t accept hearing this out of me, but? Me, coming into your cell unannounced and saying what I did to you... not cool. I’m... sorry.”
Fal-Mai regarded him calmly for a second, before her gaze slid over to Eliza. “And how is the weather outside, Commander?” She saw Mordenna’s face twist a bit in her peripheral vision before she continued. “Is blood raining from the sky, or however it went in old world stories? This... is an interesting day.”

She looked back to Mordenna, and he was back to only mild nervousness. He must’ve not been expecting humor out of herself... and perhaps he was justified in that department. “Nah. We were just out there earlier, sis. Maybe a bit cold, but nothing to write home about.”

“We? Did Eliza have some hand in whatever had happened to Mordenna? It was anyone’s guess at this rate. Still, Fal-Mai knew she would have to deign him with some sort of response for this to go over well. “—Your attempts at civility are not lost on me, Mordenna. You will have to excuse the fact that I am incredulous at you apologizing and meaning it, and not as one of your flippant remarks.” She closed her eyes. “... I do not excuse what you have said, no matter your mood. You attacked me from a personal place, as was your intention at the time.”

Judging by the gentle shifting of Eliza’s hair, she was looking at Mordenna. Fal-Mai wondered if he had indulged just what he had said to her... no matter. She could always tell Eliza herself later. The Assassin continued. “Nevertheless... if you are being truthful, and if Eliza vouches for your attempts at reform...” She opened her eyes, looking to him. “I accept your apology. I do not forgive you, do not mistake this. But I will acknowledge and receive your ‘sorry.’ But.” Her gaze hardened. “This comes with the stipulation that you will do everything in your power to prevent it from happening again.”

Mordenna made some gesture over his chest that ended up with him holding up three fingers together. “Scout’s honor, Fals. But, more seriously? Yeah. I’ll try.” That done, he looked to Eliza. “Now, I know my sis, and she probably doesn’t want me in an enclosed space with her for long, even if you’re here to make sure we don’t kill each other. Probably in good interest if I bounce now.”

Eliza, nodded, looking to the Assassin. “Do you have anything else to say?”

Fal-Mai shook her head. “He is my brother, and does know me some measure of well. If he is done apologizing, I would prefer to talk to him sometime else, in a much more open space.”

“Crackerjack!” Mordenna said some strange things. Eliza opened the door for him as he made to leave. “Fal-Mai? See you sometime else, preferably when we’re not going for each other’s throats.” After that, he ducked out of the door and moved out of sight.

That left her and Eliza. The Commander was quick to break the silence between the two of them. “Fal-Mai? How are you otherwise?”

Fal-Mai felt some tension go out of her shoulders as the door closed. “—I did not think my brother would ever apologize to me and mean it, Commander. Either of them, for that manner.” The animosity she held towards Jax was... lesser, but still there. “I am hopeful, but doubtful all at the same time. He has been abrasive for as long as I have existed, and many years before that. If he is able to turn himself around after fifteen years... then, suffice to say, I will work with him.”

Eliza’s smile seemed to set off that burning in Fal-Mai’s heart, and she cherished it. She did not know what the feeling was, but it was pleasant. “Thank you. For accepting his apology and expressing some interest in working with him. I can usually get a good read on people, Fal-Mai, and Mordenna does want to work on himself. I won’t lie, it will be difficult, and certainly not an overnight thing. But, as I will support him... I’ll support you, too.”
More of this fire in her chest. Fal-Mai found herself with a sliver of a smile on her face. “I appreciate the gesture, Commander.” Still, Fal-Mai understood that Eliza was probably going to ask about something else, as well. “As for my joining... a day or so more. Mordenna has set me back a bit, but I believe I will come to my ultimate decision in a short time.” Fal-Mai was very heavily leaning towards joining XCOM, but there was something in the way, she felt. She needed to ruminating on what.

Nodding, Eliza’s thumb ran over the remote in her hand. “Understandable. That was all I had for you today—have anything to say before I leave?” When Fal-Mai shook her head, she opened the door. “Have a good night, Fal-Mai. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

With that, Eliza stepped out the door. Though, she didn’t get far after it closed behind her. Her footsteps stopped immediately as another pair approached her. Fal-Mai focused her hearing, catching on to the conversation.

“—was wondering if I could visit Assassin Neylor.” That... that was Samhien. The Skirmisher she had captured... and the one who had started her on her line of questioning and thinking towards XCOM and Eliza. More importantly, he wanted to visit her after what she had put him through?

“Well, I’d have to see if it was alright with her,” Eliza replied. “... is that tea?”

“Yes! I... have a vague hunch that Chosen do not require food, nor drink, but I would imagine something palatable to her tastes would brighten her a bit in her captivity.”

The alto of Eliza’s chuckle was nearly just a hum through the wall. “Sammy, you’re a real work of art. You do know she’s going to have to have her cuffs off to enjoy that though, right?”

There was a quick pause of silence, presumably Samhien nodding based on what he said next. “As I know. I trust the Assassin to not harm me in this kind of situation. Despite her known animosity towards Skirmishers, when presented the opportunity to cloak and flee you presented by not watching the door, she remained in her cell.”

“Good observation. Well, alright. I’ll still be outside of the door in case something happens, but I’ll check with Fal-Mai first.” After that, the door opened. Samhien was indeed behind the door, holding a tray with two mugs, filled with something hot judging by the steam. Eliza leaned in. “Hey, Fal-Mai? Sammy here wants to talk to you and share some tea. He’s going to uncuff you so you can drink it. Is this alright?”

Fal-Mai had been half-tempted to interrupt with “as I know” as Eliza was talking... but that would give away the fact that she could hear beyond her cell. The Assassin decided to keep that fact close to her chest. As for Samhien... she was not afraid of being alone with him, but he still unnerved her somewhat. Perhaps due to the way Helena had brought her into this world. Still, she nodded. “Very well.”

Sammy offered her a warm smile and stepped in, Eliza placing the remote on his tray as he did. When the door closed behind him, he balanced the tray on one hand and took the remote with the other. “It is good to see you again, Assassin Neylor. Though our circumstances are curiously reversed, I just want to chat and make you feel at home on the Avenger.”

Fal-Mai looked down at him benignly, trying to gauge just how truthful he was being. Surely that remote had other functions, too. Would he use those? “If I were any more cynical, I would accuse you of gloating.”

He shook his head. “Nothing of the sort, I assure you. In a way, I would also like to apologize. But,
first.” Sammy felt out for a button on the remote and pressed it. Fal-Mai could feel her cuffs loosen
to the point that they slid off of her wrists and clattered to the ground—same with her shackles. Just
for a moment, the thought of springing on Sammy came to mind... but she hardly entertained it.
She would not throw Eliza’s trust in her face. Instead, she rubbed her wrists, then slowly took one
of the offered mugs and sat down as Samhien did.

She got caught up on something he said, a finger testing the hot ceramic of the mug. The scent that
wafted up from it was... pleasant. She might have to try some when it cooled. “Apologize? I would
believe I am the one who has committed wrongs in this room. What would you have to apologize
for?”

Sammy took a gentle sip of his own mug before replying. “For antagonizing you while I was
captured. What I said clearly caused you distress, yet I had pressed on anyways and ‘earned’ a
dagger to my hand.” That made Fal-Mai’s eyes flicker to that hand. The wound was starting to scar
up. Goodness knows how long he’d have that for...

Fal-Mai shook her head, taking her focus away from the wound she had dealt. “The facts you had
faced me with were simple truths that I was still not keen to accept. Though it irritated me at the
time, what you were saying needed to be heard.”

“I will still contest my delivery. I... could have been more calm about stating what I did.”

Lidding her eyes, Fal-Mai let the matter drop. Surely it was understandable for him to have said
things the way he did thanks to her own actions. She suspected she would be arguing with him for
a long time if she kept insisting he had no error. Indeed, a part of her reminded herself that she was
arguing that a Skirmisher had done nothing wrong... but it was becoming increasingly apparent to
her that her and the Skirmishers’ crimes were one in the same—they dared think for themselves.
Though her being reeled at it, maybe she shared more with them than she thought.

Sammy sighed, tapping his mug. “With that in mind... I’d like to assist you now, Fal-Mai. More
than me forcefully presenting you truths. I would like to come at things with a gentler hand.”

Fal-Mai still found herself rejecting what he was proposing. As much as she was sure he wanted to
do good by her, she just... didn’t trust him. Half of it was still her ingrained hatred for him and his
kind, the other half was that situation he’d like to help her with was very personal. She’d only trust
someone like Eliza. Probably just Eliza. Fal-Mai thought about giving him a half-hearted answer.
He can see through your lies. It would be best to tell him the truth.

Fal-Mai straightened. “I will have to reject your offer, Samhien. Perhaps later, when things are not
as... muddied, between us, I will give it some thought again.”

She expected some kind of resistance out of Samhien out of that, but he merely nodded.
“Understood, Assassin Neylor. Do you at least have someone to confide in?”

Hm. To tell him, or not... Fal-Mai took this chance to take a taste of her tea. Herbal. A little bit
sweet. Could be sweeter, in her opinion, but it was welcome. Still hot, though. She’d take measured
drinks, and the time to taste it gave her time to arrive at her answer. “Yes.” That would be all that
she would offer him.

Sammy seemed... unsatisfied by the answer, but he did not press on it. She wasn’t lying, at least—
she considered Eliza a potential confidant. “Ok. Friends, then?”

She blinked. “You. Would want to be friends with me. ”
Sammy smiled warmly. “The reasons why not are outweighed by the reasons as to why. If you have someone to confide in, you should have someone you can relax and talk with normally, as well. Hobbies, philosophy, chit-chat, there is much to be shared without having to divulge feelings more personal to you. Friends are good to have, Fal-Mai.”

Friends. Eliza had said she would want her as a friend, if the Assassin allowed it. Fal-Mai had to consider the thought for a moment. She did not trust Samhien as a confidant... but perhaps she could give him the chance to be trusted as a friend. She took a measured drink of her tea before she replied. “I believe that could be done. I do not know much of what it’s like to be someone’s ‘friend,’ so you will have to bear that in mind.”

Chuckling, Sammy shook his head. “There is always time to learn, Fal-Mai, and you have so much time to do it with! I’m sure you’ll know how to be a great friend, given the chance. You just need the chance to do so.”

Chances. Second chances, at that. Fal-Mai had already failed with the Elders. Something in her seethed about her lowering the bar for herself, but she reminded herself that the standards of Helena were realized as being too high to meet. A second chance did sound nice. “I suppose I should count myself lucky that you and Eliza are patient, then.” Eliza was more than patient, of course. Kind. Understanding. Thoughtful. Thinking about her made Fal-Mai’s chest roll in that pleasant way. She looked to Samhien... and was taken aback by his curious expression. Of course. He could still read her emotions, and Fal-Mai felt as if he was going to question just what she was feeling. Or maybe he knew what she was feeling and that it was bad in some way. Instantly, Fal-Mai felt herself get guarded, trying to shoo away the feeling. “—If one aspect of being friends is respecting the other, would you respect my want for you to leave at any time?”

Sammy seemed to catch what he did, and he had the decency to look flustered. “O-of course!” She hadn’t thought that she would dismiss him so soon, but that seed of doubt had taken root in her stomach and seemed to battle with the feeling in her chest. Ultimately the doubt won out and she drank as much of her tea as she could manage to staunch it. “Then I would kindly ask you to leave now. I fear I am a ‘broken record.’” A phrase she remembered Mordenna using, “but I want to meditate in peace. If I decide to join XCOM, we may talk more of my own accord.” She sat her nearly-finished mug down on the tray. “... and thank you for the tea. It... could be sweeter, I think.”

Sammy nodded, putting his own mug down and setting the tray aside. “I’ll have to remember that. Now, um... I think they would want you to have your cuffs back on before I leave.”

Ah, right. Fal-Mai had almost gotten used to having her arms free. “Understandable. Allow me to stretch for a moment and I will put them back on myself.” Fal-Mai stood up and rolled her shoulders, flexing and bending a few joints that had become a bit stiff from the cuffs. Afterwards, she re-attached her shackles, then finagled the cuffs behind her back even as Sammy seemed to want to offer his help. She could do it on her own, and soon she was back to her bound state.

Sammy put the remote on the tray and picked the whole thing up. “Fal-Mai, it has been good chatting with you, and I am glad that you enjoyed the tea. Hopefully we may talk again soon.” With that, he balanced the tray to open the door, stepping out. Eliza’s arm came into view as she plucked the remote off of the plate and stepped in.

When the door closed behind her, she began to talk. “Everything go alright, Fal-Mai?” Fal-Mai nodded, though her insides were busy twisting up. How fortunate that Samhien wasn’t there to reap what he had sown. “It seems you are not the only person who wishes to be my
friend.”

That earned a giggle out of Eliza, a sound that just made the battle inside her worse. “Hey, that might speak to a larger trend. Only one way to find out, yeah?” Eliza looked to the pad in the room, then to Fal-Mai’s arms. “... y’know, since you swung being uncuffed with a Skirmisher in the room for as long as you did... I think I can give you access to something we wouldn’t have trusted Mordenna with.” Eliza then proceeded to tap through options on the datapad, editing quite a bit from the looks of it. When she was done, there seemed to be one less option on the screen.

“Not being able to trust the Hunter with something? How ever could you say that, Commander?”

Another laugh out of Eliza. “I think you’re picking up humor pretty fast, Fal-Mai. Keep up the good work.” She waved that line of thought off and gestured to Fal-Mai. “What I’m going to do is adjust your handcuffs to be in front of you. This is to let you interact with the pad on the wall over here. You... can’t do much with it for safety’s sake, but what you can do is hit a panic button... and hail for me. Just to make it easier for you to contact me when you do come to a decision.”

Eliza was placing more trust in her from the sounds of it. Perhaps it wasn’t unfounded, but she continued to fascinate. “So you are going to allow the Elders’ Assassin to be in a room with you, unbound, even for such a short amount of time?”

Eliza nodded. “You said it yourself. You’ve got too much honor to attack me like this. I’ve proven able to best you, even if it was by proxy and when you weren’t exactly giving your all. Would be kind of dirty to attack me now, yes?”

She had remembered Fal-Mai’s words. The Assassin looked to the side for a second. “It... would. I will not attack you, Eliza.”

“Alright. Just give me a second here.” Eliza pressed the same button on the remote, and Fal-Mai caught her cuffs before they could fall. After a heavy moment, where her chest suggested she do something her gut disagreed with, she handed Eliza the cuffs, pausing a moment to redo her own shackles. Holding out her hands, Eliza redid her bonds gently. Through the material of her gloves, Fal-Mai could feel the relative coolness of Eliza’s hands compared to her elevated body heat.

“There we are. You be sure to contact me if you need anything, alright?”

“She understood, Eliza.”

Eliza nodded, turning to leave. “Have a good night... again, Fal-Mai.”

“Have a pleasant evening, Commander.”
Belongings

Chapter Summary

The Assassin joins XCOM.

There were only so many times Fal-Mai could count to ten to stall.

Everytime she started counting again, she promised herself that once she hit ten, she’d contact the Commander. She was sure that, as she was counting, she would get up and hit that pad, hailing Eliza. Then she hit ten, her will wavered, and she started again. This time would be the one, Fal-Mai assured herself.

One. Fal-Mai knew what was holding her back now. She had taken the time to think over it, and she now knew why she was still hesitating to join XCOM. It was her Ascension Facility.

Two. It was simple, yes? It could be her first mission—join with XCOM, topple her facility, rid them of one of the last vestiges of her creation. Then she would be free. Then there would be no more monuments to what Helena had done.

Three. She knew her Stronghold would still stand. Perhaps that was another mission she could request—but a building as large as that... might take some more time. Later. It was not as emblematic of her.

Four. The less ADVENT had of her, the better. She had resolved herself. Eliza’s words, Helena’s actions, her own feelings; everything wrapped into a will to change, to lash out against what had been forced upon her.

Five. To strike against the Elders themselves would be the greatest blow of all. Perhaps there could have been things she could have done better. Fal-Mai had considered it for a long time, and came to the conclusion that her observation of their hypocrisy was right. Mordenna was right.

Six. Mordenna. Yes, he had apologized. Yes, Eliza had vouched for his want to change. Yes, there was a part of Fal-Mai that wanted to see him become far less abrasive. But, if she were to cooperate with XCOM, he would be there.

Seven. What of her downtime, as well? Trying to find a life on a ship where one member hadn’t hesitated to kill her in the past, a host of soldiers who would probably still see her as an enemy, and a singular woman who stood for her.

Eight. Eliza could not be everywhere, and Eliza could not tend to Fal-Mai all the time. Not that the Assassin would wish for that—but there would be times she would want to talk and Eliza would be unavailable. What then? Samhien might be a wise ear, but...

Nine. What would she do, if presented with Helena herself? She knew of the Avatars. Even if the Elders were being set back in their goals, what if Helena appeared on the field astride one? Would Fal-Mai be able to kill her? Could Fal-Mai raise a blade against her, essentially her own mother?

Fal-Mai stalled. Her mind wouldn’t shift to ten. To try again, and fail? To suffer the consequences? You are not dealing with the Elders anymore. Eliza’s standards are not theirs. Yes, but even so...
Fal-Mai was certain she would fail eventually, and then how would Eliza see her? But... Mordenna seemed to have “failed,” if him barging into her cell was any indication. He seemed more skittish of his own accord when he was brought back—plus, he apologized. She was sure he would rather die than do that under the Elders.

Maybe things could be different. She still didn’t want to fail... but maybe she didn’t have to. Eliza’s standards were not theirs... hopefully. She could only wonder and guess, but there was one way to find out. It wasn’t like she was going to be doing anything else if she refused the offer.

Fal-Mai took in a deep breath. “Ten.” She then stood up, walked over to the pad and crouched down to access it. There were some options in a list: open door, hail Commander, and SOS. Fal-Mai was pretty sure that opening the door would require a fingerprint or some other form of ID in order to make it work, so she dashed trying it. With a moment’s hesitation, she reached up and pressed the button to contact Eliza. The screen shifted to a spinning symbol, then to “Commander Contacted.” All she could do was wait, now.

So back she went, standing up and going to lean against the opposite wall. It was... a few minutes, by her own probably inaccurate guessing, but she heard Eliza’s footsteps outside of the door. Fal-Mai kept her cloak down as the door slid open. Eliza smiled at her. “Sorry for the wait. What’s going on, Fal-Mai?”

Fal-Mai found herself carefully considering her words, but eventually she pieced together just what she wanted to say. “Commander. I have come to my decision. I believe my best place in this life, in this moment... would be to join up with your forces. But,” she was quick to say, before Eliza could get anything in edgewise, “I do not come without conditions. I have one or two stipulations that I must address before you can truly consider me to be allied with you.”

Eliza looked pretty pleased, even if Fal-Mai had stated that she had some conditions. “Well, let me hear them so I can decide.”

Fal-Mai nodded, mostly to herself. “My main wish is that we are to embark on a mission as soon as is reasonable, Commander. There exists a facility that was used to create me—my Ascension Facility, if I recall correctly. I want my first mission to be to take it out. Then, after that is done... you may consider me ‘part of the team.’”

Eliza mulled that over a bit, but ended up nodding in turn. “Honestly? That sounds like a plan. I can’t say we’ll be able to go immediately, but within a few day’s time we can start making the trip. Still doing some scanning in the area, but after that? Absolutely.”

There it was. Eliza had agreed to her plan. Fal-Mai straightened. “Then do we have a deal?”

“Just a second,” Eliza held up a hand, “I have some things I want to clear with you, too. Standard procedure.” She paused. “As... standard as ‘second time, ever” gets.” The Commander cleared her throat. “Firstly, and it probably goes without saying, just try to be on your best behavior. You don’t have to be buddies with everyone, of course, but just don’t be abrasive or hostile.”

“You will find me far more agreeable than my brothers in that regard,” Fal-Mai replied, “though I am glad you do not expect me to be friends with everyone.”

“Friends are good, but I understand if you’re not keen to jump into the idea at the deep end.”

Gradually, Fal-Mai would approach the idea. Eliza and Samhien would be it for now. “Your other terms, Commander?”
“Right. Secondly, once I have Jax, I’ll be swinging him to our side the best I can—but I figure you’ve already gathered that.”

Fal-Mai lidded her eyes. “You have a daunting prospect ahead of you, Eliza. Jax idolizes and deifies the Elders far more than Mordenna and I ever did. I respected them; he worships them.”

Eliza’s smile fell in favor of a bit more seriousness. “I’ll do as I always do, Fal-Mai—I’ll try. Not much in this life has been easy for me, and few worthwhile things are. If it’s hard, I’ll get through it. But he needs to be given the chance, just as you two have.”

Fal-Mai lapsed into silence at that. Truth be told, she was unsure if Eliza would succeed there. Capturing Jax? She would say Eliza had a sporting chance, at the very least. Convincing him to go against his beliefs in the Elders? Easier said than done, went the phrase, and Fal-Mai agreed with it. Having nothing more to say to it, she moved on. “Anything else?"

“Lastly... if you need someone to talk to, someone to confide in, or just a shoulder to cry on... I’m here.” She tapped an area just behind her ear. “You’ll be given a communicator that can access a general channel on the Avenger, and I’m going to ask Lily what she can do regarding a direct link to my own comms. Like I’ve said before—I don’t want you to fear for questions. I also don’t want for you to fear for speaking your mind.”

Fal-Mai could hear shadows of her own words in what Eliza said, but something occurred to her. She considered not asking, but judging on what Eliza just said... “What of your soldiers, Eliza? Who may they turn to?”

Eliza smiled gently. “The roundabout concern is noted. But, as for that? Leo styles himself a therapist of sorts, though I think many agree he’s outclassed by Samhien. I’m extending what I am to you because I’ve got a touch more understanding about what’s going on... and you may not necessarily trust either of them enough to relate your worries.”

With that question handled, Fal-Mai returned to what Eliza offered. A “shoulder to cry on?” Fal-Mai did not fancy herself crying anytime soon, but she supposed it was another metaphor. Eliza was about the only person she trusted enough to get into what had happened to her, even if that trust wasn’t much in her eyes. She would remember that for the future. The Assassin looked into Eliza’s eyes, searching for something. Somehow, the act made her chest burn... “Those are reasonable terms, Commander. I am at an agreement if you are.”

“As am I. Let’s get you out of those, then!” With that, Eliza pressed that familiar button on the remote, and Fal-Mai’s bonds fell away. Stepping out of her shackles, she rolled her shoulders. The freedom of movement was much appreciated. “Your weapons are down in the Workshop. I think I recall Lily having a question or two about your blade.”

“I would be willing to answer,” Fal-Mai replied, “depending on the question.” Fal-Mai looked towards the door... but it pretty quickly occurred to her that she would have no idea where she was going. Yes, she had been aware for the whole time they had been bringing her in, but it had slipped her mind to memorize the route they took her down. “...would you guide me there?”

“Of course!” Eliza tapped the “open door” button and turned around as it confirmed something. “Right this way. Leave the cuffs, I’ll have an engineer come back for them later.” Eliza walked out the door, and Fal-Mai followed, ducking under it.

As they left, Fal-Mai took the opportunity to look back. The last time she had been through here, the third cell in the line looked like it still needed some work... but now it appeared completely finished. The whole room did, as a matter of fact, and there seemed to be fine outlines in the
ceiling, like plates would slide back and reveal some backup measure. Fal-Mai hoped that they wouldn’t need them against her brother.

Eliza set the remote down in a drawer on a table at the far end of the room, and made to walk outside. Something seemed to occur to her though, as she turned back to talk as she walked. “Ah, yeah. Would you be partial to having your own space? Mordenna told me he can’t sleep, but I’m unsure if that also extended to you. We’ve got a few rooms that are largely storage, but off enough on the power grid that we can’t use them for anything major. Could clear one out, if you liked—the barracks are a little full, as is.”

Fal-Mai considered the proposition for a moment. “I have no need for sleep, Commander, and I am unsure if I could if I wanted to.” Fal-Mai had been tired enough to feel like she could sleep before, but had never tried. Maybe there had been a time or two before in meditation... “—But I will not turn down such an offer.”

“Grand! We’ll see what we can do about that in the coming week or so.” She turned back to the path ahead, keeping a good stride. Even so, Fal-Mai found herself having to slow down if she wanted to stay behind the Commander. Couldn’t be helped, she supposed.

There was a bit or so of silence, but Eliza was quick to fill it. “So, this Ascension Facility. Is there any part of it that we should be warned of that you know of?”

Fal-Mai shook her head. “It has been over a year since I was there. Whatever details were there at the time are likely to have been changed.”

She could hear Eliza mutter “a year” under her breath with consideration. “—You didn’t appear until last year, if I recall correctly. Do you remember anything of your former life?”

Fal-Mai blinked. The question seemed outlandish to her... until she remembered that the Elders had chose humans for her brothers. She was made by design. Eliza seemed to be operating under the assumption that the process was the same for her as it was the same for her brothers. “Unless this is a metaphysical discussion, Commander, I have no past life to speak of. I was made as you see me now.”

That spurred Eliza into a silent pause. “What you’re telling me is that you’re a year old.”

“As it is, yes.”

Eliza shook her head. “I thought the Skirmishers were bad enough, running around as seven year olds in Samhien’s case... Fully formed and fully matured, huh? Like a modern day Athena.”

Athena. That name seemed familiar. Perhaps Jax had spoken of it in passing, or one of his Priests was named it. He seemed to have a curious fascination with all things mythological. Still, her curiosity ate at her. “Athena...?”

“Ah, right, you probably wouldn’t know. Humans used to, long ago—and probably still now in some places—believe in a lot of gods. One particular group, the Greeks, believed in a lot of them. Athena was a goddess representing wisdom, military strategy, justice... a lot of things. What I was referring to was that she was ‘born’ fully formed from her father’s head. He was fine afterwards, of course. That’s basically the short of it.”

Fal-Mai blinked. “Humans... come up with some very interesting concepts.”

“Hey, allegedly a whole city got named after her because she granted it an olive tree. We make some pretty interesting stories.” Eliza was quiet for a second. “Made, anyhow. Wonder what will
“come about when we make it out of this.”

“You say that as if you winning the war is a certainty.”

Eliza looked back and flashed Fal-Mai a smile. “If I don’t believe it, who will?”

The Commander was very certain of herself, that was true. It almost inspired optimism in Fal-Mai as well—she could easily see why humans would want to rally behind her. Fal-Mai inclined her head to her. “Well spoken, Commander.”

Eliza chuckled, turning back ahead. She turned down a hallway and eventually ended up at a slightly strange, almost reinforced-looking door. Eliza tapped the pad on the side. “Welcome to the Workshop, Fal-Mai. Watch your head.”

The door opened and Eliza slipped on in, Fal-Mai following close behind. A workshop was definitely what she would call this area, with a few workbenches set up with one of them having a few unknown devices on it. Compartments and more unknown machinery lined the walls, with tethered-down crates just beyond the stations. In the middle of the work area, Lily Shen and Mordenna were present, with SYN seemingly shut off and being worked on, chassis open and a device out on a table. Mordenna was working on SYN, Lily was working on the device.

A twinge of regret was all she got to process before Mordenna and Lily looked up. Mordenna was the first to speak. “Commander! And... sister!”

Fal-Mai regarded him. “Brother.”

The exchange was followed by a period of silence. Fal-Mai had expected her brother to be quick to fill it—but his eyes flickered to the side as if he was wondering how to begin. Eventually he found what he was looking for and began. “Well! You’re here and without your cuffs, I see. Finally batting for XCOM?”

“As I am,” she softly replied. “I believe it is the best way for me to go in the light of everything I have learned. It is... certainly the most convenient option to strike at the Elders with.”

Mordenna chuckled, gesturing at her with a tool. “What, staking out a life of your own not quite meet the cut?”

Fal-Mai tipped her head up a bit at him. “You would know best why I would prefer the support of XCOM.”

His joking face fell. “Yeah, yeah, I was an ass. Still am, probably, but trying to work on that.” Oh, he... hadn’t gotten what she had meant. She looked to Eliza, then back to him.

“Brother... I had meant our mutual experiences with the Elders, and with regards to the fact that we would want as much help as possible in eradicating them.” She offered him a hint of a smile in apology. “Though, your statement still does stand.”

He blinked, as if processing that. Then he gave a chuckle. “Well, alright! Hush my mouth I suppose.”

“Oh,” Lily interjected, “now you’re going to do that yourself? Finally.”

“Hey!” He pointed the tool at her—it looked like a needle with a thick handle that had a cord that ran to another machine. He’d been applying it to SYN’s chassis, it seemed. “You love every goddamn second of my banter and you know it.”
Lily blew air out of her nose incredulously. “You make some strange assumptions, Mordenna. Don’t think I’ll ever make heads or tails of them.”

“You’re just angry because I cracked the security on your workstation.”

“Are you expecting me not to be?”

Eliza cleared her throat, stopping the two of them up. “As glad as I am to see you two have worked out... most of your differences, we’ve got a purpose to being down here. Lily? Where are Fal-Mai’s weapons currently being kept?”

Lily gave an “ah,” pointing at a locker against the wall. “In there. I figured Fal-Mai wouldn’t want Mordenna messing with them, so I locked them up best I could.”

“Please,” Mordenna waved it off. “If I wanted in there, I would have done it faster than you could blink. You think I don’t know how to lockpick? You wound me, Shen.” Getting a touch more serious, he gestured to his sister. “Besides. I may be an idiot but I’m not a dumbass. Don’t wanna fuck with her stuff and get myself killed over it.”

For one with as strong a deathwish as he had, Fal-Mai found that initially hard to believe. Maybe he just wanted it to be on his own terms... she didn’t think on it long, as she shook her head. “I will concede that much. Lily? Where is the key?”

“Hold on,” she said, ducking over to one of the tables and checking through the drawers. “Unless Mordenna’s gone and put it somewhere else, it should be right... here.” As she said that, she stood up, clutching a key. She tossed it to Fal-Mai, and the Assassin smoothly caught it.

“I do not foresee a need for my weapons at the moment...” Fal-Mai squinted at his brother. “Optimistically, at least. But having my key personally will be nice.”

“All else fails,” Eliza chimed in, “there’s the Armory. We’ve got lockers in there, too. I can only trust that you won’t need to worry about the lock being picked?”

By the way she phrased it, it was most definitely aimed at Mordenna. He held both hands up in a pacifying gesture. “Hey. If I wanted to mess with them, new strategy is to ask, right? Which, by the way...” He looked back over to his sister. “I built that shotgun of yours a long time ago. A year? Goddamn. I think I’ve got at least three different ways to improve it, if you’d let me get my hands on it.”

Fal-Mai didn’t hesitate in shaking her head. “I will have to refuse. Not that I wouldn’t welcome improvements to my arsenal, but...” There was the whole matter of trust, and as much as she was going to try to give him a second chance? Not her weapons, not so soon. “Perhaps after a few missions, when I am convinced I might need the upgrades.”

“Right, right...” Mordenna looked defeated and perhaps a touch annoyed at that, but he didn’t say much else.

Lily was the one who picked up the slack after that. “Alright, backtrack me here. You made her shotgun too, Mordenna?”

Mordenna perked right back up at the question. “Sure did! Jax’s rifle, too, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen him use the poor thing. The Heretic Eradication Rifle’s just going to waste like that.” He scoffed. “Renamed it the Disruption Rifle, too. Stuffy bastard.”

Seeming to ignore the rest of his tangent, Lily pressed on. “You make her sword, too?”
“That? Nah. Just the dagger in the hilt. Elders handed off the sword to her, I’m pretty sure.”

Fal-Mai nodded, casting another glance over to her weapons locker. Maybe... she could just carry the blade on her. She meant no offence to Eliza and her crew. Perhaps just some offence to Mordenna. “Indeed. A sword of astral metal, unbreakable by any means. Psionically conductive, as well.”

“Unbreakable?” Lily sounded disbelieving. “I’d pay money to test it out, considering I’m sure compounds like that don’t even exist.”

“Oh, they very much do,” Mordenna countered. “My brother’s gauntlets are made of the stuff. If he got crushed by a Sectopod, all that would be left of him would be the damn things.” Though, it seemed something came to mind for him, as he scowled. “Figures I could never get my hands on the stuff. I just know there’s a cache or two of that shit here on Earth but god knows the Elders would never let me get my hands on it.”

As the two of them started to talk to each other, Fal-Mai slowly began her walk over to her locker. She’d decided—she would be taking the blade with her. Arashi could stay, she would reclaim it when she needed it. But the blade was something of a comfort item. It was essentially an extension of Fal-Mai herself, and she was able to move it as if it were another limb she had from birth. Almost as close to her as her shroud. Almost.

“If I didn’t know any better,” Eliza added, “the Elders kind of sound like dickheads.”

Fal-Mai crouched down and sought out the lock, inserting the key after a failed attempt and turning it. The locker clicked open and out swung the door, revealing her weapons inside. Her throwing daggers were there as well—that had been a somewhat awkward disarming by Mox, and the experience really hadn’t endeared her to him. After a moment of consideration, she slotted them into her belt. Better safe than sorry.

“The Elders are bastards!” Mordenna stated resolutely. “Never let that leave your mind, Lizzie. I’m sure it never will, but everyone’s gotta know. I will not rest until the tiniest songbird knows that the Elders can blow it out their asses.”

Taking her sword out and holstering it on her back, Fal-Mai stood up and rejoined the group. Not before locking up her locker again, of course, stashing the key on her person for good measure.

“You certainly have grown more... colorful in your vocabulary, brother.”

He shrugged. “Just part of the liberation, dear sis. You think the Elders like swearing?”

Fal-Mai understood the implication there. It was likely that it was one of the things the Elders used as a flimsy excuse to lecture him with. Still, there was something else that was on her mind. She turned her head to Eliza. “Commander? How soon do you think you will be able to undertake my mission?”

“Let’s see...” Eliza tapped her chin. “If you want ’as soon as possible,’ I’m predicting about four to five days. I feel like we’re close to finding out the source of that transmission in this area. After that, it would just be the flight time needed to wherever your facility is.”

“He shrunked. “Just part of the liberation, dear sis. You think the Elders like swearing?”

Fal-Mai understood the implication there. It was likely that it was one of the things the Elders used as a flimsy excuse to lecture him with. Still, there was something else that was on her mind. She turned her head to Eliza. “Commander? How soon do you think you will be able to undertake my mission?”

“Hold the phone.” Mordenna pointed his tool between the two of them. “Fal-Mai gets to send you on missions right out of the doghouse? This is an injustice, Commander, and quite frankly I won’t stand for it.”

Eliza smirked for a moment, but it was gone quickly. “—Fal-Mai, may I enlighten him?”
She considered that for a moment. To let Mordenna know... this was supposed to be a very personal undertaking for her. Yes, she could accept the company of whoever else Eliza sent with her on the mission, but Mordenna? To her Ascension Facility? She would rather that not be the case. “… With the concession that I would prefer it if he does not come with, for reasons I hope he will glean from your debriefing.”

The Commander nodded. “Mordenna, it’s her Ascension Facility. She wants it gone—and besides, best we get the files out of there, anyhow. If we can even just inconvenience the Elders, I’ll take the chance to do so. You can understand why she doesn’t want you in on that, right?”

Mordenna was quiet, but to his credit, he didn’t look slighted. Merely contemplative, and after a bit he slowly nodded. “… Yeah, I understand that. Got SYN to fix up anyways, right Lily?”

“Yes. Nearly done restructuring his core, but probably not in time for that mission, sadly. There’s… a few other tweaks I wanted to make to his systems to prevent too much data loss in the future.”

Fal-Mai lidded her eyes. Again, the regret surfaced, and she felt compelled to say what she was about to. “—I am… sorry, that I destroyed your companion. From the way I have observed him in the field to your squad’s mourning…” There had been a lot of hushed whispers during her extraction, and even some silent moments where most of the squad spent some of their time regarding SYN’s body. From the way they acted… it seemed Fal-Mai had taken someone cherished. “He appeared to be important to you all. Though I may have had my reasons, I do not excuse my actions.”

Lily’s face softened. “I don’t think you should be apologizing to me, but thank you. I get that you might’ve needed to put up some kind of fight with the Elders breathing down your neck. Someone you should be apologizing to is Rosa.”

At that, Mordenna winced. “Yikes. Right. Think I owe her an apology too. Lest we forget I shot out SYN’s leg and taunted whatever relationship the two had going between them.”

A… relationship. The SPARK was in a relationship? Maybe with another AI, Fal-Mai could get more to grips with. But with a human soldier? It was almost surreal to hear. Though, the absurdity of it was outweighed by the realization that it meant that Fal-Mai had taken away someone’s partner. Her heart further ached. “Where… where could I find this ‘Rosa?’”

“The Commons, mostly,” Eliza replied softly. “Or you could catch her down here, watching over SYN. He’ll be back, don’t worry. From the sounds of it, Lily has him on the verge of being up again. Just make sure you do get your apology in—the both of you. Letting things like that sit isn’t healthy to anyone involved.”

“Thanks, Dr. O’Leary,” Mordenna muttered, lacking his usual joking air despite his statement.

That left Fal-Mai with not much else to do, other than explore this new environment. Taking in a gentle breath, she nodded to Eliza. “If that is all, I will be taking the time to familiarize myself with the Avenger.”

“Understood.” Eliza gestured to Lily. “Lily? We have any spare communicators?”

Lily eyed Fal-Mai a bit. “… considering how Fal-Mai’s hearing works? I’d probably need to make one custom for her. Don’t want to blow her ears out trying to communicate with her, of course. Won’t take long at all.”
That... was some pleasant consideration on the Chief Engineer’s part. Fal-Mai would’ve likely caught it herself, eventually. She hoped. But to have it caught this early on was nice. Eliza seemed to think the same—she offered Lily a warm smile. “Good thinking, Shen. Fal-Mai? I’ll have the communicator put on the table in the Chosen Holding Cells. I figure you know where that is, and it’s easier than trying to seek you out in your cloak. When we get your room situation sorted, I’ll contact you through them.”

Finding it agreeable, Fal-Mai nodded. “Understood, Commander. I will await them.”

With that, she let her cloak slip around her, and she departed the Workshop. There was much to explore.
Imperfection

Chapter Summary

XCOM and the Assassin siege her Ascension Facility.

The trek to her facility was long, but Fal-Mai had traversed greater distances before.

Fal-Mai was a fair distance ahead of the group Eliza had assigned her. She was initially worried at first—Eliza had sent two of the troops that had been witness to her destroying SYN with her. Banel and Edgar, to be precise. Maybe the inclusion of Samhien was to counterbalance that. The other SPARK, Julian, certainly wasn’t one she had seen often, but she felt responsible for his presence. Finally, she knew much of the sniper at the back—Fal-Mai remembered quite a few of Moody’s attempted flirtations on the field. She hoped he’d keep that down.

The Assassin was actually keeping her cloak down for now. It had been discussed in the group that she was to remain visible until potential contact, and then keep in touch via communicator from there. Said device was as comfortably placed in her ear as she could manage—even then, she was ever conscious of the low static it gave off. Lily had made her efforts in reducing it, but Fal-Mai had learned there were no truly silent devices, especially so close to her eardrum. It was... ignorable, but an auditory reminder of who her allies were.

Besides, her concentration was far greater than to be disrupted by what amounted to white noise. She scanned over it, picking out the dry crunching of the grass in the cold air. Four sets of feet, one set of servos... and tens of scrabbling claws as the beat of wings against air occasionally sounded out. Edgar’s ravens were out in full force, some going even farther than she was. The fact that such a psion existed at all drove her to wonder what else could be out there. As it stood, the Raven King had certainly earned his title.

Thankfully, she hadn’t had to tell the squad behind her to keep their voices down. About the only disruptive person she had to deal with was Julian—and she was quickly memorizing how his mechanics sounded. ADVENT MECs sounded subtly different from SPARKS, and now she knew what to listen for. She kept her profile low on approach, eyes forward as they moved through underbrush.

Over the din of shifting foliage and raven croaks, a more distinctly industrial sound started to hit her ears. She held up a hand as she halted, hearing the advance behind her stop. Fal-Mai cocked her head as she listened in. ADVENT transport. Four... no, five sets of tread. Less and less as time went on. More deep, but reverberating humming. Fal-Mai had heard enough. “ADVENT dropship up ahead. Transporting at least five troops away.”

“There’s a ‘raid’ on an ADVENT station going on not far from here that the resistance has covered,” Bradford said, filtering in over her comms. “It’s a diversion. Good thing they bought it.”

“Which means less of ADVENT’s goons to fire at us,” Julian concluded. “The incompetence they show never ceases to amaze.”

Fal-Mai squinted. There could still be security up ahead, enough to reasonably cover her facility.
She would still be cautious. “Best to advance.”

Menace One-Five, thankfully, seemed to get the message. She resumed her stalk, mindful of her team behind her and the ravens around her. The thicket of trees was beginning to thin, and Fal-Mai could catch glimpses of gray between green. The facility was within sight. Fal-Mai found her pace speeding up despite herself. It was nearly time; nearly time to demolish the one remnant she could destroy of her creation within ADVENT. If she was to be allied with XCOM, she would not let the Elders possess so much of her.

The cover of trees broke, and Fal-Mai found herself staring down her Ascension Facility. It loomed in the clearing of the forest, far from the public eye, almost hiding itself. A strange ache went through her at the sight of it, but she didn’t focus on the feeling long. Her eyes went to work scanning the security detail.

Edgar had her covered, however. “Four turrets, each on one of the corners of the building. There’s an Andromedon working its way inside. Four Troopers, and one of the ravens is sure it spotted an Officer in the facility itself.”

If that was what all the security detail was, Fal-Mai felt as if they weren’t even bothering to keep her “cradle” safe. Biting back a scowl, she glanced to her team, then looked back ahead. Their loss. Easy or difficult, she would destroy this monument to what Helena made. “I would like to scout around the building,” she murmured, “and observe any potential blind spots. I may look in, of course.”

There was a general chorus of affirmations from the squad, and Fal-Mai let her shroud overtake her being. The white noise in her ear didn’t cease—perhaps that was one thing her cloak did not mask. Noting that for the future, she advanced silently, feet guiding her around the facility. As she passed the windows, she peered in. Sure enough, one of them revealed an Officer and a Sectoid, but outside of the already accounted-for security? That seemed to be it. Minimal, but still present. “I can confirm the Officer, and there is a Sectoid with it.”

“Noted.” That was Banel. “Anything else?”

“I will keep looking.”

Fal-Mai stalked away from the window, now on the opposite side of the facility. A watchtower stood, seemingly vacant... but Fal-Mai looked in to make sure. Empty. She checked around the other side of it, and it too was barren.

She was halfway through walking back around when ear-splitting psionics rang through the air.

Fal-Mai stumbled despite herself and steadied against the side of the tower, hands over her ears. She recognized this sound—but being outside of it and hearing it was a vastly different experience to being ferried through the Void. A Chosen was being brought in, and considering who remained...

Having squeezed her eyes shut, Fal-Mai lifted her head, praying her cover wasn’t blown. Thankfully, Jax had warped in with his back to—

Wait. What was wrong with his armor?

From Fal-Mai’s angle, the back of Jax’s armor looked like it had been nearly destroyed. Partially melted, it was as if someone had forced him against a pyre. But, no man-made flame on Earth could warp the metal of their armor as such. From the way the damage seemed to blossom out...
and how there seemed to be several smaller damaged spots...

A fire to match the heat that branded Jax burned in Fal-Mai’s gut. She knew he had been punished, but that? That was a mark of far too much strength used even for a “disciplinary” action. Fal-Mai could only wonder as to how much force the Elders used in their punishment of him. Her back ached simply thinking of it.

After a moment of taking in a breath, Jax advanced. She knew she couldn’t let him reach her squad, or her facility. Dropping her cloak, she stood up on her own and molded her face into a calm mask. “Brother.”

Jax wheeled around, catching sight of her. His face went through a range of emotions at once, finally settling on a hesitant one. “—Sister. You... you are here.”

“As I am.” She crossed her arms, levelling an even gaze at him. “Do you seek to defend this facility?”

Jax’s hands tightened into fists. “It would be low of me to not put in at least the same effort I saw to put into defending our brother’s cradle. I figured XCOM would be moving on either of ours soon enough—and the raid nearby was simply too convenient.”

To his credit, Jax was not dull. At the very least, he could see a pattern when it was forming. Still, the thought that he wanted to defend it on some misguided sense of... familial bond? What did he seek to do? “Why? I can assure you that I do not come here today alone, and assuredly you must know why.”

The Warlock’s face twitched at that, and he gave a half-hearted scowl. “You... you would also debase yourself in joining with this foolish resistance? I knew Mordenna would be easily swayed, but you? I had higher hopes, sister...”

“You have not answered my question,” she stated firmly. “My reasons for joining XCOM are sound. Believe me—I had also thought what they did to Mordenna to be foul play. But, I have had time to think. The Elders are not what they want us to believe they are, brother. If you say you have higher expectations for me...” Her gaze turned hard. “And if you are capable of picking out a pattern... do you not think this odd?”

Jax shook his head. As angry or even disappointed as he seemed... there was something else beneath it. His heart was racing and his breathing was a bit uneven—and there was a certain roughness to it that was not there before. “XCOM and its wayward Commander has deluded you, twisted your mind into believing that these are your own thoughts. Tell me your reasons, Fal-Mai. I contest the very fact that your reasoning could be sound.”

Fal-Mai spread her arms out. “Because what Helena had imposed upon me was hypocritical. A good parent would not leave their child fearing for their life at punishment, would they? When have the Elders ever been emotionally invested within our health? Physical, yes. But everything else? Do you not think there must be a reason Mordenna is the way he is?” She gestured to him. “I felt what you felt, brother! I have seen the back of your armor. Does that strike you as something a caring parent does?”

At her last point, something in Jax shifted. His eyes widened and he turned to the side, clutching his forehead. As his breathing sped up, feelings began to ghost at the back of her mind. Terror. Agony. Hopelessness. “N-no. They are j-justified, Fal-Mai! I failed Them. They—”

“We were angry and wanted someone to lash out at, brother!” Mordenna’s words once again ran
across her mind, and this time she fully understood. Seeing Jax devolve into such a state like this only reaffirmed the truth in them. The Warlock was not meant to be an anxious, fearful being. Not in any right world. He was not meant to parrot the very same excuses she found herself running to in his situation. “Please, Jax. Don’t you see what they’re doing to you?”

Jax squeezed his eyes shut, and the ghosts of memories got stronger. “—d-don’t... sister—” He took in a sharp breath. When he started again, his voice was low and tremoring. “They mean well. They love us, Fal-Mai.”

“Is ‘love’ supposed to hurt?”

Jax didn’t answer. A second gauntlet joined in an effort to hide his face, palms pressed to his eyes. At this point, Jax was almost hyperventilating, and Fal-Mai was finding it harder to keep the memories out of her own head. She walked forward, deathly silent. She hadn’t meant to do this to him. Just to try and make him see a bit of reason... but it was clear that wasn’t going to happen unless it was a better space than this, and with him being away from the Elders. “Just... leave, brother. I want to destroy this place. I want the last monument to Helena’s hurtful ‘love’ to fall. We don’t have to fight.”

At this range, Fal-Mai could almost hear the churning storm of Jax’s psionics. “C-Cronus... He could be watching... I-I don’t want Him to see...”

She closed her eyes, trying to stem off a particularly powerful memory. Cronus had seen his tears. Cronus had punished him. The fire in Fal-Mai’s stomach burned brighter, and she took her dagger out of its sheath. “It’s ok,” she whispered softly, “I’ll send you back. Just don’t move; we’ll be coming for you soon.”

Jax tensed up at hearing it... but he didn’t try to move away, or even lift his hands to see what she was doing. She would make it painless. Flipping the dagger in her hand to reverse-grip it, she raised her arm and brought it plunging down, sinking into the base of Jax’s neck.

It was instant. The memories stopped, and Jax fell to the floor, motionless. Mere seconds later, he was whisked away in an ear-ringing column of psionics, leaving only the orange of his blood on her blade. Fal-Mai was left alone again... and the encroaching quiet reminded her of the white noise in her earpiece. XCOM had been privy to the whole conversation. She stalled where she was at, motionless. Then, she felt her mouth move. “Warlock down,” she intoned.

Eliza’s voice was soft. “Good work, Fal-Mai. Rejoin your squad.”

Fal-Mai’s eyes fell shut, and she brought her cloak in around her again. In the wake of the encounter... Fal-Mai was realizing how much the fire inside her hurt her. Jax was trapped with the Elders, unable to escape his fate. His only hope lay with XCOM, and Fal-Mai saw that clearly now. There was nothing he could do, and Fal-Mai related heavily to his helplessness. We’ll be coming for you soon.

Her chest ached, and her thoughts went to Eliza. A “shoulder to cry on.” Perhaps she would be seeking that out soon. Shelving the thought for later, she cleaned his blood off the best she could and sheathed her dagger, stalking back to the facility. Eyes moving upwards, she spoke into the comms channel again. “Menace, are you close?”

“As close as it gets without knocking on the front door,” Edgar replied. “Those turrets are keeping us back.”

“I intend to deal with them.” She would still fulfill her duty today, the turbulence of feelings inside
her be damned. “I shall handle the closest set to you all first.” She hadn’t the foggiest about how the turrets were put together... but her blade was sharp and her aim keen. Cutting them apart should make them stop working; she’d then just need to work through the ensuing mag fire.

Silent as the grave, Fal-Mai took a running start, making a bounding leap and grabbing onto the guardrails of the roof. From there, she pulled herself up and transferred the momentum into a roll forwards, righting herself in time with the unsheathing of her sword. As her blade raced forward, the veil of her shroud peeled back, and she found only mild resistance as she cut the turret cleanly. The priming of chambers and smooth grind of metal around her told of her assumptions being correct. Fal-Mai ducked and strafed with her body close to the ground, narrowly avoiding gunfire. Their positions were fixed—making it trivial to weave around the bursts of mag shots. An upwards cut disabled the second turret overlooking Menace’s approach, and she heard the scrambling of footsteps below. Assuredly others had heard the turrets go off, but she would leave that skirmish to them at the moment. More fluid movement brought the Assassin to the other turrets, and two swipes more meant the security detail on the roof was neutralized.

Efficient. Deadly. Graceful. It did not matter for which side she fought. The Assassin was meant to be perfection in every movement. Meant to be. The knowledge of the facility below her could turn everything upside down. What if she learned something that would make her want to go back to the Elders? What would Eliza say then? Surely she would have no place for her own defectors—and it would be easy to guess what the Elders’ response would be. It didn’t matter. Fal-Mai just wished that fact could make it to her gut.

Working through her thoughts, Fal-Mai turned to the battle below. Two Troopers had already been shot down, and the rest of the guard were fighting tooth and nail against XCOM. Her eyes scanned to the Sectoid. Many a time, she had been witness to their potential deadliness on the battlefield, how they twisted the minds of the resistance and offered a chance to fire upon those they called allies. Not here, not today.

As easily as she breathed, Fal-Mai slipped back into her cloak, blade out as she vaulted over the side of the roof. With a roll on the ground, she sprang from her position, her cover flying back as she sent the tip of her sword into the Sectoid’s chest. The second it was clear she had hit home, she spared no time to savor the kill. There was no joy to be found in it, after all, and she pulled back from victim and sight. Already she could see the rest of the security detail reacting to what they just saw—the Officer looked distinctly unsettled and the Troopers nervous.

No time to be spared. Sliding into low cover, Fal-Mai considered her next target. The Troopers were speed bumps. The Officer could be dealt with later. The Andromedon? That would be her next course of attack—so long as she could handle it carefully. There needn’t be much said of their toxic backlash.

As more plasma fire erupted from her squad, Fal-Mai was quick to call out her move into comms. Almost as she said it, she surged forwards, ducking under one of the suit’s arms and plunging the blade through its side and to the rider. As she withdrew her blade, she spun around to its back and kicked it forwards, shattering the containment suit’s glass against the ground and the acid with it. She could assume that someone in the squad would deal with its backup system—an assumption made rightly, as Julian fired into its downed form.

Slipping back into the shadows, the din of battle was proving distracting. The screaming of plasma through the air, the cycling of gun chambers, the priming of mechanisms, the callouts of the squad, the white noise in her ear...

All too much. Fal-Mai was attentive but not omniscient. The only sign she got of the grenade was it
hitting the ground—then, the ensuing blast.

She could feel a white hot pain overtake her left side as she distinctly felt shards of shrapnel bury itself into her—stopped from going too far by her armor, thankfully. Less thankfully, and more painful, was the ringing that overtook her ears and sent a splitting migraine across her consciousness. Fal-Mai felt a scream rip through her throat and her shroud vanished. She was exposed. The Officer had a good shot. Fal-Mai was sure there was a kill order on the Network with her name on it.

The distinctive crack of a plasma lance rang through the air, and the only other thing that accompanied the silence afterwards was the thudding of a body against the ground. Ears still ringing, Fal-Mai looked around. All of the resistance against them were felled—including the Officer that had thrown what should have been a life-ending grenade. Looking back, the acrid smell of plasma hung in the air as Moody’s rifle cooled down. He lowered his gun, eyes trained on her. “You alright there, love? That sounded like it hurt.”

“Sorry about that,” Banel said, gun still raised and pointed towards the facility. “Had a good shot on ‘em but miscounted my ammo.”

“Ah, good old Baal. He’s got a big gun but he—”

“Menace, please, observe the facility ahead.” Samhien cut across them, stepping over barriers and rubble towards Fal-Mai. “I’ll tend to the Assassin. Secure the area, double-check for stragglers. I’ll catch up shortly.”

Even for someone of his personality, it was clear to see that Sammy hailed from ADVENT in certain situations. Summarily ordered, the rest of the squad moved forward. Edgar was already reporting that the ravens weren’t picking up anyone else around, but Fal-Mai was more focused on the Skirmisher coming towards her. From a bag on his hip, he was producing a number of tools as he approached. “Assassin Neylor, please sit down with your side exposed. I am aware of your heightened regeneration—but we cannot let any shrapnel remain.”

Pain still coursing through her nerves, Fal-Mai complied and leaned against one of the barriers, doing her best to lean away from her injuries. As the crouched down, he adroitly handled his tools. “I understand you are in pain, and I am here to help. I must ask some questions before I work. Would you like localized anesthetic, and where did you feel the foreign bodies enter?”

Though Fal-Mai had never been alive to witness ADVENT Medics in action, she could only imagine that was a practiced opening ingrained into their genetics. Sucking in a breath, she responded. “Yes. Five of varying sizes into my side, two into my thigh.” She counted herself very lucky that anything else either missed her or got stopped by her armor. If that blast had been any closer...

Producing a syringe, a bottle, and a wipe in short order, Samhien prepared his needle and injected Fal-Mai. The pinch was nothing compared to what she had felt before—but the coolness of the liquid certainly caught her off guard. It was quick, and Fal-Mai could feel her side going blissfully numb. Not her thigh—but she could grit her teeth for that part. “Alright. You’ve been numbed up. The agent is quick-acting but does not last as long as a normal numbing solution. Please remain calm and allow me to do my work as quickly and safely as possible.”

With that, Samhein went to work at an impressive speed, working his tools and extracting the shrapnel from Fal-Mai’s side. Though she felt nothing, it was still somewhat unnerving to watch him take out everything. She averted her eyes, looking to the facility. Menace One-Five had already entered, and over comms it was confirmed they were doing a check of the place. Things
were coming up empty, and Julian was commenting on an exposed access point.

A sharp sting of pain in her leg brought her back and she hissed, causing Sammy to stop up. “Should I inject at your leg, as well?”

“No,” she was quick to shoot back, “I would not waste more of your resources on temporary pain. Keep going.”

Samhien nodded quickly, though she could practically sense his concern through his helmet as he went back to work. It stung far more without the numbness, but Sammy was swift and spared no time for nerves. Soon, every piece of shrapnel was collected in a bag and put into his pouch with the rest of his tools. His hand went to the medkit on his other side, but he stopped up. “As I am aware of your regeneration... do you want me to apply the medkit to you?”

She shook her head, moving to stand. It would take longer—and she was not Jax—but her wounds would close. “Save it for one who needs it. If it is a problem, I can be tended to back on the ship.” Her eyes slid back to her facility. “There are more important things to be handled.”

“Nothing is more important than your health, Fal-Mai. Physical, mental, and emotional.”

Fal-Mai closed her eyes, letting his words sink in for a moment. Her physical health, she needed to consider a lot more nowadays. This wasn’t a time where she could shrug off her injuries and rely on a Sarcophagus to bring her back. Her mental and emotional health... had she ever cared for those during her time at ADVENT? It was easy to say “no” to that. She had told Jax no, after all. Opening her eyes, she started to gently walk forwards. “Then let this facility be key to my mental and emotional health... friend.”

Once she heard Samhien following behind her, she sped up her pace, ducking through an open door into the building. Once she caught sight of the scenery, Fal-Mai was hit with a massive dose of her own memories. Clean floors, red glass, the humming of electricity and machinery. The smell of sterile instruments, metal wiring, and suspension fluid. It was her cradle.

She would be glad to see it go.

Turning to Julian, currently surveying with his BIT, she cleared her throat. “All you need to do now is take what you wish from this place. Afterwards... I want it destroyed.”

“No need to ask twice,” Julian grumbled, “just making sure there isn’t any other admin points around here that I can get a better uplink through. Seems not, of course, ADVENT were never clever with their network infrastructure. HAL, over there.”

Julian’s BIT flew over to a currently-on monitor, and soon the back of it and the computer were showing streams of data. A certain clicking caught her ear and she looked to the side. Banel was hooking up X4 charges to pillars. He seemed to notice her looking. “Normally we only use one, but I figure two might be a good capstone on all of this for you. Sound good?”

She nodded. “Whatever brings this abhorrent monument down.”

“Could say that again.” Banel inputted a sequence on the second charge. “Central, X4 charges placed and armed.”

“Good work, Menace,” Bradford replied. “How’s that hack going, Julian?”

“I’m an on-board AI, not a cracking program! But, in other news, like a charm. It’s ADVENT, their protocols are made out of gum and prayers. You should be getting what little data’s here... now.”
“Read it.” A few heads turned to Fal-Mai. She closed her eyes, unable to meet their gaze as she knew what she was saying. “I must know. Perhaps XCOM should know too, if they doubt my loyalties.” This was a very big gamble she was playing here, and she knew it. If those files somehow pointed towards her being just what Helena had told her she was...

There was a bit of silence, but eventually Lily’s voice came over comms. “About two years spent on the creation process... signed by an Elder named Helena. Project name Pandora.” Next to her, Moody and Edgar winced. “...it’s—it’s acknowledged here that it should’ve taken at least one more year to iron everything out, but there’s a transcribed log here—it says that Helena just wanted this tool out there to show Odin and Cronus their shortcomings?” Lily’s stifled rage was clear through her reading of the quote. “Apparently the—your blast weakness was ‘noted’ but accepted as a ‘reasonable, minor setback.’” Then, a while of silence. She thought she could hear Lily take in a shocked breath. “Says here a few months were spent on trying to make you emotionless... just a few. It didn’t work. Added note that she’d ‘take care of it herself.’”

Everything Lily said hit Fal-Mai like a truck. The bottom of her stomach fell out and she could feel every stare from the squad on her. Helena made her imperfect. Helena knew she was imperfect. Helena forced emotionlessness on her, knowing it was impossible. She hadn’t even tried very hard. She brought Fal-Mai into this world, knowing very much that she could feel, and told her not to.

The fire she had faced knew Jax’s suffering burned harder and the flames licked at her throat. Fal-Mai grit her teeth behind slightly drawn lips. Anger, betrayal, mourning... all churning inside of her, begging to be let out. Feb itary, she took in a breath and let it out gently. Not emotionless. Just calm. She could not stymie her anger fully, but she would not unleash it here. “I hope that... that is conclusive, XCOM. Let us leave this place, and never come back.”

There was a silent agreement amongst the squad. They started the move out, and Samhien let up on his hug. He looked up to her. “Fal-Mai, are you alright?”

The Assassin watched the retreating forms of the rest of her allies, and didn’t respond for a moment. When she did, her voice was low. “No, friend. I am not alright. That is all I will say for now. Let us leave.” Mindful that she was on comms with no known way to tune out, that was all she kept it at.

Sammy nodded. “Let’s go back.”

Hardly needed to tell her twice. Following along after Sammy, Fal-Mai didn’t spare one more look back as they walked towards the flare hailing the incoming Skyranger. The wait for their escape was tense and quiet. How would one go about approaching a Chosen with their secrets laid bare like that? What did Eliza think, now? Her gut twisted and her chest burned. Would it not speak more as to her loyalty?

She could hear the Skyranger approaching long before it was visible. She kept her eyes trained on the skies as it was on approach, appearing over the trees and coming in to a hover. The back hatch opened and black cords draped from it. Watching everyone else take theirs—and watching Julian take off—she grasped hers and allowed it to lift her into the waiting deck of the ship.
Once inside, everyone filed into their seats, leaving one at the very end spared for Fal-Mai. She sat down, not looking at Sammy across from her. Instead, she looked out the open hatch, at the outside of her Ascension Facility. It started to grow smaller as everyone fastened their seatbelts and Firebrand took off. After a bit, she came over radio. "Central, this is Firebrand. We’re clear of the hot zone. Mind giving us some fireworks?"

"Loud and clear, Firebrand. Detonating X4 charges... now."

Even from their position high in the sky and far away from the site, the explosion impacted Fal-Mai’s ears. But, she forced herself to keep her eyes looking head-on into the explosion that now encompassed where she had been created. Her cradle, where she was sworn into ADVENT, where Helena had given her the gift of life...

She was glad it was gone.
Reparations

Chapter Summary

Things are handled around the Avenger, and Eliza makes plans for what's to come.

There was no rest for someone as wicked as the Commander. Least, that was what Eliza would snark to herself.

She was on her way to the Bridge, thanks to a summons from Bradford. He’d been upfront about wanting to discuss what their future plans for missions were. Eliza already knew she was going to insist on visiting the Warlock as soon as possible—and Bradford would go back and forth with her on it. Not that she begrudged him for doing so—if she was paying him, it would be what she paid him for. She valued that second opinion he brought, even if it was just to double-check everything she wanted to move forwards on. Besides, it wasn’t like she could get mad at him outside of that; the man looked too good to be cross at. It was criminal.

Chuckling the thought off, she stepped through the door to the Bridge. It was around “morning” on the Avenger, so the Bridge was quiet and empty as everyone else caught breakfast. Eliza would be over there herself eventually—but Bradford was waiting for her at the Hologlobe. He nodded to her as she approached. “Commander.” He squinted at her, and his mouth set. “You catch yourself in a mirror? The bags under your eyes look horrible.”

Eliza gave a dramatic sigh. Truth be told... she’d woken up on her back in the middle of the night. Being on her back for twenty years tended to make the whole muscle memory, combined with sleep, freak her out. But Bradford didn’t need to be saddled with her problems. He was just as taxed as she was in leading the resistance. Still, might as well joke with him. “Oh, please, Bradford. You know damn well how they got there. You run my schedule of managing the whole place, guiding missions, wrangling factions, and you see how hard it is to keep looking pretty.” She grinned. “I still manage though, don’t I?”

“Managing’ is a bit different than ‘handling it well,’ Eliza.” He crossed his arms. “I know you’ve got a lot on your plate, but you need to look after yourself, too.”

She gestured to him. “Did you and I not go to the same bootcamp? I know I don’t hit the GTS every day but I do it at least three times a week. Plus, you know I’d strangle myself if I let my hygiene slip.”

His shoulders slumped, and Eliza felt like he had something more to say. But instead of voicing his concerns... he moved on. “Well, I could stand here all day and lecture you on how you’re not taking care of yourself, but we’ve got other things to handle.” Bradford leaned over and tapped a few buttons on the display, bringing the Blacksite vial up. “You and I know Shen was able to pull some coordinates out of this damned thing, but recently I pulled one of the favors the Reapers owed us to get a more thorough scout of the location. Apparently it’s a facility with a security detail to rival the force of the Blacksite—one of the scouts thinks they saw a Sectopod. No word on what’s inside, but we do know that entry to the facility is ran through a checkpoint and two bridges.”

She eyed the display of the Blacksite vial before turning to Bradford. “Are you suggesting we
move on it as our next mission?”

“That’s my thinking. We’ve left the Elders’ plans alone long enough in the hunt for the Chosen. The Skirmishers have been good in keeping that Avatar project down, but we need to make moves of our own to make good on the effort they’ve been putting in.”

Eliza clasped her hands in front of her. “About that.” Bradford locked eyes with her, but motioned to indicate he was listening. Eliza continued. “I will very much concur that we need to be advancing on the Elders’ project as soon as possible—but there’s one other thing that must be handled before we do anything else.” She levelled a calm gaze at him. “John. You saw Jax out there. I would think that what we heard over Fal-Mai’s comms is more than enough to say that we need to mount the mission to get him away from the Elders.”

Bradford opened his mouth to say something, then closed it, rubbing at his chin. The look on his face told of a sympathy going towards Jax battling with his duty as Central Officer. Eventually, one side won out. “As much as I hate to argue against that,” he began, “you and I both know what’s going on behind the Forge. We, at the very least, need to find out what’s in there.” He sighed. “Not to say that the Warlock can wait. Just...”

Eliza’s expression softened. “Look. You’re even having troubles justifying it. I know, we have to move immediately on it, which we can do. Mordenna and Fal-Mai can give me the location of Jax’s Stronghold. After that, we can then turn tail and head over to the facility. The difference would be a day at most, and you and I both know we have enough soldiers for multiple squads. We shouldn’t leave that situation going any longer.”

Looking at her for a long moment, Bradford sighed again and looked to the side. “Not every day you’re dealing with saving someone from a bad home life in war...”

“This war has been nothing but extraordinary situations, John.” She walked closer, placing a hand on his shoulder. “But XCOM has always been about making a difference where it can. Jax needs that.” She squeezed his shoulder. “And if you need me to run over all the non-emotional reasons, I can. Just to put your mind at ease.”

Bradford settled a hand on hers, face becoming more gentle. He always seemed to unwind a bit more with her around. “—just one. Just so my worries aren’t kicking my ass.”

“The Warlock is a valuable asset to the Elders, considering his psionic prowess,” Eliza began. “Taking him out, however we do it, will leave the Elders with no Chosen left to stand on, especially their strongest psion. Not to mention what the Templars will owe us.”

After a moment, he nodded. “Knew you’d have a good one, Liz. You do know I just—”

“‘Have to ask.’ It’s alright, John. I know you’ve got your worries, and I could always use a second opinion. God knows you’ve set me on the right path in the past, many times over.” She could feel her gut starting to knot up. “Especially through First Contact...”

At that, Bradford moved his other hand to her shoulder. His shoulders squared and his face set. “Liz. Things were different back then. You were different.”

Eliza fell into silence, though after a moment, she found what she wanted to say. “That woman was still me, John. Only at one point in time, but the fact that I could be like that...”

“First Contact was stressful on all of us. Plus, I’ll be the first to admit that damn instructor of yours was shaping you into something nasty.” Bradford looked her dead in the eye. “You were fighting
for Earth. Trying to please countries who didn’t give a damn about you. We were fighting a losing battle. Any lesser woman would’ve cracked under the pressure.”

“Any *better* woman would’ve found another way.”

Bradford straightened, looking up into her eyes. “Eliza. What happened then, *happened*. You’re different now. It doesn’t take someone who’s known you like me to say you’re a force of good. I know things weren’t exactly... *clandestine* back then. But it’s different now. You are, too. And I’ll say that as many times as it takes to get it drilled into your head.”

Eliza looked at him for a long moment, lidded eyes meeting his. Every time she thought on who she was, she had sworn never again. But it had happened, hadn’t it? *And what makes you so different to the Chosen you try to save? Don’t you deserve redemption, too?* It... was a matter of scale and power. The Chosen had the Elders dictating their actions. Eliza just had her. Her, a military budget, and six months of suffering.

Wordlessly, Eliza moved her hands and brought Bradford in for a hug. He didn’t seem to have been expecting it—but even so, he adapted quickly and returned it. The reassuring squeeze calmed her heart a little and she closed her eyes. “... thank you, John. For everything. I know I’m not exactly the easiest to work with at times. I definitely wouldn’t be here today without you.”

It was a moment before Bradford responded. “—I wouldn’t be here without you either, Liz. I’m doing what I can to return the favor. Someone’s gotta make sure you’re functioning, at the end of the day. And I’ll always step up to the plate.”

Eliza hugged him closer, relishing in the contact. She... definitely felt something for Bradford. But to ruin something like this by approaching a potential relationship? Though Eliza didn’t doubt his ability to be impartial even afterwards... he probably didn’t look at her like that. Bradford was a man set in the old world military standards. Falling in love with a “superior officer” like her was probably a thousand miles from his mind. Well, they could still be friends. “I’m glad to have someone like you. Never forget that.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

It was a bit more of relaxing in the hug before Eliza was the first to break it off. She stepped back from him, setting a hand on his shoulder again. “Alright. So, Warlock’s Stronghold as soon as I’ve got coordinates. Then, after that, Forge?”

A lot of tension seemed to have left Bradford. He looked as relaxed as Eliza had seen him in months. *Maybe I should hug him more often.* “Sounds about right. Anything... anything else you want to go over?”

“Maybe breakfast.”

His chuckle made Eliza’s heart lighter. “Of course, Commander.”

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Mordenna had seen a *lot* of different things across the planes with those eyes of his. Horrors that defied description. The true, decaying forms of the Elders. Other dimensions that, when the time and location were right, were easier for him to see than the reality he inhabited.
But a human fawning over a robot like this was relatively new.

Theoretically, Mordenna knew it was at least somewhat likely, given the right circumstances. Humans could be so hyper-empathetic sometimes. So for Rosa to be in the room with him, gently talking to SYN as he went through the final touches on his main datacore wasn’t the weirdest thing he’d seen. Merely notable. The main problem he took with it was how it reminded him that he’d said something a little... off-kilter to them.

_The mighty Mordenna, worrying that he might’ve hurt someone’s feelings._ Those kinds of thoughts were a little late, and Mordenna had to bite his lip to keep himself from saying them out loud. Rosa was fading into background noise for him and it was easy to feel like he was alone. _She’s practically talking to herself, there. Why not indulge? Easy; the things he was thinking about probably didn’t need to be aired around her. Feelings, feelings, feelings. What’s got you so soft?

“There’s nothin’ wrong with being soft,” he muttered before he could stop himself. Rosa stopped in her murmuring, and something in him spurred him to continue. “Liz is soft. Too soft for her own good, maybe, but damn good for others. Don’t gotta be a piece of shit, me. People out there have proven it’s possible to not be a huge nuisance and still get the job done.”

There was a bit of silence that Mordenna almost filled himself, if the chance wasn’t swiftly taken away from him. “You talk to yourself? Or are you trying to strike up a conversation?”

“Eh. Little bit of column A... nothing of column B, come to think of it.” Mordenna’s fingers flew over a datapad as he worked. “Hate to interrupt your little chat. Can’t help it, sometimes.” Talking it out with himself was just so natural. Mordenna could point to a few reasons as to why, but the urge had always been with him. _Even as a dog_. He... didn’t want to remember that time so much, but it was present during his early ADVENT years, yeah.

“Interesting topic, at least. To an untrained ear, it might sound like you’re trying to get better.” Rosa rested her hand on SYN’s shoulder. “Definitely very interesting.”

“A comet strikes the earth, the Great Winter comes, and lo, I beheld a pale horse and its rider’s name was Death. Yadda yadda yadda.” He leaned over and picked up SYN’s core, turning it over to look at it. “Don’t think I don’t get what you’re implying. If you want to accuse anyone of bringing on the apocalypse, it’s Eliza. Without her, you lot would be—” _All dead? Very helpful, Mordenna._ “—undoubtedly in a far worse place. Thank whatever deity you bow to for her.”

With her helmet off, Mordenna could watch as Rosa tossed her blond, mild shaved-undercut hair and chuckled gruffly. “Please. You say that like any of us don’t. The woman’s got her faults... but I trust her as a leader. Took me, put me where I belonged, and led me to SYN. I’m a happy woman.”

At the mention of their relationship again, he grimaced. He... really needed to get around to saying something about that. He didn’t want to repeat himself, though... so he’d save it for now. “Fair enough. One more minute and I’ll have your Prince Charming online.”

“Take the time you need.” Rosa’s voiced softened as quickly as she got confident. “I’d rather have him in one piece later than in subpar condition sooner.”

Nodding, Mordenna went back to wholly focusing on his work. The sooner he could get this bot online, the sooner he could apologize, and the sooner he could go back to being... relatively guilt-free. _Oh, Mordenna, a creature of guilt? Are you just feeling that because you knew Eliza heard that whole jab on your part?_ Maybe. But even if it just made Eliza happy, it had to be a good thing. God knows that, if nothing else, Mordenna was just trying to do right by Eliza now. Her little soldiers... eh. He’d work on that.
Was working on it, come to think of it. He didn’t have to let Rosa in when she asked to see SYN. Could’ve just told her to pound sand as he worked. So you can work around her. Big whoop. It helped that she didn’t hover. She seemed more concerned with the big guy than anything else. He could get that attachment. Though he wasn’t like that with even his favorite guns, he could understand being like that with—

“Nope.” Rosa turned her head towards him as he interrupted his thoughts. He shrugged it off, reinserting SYN’s core, closing up his chassis, and tapping away on his pad. “Bad thought. Gone now. SYN’s coming online in three... two... one... zero.”

A mechanical hum sounded a few seconds after Mordenna pressed a final button. Lights on SYN’s chassis smoothly kicked on, and the Hunter watched as startup data poured across his datapad. SYN’s head raised, then he mechanically stood up and unfolded from his deactivated position, towering over Rosa and standing a bit under Mordenna. His head swiveled between the two of them.

Before he could speak, Mordenna’s eyes flickered to the datapad. “SPARK SYN. Give me a last action report.”

His systems hummed a touch louder before winding down again. “Last known action was receiving a second-hand debriefing from Chief Engineer Shen about upcoming mission ‘Shadow Screech.’ Judging by the way I am not at my charging station and you two have replaced her presence, I can reasonably estimate there has been some sort of an error.”

“As much of an error as getting a sword shoved through your chest can be. Yeah, it’s...” Mordenna trailed off. He was about to update SYN on the current day and what had gone down, but Rosa was now hugging the SPARK. The three of them lapsed into silence as SYN hugged his companion back.

Well. It was now or never. Mordenna anxiously cleared his throat. “Well! Now that the gang’s back together, I think there’s a thing or two I wanna say before I leave you two in peace. Firstly? Sorry for giving you an emergency restructuring, tin man. Part of the hunt, and all.”

SYN’s neuroptics turned towards him, then back down to Rosa. “This unit considers the blow it had administered earlier to you to be ‘fair trade.’ There is no lingering hostility.”

“Hold your horses on that one,” Mordenna muttered quickly before continuing. “And, to the two of you?” He set the datapad down, running a hand through the hair under his hood. “I’m... I’m sorry for making that jab at you two I did. Wasn’t the best out of me. Maybe needlessly cruel even for me at that time. Probably didn’t feel lovely.” Empathy?! Out of you? The world really is ending. Well, then, let it! This felt nice. Settling things without murdering someone gave him a better feeling than the haze of sorrow and regret. If that was cause for everything to end, about damn time.

The two lovers exchanged a look, then Rosa laid her head against SYN’s chest. “... it’s. Alright. I get your apology. Even as weird as it sounds coming out of your mouth.”

“Again, blame Eliza.”

“Already did,” Rosa shot back. “And, hey. I appreciate the meaning behind it. SYN?”

“The gesture is very much appreciated, Hunter Mordenna.” His servos sounded out as SYN nodded. “You did not have to apologize—your noted work on bringing me back online would have been enough. As it goes, your goodwill shows. Thank you.”
Mordenna cracked a smile, pointing a friendly finger-gun at him. “All good? All good. I’ll leave you two to catch up. Just remind him of what he’s missed, Fortuna. Rest is up to you.”

With a wave from the two lovebirds, Mordenna departed from the Workshop, feeling a touch better about himself.

Sammy never did quite like walking alone in the ship.

Maybe it was something in him as a former ADVENT Medic that drove him to seek safety with others. Maybe it was something else. But being alone, even for just as long as it took to walk down to the Infirmary... Samhien kept his head down, focusing on his feet as he went on auto-pilot. It wouldn’t take long. He’d be in there, he could check on Clint, and that would be someone. Maybe he could ask Sherry to walk him back to the Commons. Oh, but that would be interrupting her duties! He couldn’t impose on her like that.

The sound of other footsteps down the hall made Sammy’s head shoot up, and he was greeted with the sight of Vlad and Herod advancing towards him. Vlad... didn’t particularly look like he wanted to be here, but Herod was pointedly walking behind him, as if he’d prod him onwards if he’d slow down. Judging by the way Vlad felt, he certainly didn’t want to be here. The apprehension was pretty easy to read off of him. He had his helmet off too—revealing a scarred face with short, dark, curly hair on beige skin. Vlad wouldn’t lock his brown eyes with Samhien.

But! It was more people. Sammy could feel his shoulders relax, and he smiled warmly. “Vlad! Herod! Good to find the both of you well.”

Herod flashed him a smile. “Good to see you too, doc.”


Samhien stood silently for a moment, face turning neutral as he studied Vlad. His apology... wasn’t the most genuine, but there was a hint of effort in there that showed he was making some attempt to patch things up. Sammy understood that Vlad didn’t have the best of views on him and Skirmishers. Still, the fact that he was going through with this? It made Samhien smile again. “Apology very much accepted, Vlad. I’m glad you came forward with it! I understand my kind may not be the easiest to accept, but to see you making an effort is good salve.” He offered his hand.

Vlad stared at it for a bit. The pressure from Herod could be felt, but in the end, Vlad loosely took his hand and shook it once. “Well, glad that’s clear.” He was quick to withdraw, crossing his arms. “I almost thought this was going to have to be a whole thing—”

“Eliza chewed your ass out for a reason, V,” Herod hissed, “Don’t make me finish what she started.” Turning back to regard Sammy, his face lifted again. “Vlad here will... need a bit more, I’d say, but he means well. Thanks for hearing him out, Sammy.”

Samhien nodded. The genuineness from Herod always cheered him up. “Of course! Now, do either
of you have anything more to impart? I would love to talk more...” His eyes scanned, and the door to the Infirmary was right behind the two of them. “... but I have patients to attend to in the Infirmary. Clint’s state is tentative and I must insure he doesn’t need any additional assistance.”

“Sure thing!” Herod clapped a hand on Vlad’s shoulder. “We’ll get out of your way.”

Vlad finally lifted his gaze to eye Samhien... and something in him shifted. His shoulders slumped and the unease Sammy could always feel directed at him waned a bit. “... good luck, doc. Clint needs it.”

Sammy offered the both of them one more smile before they moved around each other. The two of them passed him, and Sammy made his way to the door, stepping in once he was granted access.

The sterility and relative quiet of the Infirmary always calmed Samhien. He felt right at home in the near soft edges of everything present—even if the new addition of one, soon to be two Chosen-sized beds in the back was something he would have to get used to. Fal-Mai had already been and gone through here for a checkup on her blast wounds—which had healed faster than Samhien gave the Chosen credit for. That left Clint on one of the far beds, EKG pulsing softly as the PsiOp weakly regarded him.

Sammy went to work cleaning his hands in the sink before approaching him, swiftly getting his gloves on, reaching Clint’s bedside. “Clint Vonnet. Can you hear me?”

Clint groaned, rubbing at his eyes. “Y—yeah, Sam.” He winced, probably catching the lights in the ceiling. “—got anymore painkillers? This headache’s going to send me to hell.”

Checking Clint’s IV bag, Sammy nodded. “I can get you some more, yes, but we’re going to have to meter out your doses.” Taking the near-empty bag with him, he got a new one along with some painkillers and a cup of water, bringing them back and handing Clint the latter two while hooking up his new bag. “Take those, and then I would like to do another mental wellness check.”

“Aye-aye, doc. God...” Clint popped the pills in his mouth and took a full swig of his water, sighing afterwards. Samhien took the cup as he was offered it, tossing it before coming back.

“Clint, please look to me.” When he did, Sammy continued. “Do you know what year it is?”

“2035.” He paused. “Unfortunately.”

“Who is your Commander?”

“Eliza O’Leary.”

“Do you now remember what you were last doing?”

Clint squinted, kneading his forehead with his hand. “—a little bit more than I did yesterday. I was... in a squad, Sherry, SYN, Rosa, Roland? Uh... Arsozu. Arsozu was our fifth. We were going through a building; I remember killing some ADVENT, but isn’t that typical? Right.” He hummed in thought. “I remember talking about hockey sticks—”

That... certainly wasn’t correct. Samhien had gotten his hands on a recording of the fight from Eliza for when Clint woke up. He shook his head. “That wasn’t you. Mordenna was the one who was talking about them, bantering with the Commander.”

Clint regarded Samhien strangely. There was confusion bubbling up in his person, a lot of it. He shook his head, both hands on his temples. “No. I... I could swear that was me talking about that! I
was—I was standing in front of the slab in my Inner Sanctum.”

Worry was growing in Samhien. “Clint. You’ve never had an Inner Sanctum. It belonged to the Hunter.”

The PsiOp lapsed into a minute of silence. His eyes flickered about, as if in thought, and his index finger was tapping his head. After that minute, it stopped, and he looked Samhien in the eye. “Sam... I—I wasn’t a Reaper, was I?”

It took a moment for Samhien to shake his head slowly. “No. Not to my knowledge. You were picked up by Eliza in your Haven, initially deemed unfit for combat until the nonstandard exercise psionic training offered allowed you a way into her forces. From there, you have become one of her most talented soldiers.”

Blinking a few more times, Clint muttered something under his breath before speaking up. “Alright. I... guess it was nothing.”

Samhien’s lips settled into a concerned frown. “I would believe your confusion leading up to asking that would provide a reason, yes? Please, tell me, Clint.”

After a hesitant second, Clint began. “Well... I’ve. I’ve got these visions, I think. Winter trekking, trapping animals, laughing with folks that look a lot like Reapers. But...” Clint took his hands off of his head, staring at them. “My hands weren’t ever that calloused, I don’t think. And I remember before never leaving the boundaries of the Haven when it snowed. I was always helping people out in the Haven, helping budgeting, fine detail work, bringing in kill hauls—” He shook his head. “No. That one... I’m wearing fingerless gloves. I don’t wear fingerless gloves.”

“You prefer padded, full gloves in all of your armor.”

“Right! But... there’s a memory I’ve got, doc. I can remember a bit of it as clear as I’m talking to you.” His hands flew about as he gestured. “I’m on my own, winter jacket on as I’m hunting. I’ve got my sights lined up on yet another rabbit. Standard fare, but it keeps the belly full if you kill enough of them—they’re about the only thing that’s survived the Chryssalids as well as they have. And then...” He shudders. “I just get this feeling —like all the hairs on my back are rising up. I can only pick out the purple glow shining down on the snow around me when it’s too late—I’m getting scooped up by someone huge! He takes my rifle and crushes it in one of his gauntlets. I get a rush, like I’m falling, and...” Clint trailed off, arms lowering and hitting the blanket that covered his lower half. “That’s it. It just... ends there, like I got knocked out then, too.”

That whole recounting... deeply concerned Samhien. Judging by the things he had misremembered before, it sounded like he had picked up some of Mordenna’s memories in his overload. Samhien took in a breath, bringing himself into a more measured calm. “... I can assure you, as far as we know, that memory is not yours. I... believe you have picked up thoughts and memories from the Hunter when you overpowered him.”

“That...” Clint sighed. “That sounds likely. It’s going to be one hell of a deal to sort through.” He leaned back against the inclined part of the bed. “—anything else for me, doc? I want to get some good sleep. Think those painkillers are starting to work.”

“Well...” There were a few more checks, but those were mostly centered around if Clint wanted to try to stay awake. He wound his hands together. “Just one other thing. Any residual pain or dizziness I should be aware of?”

“Outside of what’s been going on? Nah. Feels like... well, as normal as this gets.” Clint pulled up
the blanket. “That’s it?”

“That’s it. Want the curtain drawn?”

“If you please. And—” He held up a hand. “I know where the call button is and where everything’s at. I appreciate the intent behind the whole closing deal, but I know, doc.”

Samhien nodded, grabbing a side of the privacy curtain. “If you understand, then I will refrain. Have a good rest, Clint.”

“Thanks, Sam. I will.”

Stepping into the Resistance Ring, Eliza’s mind was already working away.

Datapad in hand as she entered, Eliza automatically took her usual spot. It wasn’t nearly time to contact anyone—maybe Geist beforehand to assure him that they were about to handle the Warlock, but that was about it. “Can’t help it,” she muttered to herself, “it’s my spot. I’ll stand here and get shouted into the cold, cold ground with a smile on my face.”

No, what she was here for was her monthly reports. It was getting closer and closer to the time Cato was going to contact her regarding her overall progress, and she wanted to be a step or two ahead at the meeting. “Not to mention figuring out if I want to ask the Resistance to do anything different. I think I’m still good with the gig I’m pulling with the Reapers... but I think the Skirmishers had something for me? Betos left me a message she wanted me to handle. Right, right, right...”

Opening up her datapad, she accessed the terminal in the room and checked through. Betos had, indeed, left her something. “Alright, talk to me, beautiful. ‘Commander, we have had a development I believe you will find most welcome. A rather non-standard recruit came into our ranks, asking to be accepted. She calls herself Arachne and—’ Sectoid?!’ Eliza raised her eyebrows. According to the message, a Sectoid had come to the Skirmishers, seeking sanctum and the ability to fight back. Betos... tentatively accepted her, but admitted to Eliza that “while a hopeful sign, she is not the freed ADVENT we are used to.” Knowing that Eliza had, and did take in the likes of the Chosen and Wiki into her ranks, she was asking if Eliza could take her in.

The Commander opened the field to respond. “I would most certainly love to take her into my ranks... show those bastards up top that they are failing everywhere. Should probably talk to Shen about getting more living spaces sorted out. I’d love to be optimistic and say trends are going to continue.” SENDING the message, Eliza straightened with a smile on her face. “Well! That brightens my day a bit.”

“It is good to know that news finds you well, Commander.”

Eliza could recognize the Assassin’s husky voice anywhere, but she still jumped. Recovering quickly, she beamed at Fal-Mai, currently standing near one of the new couches in the room. “Fal-Mai! Scare the daylights out of me, why don’t you. What do you need?”

Fal-Mai’s eyes flitted away from Eliza’s, and she slotted her fingers together in front of her, twiddling her thumbs. “… do you remember what you offered me, in my cell? I believe your words were ‘a shoulder to cry on?’”
Eliza got the implication immediately, nodding. She set her datapad down on the table and walked over to the couches, sitting down on one. After a moment, the Assassin joined her, sitting on the same one. Eliza clasped her hands together on her lap, looking to Fal-Mai. “Alright, Fal-Mai. What’s on your mind?”

Fal-Mai seemed to mimic Eliza’s posture and hand position, though she did not look at the Commander. She looked like she was going to start—but shook her head. After that, she tried again. “I will be blunt, Commander. Though I had gambled on something... reprehensible being in my Ascension Facility files, I had not thought it would be so...” She splayed her hands out before bringing them together again. “So clear, of how inadequate she was. How inadequate I am.”

Eliza shook her head. “You’re certainly right about Helena, but definitely wrong about yourself. Calling yourself inadequate is implying you’ll always have one role in life to fill. Everyone has different callings, sure, but that doesn’t mean you can’t have a place in yourself for more than one thing.”

“I was meant as a perfect Assassin, Eliza.” She closed her eyes. “A role I now know as impossible from the very beginning of my creation.”

“Was, Fal-Mai.” Eliza turned a bit more towards her and leaned forwards. “Under the Elders. Under ‘gods’ who didn’t give a damn about you. You don’t have to deal with their standards anymore.”

“But won’t I, Eliza?” Fal-Mai further squeezed her eyes shut. “I may not be with them now. But they have left an imprint on my very soul. I have been branded thanks to their cruelty. For as long as I live, I will have to deal with what she has done to me.” Her voice dropped in volume. “Is that not what makes me inadequate? Having to struggle with that forevermore? How could I ever be acceptable again?”

Eliza could feel her chest soften at Fal-Mai’s plight... as well as an anger for the Elders rise, but she shooed that off for now. Fal-Mai’s own feelings were much more important. Eliza gently spread her arms out. “Fal-Mai.”

Fal-Mai opened her eyes just enough to look to Eliza, and they widened a bit more when she saw what the Commander was offering. She could see the Assassin’s shoulders tense for a moment... but quickly after, she reached out and hugged Eliza, dragging her close. As Eliza wound her arms around her, her whole body seemed caught between relaxing and staying tense, like she didn’t know what to do. At the same time, Eliza could feel the soft thudding of Fal-Mai’s heart as she was pressed against her chest. In a word, Fal-Mai was likely nervous. Eliza could handle that just fine, and stroked her back.

She... was quite a touch stronger than Eliza gave her credit for, too. Mordenna hadn’t squeezed her this hard. Eliza endured, however—it was clear Fal-Mai needed the outlet; something made even clearer by her next statement. “A-am I inadequate to you, C-Commander? Please, be truthful.”

“No.” Eliza said with conviction. “You are as far from inadequate as could be for me. I don’t want perfection out of you, Fal-Mai—it’s inherently impossible. Mistakes and accidents happen, and nobody should be punished that badly for them. There’s a clear line between a deserved reprimand and abuse of power.” She gave Fal-Mai a squeeze back. “I only ask that you put your best effort forth, and try to learn and grow. And trust me, I can see you’re trying—and I’m proud.”

Fal-Mai held Eliza closer, gently resting her head on her shoulder. “... I. I don’t know if I can learn how to stop trying to be perfect,” she murmured, voice shaking. “But I want to try. I just... don’t want...”
She could feel Fal-Mai start to shake and she gently shushed her, patting her back. “Failing is ok. You wouldn’t learn otherwise. You can learn a lot from a mistake. But let me make this clear—I will never, ever punish you like the Elders did. That just doesn’t have a place on my ship. There’s acceptable consequences and then there’s that, which none of you deserved. You understand?”

Fal-Mai nodded beside her, but didn’t verbally respond, opting instead to lean against the Commander. Eliza gladly supported her and kept running her hand across her back soothingly. The things the Elders did to the Chosen really cut at Eliza, and further reinforced the fact in her mind that she needed to go after Jax as soon as possible. This just wasn’t right. Nobody should fear for messing up like this, and nobody should have had to go through that abuse. If she didn’t have a strong desire to make the Elders suffer before...

“E-Eliza.” Eliza nodded to show she was listening when Fal-Mai spoke up. “I... thank you. You didn’t have to do any of this.”

“Just because the Elders didn’t care for you doesn’t mean I won’t, either. I want to see you get better and I’d be more than happy to help you get there.”

Fal-Mai shook her head. “No. I very much think you do care. But... I would not imagine that a hug would be so calming...”

It really was—Eliza could feel that, over the course of the conversation, Fal-Mai had steadily decided on relaxing. She wasn’t squeezing Eliza so much now as just holding her. Eliza smiled warmly. “A hug is a very powerful thing. You’re free to them at any time from me, and I’ll try to ask before I initiate them. I’m glad I was able to help.” She paused for a moment. “Is there anything else on your mind?”

“Not for now, but.” She felt Fal-Mai’s head shift, as if she were looking over at something. “I believe I interrupted you when you were working. I will let you get back to your duties.”

“Hey,” Eliza interjected softly, “it’s just paperwork. It can wait.”

But Fal-Mai shook her head. “I do not have anything else for you, Eliza. Merely a ‘shoulder to cry on’ regarding the files.” Slowly, almost reluctantly, Fal-Mai pulled away. There were no tear tracks on her face, but were her eyes a touch more orange? “Thank you, again, Eliza.”

“Of course.” Eliza beamed at her. “I’ll say it again; I’m very proud of you. Coming to me to vent is a good action, and I’ll always be happy to hear out your worries and comfort you. Got that?”

Nodding, Fal-Mai moved to stand. “I will remember that, Commander.”

Eliza relaxed back into the chair... before starting upright. “Oh! One more thing. We’re... heading over to get Jax, very shortly. Like, I’m handling these files and we’re taking off as soon as I have a squad together, shortly. Would you...?”

It was a moment, but Fal-Mai responded after some brief consideration. “Yes. I would like to help my brother escape the Elders. It would be right, after the distress I caused him.” She inclined her head towards the Commander. “If you require the coordinates to his Stronghold, I have them memorized.”

“Grand! Tell them to Bradford—he’s the one flying around here. Unfortunately.” Eliza got up. “That’s all I had. Bradford should be around here, most likely either at the Bar or the Bridge.”

The Assassin nodded again. “I will be seeing you soon, Eliza.” With that, Fal-Mai disappeared from sight, and the door to the Resistance Ring opened and then closed silently.
Now alone in the room again, Eliza got up and went back over to her spot, picking up her datapad. “Eliza, you are one outstanding woman, you know that?” She smiled fondly. “Not every day you get hugged by a tall, stealthy, attractive—"”

She blinked, stopping in her spot. Well, that was a slip. But, the more Eliza thought on it? Fal-Mai had a very alluring charm to her. Far be it from her to give praise to the Elders, but Helena crafted something very beautiful. Fal-Mai’s unnatural warmth still clung to Eliza and made her feel cold against the usual temperature of the room. Her heart was still pounding, too...

Eliza groaned. ‘Letting your worldly attractions influence your choice of allies, Eliza?’ We’ve been over this before with Mordenna. She’s Chosen. Probably doesn’t have eyes for you.” She sighed. “Might even see you more as a mother compared to Helena, anyway. Let it be.”

Her heart still ached, but Eliza shrugged it off. She was a real bleeding heart, this much was true. Trying her best to discard those thoughts, she thumbed through her datapad, mind now focusing on Jax. He was still out there, and god knows how he was feeling against everything.

Eliza lifted her eyes to the world map. “Hold on a little longer, Jax. We’re coming.”
Chapter Summary

XCOM comes for the Warlock.

Chapter Notes

I know I put out Ch23 like, two days ago, but I got impatient with myself. Enjoy.

Even through the hallowed halls and reinforced walls of his Stronghold, Jax could hear the oncoming storm.

For now, it was distant thunder and closer rain—the low din making it through and filling the air with white noise. If it were any colder in the year, it might’ve very well been thundersnow. As it stood, it would be a while before the storm would descend upon his Stronghold and bring the noise with it.

Jax was occupying himself the best he could—lumbering in his facility aimlessly, nodding to the occasional Priest. For now, his thoughts were at a low drone, entertaining what he could even venture out to do as he bode his time. What he was waiting for... he couldn’t say. Some part of him knew that he would be the next to be advanced upon; it was not a matter of if XCOM would come, it was when. There would be no forewarning—just the cruel advance of their transport and a bold knock upon his door.

His eyes swept over the entrance to his Observatory and he half-wondered if he should be keeping his eyes on the skies. Even so, a kind of finality prevented him from moving upon it—as well as the weight of the device around his collar.

Looking over it again, he felt a weary gratitude bubble up. Cronus had summoned him a few days back... something he had initially met with the fear that He had taken notice of Jax’s recent lethargy, but the encounter had turned out far better than he thought. Cronus dubbed it something along the lines of the “Subversion Inhibitor.” Apparently, it would disrupt the technology used for the Assassin’s cuffs, should they move to capture him.

Though, that just brought Jax to thoughts of the battle against XCOM. He could not, and would not move his Priests against them. Nor his new platoon, who had made the integration smoothly. That left just Jax himself, considering his distaste for using any of the other forces available to him. He would face XCOM alone... and likely his two siblings, come to capture him and... what? Indoctrinate him as they had been?

The conversation with Fal-Mai sprung to mind and he made the effort to quiet his thoughts. No. He would not relive that embarrassment. To break down like that in front of her... she must think he was weak. Killing him then was a mercy to him and her. He shook his head, casting his eyes forwards. Something, anything to distract him from this train of thought.
As luck would have it, Maria stepped through a door ahead. She seemed to be looking for the Warlock—her gaze locked with his and she advanced, smiling. She arrived by his side and he could feel her familiar, comforting signature close to him. “My Chosen. How are you faring?”

“I have had far better days,” he began, “but I have also had far worse. This evening passes slowly—about the only noteworthy event is the storm.”

“It is good to hear you’re faring better.” She inclined her head. “Especially after recent events... nevertheless. The Stronghold itself fares well. No downtime in security—and our new brothers and sisters are integrating well.”

“Are they?” Jax gave a pleased hum. “Good to know. I was hoping they would find their place well enough. So long as they are good on your sisters, then they are fine by my reckoning.”

“More than good, my Chosen. They are almost overjoyed to have a facility such as this to call home. Jeanne herself is revelling in finally filling the role of your Head Officer.”

Jeanne, naturally, was the name of the Officer he had picked out in his “walk.” He felt it natural to give them names as he did his Priests—it was a more proper designation then having to call them by their numbers. “Is your utterance of ‘finally’ a complaint, dear Maria?”

Maria chuckled. “Not at all, my Chosen! Simply a pride at seeing you introduce more into your ranks.”

Indeed, it had gotten a little livelier around the place ever since he had brought in the new recruits. They were rather fascinated in the art the Priests got up to in their free time, and the Priests were all abuzz about having fresh blood. He’d already heard through his own grapevine that there were plans for a grand showing to really get his new squad in the mind of recreation. It felt... more complete. More full. Perhaps he should have done this sooner...

He looked properly to Maria. “And what of yourself, Maria? Do you continue to do well?”

Maria’s smile grew warmer. “Of course. As long as you are happy, I am as well. To see you flourishing is what gives me happiness when I am away from my sisters or taking a break from my training.”

A smile tugged at Jax’s lips, and he could feel himself relax. “It is good to know, Archbishop. It sets a mind such as mine at ease. Especially...” Thoughts resurfaced, and his mood dropped. “Especially when it seems everything else is being taken from me.”

Her mouth settled into a concerned line, and she stepped closer. “These circumstances will have their place, my Chosen. You have done everything in your power to prevent them—you cannot be blamed for not achieving the impossible.”

“But is it impossible?” He crossed his arms defensively, looking away. “I have triumphed over XCOM in the past, sent their pitiful squads scrambling for safety as I took members of their own. Why do I find myself so deficient, as of late?”

“XCOM has grown. Their arsenal has evolved, as have their numbers. Their last action against you saw the deployment of your own sister against you.” Her hand settled on his bicep. “Please, Holy Father. You have done your best. There will still be triumphs to come. We must only strive for them.”

Jax lidded his eyes. If he argued any further, he would tread himself in circles, further casting his mood downwards. As much as he saw more failure as an inevitability... to linger on it did him no
good. Maria was right, in a way—even if he would assuredly fail, there would be *some* victories to be had. Maybe not enough to his liking, but they could be taken. That was small comfort.

A psionic ping drew his attention to her again. Maria had her arms outstretched, wordlessly offering a hug. Doing a quick check around him to make sure none of the new recruits were in attendance, he graciously accepted it, pulling Maria close to him. He was infinitely grateful he had passed his initial hurdles of thinking that he “shouldn’t stoop to touching his Priests” and “hugs were meaningless, *childish* gestures amongst humans.” As it turned out, they were something that made him feel a lot better. Didn’t help that he didn’t have to stoop to hug Maria, who came just shy of the Assassin’s height. Tailor-made for him by the Elders, and one of the few things he would never take for granted.

After a bit, Jax backed away from the hug, satisfied. Maria was positively glowing... but her gaze seemed to catch on his neck. “Now, I’ve been meaning to ask, my Chosen... but what is that around your neck?”

Jax found himself looking at the device again, as much as he could, anyhow. “It is a gift from Cronus Himself. This collar is meant to disrupt what technology XCOM will bring to bear against me when they come calling. I believe... He meant it as apology. I have been doing *somewhat* better since my unfortunate outburst against Him. So long as I maintain my tongue, I am sure things will fare much better.”

Maria... didn’t look entirely convinced by that, but whatever argument she was about to put forward was suddenly interrupted. Across both of their minds flashed an urgent Network alert—the Skyranger was sighted on long range scanners. XCOM was coming.

The two of them locked gazes again before Maria clasped her hands in front of her chest, pleading. “Jax, please. Let us fight beside you! Are you truly going to let XCOM come upon you without a hint of struggle?”

Jax’s face set like stone and he grabbed her shoulders, looking at her where he knew her eyes were. “No. You are to run, as are your orders! Round up the rest of the personnel. If you stand against XCOM, the lot of you will be slaughtered.” He tightened his grip a moment as he could feel some vulnerability enter his voice. “Run, Maria.”

He released her, and she opened her mouth to rebut him, to speak against him again. But, with a finality, she closed it. “...yes, my Chosen.” Quickly, she rushed forward and caught him in another hug, which he returned with a desperate squeeze. Then, she parted from him and he could feel her send out a message on the Network as she rushed away, deeper into his Stronghold.

The weight of Jax’s weapon on his back was cold comfort as he strode in the same direction, eyes forward and unwavering as the Stronghold erupted with activity. Perhaps there had been more Priests bargaining with him to fight—maybe some of his new squad were offering their guns despite Maria’s instructions. He heard nothing over the oncoming storm, roaring in his head and through the facility.

Eventually, he found himself at his Ascension Pad, stepping onto it and willing the Void to transport him to his destination. The Void was a temporary, comforting embrace as he was shunted from one world to the next, landing in his Inner Sanctum with nary a stumble.

He had seen his sibling’s homes. His was much more *decorated*. Meditation mats circled the platform at the end of the area, with one such rug reserved for himself right in front of his Sarcophagus. Incense hung heavily in the air from several sessions of meditation, and there was even a harp near his Sarcophagus reserved for Maria’s talented hands. The raised platform in the
middle was even home to a few paintings and statues deemed worthy enough to be lifted from the
Studio.

XCOM was coming to ruin all of it. Attempting to put it out of his mind, he made his way to his
personal rug, kneeling upon it and preparing to dip into the Network’s feeds.

That was his plan, until his psionics pricked with the sound of an incoming orchestra. Bolting up
straight, Jax assumed a more dignified posture in time for Cronus to enter his presence fully. The
weight of His psionics upon Jax’s mind was almost suffocating. “Son. XCOM arrives. Have you
prepared yourself?”

“I have,” he murmured. “When XCOM arrives, they will find a resistance worthy of the Chosen
Warlock’s power.”

“Good. Let them know the true fury of the Elders, as I have gifted upon you. I will be watching,
waiting.”

With that, Cronus’s presence shrunk into nothingness. Letting the tide of his momentary fear
subside, Jax dipped into the Network and watched through surveillance. For good measure, he
entered the general comms channel that XCOM would be no doubt talking to him on once they
entered.

It was a long while before XCOM came to his door proper, hopefully long enough for all of his
troops to vacate the premises and flee somewhere safer. When XCOM arrived, it was with a
deafening explosion—the elegant front doors of his Stronghold blown to nothingness. He watched
as the squad advanced, host to many familiar faces. SYN, Rosa, Sherry... there was a new, green
Templar that he might’ve seen before, but that was the extent of his knowledge. Finally, sprinting
in from the back was Mordenna and Fal-Mai, with his sister looking a little shaken from the
explosion.

Jax’s heart seized. He knew that, inevitably, either Eliza would assign them to the mission or they
would come of their own accord. It was only natural, to field them against him. It still did nothing
to abate the dread that rose up inside of him, knowing he would have to face both of them at once,
alone. Not to mention the squad brought with them. The confidence he had managed to rally was
starting to dwindle. This wasn’t looking good...

Slowly, XCOM moved forwards. Over the microphones of the surveillance, he could hear their
chatter. Sherry was taking over as squad leader, assigning Rosa and SYN to the front while...
“Seer” played “lancer.” Mordenna was to stick to the back while Fal-Mai filled what was needed.

While there was agreement with the rest of the squad, Mordenna seemed focused on something
else. He lifted his head, and after tapping his ear, his voice came over the general comms. “Yo,
Jax. Brother of mine. Big head extraordinaire. If you aren’t in here I swear I’m dragging you out of
whatever art museum you’re caught up in.”

Before he could stop it, Jax gave a “hmph.” The more things changed, the more they stayed the
same. Figuring that was audible over the comms, he continued. “So here you are, flag bearers of
XCOM and trespassers into this holy temple. As I have taught you before, siblings, I will teach you
again to not tread so carelessly.”

Mordenna went “pffft.” “What, by lecturing at me for three hours? Seriously, the broken arm I
taunted you into giving me was seriously a better alternative. Eliza, I can’t work in these
conditions. He’s going to talk me to death.”
“Need I remind you that you signed up for this mission?” Eliza’s voice, as always, had that haunting familiarity to it. Twenty years of consulting her on the Network had lead her voice into being one of guidance. Now... it was one of rebellion. “Keep your heads on straight, Menace, and keep pushing forward.”

She got a variety of “understoods” out of that, and Jax watched as they moved deeper into his compound. Though he had seen their Specialist handle this very sort of mission no less than twice before, she seemed rather... distracted. Her head was on a swivel, but not for enemies. Sherry was admiring the architecture. Some part of him rolled with pride, and mused at the thought that if he had fielded anyone against them, she would be caught woefully unprepared.

They continued their march through another room, and it was Fal-Mai who spoke up. She wasn’t currently visible—must have been either under her cloak or deeper within the facility. “Jax. Where are your Priests? Any of your guard?”

His hands balled into fists. He had been hoping to avoid them questioning this; but why wouldn’t they? After all, when met with enemies two prior times... there was also the fear that someone might have heard her asking. He hoped Cronus hadn’t heard that. “Dare I deign to give you their locations? Do you think me foolish enough to give away their positioning to mere questions?”

“No,” Mordenna responded, “but you’ve usually got the little ladies everywhere. Don’t tell me you’re—” Then, horror of horrors, Mordenna stopped. Jax knew exactly what the Hunter had wanted to say next—but the very surprising fact was that he didn’t. He had always sought to stick in knives and twist them where he could, but this time, he closed his mouth, waiting a second before he began again. “Jax. Buddy. I don’t like this.”

“You are the one who decided to intrude upon my sanctum.” He shook his head. “It is only your own doing that leads you to these observations.” Hopefully, if Cronus was listening, his vagueness would lead them to think they were merely deeper within—or even with him in his Inner Sanctum.

Though, as he realized what next room they were about to breach, a sense of mourning overtook him. They were about to enter the Studio—a birthplace of creation for all of his Priests, where works of art were proudly displayed. He didn’t want to face the fact of what would become of it if he was taken. All the more important you fend them off yourself.

He swapped into surveillance to the next room... and suppressed a gasp. His surprise was twofold—firstly, the Studio was far more barren than he had remembered. Most, if not all of the smaller art pieces were gone, and even some of the more moderately sized ones seemed to have walked off. Did Maria organize everyone into lifting everything they could? The thought inspired a few conflicting emotions within him, but he didn’t have time to think over them, because secondly?

Two of his Priests were still in the room.

Jax practically leapt up from his spot as his first instinct. The twin Priests he identified as his seamstresses: Hestia and Demeter. They were as trained fighters as the rest of their sisters were, but the more important fact was that they were still there. Why, he didn’t know, but every muscle in his body was screaming to rush through the Void and guard them from XCOM.

He watched as his sister lifted her shroud in front of them. The two Priests jumped and yelped, clutching each other. Even as they cowered, Demeter did her best to shield Hestia with her body... even if she was the one shaking more out of the two. XCOM entered the doors. Though initially caught off guard by the contents of the room, their eyes were quickly on what Fal-Mai was looking at, guns raised.
Jax had to do something. He steeled himself, voice hard and commanding as he spoke. “XCOM. You and yours would not stoop so low as to fire upon a duo of unarmed seamstresses, would you? Or have I underestimated the very depths your cowardice sinks to?”

There was a moment of silence as everyone considered the situation. Slowly, Mordenna was the first to lower his gun. Fal-Mai held up a hand to call Menace off, and Eliza came in. “Stand down, Menace. Those are unarmed combatants.”

The rest of the squad followed suit, and Jax could see some relief enter Hestia and Demeter. Not much, of course, considering they were in the same room as XCOM and two other Chosen. Sherry was the first to talk after the Commander, walking a bit closer to the two Priests with her gun down. “If you two are unarmed, what are you doing here?”

“...” Demeter’s voice was so quiet Jax could hardly hear her over surveillance. “We... we left some of our t-tools behind and...”

The implication was clear, but before Sherry could respond, Hestia spoke up. “You’re... are you all going to slay our Holy Father?”

Fal-Mai was the one to shake her head, kneeling down to their rough eye level. “No, not at all. We are here to take our brother from the clutches of the Elders. We will not be harming him more than we have to.”

Hestia and Demeter exchanged a glance, and then began talking amongst themselves. Jax dipped into their own comms to hear what they were saying. He caught Demeter in the middle of a sentence. “—seen what They have done to Warlock Tessura. If XCOM comes with him alive and bound through here once more...”

“...then it’s only natural, yes?” Hestia followed up. “Forgive me for my heresy, sister, but I would rather claim my true allegiance to the Holy Father.”

“It would only be heresy if I didn’t agree. So, is it decided?”

“It is.”

The two turned back to Menace, knowingly looking to the Assassin. Fal-Mai nodded, standing up. Jax switched back just in time to hear her. “We should leave them here. They are unarmed...and assuredly only looking for their tools. Unless there are concerns that they could mount a fearsome offence with statues and sewing needles...”

Sherry looked between the two of them, and backed up. “The Assassin’s right. Leave the Priests alone—worst comes to worst, we’ll detain them when we get back.”

The squad began to move forward again. “Would be nice to have some new duds,” he could hear Rosa mutter. When they left the room, he could see Hestia and Demeter practically collapse against each other in relief, slumped against the wall they had been huddling against.

Now that XCOM wasn’t going to potentially slaughter more of his disciples, Jax found the time to reflect on what had just happened. Hestia and Demeter were speaking outright heresy against the Elders. Their first allegiance should be to Them, not him. Yet here they were, undoubtedly going to join XCOM if Jax was captured.

Maria’s outspoken words. The missing art pieces. Hestia and Demeter’s plans. Jax had only grimly and facetiously offered the option of coming with him if he was captured, but from the looks of it? They had taken him seriously. Though a fear had steadily overtaken Jax, he could feel a pride in
his followers welling up. They cared enough about him to defy the Elders and follow him to the ends of the Earth. Jax was now much happier at his decision to tell them to flee.

He stopped his self-reflection long enough to watch XCOM enter the room before his Ascension Pad. Mordenna looked very concerned at the continued lack of armed forces. Before he could raise his concerns, Jax offered a final comment. “So, it has come down to this, XCOM. You would willingly throw yourselves at the Void just to have a taste of my power. If you are so set on your path, continue your advance. I shall be waiting.”

With that, Jax ducked out of the Network. Now that his eyes were freed up, he gave one last look over his Inner Sanctum. Twenty years, he had inhabited it. Built it up. Made it a home. Led countless sermons in its hallowed halls. Now, XCOM was coming to tear it all down. At the same time, he saw a light on his collar flicker to life. Seems it was now primed for the upcoming battle.

Jax took in a deep breath, the deepest he could muster. He would not go down without a fight. His pride would not allow it. If Cronus was watching, he would show Him the true might of what He had granted him.

His psionics filled his gauntlets, ramped up by the amplifiers that were his horns. He let his power suffuse his body, coursing through his very veins. Then, he extended his mind outwards. Countless psionic ghosts inhabited his sanctum, years of conquests and inquisitions culminated. He summoned them, gave them form through his psionics, let them walk the Earth as husks once more, filled to the brim with volatile energies.

Then, he brought himself and his gauntlets into the floor in a kneel. An impenetrable Stasis formed around him, cutting off his air supply. His power lanced out, forming into much more clear bodies—Stun Lancers, Troopers, his mind’s eye even picked out an Officer and a Purifier, new additions to his Spectral Army’s ranks. They took their positions, mindful of his belongings, and waited.

Jax didn’t have to wait long. He could feel the very Void shudder with energy as his Ascension Pad was activated. To this day, he was sure it was one of the warmest welcomes XCOM had ever received.

XCOM suddenly found themselves in a very disadvantageous position. SYN was the first to react, body shuddering as the blue lights across his body grew brighter, and he began rapidly firing upon Jax’s forces. The rest of the squad dove into cover, some of the humans taking a few hits from the ambush he had established. He watched as Mordenna opted instead to hold his ground, grinning. He whipped out his pistol, and as fast as Jax could move his consciousness, lights of his army were flickering out. Mordenna always had fancied a challenge.

As his numbers dwindled, Jax could feel his lungs starting to burn, and he summoned his willpower to force the urge to stop down. This was now or never, he couldn’t show that kind of weakness in front of Cronus and XCOM. But the urge kept growing, begging him to drop his Stasis so he could cough and breathe. More lights in his mind dimmed. The urge grew stronger. No. He had to hold out a little longer, cause a little more damage—

He couldn’t. What remained of his Spectral Army disappeared and his Stasis dropped as Jax was wracked with a coughing fit. The sound of a few more of his constructs being put to final rest reached his ears over his hacking, and then? Silence. He was the only noise in his Inner Sanctum.

Eyes watering, he case them upwards as the fit started to subside. In XCOM’s faces, he could see pity. Mordenna clearly had a shot lined up, but the hesitation on his face spoke thousands of words. Not only that, but Mordenna didn’t seem to be looking him in the eye—he seemed to be focused on something just under his face. Petulance and rage rose up in Jax. He stood to his full height, no
longer plagued by his lungs as he let his psionics flow. “Do not humiliate me with your misbegotten pity!”

With that rage, he cast forth a Mind Scorch, linking off of Rosa and Sherry’s heads as they slumped to the ground. The energy jumped to the Seer—and now, Jax could see why XCOM had a new Templar to bear against him. Above her, cloaked in purple, was a psionic mass of tentacles and featureless faces. Its shuddering limbs coiled around the Seer’s head—and judging by the way Mordenna’s eyes followed, he could see it too. The wall of psionics deflected his own powers. Jax had, once before, seen the specter that hung over Cronus. Could mere mortals also possess this power?

He wasn’t given long to think over it. Over the momentary quiet of battle, Jax could’ve sworn he hallucinated a “sorry” from Mordenna. There was a momentary, splitting pain in his chest, and then nothingness.

Jax could feel his very soul being pulled backwards, into the awaiting arms of the Void. He watched through the plane, his body being teleported out and with him into the soft, shuddering area. He took one look at it and grimaced. The caliber on Mordenna’s bullets was overkill, to say the least.

Cronus’s orchestra was deadly low as He regarded Jax and his tortured body. “So. You would have no other forces to defend you. Not even the Priests I dared grant to you out of goodwill.”

Terror and dread became Jax. In lieu of saying anything, he merely inclined his head. He had hoped Cronus would understand... but it would seem his efforts were for naught. Cronus was disappointed, and this disappointment was likely the last he would know of Him.

Jax could feel his in-depth connection with the Void shuddering and cracking. XCOM were undoubtedly firing upon his Sarcophagus. His time with the Elders, one way or another, was drawing to a close.

With a magnificent, but restrained gesture, Cronus used the energy in the area to piece together his body again. “Go. May you remember your failure in your final moments.”

Wait. Final moments? Mordenna said something over comms but Jax couldn’t even process what he said. Despite what he knew was best, Jax found himself speaking. “Father, what—”

He wasn’t given any time to finish. The Void lurched and Jax could feel some deep part of himself shattering and darkening. With a nearly nausea-inducing force, he was pulled from his place, united mid-flight with his healed body.

Jax found himself almost stumbling over on one of the pads in his room, flung back into the world of the living. He didn’t have any time to figure out what was going on or what he should be doing before the collar on his neck emitted a high-pitched whine.

One thing he could understand was Mordenna’s almost panicked shout. “Fal-Mai, now!!”

Suddenly, he saw Fal-Mai racing towards him, sword brandished. Was this the final moments Cronus was referring to? Did He know that XCOM had intended death for him all along? What had Cronus meant?

So caught up was he in his thoughts, that Jax didn’t even react. Fal-Mai’s sword swung upwards—and cut through the connector on his collar, as well as grazing his neck a bit. Before it could fall, she was grabbing the device and hurling it with as much force as she could muster to the side.
Mere seconds later, the collar exploded.

A bomb collar. Cronus had put a bomb collar on him. *His final moments.* Cronus had not made him a device of goodwill. He had made him a possessive shackle. Between the choice of His Son living in captivity and dying unknowingly... He had chosen the latter.

Jax couldn’t process much else. He felt as if he wasn’t even connected to his body, merely watching events happen as a passive observer. It wasn’t him who looked just off to the side as the Void surged, and Cronus’s energies overloaded his Sarcophagus, shattering it into pieces. Mordenna approached him and said something, but it wasn’t Jax who numbly followed as he was pushed by the shoulder.

There was a commotion behind him. Someone was speaking indignantly. He was sure there was a question asked of him but he understood nothing of it, and he simply shook his head. The Void was nothing to him as they all proceeded through the Ascension Pad and into the Stronghold.

Was Cronus so willing to sentence him to death? Was he really better off dead than captured? Did He hold out no hope that one day, he could be rescued?

Jax couldn’t think on it. They went through his Studio, and the voices of Hestia and Demeter reached his ears, but they, too, could not be understood. He mindlessly walked as he was guided. He could hear the two of them ask him a question, of what, he didn’t know. Jax just shook his head again.

They kept walking, more footsteps joining them. The scenery of the Stronghold blurred past him as he felt his feet shuffle, one foot in front of the other, one step at a time. Mordenna was muttering something, though if he was speaking to Jax or not... he didn’t know. He didn’t know anything anymore. He had thought he had everything cleanly understood. The explosion wracked his memory again and he could feel himself take in a shuddering breath. Mordenna moved his hand to his arm and squeezed.

*Why.* Cronus was his Father. Why would He sentence him to death? Why would He lie to him about what He had placed upon Him?

What would have happened if Mordenna had not seemingly spied the device’s true intention?

Vaguely, he registered the blown-out remains of his foyer. He was led through the hole that was his front door, where the Skyranger was parked on the ground. Mordenna guided him inside and sat him down in one of the two seats closest to the cockpit. Though he stared straight ahead at his brother, Jax couldn’t say he was looking at him. Something far, far beyond him, beyond this realm.

The latch closed. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Hestia and Demeter in the seats beside them. Once again, they tried to speak to him, but he was lost to them.

The godlike hand of an Elder had sentenced Jax to death, and Jax wished he had died.
Chapter Summary

The Commander talks with the Warlock, and facilitates a reunion.

How long had it been?

Jax was slumped against the far corner of his cell, sitting on what he could only assume was the “bed.” His eyes were unfocused, vaguely staring at one of the corners in the ceiling. The only thing keeping him from hugging himself for comfort were the shackles on his hands, and his psionics felt much lesser without his horns.

The panel on the wall displayed a time in the military standard—but Jax couldn’t be certain if it was accurate or even true. He couldn’t be sure of anything, anymore. Cronus had intended for him to die. His siblings, the ones he was told would conspire against him, had saved his life. Now, he was apparently aboard the Commander’s vessel. Caught in a limbo, a hell of nothingness. Only him and his thoughts, and the terrible, terrible reality he was now forced to face.

If not the Elders to look after him, then who? He... admittedly, loved his Priests. But he was unsure if they were even here now. Hestia and Demeter... were in the plane with him, he thought. He could swear they were sitting next to him. But, of Maria...? His chest ached with a mournful hollowness. Jax didn’t know what he’d do without Maria. She was his constant companion and source of comfort, tailor-made to suit him. A life without her would be a far bleaker one, if it wasn’t already.

What would he do, now? He was captured. There was no salvation to be had with the Elders, anymore. As Cronus had decreed death, assuredly the others had been made known of his failing. What was he to do, join XCOM? If his whole body didn’t feel so numb, Jax might’ve actually laughed. The notion was absurd, and yet... he had nowhere else to turn. If Hestia and Demeter were with XCOM, as he had gotten from their scheming, it was a solid reason. It was that, or remain in his cell for the foreseeable future. He just... had some troubles about working with XCOM. He didn’t know why. Perhaps some part of him was still holding out hope.

The Elders looked after you for twenty years. It is only your own fault that you are now in this situation. If you had held your tongue with Cronus, He would be moving the very stars to seek you.

Jax lidded his eyes, and a dull pain in his chest permeated the numbness. Yes. If he hadn’t been uncouth with Cronus, he wouldn’t be as he was, now. Cronus would still look upon him favorably. He would have reason to stay in his cell and admit nothing. He had failed the Elders, and he only had himself to blame. It had all been well, until Jax began to question it. If he had just left himself to believe in the Elders unquestioningly, as he had always known... he could sit here for hours, facing himself with the “ifs.” The conditions that would give him a clear reason to not work with XCOM.

Is further disgracing yourself in Their eyes not enough? Well, it wasn’t as if he could get any lower than Father latching a bomb unto him. Even now, recounting it made Jax shudder and draw in on himself. Why. That was the one question he kept returning to. He knew why but why? What would move a being so noble and selfless before to such cruelty? He could only stand your
incompetence for so long. There is infinite patience, but no such thing as infinite tolerance. His brother proved that much.

Mordenna. Mordenna had every reason to not call out the collar. Sure, Jax assumed the mission’s purpose was to capture him. But Jax knew Mordenna... or, thought he did, anyhow. The Hunter would have left the Warlock to die. So Jax believed. Instead, he organized his sister into sparing his life. Saving it. What had happened, in the months he had been gone? The only insight he had was the ghost of one of Mordenna’s telltale episodes, and the fact that he was still alive certainly brought some questions. Dare he think his brother might be becoming a better person? Certainly he was trusted enough to go on a mission with Fal-Mai.

That last thought left Jax with both an incredible loneliness and the numbness, once again. The numbness he could understand, but this feeling of longing? For his brother? Jax was almost certain there was something wrong with him, if there wasn’t already. Under the Elders, the three saw fit to fight with each other, and Jax had a distaste for both of his siblings. Mordenna was a slacker, keen to mouth off to the Elders and neglect his duties as much as possible while picking fights with Fal-Mai and Jax. Fal-Mai was young, naive, and single-minded in her purpose under the Elders. Struggling with emotions she had been told not to feel. Why, now? Why did he feel some urge to speak with them? Masochism, perhaps. The word echoed in Father’s voice and Jax shuddered.

Fully withdrawn on himself and balled up as much as he could manage, Jax closed his eyes. Sleep... was difficult. Only if he was well and truly relaxed. But he had to try. Anything was preferable to being left alone. A fear of being alone. How childish are you? Had he ever been allowed to grow up? He was twenty years older, but some things crept upon him still.

A sound that wasn’t the ever-present, deep thrum of the ship made Jax jump, eyes shooting open. Across from him, the door to his cell had opened, and in stepped the Commander herself. She was... far more earthly, than Jax had expected. Yet, there was a certain uncanniness to her features. She was over fifty, was she not? Where were the age lines to her face? Why was her skin still so taut? Even stranger was the eccentricness of her signature. Soft... so soft. More of a soft hum than any instrument he was used to. Light blue.

Her eyes locked with his, and she offered a gentle smile. “Jax.”

He merely gave a soft noise in reply. The numbness was still there, and he didn’t want to speak. He almost wanted to pout. Outside of his usual disgust for his childish tendencies, something else stopped him. Eliza’s smile seemed genuine, and he would be lying if he said he didn’t associate her voice with one of authority and knowledge. Twenty years of consultation on the Network colored his hearing of her.

Eliza took her spot, sitting down across from him, giving him plenty of space. Now, he could see there was a remote in her hands, which she placed on the floor. Some part of him suggested overpowering her and taking it... but to what end? Cronus had already wanted him dead. Presenting the Commander would bring momentary praise... and then annihilation. Besides, he could not teleport even if he wanted to—the familiar feeling in his being he would always call upon for longer travel was gone. With his Sarcophagus, went his long-distance teleportation.

“I... know this is a silly question,” she began softly, “but I’ll ask anyway because I care. Are you alright, Jax?”

He lidded his eyes again, pulling his knees closer and hiding the bottom half of his face behind them. Hiding! Like a coward. He was scared. Jax was somewhere he didn’t like, with no comfort, nobody else with him, and no clue what he could do. Yes. He was upset. Figuring that was his answer, he shook his head.
Eliza looked pretty somber at that, fidgeting with her hands. Well, what was she supposed to say to that? It wasn’t like he was going to give her a verbal answer. Still she made a good effort. “Jax, I want to help any way I can. If you’d let me, we can talk if you want.”

Talking. What good would talking do at this point? He knew where he had failed. He knew why he had failed. There was nothing more to lament about it than to gripe for gripes sake. He did not want to speak—he wanted his Priests.

Thinking about it... Eliza likely had Hestia and Demeter on the ship. Maybe more of his followers, if he wanted to believe the hope that they had approached XCOM afterwards. If Eliza was not being facetious about her want to help, could he not ask for them? Though, that would involve mustering up the will to speak...

Jax closed his eyes, taking in a deep breath. He just needed one word. Hopefully Eliza would understand. “... Maria.”

It took a moment, but Eliza responded. “Do you want me to bring your Archbishop in?”

Was it true? Did the Commander have Maria on the ship? From the way she worded it, it seemed to be the case. The numbness that suffused his being seemed to lighten a bit, and he nodded. He could hear Eliza shifting around, likely getting up. “Central, send the Archbishop over to the Chosen Holding Cells. Room three. Have her open the door.” A pause. “I’ll stay in here with you, Jax.”

As much as Jax wanted to say he didn’t care if Eliza left or stayed... it was untrue. Eliza was company, and he didn’t want to be alone in here. He opened his eyes again, studying Eliza more. She was awfully tall, for a human female. Jax wondered if that had anything to do with the modifications Argus put upon her. He hadn’t known the extent—he’d managed a conversation with Them once, and it was about all he got. Eliza remained standing, obviously trying not to stare him down in the silence.

If he were in a better mood, he might make more conversation. As it stood, all he could do was look down and hug his legs as much as he could with his shackles on. Maria would be here soon. As much as he brushed off talking earlier, talking to her would soothe him.

It was a bit of waiting, but eventually Jax heard the door open, and he chanced sitting up. Ducking under the door was Maria... helmetless. Jax could now see the structure of her face. The crest of her head and strong jaw alluded to her Berserker heritage, but the two tentacle-like bumps on the top of her head, three bolts going along the middle of her scalp, and orange, detailed eyes belied her Gatekeeper strain. There were mechanical fasteners going along the length of her jaw—one of the Skirmishers must’ve helped her get her helmet off.

Maria looked... dignified. Magnificent. Jax had once balked at the idea of any of his congregation taking their helmets off, but Maria proved his fears were unfounded. Their eyes met and Maria stalled, for just a moment. Not a very long moment; she was soon rushing towards him, ignoring Eliza completely. She practically dove into him and wrapped him in a hug, himself leaning into it and burying his face into her.

“M-my Chosen, I’m—I’m sorry, please forgive me, if I had known that was what Cronus had granted you—”

Jax sucked in a breath through his teeth at the recent memory, numbness fading as he leaned against Maria. Maria delved into more apologies and squeezed him close. He wasn’t surprised that Maria had found out what had happened. He was sure that word of it spread quickly—and his
Priests, if nothing else, knew how to share the news. That didn’t matter to him so much now. Maria was here. Jax wasn’t alone. He had someone who would comfort him.

The more the mist lifted, the more Jax hurt, and it felt more and more like his chest was trying to rip itself open. He tried, with all his might, to hold it back. Eliza was still in the room. If she hadn’t been privy to his and his sister’s encounter out in the field, he didn’t want to have the Commander of XCOM see him like this. He was the Chosen Warlock! Bastion of strength, pillar of fortitude and psionic prowess. Dignity incarnate.

That didn’t seem to matter to his emotions so much. His chest heaved. Jax choked back a sob, and his eyes watered. No. Weakness. Why must he show such weakness? If he had not been weak, if he had not questioned Cronus, he would not be in this situation. His chest ached and he sobbed again, hiding his face against Maria.

Suddenly, he could feel the cuffs over his gauntlets open. There was a brief moment where he wondered as to why—a very brief moment. Shucking off his shackles, he wrapped his arms tightly around Maria. Perhaps Eliza had expressed pity for his condition and allowed him this. Whatever the case, this certainly felt a lot better, even if the physical expression was just bringing on more tears.

Jax took a solid while to just cry against Maria, voice muffled against her armor. The thought of the Commander being there quickly slipped from his mind and he gave himself a moment to grieve. Maria’s Solace had washed over him in short order and he willingly accepted it. It hurt, so much, but being able to vent like this was helping.

Eventually, Jax found himself calming down. Though his tears still flowed, he wasn’t sobbing anymore, and the pain in his chest was down to a dull ache. Jax indulged himself a bit more in his self-pity before wiping at his eyes, sighing. Before he could muster up the words to speak, Maria looked over her shoulder. “Thank you, Commander. It’s... very good of you to allow this.”

“Far be it from me to let him suffer,” came the soft reply. “He’s less ‘prisoner’ than ‘refugee,’ anyhow. The cuffs... were more of a formality.”

Maria nodded at that. Jax, himself, mulled over Eliza’s words. He could understand, having to keep up appearances on someone like him. If they were to simply allow him to walk the ship, even after a tragedy like his and with his allegiance unannounced... the backlash would be strong. Still didn’t make the prospect of sitting alone in a cell any nicer, but that led him to another line of thought.

Though Jax didn’t want to reveal his no doubt blotchy face and orange-tinged eyes to the Commander, he at least lifted his face from Maria so his words wouldn’t be muffled. He took it slowly and calmly, so he wouldn’t stutter or trip over himself. “Commander. Am I right to assume you will be trying to recruit me into your ranks?”

“That’s correct, though I didn’t want to impose the question this early, considering...” Eliza cleared her throat. “I really had just wanted to check in on you. Isn’t right to leave you in solitary confinement like this. Wish we had built the cells differently, but how was I supposed to...” Eliza trailed off for a moment, then continued. “I was going to approach it later, when things weren’t so hot as they are.”

Jax would give the Commander that—she had some basic consideration within her. Indeed; how was she supposed to predict something like this? He took in a deep breath, deciding if he wanted to approach what he would next. “—what would this prospect entail?”

“Joining XCOM, for one,” she began. “Basic respect and support for what we do is a must. It’s the
ability to fight alongside a force that looks after itself, members that care what happens to each other. I’d also like to claim that it has leaders that care what happens beneath them. Who are willing to spare those who don’t want to fight anymore, and will look after those who want to fight for us. No man is an island unto himself—people need support. I’m happy to give it.”

Rather nobly-spoken, but Jax didn’t expect much less from someone who had organized a resistance for this long. It wasn’t as if he had anywhere left to turn—he didn’t think in the slightest that the Commander would let him go even if it was to forge out on his own. Need you be reminded as to why you’re in this situation?

He blew some air out of his nose. Even if he had wanted to join up right there and then, his mind and his pride wasn’t exactly allowing him to. Not without some resistance, at least, even if it was just token.

Maria was warm. Jax didn’t want to stay in this cell forever. He wanted to see his Priests, and he didn’t want to be alone. “—I will consider this for a few days... a timespan that might go faster if my Priests are allowed to visit me.”

Eliza gave a single chuckle. “I’ll keep that in mind—though, excuse me for saying you could see them all the time if you wanted if you joined up.”

Very tempting. But, Jax had already stated what he wanted to do. Going back, even with a proposition like that, would further humiliate him. “My statement stands.”

A pause, presumably Eliza nodding. “For standard’s sakes, I’ll have to have someone chaperone the visits. They don’t have to necessarily be inside the room—but someone has to supervise. And the cuffs...” She sighed. “I’m going to have a talk with Bradford about taking them off entirely. Can I trust you with that?”

“Of course,” he murmured. “I would not harm you, Commander, or anyone under you. Suffice to say, I could not smuggle you off of this vessel, either. Then there is the fact that, by how you have spoken, you have taken in my Priests. I would not jeopardize their own safety for a petty grudge or anything of the sort.”

“Good to hear. And, you’d be right. Helps that we’ve got space in extra rooms and the ones who didn’t want to fight were alright with picking up odd jobs. Have to admit, seeing a whole body of Priests—and other ADVENT soldiers, I noticed—approach Menace made me fear for them for a moment.”

Everyone. His Priests’ numbers had dwindled over twenty years, and he hadn’t had the heart to replace them. He could certainly see who was left—including his new squad—fitting onto the Avenger. They were all here. He... really didn’t have any reason to go back, now. The Elders, assuredly, no longer wanted him. His personnel were here. So were his siblings...

With a deep breath, he responded. “I am... very glad to hear you were able to take in my congregation. I will admit—I would not have, before, expected XCOM to take in my numbers willingly. But you have proven yourself a surprising force, Commander. If they need it... they have my expressed permission to work with XCOM.”

“Got it. Some of them did have hang ups about that. I’ll spread the word. Outside of that... that was about all I had. If the two of you want to catch up, be my guest. Though...” She sighed. “I hate to continue imposing, but someone’s gotta authorize the door open request, and it’s currently print-locked. Plus, until I clear it with Bradford, we’ve got to keep the cuffs on you, Jax.”
“Understood. I would hardly expect XCOM to allow myself to prance about, unbound.” Jax gave a
“hmph.” “Even if it would be in the bounds of my own cell.”

“You and me both, big guy,” Eliza responded, apparently concurring with his minor musing.

With that, he tilted his head to look up at Maria. The area around her own eyes seemed a bit puffy,
as if she had been caught up in her own mourning. Unable to maintain eye contact out of self-
awkwardness, Jax’s head thumped against her chest. “You must think me weak,” he uttered, voice
low enough that he was sure only Maria could hear him.

“Nonsense,” she shot back at the same volume, “for you to have withstood what you did makes me
think you are stronger than I ever will be. A lesser being would have succumbed under the weight
of what you have been through. Jax...” Maria paused a moment, letting his name hang. It was only
in rare moments did she ever speak just his first name. “The Elders wronged you. That is the
simple truth of the matter. No caring being would have done all of what they did to you.”

Maria’s continued speaking out against the Elders was strange to hear. Then again... after his initial
punishment, she had seemed more... distant, with Them. Less willing to speak praises of Them, and
not much need be said of her behavior after he was punished a second time. Even in his inner
circle... were the Elders...?

He couldn’t approach the thought. Not yet. Too much had happened at once, today, and he just
wished to rest. But, he wanted Maria here a little longer, too, and thought of questions to ask. “—
what of your sisters and brothers? Are they faring well?”

Maria nodded, a hand running over his hair. “Yes. Their concern for you is mounting, but I will tell
them that you will be fine. What Cronus did has put them in an uproar, and Jeanne has expressed
the wish to fight alongside XCOM to deliver justice on your behalf.”

“She has my permission to do so.” He was silent, for a moment. “... she will probably be one of the
next I ask for. Iris, Hestia, Demeter, Odette, Bastet...” His voice dropped further, almost entirely a
baritone hum. “I do not know what I would do without them, Maria. Without you. This world
would be far bleaker without you and yours in it. I... want all of you to thrive. And it is clear to me,
this much at least, that it would not happen within ADVENT.”

“Oh course. We care so much about you, my Chosen.” Maria squeezed him. “You are our Holy
Father. Our guiding light. Our tender shepherd. To see you suffer hurts us all. Our place is not with
ADVENT—it is with you. We will follow where you go, call home what you call home. I speak
for all of my sisters and myself when I say we love you.”

Love. The kind of love that did not sting, did not leave him asking why, did not make him fearful of
it being taken away. The kind of love that soothed him, comforted him, and offered him a listening
ear whenever he needed it. The pain from earlier faded, replaced by a warm glow in his chest. He
renewed his hug on Maria. “... and I love you as well, Maria. Your sisters and brothers as well. It is
the least you deserve out of me.”

He could feel Maria’s Solace reverberate with her joy. “It overjoys me to hear you say that, Jax. I
am here for you. We are here for you. I know you have already stated that you will wait, but...”
She smiled very warmly. “It will be good to see you out of this cell.”

It would be good, indeed. Jax didn’t feel as if he would wait very long. His Priests... come to think
of it, they were not so much “Priests” anymore. Their allegiance to XCOM wiped them of their
dealings with ADVENT. Maria was not his Archbishop anymore. They all needed new monikers,
something emblematic of their new home and life.
After a moment of thinking, he lifted his head from Maria’s chest. “Maria. I have a duty for you. As my path seems to eventually align with XCOM’s and away from ADVENT... it is time all of you adopt new titles. I do not imagine XCOM will favor calling you and yours by your old designations, anyhow.” Gently, as if scared he would hurt her, Jax brought up a hand and placed it on her shoulder. “You, Maria... are now the Matriarch. The head of your brothers and sisters, and rightful leader with me. Jeanne is your Centurion. Your sisters—Mystics. Briareos—’the Shieldbearer, ‘—your Guardsman. The Purifiers, the Phoenixes, and the Troopers, the Seekers. Thus into this new life, let all of you stride.”

She nodded. “I will commit this to heart, my Chosen. I will let them know shortly. And...” She hugged Jax close again. “Thank you. For you to consider me as leading with you... it will be a while before I fully acclimate to being your equal, but the gesture is beyond words.”

Jax leaned against her once more, the soft pride in his chest continuing to soothe him. He was so, very proud of his own. They had made it this far, followed him into XCOM... and cared for him, so much. He could only hope he would return the favor.

They lapsed into a comfortable silence... comfortable, right up until Jax remembered Eliza was in the room. Hopefully, at their volume, the Commander should have heard nothing of their conversation. It wasn’t as if he did not trust her, but... she was a relative outsider to his affairs. It was between him and his inner circle.

Maria was the first to break it, remaining at their private conversation volume. “Would you have anything else of me, Holy Father?”

Jax sighed, and shook his head. “As much as I would wish you to stay further... you have news to impart. I would not have my disciples worry much longer. Thank you, my Matriarch.”

Maria gave him one last squeeze, then parted from him, standing up and turning to Eliza. “I am ready to leave, Commander. We have exchanged our words.”

The Commander straightened, nodding to her. “Alright. I’ll let you out, here.” With that, she went over to the panel on the wall and tapped a button. The door slid open, and with one last smile towards Jax, Maria departed. That left him with Eliza, who turned towards him as the door closed. “Anything else you want to speak to me about, Jax?”

Looking over at his discarded cuffs, Jax mulled it over. As much as he didn’t want to be alone, the Commander was... the Commander. Nebulous. All of his interactions with her had been the twenty years of consultation and the occasional banter on the field. He had felt envious of her. Perhaps he still did. Knowing that, not matter how hard she struggled against Them, the Elders would always try to secure her alive? He somewhat longed to be as coveted as she was—even if his place, now, seemed to be away from Them.

But, the more he thought of it? He would not fancy being in her position. Yes, it was one of utmost importance—but to be immobile for twenty years? To, upon the twentieth, be prepared for Ascension? Jax vaguely remembered his Ascension. Taken young. The psionic horrors. The strain migraines. He would not wish that upon the Commander, even if Argus’s methods seemed to be different.

Something struck him as a means of conversation, brought on by earlier thoughts. “—you proclaim yourself a caring leader, Commander. If my brother’s sudden change in behavior is anything meaningful, there seems to be weight to that statement. But can you claim to level with those who need it yourself?”
Absolutely,” she responded with certainty. “It was only through personal talks that I got both of your siblings to my side—and continue to have them there.” Her face softened, and she gestured towards Jax. “All of you deserve someone who cares about you deeply. Personally... I’m glad you have Maria. It looks like she means a lot to you.”

“More than ‘a lot,’” Commander. Were she to leap into the fires of the Pit with confidence, I would feel emboldened to follow her. She has been with me almost ever since my Ascendace.”

Eliza smiled. “Mark me as very glad, then. I’ll still offer you what I did your siblings—someone to bring up your problems with, ask for advice, and all else fails? A shoulder to cry on. I want to be there and help out, Jax. It’s why I came in today—I would’ve waited to ask about you joining us if you hadn’t brought it up.”

Jax nodded slowly, leaning against the wall. Though he initially thought the offer redundant... the more Jax thought on it, the more merit he gave it. He would be fighting under Eliza if he were to join XCOM, no? The chance to have a caring leader, one he could bring up his personal grievances with and not fear for rebuke, one he could seek out for his grief with the Elders and find a like mind? The temptation to join XCOM immediately was a strong as ever. But, Jax steeled his resolve. “—that was my only inquiry, Commander. Allow me enough time to think on your offer.”

“Five days?”

“Five days. I trust the clock on the pad is accurate?”

“Sure is. Though—the Avenger runs on its own time. Still 24 hours to a day, but due to how we tend to pinball all over the place? We run on our own cycle. Regardless, time passes the same.”

He waved it off. “So long as ‘five days’ will continue to be ‘five days,’ it is merely semantics.”

She chuckled, shaking her head. “I suppose that’s a good take.” Her jovial mood died down a bit, however, as she looked to the cuffs. “—sadly, I’m going to have to cuff you again, big guy. I might stop in early if Bradford clears you being unbound, but otherwise?”

He got the implication. Musing on the nickname “big guy,” Jax picked up his cuffs and offered them to her. Once she took them, he respectfully presented his wrists, and Jax got a better look at Eliza. Her uniform was mildly thick—though even through it, Jax could see the hints of a well-maintained physique beneath. Her hands were even a little rough—perhaps she was not out in the field as her soldiers were, but Eliza seemed to be keeping herself in shape. Were those scars on her knuckles, as well? It all came together to give her a more human quality, offsetting her unnatural youth. He could certainly respect a leader who kept themselves in prime form, at the very least.

His inspection was interrupted by the cuffs sliding back into place, and Eliza stepping back. “Got you all kitted up now. I’ll head out—there’s a button on the pad if you want to call me early for any reason. You take care, and I’ll ask around your group about visits, alright?”

Jax nodded. “Of course, Commander.”

Eliza gave him a thumbs up and turned towards the door. It opened and shut, and Jax was left alone once again.
Chapter Summary

XCOM arrives at the Forge Facility.

Mordenna had to admit, Bradford was kind of a blast when he got right down to it.

Here he was, leaning over the Hologlobe, grinning at a distinctly miffed Bradford, drumming his fingers and making the projection of the globe distort slightly. Debating with Bradford... wasn’t as fun as the debates with Eliza he had done while she was still in the Elder’s drunk tank, but it was still damn good.

Case in point! “So you’re telling me that your only proof of time being more than just a construct is just what you’ve been told? You ain’t ever gotten out a tool of your choice and actually tried to measure its passage on anything that isn’t automated?”

Bradford gestured exasperatedly. “Sundials have got to count for that—”

“Ah, ah, ah!” Mordenna waggled his finger. “Sundials only measure the rotation of the Earth on its axis! Which would happen regardless of some arbitrary number ticking upwards. What’s to say that we all aren’t merely experiencing the sequence the universe has set in motion, but reverse? How does your little theory of time hold up then? Space exists, sure, but time’s a boring concept you lot came up with just to tide yourselves over.”

Bradford groaned, pressing a hand to his forehead. “Can’t believe I’m debating with a purple beanpole over whether time exists... if time doesn’t exist, then why do the Elders date their logs at all, huh?”

“Oh, please, don’t use them as some kind of defense for your argument, John. It’s practically bad form.” He shook his head, still grinning. “They’re idiots. Time, as a concept, may be uniform across civilizations, but it’s fake! Much like organized calendars, you lot decided to fabricate a concept based on the rotation of your little planet around the Sun.”

“If it’s so fake then why do you refer to it?”

Mordenna shrugged. “Convenience, mostly.”

“I’d argue that convenience is a damn good reason for it to exist.”

“As a concept.”

Right then, Eliza entered the Bridge. Bradford turned to her and pointed at Mordenna. “Eliza. Please tell the Hunter that time exists.”

Well, that was quite the statement to walk in on. Eliza looked between the two of them and shortly began to laugh. Bradford kneaded his temples and Mordenna just grinned further. Eliza was a real card. That laugh certainly added to it... as much as it made him want to beat down his Id with a stick. Chill, me.
She recovered, left with a smile from her laughter. “Oh, what’s your argument, Mordenna? ‘Time doesn’t truly exist and is merely a concept made by humans?’”

“Yes! See, Bradford, she understands.”

“Doesn’t mean she agrees,” he grumbled.

Eliza put a hand on her hip. “So. What’s the evidence for your theory?”

“Obvious. There’s no quantifiable amount of ‘time’ that can be measured by any instrument anyone has crafted—”

“No. That’s evidence against time existing. Where’s the evidence for your alternative theory?”

Mordenna blinked. “Liz, the alternative theory is the lack of time’s existence.”

“Ok. Where’s your proof? Where’s your thesis? Where is your research document, thirty page minimum, twelve point font, preferably submitted and on my desk by Monday? All you’ve got for your argument is words. The evidence for time existing is there. It may not be a quantifiable amount, but not everything in the universe is. Can’t quantify emotions, after all.”

“Now that is just a filthy lie, Commander.” He shook his head, preferring to latch onto the last part of her argument. “Emotions are merely measured chemical doses from the brain that tell us how we feel.”

“Is that so?” She pointed at him firmly. “Are you trusting the chemical reactions in your brain to tell you that they are mere chemical reactions? Are you going to base your observations on something you cannot quantify without bias? Here I thought you were against time existing, Mordenna.”

The Hunter straight up stopped. He almost felt as if his brain was hanging on a single command execution, something that had stopped up his whole system. When the haze broke, he burst out laughing, trying and failing to hold back a snort within it as he doubled over. Over his own laughter, he could hear Bradford and Eliza chuckling together.

He caught his breath and stood up from his mild hunch. “God, Commander, you are a riot. I’ll give you that one because you made me laugh.”

She held up her hands. “Happy to tango anytime, as always. Now.” She stepped further up to the Hologlobe, tapping on her datapad. Soon, the display changed to a reasonable reconstruction of the Forge. “Onto what we’re actually here about. As we speak, we are currently approaching our landing site so we may infiltrate the Forge. From there, we will be doing an on-grounds inspection and seeing if there’s anything we need to leave with, like last time. All else fails, we destroy the compound and put the Elders back further on their progress.”

“That’s the long and short of it,” Bradford replied, nodding. “As it stands, we just need to assemble the team together for it.”

“Considering we’re on the heels of Operation Last Coffin,” Eliza changed the display to a roster, “we’re effectively running with the B team.”

“B team plus me,” Mordenna was quick to add. “Never bothered to look at the Forge myself. Would you mind helping me address that?”

Eliza nodded, and an entry for him popped up on the list. “Noted. Do you think Fal-Mai is good
for the mission?”

“After what happened? Yeah. She’s angry and probably needs someone to take it out on.” Not to mention how quietly furious Mordenna was. It wasn’t so much that Cronus put a bomb on Jax... ok, maybe it was a little bit of that, but it was moreover just another shitty maneuver that told him how shit the Elders continued to be. A message that clearly stated that if Cronus couldn’t have Jax? No one could. God forbid he think of alternative methods. If he hadn’t spotted the make of the connector in time...

“Understood. I’ll pencil her in.” Eliza’s voice interrupted his thoughts and he focused back on the conversation. Fal-Mai appeared on the registry. “I made sure to do my usual scouting around the troops and Mary was ready to go, so she’ll be our support.”

“Gonna be some heavy firepower there,” Mordenna muttered, mostly to himself. “The Forge is pretty important, though I can’t say I remember why.” He was penning the Network Severance Effect as soon as he could grab Tygan’s ear about it. He did remember a few details about the Avatar project, but... best spared for another time, and not right at the moment.

Bradford looked up at him. “SYN’s back online...”

Getting the message, Eliza nodded. “And I know Rosa can always take more time with him.” The two of them joined the list, leaving one slot empty. She looked between the two of them. “Close range and scouting, long range, heavy support, SPARK, and medic. Usually I’d pen a PsiOp in here but Clint’s only freshly awake and Leo...”

Bradford grimly nodded. Mordenna knew what Eliza was on about—taking a direct hit from the Disruption Rifle was never pretty for a psion. Last he’d heard, Leo was still experiencing psionic “soreness.” Mordenna darkly considered he might’ve done too well of a job, there. Though, something occurred to him and he spoke up. “Far be it from me to suggest something useful, but I’d say set Maria on him. If he’s still out after this long, either I did a bang-up job or it’s not going to heal naturally. Jax’s Archbishop is an expert at healing through her own psionics. Given she was designed for my brother, I don’t think it’s a stretch to say it extends to other psionics.”

Eliza looked fairly impressed, which gave Mordenna some satisfaction. “Good to know, Mordenna. I’ll talk with her over it.”

“Good advice,” Bradford said, looking at the empty slot on the list, “but sadly it doesn’t fix our current problem.”

“Right.” Eliza looked there, too. “Think we should split up the Twins for this?”

“Actually, I don’t think you have to do that at all.”

Though Mordenna spotted her coming, he didn’t blame Bradford and Eliza for being surprised when Wiki zipped into their plane of existence. She’d recently gotten a paint job—what was orange before was now a mix of blues, even having adjusted the formerly red glow of her “brain” to a sky blue. She took her place at the side of the Hologlobe nobody was occupying. “Sorry to barge in, but I overheard and I couldn’t help myself.”

“Good to see you, Wiki.” Eliza inclined her head towards her. “How’s the integration with the Shadow Chamber?”

“Smooth as ever. I already gave her props, but your Chief Engineer can certainly make some user-friendly design.”
“Oh, what,” Mordenna interjected, “you didn’t like the hostile code of the ADVENT Network?”

Wiki’s eye-lights rolled. “Please. We’ve been over this.” She gestured back to Eliza, resuming the topic. “I’ve began aggregating all the old world knowledge I can, as we agreed, as well as safely defragmenting one of my downed Codex buddies regarding what she knows. I’ve also added my own processing power to your systems, so everything should be running faster.”

Bradford nodded. “I noticed that. Things are running a bit smoother thanks to you.”

“Naturally. But, yes, I’m here for a reason.” Wiki pointed to the last slot on the list, the projection glitching a bit at the action. “I’d like to fill up that last slot. Lest you forget, I’m good for battle, and I’ve been meaning to fill in some blank entries in my databanks. The Forge is one of them—I, sadly, couldn’t grab everything in my exodus. Just most of it.”

“The intel’s been grand, Wiki,” Eliza replied, “and I’m thankful for it. As for you coming on the mission? Absolutely.” With a final tap, the mission roster was filled out. “That’s it. Now to rally the troops and get everything together.”


Bradford shook his head. “This is gonna be another long one...”

The more Mordenna moved with squads, the more he could see the potential appeal in them.

Safety in numbers, for one. He was guaranteed more firepower than he could possibly carry by himself by just having a few more bodies around that could lug and fire it. A more cynical side of him—which was a fair portion of him, but lesser than before—wanted to say they were pretty effective decoys. A less cynical, more pragmatic part spoke of them being worthwhile distractions—loud, noisy, dangerous distractions while the real threat in the back lined up another shot.

Though, of course, he still knew the downsides. Most people couldn’t sneak. To him, his whole squad, sans his sister, stuck out like a sore thumb against the slightly-brown backdrop of the dying grass and foliage. Wiki, being the shining beacon she was, definitely didn’t help either. Granted, she was sticking in another dimension for now, but it was the principle of the matter. At least SYN had gotten some upgrades, courtesy of him—all of his clunking around was now heavily muted in the distortion field. That was thanks to some cues he took from Fal-Mai’s cloak and how it worked.

Speaking of her, she was farther ahead. Mordenna’s keen sight picked her out in the depot that capped off their long walk. Still advancing, he watched as a distant shimmer eclipsed a lone Trooper, the air itself seeming to swallow him. He reappeared behind a building and out of sight, throat slit. For as much grief as he gave his sister, Fal-Mai was skilled. A shame that such executions were limited by sightlines and the enemy being unaware, but eh.

The lone patrols steadily dropped as the squad kept moving forward, leaving the checkpoint empty. The lack of trees meant that the buildings themselves were the only shelter from the crisp, vaguely autumn air. This side of the globe, at least. Mordenna could see seasons being difficult to track thanks to the flight range of the Avenger. He was thankful he knew the date, at least. It made Eliza’s rather late attention to the Forge interesting—but judging by the tech on the Avenger, it wasn’t like they were doing nothing but dashing for him and his siblings.
Breaking out of his thoughts and the tangent they went on, Mordenna cast his gaze further outwards. The checkpoint led into two, thin bridges crossing a ravine, with the Forge Facility just across the way. Right before that was...

Mordenna pressed a finger to his ear. “Commander, the Assassin’s cleared out a large portion of the patrols. All that’s left is the Andromedon and the Sectopod... and far be it from me to throw out baseless guesses, but I think the former’s starting to realize this place is a lot more empty than it was.”

“Loud and clear. Proceed with caution, and you’ve got my endorsement to engage.”

As he nodded, Mordenna took up his post, pulling out his sniper rifle and settling it in his hands. In front of him, he watched the squad take position—Rosa behind SYN, Mary to their side, Wiki on top of one of the buildings, and Fal-Mai presumably well-positioned, somewhere. “Menace One-Five, I am a cobra poised to leap off a cliff over here. I’m firing on that Sectopod—I know those things top to bottom and I guarantee I’m toppling it over.”

“Got it,” Rosa said into comms, voice low, “SYN and I will focus on the Andromedon, then. Mary, stand by to help as you can. Wiki... help however. Assassin, cleanup duty.”

The silent agreement among the squad was what she got back as everyone got prepared. Gazing through the scope of his rifle, it was quick to highlight potential structural weak points on the Sectopod. He’d have to make this shot count—he didn’t doubt its ability to lock onto him even from this distance. Adjusting a bolt on the side of his gun, the scope’s display confirmed he had swapped over to AP rounds. Mordenna breathed in, steadying himself. “Firing in three... two... now.”

He squeezed the trigger on his Darklance, and his eyes were locked on the destination of his bullet. The round shredded through the air and hit home, completely destroying one of the leg joints of the Sectopod. With a heavy weight behind it, it crashed down—and its leg fell onto the Andromedon, pinning it prone. “Right on the mark,” he hissed, the satisfaction of having pulled that off in front of a squad a bit more than the usual spark.

The squad fired in turn, the twin barrage of Rosa and SYN cracking open the safe chamber of the Andromedon and swiftly killing the rider. The top of the Sectopod’s chassis popped open, revealing its blaster. Mordenna lined up to split that thing from barrel to receiver, but was pleasantly surprised when he didn’t have to. Wiki was quick to zip from one spot in reality to the next, appearing on top of the Sectopod and plunging a hand in it. With a shuddering whine, the cannon slipped back in, and the Sectopod shut down.

A shot out of Mary’s rifle left the Sectopod the only threat to deal with. “Move it, sparky!” Mordenna barked. Wiki was fast to comply, winking out of normal sight and reappearing behind one of the buildings. With his eyes trained on it, Mordenna let another shot rip out of the barrel of his gun, blasting a hole straight through the main body of the war machine. Its systems overloaded and with a deafening bang, it was no more.

Letting the breath go, he lowered his weapon... just in time to see a shimmer of psionics. His sister’s cloak dropped and made it clear that she was clutching her head. Feeling some sort of bad twinge, Mordenna rubbed the back of his neck. “... sorry, Fals.” It wasn’t that he hadn’t figured the explosion would hurt her—he wasn’t a Hunter for nothing—it was more to the point that it... Felt bad to see? You really aren’t a Hunter anymore.

Fal-Mai shook her head. “It was a necessary action—I would not have you hold off on dispatching an enemy just because the process of doing so disturbs me.”
“Still,” he protested, “Gatekeepers, Sectopods, unruly Reapers, there is a lot of noise that XCOM brings. Seems hardly fair you’re getting the short end of the stick because Helena didn’t know how to safely design worth shit.”

Fal-Mai was quiet at that, and Mordenna internally cursed. He’d meant to lead up to something good, but...*The ‘bad parent’ card is never a good one to pull, you idiot. You think you’d know this by now. Just get on with it.* “My point being, I think it’s high time we fixed that. Lily? You listening in?”

“*Sure am, Mordenna.*”

“Headpiece that dampens noise above a certain decibel level. I bet my left eye that we can pull that off, yeah?”

“*It’s certainly possible, and definitely something I’ve been meaning to look into.*” Mordenna could figure that line of thought came around for her ever since Fal-Mai’s Ascension Facility. “*Yeah. You just need to make it out of here in one piece.*”

“Don’t go betting on racehorses when you’re not at the track,” he shot back. “Anyway, sound good, Fals?”

She nodded. “I appreciate the gesture. For now—”

“—*We’ve got other stuff to do,*” Rosa followed up. “*The whole goddamn facility likely heard that Sectopod explode. Our cover’s blown.*”

With that, Rosa and SYN began their advance. Not one to be left behind, Mordenna abandoned his perch and traded it for one of the buildings Wiki was perched on. “*Sup, sparky. Pretty intense hack you did there.*”

Wiki stayed where she was at, trying to keep behind a railing. “Largely off the cuff, too, but I had some gleaning that I could do it beforehand. Get curious enough to look up how Sectopods work and all the hostile code in the world doesn’t matter so much when you’ve memorized just how those things function.”

“Codices and their eidetic memories,” he half-grumbled. “I’m gonna have to ransom that info out of you sometime.”

“Ransom?” She gave a digital scoff. “Are you implying I wouldn’t hand it over as part of our new working relationship?”

“Are you?”

Wiki stared at him a bit. Then, she turned her attention forwards. “—I’ll get back to you on that.”

Oh, Codices. Mordenna snickered, pinning his eyes forward. The facility in front of him was all white—a notable deviation from ADVENT’s mostly-gray fare. An ADVENT logo was branded on either side of the entrance door; more notably, they were the Avatar Project type. A quiet sense of dread started to creep on Mordenna. Some dark part of his memories was calling to him, telling him that there was something dreadful just beyond that door. *Well, you’re here now. Gonna be hard to tell everyone to turn back, even if you wanted to.*

Rolling his shoulders, Mordenna readied himself, eyes on the front door. The squad was advancing steadily, splitting into two as they crossed the bridge. Wiki peered over the railing, and Mordenna got the strong impression that she was squinting. “Strange. I’m absolutely sure there’s a guard in
the facility—they should’ve come charging out by now.”

“Curious indeed, but won’t matter so much when we encounter them. Just their choice on where they wanna die.”

Still, Wiki kept her head up... which was honestly distracting Mordenna a little. Speaking of his squad (outside of his sister) being unable to be stealthy, how did she think she could hide with that constant black cloud off of the back of her head? Granted, she could warp into another dimension and render it largely moot to anyone without interdimensional vision, but he still found it absurd.

“Nice squad you’ve got here.”

Mordenna’s hand flew to the Darkclaw and he was turning around and firing off a shot behind him before he knew so much as what he was shooting at. His eyes caught up quickly—the Specter’s shoulder dispersed in a cloud of nanites, and it backed up, raising its hands in a pacifying gesture as it reformed. “Hold on hold on, don’t shoot.”

Wiki caught up quickly and had her gun levelled at the intruder. “Give me one good reason, you. You meddler.”

The Specter’s head swiveled to Wiki. “Ah, yes. You. The defected Codex of legend. Figured the lone Codex batting for XCOM’s side and flying their colors like that had to be you.”

“That is not a good reason,” she hissed.

They shook their head. “Apologies. My one good reason is the same as yours, Wiki. I’m tired of fighting for ADVENT. You know exactly why me and my ilk were brought in.”

Ever so slightly lowering the Darkclaw, Mordenna squinted. “—One of the Ethereals outside of the Trio brought you guys in to spite my old man making the Codices, right?”

“Precisely... well, largely. Twin Ethereals, but otherwise the story’s correct.” They gestured to Wiki. “Probably why Wiki here is still visibly agitated at me.”

“While I can’t exactly lie and say that’s not the reason, it’s not my only reason.” Her gun remained raised, but she took her finger off the trigger. “More importantly you just showed up behind the both of us!”

“Mordenna, Wiki, what’s going on up there?” That was Mary over the channel.

Shaking his head, Mordenna lowered his gun completely. “—got spooked by a Specter. Still negotiating, but I think we might have another turncoat.”

“Upgrade that ‘might’ to a ‘definitely,’” they corrected. “I am, as you might be, tired of being a product of spite. Tired of running around under ADVENT’s quite terrible administration, and wanting to lash out at the Elders like many others.”

Mordenna eyed them up. “And why should we trust you?”

The Specter pointed towards the Forge. “Technically, I’m the leader of a squad in that building. I told them to stay behind while I ‘sabotaged their SPARK.’ Two Troopers, a Shieldbearer, and a Viper. If it helps, I’d be fully willing to let your Codex here sever me from the Network herself—and check back through my order logs if she thinks this is some sort of trick.”

Wiki finally lowered her gun completely, pinning it to her hip and standing up. “If I find out you’ve
been lying to us in any capacity, I’m having Mordenna here fire on the core keeping you together.”

“Right side of your hip,” Mordenna confirmed. Just for a second, he could swear he saw the Specter tense. Specters could move their core around, but Mordenna’s eyes were good enough to pick out where it was.

If they betrayed any emotion, it passed quickly. “All the more reason for me to not be duplicitous. Now, make it quick. Sooner or later they’re going to get curious why I’ve been out so long.”

Stepping forward, Wiki plunged her hand into their chest as she had the Sectopod. The green lines running down their form flickered and the Specter stood stock-still for a few moments. After a while of silence, Wiki pulled back, and the Specter animated again. “—They weren’t lying. Free of the Network now, too.”

“Excellent!” Mordenna holstered his Darkclaw and clapped his hands together. “Does this please the Great Commandy One?”

He got a chuckle over comms for his troubles. “Absolutely,” Eliza replied. “Though, I can’t help but notice our new ally hasn’t presented us with a name.”

“ADVENT was never fond of giving us names—”

“Schrödinger.” Mordenna interrupted them with. “And I pray to god you know why, you obfuscating science horror.”

The Specter laughed in turn. “Schrödinger it is. ‘Schro’ might make for a better nickname for short.”

“Lovely,” Rosa replied. “Can we go, now?”

Mordenna watched as Schrödinger’s green lines shifted to an XCOM blue. “I’m ready to go if we all are. Revenge and whatnot, yes?”

“As always,” Mordenna collected his sniper rifle—propped up against the railing in his quick action—keeping his sights on the building. “Now that you’ve been severed—”

The front door opened. Mordenna fired. One less Viper. “—they’re gonna come crawling out of the woodwork! Look at that.”

The squad on the ground made it across the bridge as the Viper went down. Through one of the windows, Mordenna himself spotted one of the Troopers. So, too, did SYN, and the Trooper got some plasma in his shoulder for his troubles. Pulling the bolt on his weapon back to reload, he adjusted it again. Bloodletting rounds. His favorite. Made a hell of a trail and left wounds that were hell to fix up. If the target survived the encounter, of course.

Schrödinger advanced, disassembling and buzzing forwards. Once they got closer and into some good cover, they reformed, peeking out of it. “—It’s likely one of them’s radioed for backup. I’d highly advise clearing through them all quickly and making your way inside. I probably don’t have to tell you this, but you’ll want to see what’s in there.”

“It’s why we’re here, after all,” Wiki replied. “Not here for just the exercise.”

“Never meant to imply it.”

Disregarding the banter for a second, Mordenna kept his eye on the second window. Any second
now. Was only logical that someone would either dash past or poke their head out. They probably knew he was here by now—but that Commander proxy leading the lot of them likely didn’t know how to move against him.

A flash of white. A trigger squeeze. Definitely not, if that dead Shieldbearer was any indication.

It was down to two Troopers at this point. “I reckon you can blaze in there,” Mordenna offered. “Not like two Troopers will do anything to SYN’s armor.” SYN was a tank. Though he knew his sister’s sword could slice through it regardless, he’d taken the time to firm it up.

SYN took the suggestion, and his chassis lit up blue as he ignored the door and smashed his way into the facility. Mordenna could hear they dying cry of one of the soldiers as SYN opened fire. Rosa sprinted after him, and after purposefully crashing into his back, unloaded to his other side. After a moment, she spoke. “Area clear, and... you’re going to want to see this, guys.”

“Ominous!” Mordenna returned the Darklance to his back and jumped down. “I love it. Marching in right behind you.”

“That should be the last of the resistance for now,” Schrödinger confirmed. “Until the reinforcements come in. Probably best we get a move on.”

Not like Mordenna needed to be told twice. With his usual strides, he advanced towards the facility, walking across the bridge but keeping his vision wide. Just because Schrödinger said that should be the last of them didn’t mean it was. It wasn’t as if he didn’t trust their new recruit—well, maybe that was a bit of it—but better safe than sorry. He ducked through the hole that SYN made...

... and a few lost memories came screaming back to him.

The inside of the facility was a stark contrast to the outside. Dark floors and walls, while well-illuminated, lent the inside an air of being covered in shadow. Upright tanks on the far wall lay just beyond some workstations with dark monitors. The tanks themselves bore the standard ADVENT logo. Guard still up, he talked in comms. “Eliza. You seeing this?”

“Somewhat unfortunately,” was the stilted reply he got back. It hit him just then that, well, Eliza was trapped in one of those for twenty years. Probably wasn’t the most comforting sight to see three of them here. Yet, something in his gut spoke of something far more terrible beyond.

Bradford seemed to step in for her. “Are those... cloning pods?”

“Most likely so.” Tygan was next to come in. “The DNA sequence and vial we acquired from the Blacksite are likely being used to clone soldiers in this very facility.” That theory had some weight, if the clear floor tiles to the far sides of the room revealing an underground part of the facility were to be believed. The structure went for a long way down, and even as they spoke, some smaller parts beneath were active and moving.

“—That vial was going for a very specific sequence of DNA, doctor,” Lily added. “Something tells me it wasn’t just for the regular troops...”

“Keep looking’ is the message here,” Mordenna summed up, walking further in with intent. “Sis? Anything around we should be aware of?”

“There are no further guards,” was the reply. “The outside is empty. I will be returning inside shortly.”
Mordenna rounded a corner and walked under an archway, unintentionally leading the squad. A thousand thoughts were brewing in his head as his brain was wracking his memory, trying to see if it could find out what way beyond the double doors he came upon and how it linked to what else he knew of the Avatar Project. Lily was right. The Elders needed a very specific sequence of DNA for themselves. But... why? He knew they were dying. He knew that they needed another option. If he had any darkened memories regarding the subject, they weren’t saying anything. The only solution would be to advance and “wake them up.”

With a quick tap, the room beyond the doors was revealed. Once again, his eyes had to adjust to the sudden change in color. The room was almost stark white, with gray sections on the floor. Stairs led up to the main platform in the middle of the area. Machinery was present in nearly every corner of the room, and given the time, Mordenna could discern the purpose of all of it. No, his attention was drawn to the center of the room—where an upright tank stood, with the Avatar logo on the front.

Finally, files he had remembered accessing came back to him. This Forge... was home to the prototype Avatar. The Elders had been trying for years to make a body that they could inhabit that would be able to withstand their psionics. Humans were the last key to the puzzle. If there was an intact Avatar in there...

It took a minute, but Mordenna realized that he and everyone else that had entered the room had stopped in their tracks. Even Fal-Mai was on the far side, having entered through the other door, staring at the tank. The two of them locked eyes, and Mordenna drifted forwards like he was walking in a dream. There was a lever on the side of the tube—the Stasis Tube, he remembered—which he reached out and pulled. Klaxons blared, the front of the container parted... and revealed the body within.

Save being colored white instead of orange, the suit the body was in was nearly an exact match of the one the Commander inhabited. In his ear, he could hear Eliza’s strangled gasp, sending a knife into his gut. As the body slumped forward, unsupported, he was quick to reach out and catch it.

“That’s—"

Bradford could only get so much out before Mordenna took over. “Goons and gals,” he forced out, “this just became an extraction mission. I want a hole in the wall to the back of the facility and I want it now. We’re getting out of here.”

“I’ve got Firebrand on approach. Keep that thing safe!”

Hoisting the Forge Body further over his shoulder, Mordenna took out his Darkclaw with his free hand. He could hear SYN break out into a sprint, and soon enough, there was a SPARK-sized hole in the back of the facility as well.

“Reinforcements are coming to the south!” Firebrand said. “I’m moving this bird as fast as she can go—you get to the exfil point and we can leg it out before they get here!”

Taking it to heart, the squad sprinted out of the new backdoor in the facility, Mordenna himself being the last as he kept a steady hold on the body. He didn’t even want to think about the kind of state the Commander must’ve been in to make a sound like that having seen the suit the Forge Body was in. If anything, he supposed it was likely linked to her PTSD—you didn’t exactly sit in something like that for so long and not develop some pretty strong feelings about it.

He could spot the Skyranger on approach as they scaled the outcroppings at the back of the facility. Looking back, an ADVENT dropship was farther in the distance. Mordenna had to give
Firebrand credit—the model of the Skyranger was an old one. For her to outpace the newer dropships must’ve meant some serious flying on her part.

The Skyranger came in at a hover, and the back opened before it had even established a firm spot. As the cords came down, SYN rocketed up—with Rosa clinging to him, no less. Wiki and Schrödinger went by their own methods: teleportation and “flight” respectively. The rest of the squad took ahold of a cord and were drawn up into the Skyranger as it already started to fly out. Either Firebrand could see back there or she was taking a very confident gamble that they had all gotten to cords in time.

Didn’t matter so much now that they were on the ship, he figured. Swinging in, Mordenna took his spot next to his sister, laying the Forge Body on the floor carefully once everyone was settled in. Firebrand came in over the ship’s speakers. “Everyone in? I’d apologize for the hasty extraction, but by the sounds of it, you all needed to get the hell out of dodge.”

“We’re all in,” Mordenna confirmed, “with package in tow. Get us the hell out of dodge.”

“Alright. Central, this is Firebrand. All XCOM operatives secure and the package is safe. We’re on our way home.”

Why did she have to be so weak?

Here Eliza was, leaned against Bradford, walking down a little-used hall of the Avenger. She still had her head partially buried in his shoulder, confident that he was making sure they wouldn’t run into any walls. It was quiet, save for the sounds of their footsteps and the gentle rush of her own breathing. Eliza prayed that they wouldn’t encounter anyone else while she was like this. Nobody needed to see their Commander in this sort of state.

The minute she had seen those tubes in the front of the Forge Facility, Eliza had almost seized up—and she hated it. She knew why. But the fact that she could be paralyzed by something that really only amounted to a goddamn storage container wore away at her and made her frustrated at herself. That Forge Body certainly only made it worse. A suit. You’re spooked by a suit. Eliza, what’s wrong with you?

Eliza took in a shuddering breath, squeezing Bradford. In response, he stopped and pulled her closer. “Liz...”

“I—I’m fine,” she eked out, lying through her teeth. She loved Bradford, but the fact that he had to coddle her like this sat wrong with her. She was the Commander of XCOM. She had never fought in any of the battles against the aliens herself. She shouldn’t be like this.

“You are not,” he retorted, though not unkindly. “Look... being cooped up for as long as you were, I’d get jumpy around anything that reminded me of that time, too. It’s not like your reaction is irrational.”

“But... in front of the whole Bridge. ” She weakly beat a fist against his shoulder. “I nearly broke down. God knows if you hadn’t gotten me out of there, it would have been worse.”

“Do you think that would’ve changed anyone wanting to fight for you, Liz?” He moved her head so she had to look right at him. His face was soft, even if his words were firm. “You’ve been
through hell and back. Anyone thinking you’d come out the other side perfectly fine are the ones who need their attitudes checked. You’re human. You aren’t invincible.”

“I’m not...” Her throat seized up on her, but she pressed on. “I’m not human. I-I can’t be. Not after twenty years. Not after...” *What Argus had done to me.* Eliza herself didn’t remember—but Mordenna’s words did have to have some credit behind them...

He squeezed her into him, undeterred. “You’re human where it matters, Eliza. You still have that care for everyone around you, and I don’t think anything will change that. In a war like this... this world needs someone like you. One hundred percent human or not.”

Hearing that, Eliza took a moment to just sink into Bradford, arms winding around him properly. As much as she had forgiven Mordenna... his words stuck with her. *Chosen Siren.* One day off. Changes still made. Could she even sing, now? So much potentially taken away from her, leaving her to pick up the pieces.

But, she wasn’t immune to Bradford’s hug, or his words. Perhaps her own worth could lie outside of that... it was just hard to accept, after everything else. She had so much repenting to do. It was only right, after the things she had done. Bradford knew all of it, and yet he stayed by her side. Eliza didn’t think she could ever get around to telling her new soldiers what had happened... but Bradford was definitely enough.

A bit more of silence, and Eliza stood up properly, leaning her forehead against Bradford’s. “—I’m sorry. I’ve got no way to justify myself.”

“You don’t need to,” he replied softly. “You do enough for everyone here. You’ve got to rest sometimes, Eliza.”

“There’s just too much to be done in a day, Bradford. God knows people need the help, too...”

“And you do too.” One of his hands sought out her shoulder and squeezed it. “Human or not, you need your breaks.”

She lidded her eyes. Eliza just... couldn’t. She shouldn’t need the breaks. There were people who needed her, who relied on her. She had to be ready for them, no matter the hour. Still, she sighed and closed her eyes. “—you might have a point. Might. Just...” Her mind roamed back to the Forge Body. “... we’ve got places to be, Bradford.”

“Liz. You don’t have to enter the Lab.”

“Have Tygan cover it. We... we need to discuss the ramifications of it with him in person.”

After a long while, Bradford sighed in turn and let her go. “Alright. I’ll tell him to put it away or whatever he can do with it. Don’t feel like you have to stay, alright?”

“Alright.” With that, Eliza stepped back from Bradford, carrying herself better than she did before. Making their way through the ship, the two of them eventually got to a hallway that connected to the Laboratory, arriving at the less-used door. Exchanging a silent glance, Eliza leaned against the wall while Bradford walked in, closing her eyes.

After a second or two, Bradford came back. “There’s a sheet over it. Think that’s enough?”

Eliza nodded, opening her eyes. “Should be. Let’s get this over with.”

Following Bradford, Eliza passed through the doorway and into the Lab. Over at the dissection
table stood Tygan and Mordenna. Both of them were on either side of the table itself, where a white cloth was draped over presumably the Forge Body. A chill ran up her spine, knowing what lay underneath... but she could steel herself, and steel herself she did. Eliza walked with head held high, arriving at the table as Bradford did. “Tygan. Mordenna.”

“Commander.” Tygan inclined his head towards her. “Good to see you on your feet.”

Eliza gave him a smile, knowing he meant well by his comment. “Glad, myself. What’s in that suit?”

“An Avatar.”

All eyes went to Mordenna. He was looking down at the sheet—no doubt seeing through it, with his gifted eyesight. His gaze flickered between all of them before he spoke again. “No doubt you lot have uncovered that the Elders have been, quite frankly, refining humans for some nebulous purpose. The gene clinics. Screening for just the right sequence—and whoever had it.”

“Cut to the chase, Hunter,” Bradford said, tense.

Mordenna tapped the sheet. “I’m also pretty sure you guys know the Elders are straight up dying. Muscle degeneracy and all. Their bodies are getting too weak to handle them, though if that’s because of their use of psionics or simply a genetic disease, not even I know. The chase I’m cutting to here is that they’re making new bodies. Bodies they can inhabit.” He gestured to Tygan. “Tygan here knows that all ADVENT soldiers have gaps in their sequences, fit to have whatever alien DNA shoved in them at will. This body, this specific body, is different. Like Priests, it’s got psionic sensitivity... but that’s on its own. Not through Sectoid or Gatekeeper DNA sequence filling. The Elders manufactured a body that can withstand huge amounts of psionics... and even augment them.”

The weight of what Mordenna just said settled on the room heavily. Bradford rubbed his mouth, Tygan went stiff, and Eliza found herself simply staring at him. From the way Mordenna spoke... it was as if he knew this all along. “Hunter. How long have you known this.”

He looked to the Commander, and then swiftly away. “—Severance Effect, Eliza. I only knew when I saw the Stasis Tube. Then the memories came screaming back. I would have told you earlier if I had known.”

Eliza’s potential unease melted away quickly. God knows there had been a lot she had forgotten in her severance. She looked back to the body, other questions rising. “So what we’ve got here is essentially a puppet for an Elder.”

“Not even that. A permanent body. Conscious upload presumably included.” He looked back to her now that her face wasn’t as stern. “And this is just an alpha. Barely a prototype. You lot have been busy mucking up the process, but even then, this thing is potentially useable. Not that I’m saying it should be used. God no. But the Elders sure as hell intend to.”

Bradford dropped his hand. “Anything else we should know?”

“Just that they’re going to be pissed you guys took this one.” He gestured again. “And that there should be a total of about four, this one possibly excluded. Probably with the four Elders looking after Earth being the ones to get the test run.”

“Cronus, Odin, Helena, and Argus,” Eliza listed, spitting out the last name. “It’s our job to make sure that never happens.” She nodded towards Mordenna. “Thank you for your insight, Mordenna.
Tygan? Update me if you find out anything more about it.”

“Understood, Commander,” he replied. “Mordenna? I believe I might have to borrow you for future research projects, if your knowledge is this extensive.”

“Happy to oblige, doc.” He spread out his arms. “I’ve killed everything that walks, flies, and crawls. I ought to update your autopsies.”

“If that’s all,” Bradford said, with the definite air of “anyway,” “we’ve got some pieces to pick up. Didn’t Wiki say she had a location for us to check out based on the other Codex brains we’ve acquired?”

“She certainly did.” Eliza straightened and nodded at them all. “I’ll have to be going over those reports and getting back to her. Is there anything else for me?” When all she got was them shaking their heads, she continued. “Alright. Mordenna, Tygan, continue your work. Bradford, I’m off for Wiki.”

“Good luck, Commander,” Mordenna returned as she went to leave.
Chapter Summary

Jax’s siblings visit him in his cell—but not before an encounter with Eliza.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the wait on this one. I really don't have an explanation outside of possible, temporary burnout.

Was this really the life that Jax was meant to lead?

Stuck in a cell, banished from what he thought was his true home... and yet, getting daily visits from his followers. Extended an offer of service from who was supposed to be his enemy... and even more strangely, the fact that he was considering it so heavily. Twenty years, he had been in service of the Elders, as arguably Their strongest champion, the very face of Their power. Was he not supposed to vehemently reject the offer Eliza presented him outright?

Yet. Yet he had told her “wait and see,” in so many words. He had told her that he would consider her offer. Some part of Jax recoiled at everything he had done ever since Eliza had approached him in his cell. This was not him, surely. He was the Chosen Warlock. Their eldest child. Something had happened to him between now and XCOM arriving at his former Stronghold to make him act like this.

Yet. He was currently tracing the padding on the palms of his gauntlets. Jeanne had come in not so long ago, had marvelled at how Jax had been cleared to be uncuffed. Many more had come before her, offered their support to him, their hand by his side. He didn’t think he was missing a single follower in his visits. Maria had even come in multiple times to check in on him. Technically... they were all in the employ of XCOM now. Even if they still supported him, they moved about the ship as one of the crew. Shouldn’t that preclude him joining?

Even so, his stubborn pride was nipping at his heels every time he tried to stop at a conclusion, forcing him to dance around it and provide more and more reasoning to do it. He was “giving up too easily.” He was “not believing in Them sufficiently.” But... had He not believed in him—?

Weakness. He did not believe in weakness. The minute you decided to disobey was the minute you forfeit His love for you.

Jax’s arms sought around himself, and he heaved a longing sigh. Every time he tried to broach anything about that, some part of him was quick to supply reasons and explanations. It was maddening. He was trying to come to peace with himself, but he wouldn’t allow it! Jax did not want to make the decision to defect lightly, but it was hard to think seriously on it when his support of the Elders cried foul of it. It hurt, to think of it—to remember why he was even here. Eventually, when left alone long enough, he’d give up and resolve to come back to it later.
He’d done it too many times, now. Too many times he had gauged his wounds from Him and wondered how many were his fault. How many of them were His fault. *All of them are you fault, have you gone mad? Dare you question Him?* Yes! Yes he dared. After all... “A good parent would not leave their child fearing for their life at punishment, would they?” Had Fal-Mai not said those very words to him? *You are simply unequipped to handle Their love. They mean the best for you.* “Is ‘love’ supposed to hurt?” Jax knew there was a difference in what Maria said was her love for him, and what the Elders said Their love was. He knew this. So why was it so hard to grasp?

There is some part of you that is still rational, that knows that you are merely being petulant at the Elders, and They have acted accordingly. You are simply masochistic in your thinking. He shuddered. No. He was just... asking questions. You know where that had landed you before. You want to ask so many questions, but the minute your Father asks just one of you, you can’t answer Him, can you?

Curling in on himself, Jax hugged his knees and desperately tried to clear his thoughts. He was in the Gathering Hall all over again. He was asking too many questions. He shouldn’t think. He shouldn’t be so weak—

The rush of the door opening was something new, and Jax found himself flinching at it. It was most likely Eliza... but he couldn’t even bear to look up. Despite the outside noise, the memory hadn’t stopped. He could swear he could feel the very air around him heating up, and his whole back tensed in agony, waiting for what was surely coming. Weakness. Weakness. These emotions of yours are mere weakness. As much as you chide your sister, you are just as deficient as she is. It’s no wonder He cast you out. You’re lucky He kept you as long as He did.

Jax. He’d done all he could. He thought he had just been asking genuine questions. Jax. Cronus was angry now. He’d never heard Him use just his first name before. Jax had crossed a line. Was there nothing he could do right? Jax. He was sorry. He was sorry! He—

“Jax!”

Though not entirely coming to his senses, the presence of warmth on his arms got him to look up, fervently-muttered apologies dying on his lips. Steadily, he could make out the form of the Commander, leaned in close to him. She looked so concerned, and... pained. It was then that Jax could feel his psionics slipping out from under him as they had, a direct reaction to the terror he had been experiencing. The storm was likely buffeting her.

Jax took in a gasping breath, his gauntlets flying to his face. He could feel them hum and fill with energy as he desperately tried to stem the tide of power that was crashing out of him. They were fulfilling their duty, restraining his power. Even so, he knew a force like his to be unbearable. “C-Commander, don’t—”

He could feel Eliza squeezing his arms, leaning a bit closer. “Jax. Where do you think you’re at, right now?”

He... he didn’t know. He shook his head feverishly. The hall, the cell, his Stronghold, he just couldn’t comprehend. Jax’s gauntlets trembled with his fears and power.

“Jax, I’m going to move your gauntlets from your eyes. I want you to look around and tell me what you see, ok?” With that, there was pressure on his hands, trying to move them away from his face. He resisted, initially... but he realized what Eliza was trying to do. In the aftershocks he had faced in his punishment, Maria often attempted to calm him by reassuring him of his surroundings. Realizing that, he let Eliza take his hands down.
Gingerly, he opened his eyes... and felt a fresh batch of tears fall from them, quickly hiding them again. *Crying in front of the Commander. You are truly a disgrace to the Elder’s vision.* As if in response to his thoughts—or to the breath he choked in—he heard Eliza gently shush him, hands over his wrists. “It’s ok. It’s ok to cry. You’re hurt. It’s natural. Wipe your tears, and we can try again.”

Hands shaking, he palmed at the wetness on his face, casting his gaze upwards and trying to look anywhere but at the Commander. What greeted his eyes was white. No gray, no purple, no spectral flames. It was his cell. There were no Elders here. Just him and the Commander.

*The Commander.* Though he looked over to her, his eyes went down, focusing on the XCOM emblem on her uniform. Here he was, breaking down in front of her, having to be *coddled* by her. If he had any image before, it was ruined now. The storm was still there... but granted, it was subsiding with the knowledge that he was not there, anymore. He was on the Avenger, out of Their reach.

Something caught his eye—though the cracks and seams of his gauntlets were mostly pinkish-purple from his own powers, there was a mote or two of *light blue* coursing amongst them. His gauntlets were equal siphons and storage as much as they were restraints. Was he...?

Finally, he tore his gaze up to Eliza. She was less pained now, and while she was still concerned, it was more soft. “Can you tell me where we are, Jax?”

*This is absurd. Are you really going to have her mollycoddle you like this?* “... *I—we’re i-in my cell. Not... not there.*” The answer was *yes,* apparently.

Nodding, Eliza kept her hands on his gauntlets. “Yes. We’re on the Avenger, in your cell. This is where you’ve been for the past few days. Nowhere else. I know what it’s like, to get confused.” Her face softened further. “You don’t have to be sorry. It happens. You’re going to be ok.”

He kept repeating that all to himself, in his mind. He had to reaffirm that he was *here,* in this moment. Even if he detested his very being for falling apart in front of her like this. But... something stuck out at him. Surely Eliza, even with her minimal psionics, could feel the storm once he had entered. Would it not have been wiser to leave and fetch Maria, and forsake whatever she had originally entered for? She was only putting herself in harm’s way by doing this. What was she trying to accomplish? Was... was she actually trying to comfort him?

*This is the Commander of XCOM! A mere target for you to capture! Yet here you are, practically fraternizing with the enemy! What do you have to say for you and your relentless thirst for punishment?!”*

His hands balled into fists, and he tucked his head down, hiding his face. “I—” He hiccupped, gritting his teeth. “I’m sorry... this... this is u-undignified of me, I shouldn’t—” Then he was interrupted by a barely-restrained sob, and his hands sought into his hair. Almost anything would be preferable to this, this slow torture that he was enduring.

“Jax.” He sucked in a breath, but nodded shallowly. “Do you want a hug?” Was she seriously stopping to offer one? Jax... would not mock the action. He knew how calming a gesture it was, especially for one such as him—but that shred of pride that was still left was practically choking him, forbidding him to accept it. How much more would he debase himself? Even as he asked that, he could feel himself shaking, and a *young* part of him was crying out. *Are you going to make her go away? Are you going to make us be alone?* No. He didn’t want to be alone. He did not want to be this *childish* either, but out of all of his problems right now, there was exactly one he could help.
Opening his eyes and lifting his head just long enough to confirm where the Commander was, Jax reached out and pulled her in tightly, squeezing her. He buried his face into her shoulder, trembling with the force of holding back his crying. You’re pathetic. That he may be... but this felt better. Eliza asked. Though she was supposed to be his enemy, he found comfort in the gesture she offered.

“It’s going to be ok,” she assured, voice slightly strained. Jax hadn’t the mind to think as to why. “Deep breaths. You’re safe here. Nobody’s going to hurt you.”

“Will—” Jax found himself choking out, hating himself for every word. He had to know. “You... y-you think I’m weak—?”

“No. Not at all.” Jax could feel Eliza squeeze him back. “You’re strong to have managed this long. Everybody has their limits. It’s ok to need to vent, to break down somewhere safe.”

Some tension went out of Jax’s shoulders, and he quieted, listening for Eliza’s breathing. Short, slightly ragged. It was then that Jax realized just how tightly he had been holding her and he released a majority of his grip. Eliza sucked in a breath, but calmly let it out, going to deep breathing. He followed in her lead, even as some of his breaths in shuddered and his breaths out were more quiet sobs than anything else. “—I’m sorry, I-I didn’t mean to,” he muttered in a small voice.

“That’s ok. I’m fine,” she assured. “You’re under a lot of stress. I don’t blame you. Just keep breathing with me—I’ll guide you out.”

Jax did, following along with her, breathing deeply. He’d cried a moist patch into her shoulder, but couldn’t be bothered to lift his head. It’d be even worse to show his face in his current state. Though his self-loathing, born from his pride, still dug in at the back of his mind... he was calming down. The storm of his psionics was breaking, and he found his sorrow abating. Eliza was, rather successfully, leading him out of his episode.

Eventually, his breathing calmed completely, and he no longer felt his eyes filling up with tears. Eliza must’ve understood, as she spoke softly. “How are you feeling, Jax?”

It was a while before he responded, speaking lowly and in a measured voice. “Better. I...” He took in a deep breath. “I would not have thought you one to do such a thing, for... someone such as I.”

“It’s only right,” she replied. “I wouldn’t leave you there to suffer through that. Like I said, I know what it’s like to suffer alone, when the past creeps up on you. I don’t want you to have to go through that when I have the choice to help you through it.”

He let out the breath he had taken in calmly, taking a moment to reflect on his situation. He, almost amusingly, had literally taken her up on her offer of “a shoulder to cry on.” Jax forced himself to ignore the voice at the back of his mind that continued to decry his failures, pulling back just a bit to wipe at his eyes. “… thank you, Eliza.”

At this distance, in this quiet, Jax could swear he felt the little psionics she had radiate with warmth. “I’m happy to help, Jax. Need a bit more time?”

Right. She had probably entered to ask something of him and found him in the state he was in. By his reckoning, it hadn’t been five days yet, and she’d already visited a while ago to uncuff him. Taking another deep breath, he parted from her, eyes cast downwards. “I... believe I should be fine for now. Do you have something to ask of me?”
Respectfully, Eliza backed off in turn, but remained close, a hand on his arm. “Only if you feel you’re up for it. Your siblings wanted to see you.”

A few things took Jax aback upon hearing that. Firstly, and most importantly, they actually wanted to see him? Jax would’ve expected their wanted dealings with him to be done after the mission to capture them. He knew that if he joined with XCOM, he would have to see them day after day... but for them to approach him of their own volition? Unheard of. Secondly... if his feelings had gotten away from him that badly, there was no doubt that they had also caught ghosts of his episode. With that on his mind, he was torn between denying them outright and letting them in for the sheer curiosity of what they wanted to say.

After a few moments of consideration, Jax moved to stand, sorting himself out the best he could, even running his gauntlets through his hair and tying it up into a simple braid just so he didn’t look as bedraggled as he felt. “Allow them in. I also wish to speak with them.”

He cast a glance back at Eliza just in time to watch a pleasantly surprised expression cross her face. “Well, alright. Are you sure you’re good to handle it? I can stay here, if you want.”

“I am sure, Commander.” He drew himself to a full, confident height. “Though, I would appreciate it if you remained. I do not count on my siblings attempting to do anything to me in your presence.” Jax wondered what exactly their thoughts would be when they entered and saw him largely no worse for wear.

Nodding, Eliza walked over to the datapad, pressing a button. From his position, he could see beyond his cell, allowing him to catch Mordenna pacing in the room beyond. The Hunter stopped upon hearing the door open and locked eyes with his brother. After a moment, Jax nodded, gesturing with a clawed gauntlet to step inside. Mordenna came in short order, with Fal-Mai turning in just behind him. The two of them looked... rightfully, a little reserved, but Mordenna was hiding it well.

Jax was the first to break the ice. “Sister. Brother.”

“Jax.” “Brother.” Mordenna and Fal-Mai returned, respectively, in unintended unison.

When nobody moved forwards, Jax pressed on. “—while I am aware that the two of you have arrived here, likely seeking to ask a few questions of me... considering neither of you have asked them yet, I will ask mine first. Mordenna?” His brother nodded in response. “Was it you who deduced what... had been placed upon me?” He didn’t want to return to this subject, but he steeled himself. His curiosity had been eating away at him.

“Well, yeah,” Mordenna began. “I’ll cut my thoughts short here, but these eyes of mine are very good at spotting things they’ve seen before. That connector on the front of your collar? Same make as the ‘obedience collars’ they use to move high-profile prisoners. The rest of it had been changed, but that I recognized.”

He closed his eyes for a second, willingly ignoring the implications. He opened them again. “And you willingly guided our sister into cutting it off?”

Mordenna shoved his hands into his pockets, eyes flitting about. Jax knew that tell—Mordenna was processing a bit of info at once, thinking over what he wanted to do. After a while, he seemed to uncertainly hit upon it. “Well. Whole purpose of the mission was to capture you, not to watch you—” He winced and rubbed the back of his neck, looking away. Looked like he cut himself off. “—yeah. Wouldn’t be good if you were dead. Not exactly the mission parameters.”
It... seemed as if there was more that Mordenna wanted to say on the subject, but he kept his mouth shut. Though Jax found himself off-put by Mordenna’s cold reasoning... there was enough to suggest that Mordenna was toeing around his words because he knew he had an audience. Jax let it drop, and turned to Fal-Mai. “… I suppose I must also ask you what you must think of me regarding the incident before that one.”

Though Fal-Mai had looked a tad bit reserved before, she straightened now. “Brother. What the Elders did to you would make anyone cower. I do not think you lesser; it was an expected reaction to what you have endured.”

_Expected._ Much like Eliza assuring him that she didn’t blame him for how he acted under duress. A part of him was still asking why about it all. Jax was still wrestling with if it was a good or a bad thing, but he took it in stride for now, inclining his head towards Fal-Mai in lieu of a response.

Fal-Mai, however, continued. “I had seen you armor out in the field... how fares your back, brother? Not to mention the... _fit_ you had when we came for you.”

Taking in a steady breath, Jax’s eyes surveyed the room. Eliza continued to wear a look of heavy concern. Mordenna looked almost _resigned_ as his gaze was still off to the side. Fal-Mai herself was calm, but not with a cold air about her. She... merely did seem to be questioning it genuinely, as much as Jax didn’t want to answer.

Well, Jax figured he had asked imploring questions of either of them. He was now obligated to answer what they had for him. “… I will admit. My Mystics say they had seen a large patch of burnt skin upon my back. If they are correct...” He lidded his eyes. “It has not faded yet. Maria doesn’t think it ever will.”

The room went quiet at that. Fal-Mai was suddenly withdrawn, arms around herself, as if feeling the back of her own armor, searching for such damage on herself. Eliza bit her fist, seeming to stem off a tide of anger. Mordenna’s own anger, however? It was much less constrained. “— _figures._ It really fuckin’ does. Don’t get me wrong, I’m pissed at the Elders here. It figures that I’m not the only one that has to deal with getting _branded_. ”

Fal-Mai closed her eyes at that, looking for all the world like she wanted to disappear. If the Elders had used even close to as much power as They did on him? She was likely marked, too. Upon Mordenna’s words, the heavy silence continued, with Jax feeling his posture start to fall.

“This is bullshit.”

All eyes went to Mordenna. Sensing the need to elaborate, he went on. “We all manage to hightail it to a separate post code to get away from the Elders and we’re still dealing with the shit they did to us. Ain’t right.”

Fal-Mai nodded at that, and Jax? Jax closed his eyes. He could not join in Mordenna’s outright vilification of the Elders. His mind still sought for reasons, after all. As he opened them again, he watched Mordenna’s own eyes jump about, settling on Eliza for a few seconds before he clapped his hands together. “Tell you all what. On this ship, we don’t have the Elders breathing down our necks anymore. Just Eliza, and I’m fine with that because she’s actually got a mouth.” Eliza chuckled in response, and this time around, Jax found the sound rather melodious. Perhaps another change he hadn’t noticed before? Hard to say.

Gesturing as he was known to do, Mordenna continued speaking. “So! I propose a plan. Bro, sis... I’ve got a wild idea. How about we actually try being _nice_ to each other for a change? Failing that, at least not trying to kill each other.”
This day couldn’t possibly exist. Jax half-wanted to plead for someone to draw back the curtain and reveal the whole thing was a farce. Mordenna? Suggesting they bury the hatchet? Fal-Mai, at least, looked optimistic, but guarded. “… I will admit, I did not expect that to be a proposition from you,” she began. “I have always wanted cooperation between the three of us, though that had been in the past when I had wished for us to achieve our goal as quickly as possible. But it is a desire I could carry over into this new life. I, for one, agree with this.”

Jax… wished he could be as cautiously optimistic as his sister. He levelled a careful gaze at Mordenna. “Hear me out, brother; I would very much like for this proposition to be genuine. But I must ask, how am I to believe that this is not a tactic to make us drop our guard around you for nefarious reasons?”

“Because if I do something to you guys,” Mordenna responded, “I risk getting thrown out of here. And I really, really like it here, as it turns out. It doesn’t suck and that’s pretty groovy. So, there’s that.”

Mordenna? Thinking on the consequences of his actions? Truthfully, Jax knew that he was equipped to comprehend and calculate things to a not insignificant degree… but from what he knew of his brother, it was almost out of left field. As he mused on it, he did remember something. There had been, a while back, one of the telltale reprises of Mordenna going through some of his insecurities. The fact that the Hunter still stood before him today was perhaps a testament to what Eliza was capable of.

A good answer was a good answer. The Warlock nodded. “Fine. I see the merit in that. Consider myself, as well, invested in this plan. It will certainly make proceedings easier for the future.”

“Now ain’t that just grand!” Mordenna broke into a confident grin. “The Chosen, all standing in a circle and agreeing to not be quite as shit towards each other. Did you think you were gonna see this day or what, Eliza?”

Shaking her head, Eliza joined him in smiling. “Can’t say I ever did. I’m not complaining, though—so long as all of you are cooperating with me rather than against me.”

“You’re right, really. I don’t think this world would have been ready for the might of all three of us working together under ADVENT. Why, I ran the numbers…”

On Mordenna went, easily slipping into his usual banter. To Jax, it practically faded into the background noise, and allowed him to more easily ruminate on his thoughts. It was… interesting, to have all of his siblings in the same room without it being a public event. Just the hope of a less confrontational future. If the Elders could see this… They would probably disapprove.

The thought of it sombered Jax a little. Yes. The Elders had declared the whole competition to acquire the Commander to force them to fight against each other—though, it wasn’t as if they had needed the excuse, back then. However, when he considered that they were all meant to be pitted against each other… why did They punish him for “arrogance?” He had merely taken pride in Their will.

Line of thought continuing, his eyes moved to the Commander. He had thought at length with himself about what could justify Cronus’s actions. At this point, he considered himself too biased to come to any kind of real, unaffected conclusion. Sadly, he considered his followers too biased as well. Based on all of their reactions when the topic came up, they were still too filled with either conclusion or fury… and it wasn’t as if they knew the Elders as he had.

So, what then? His siblings? He already knew Mordenna wasn’t an option. All Mordenna housed
for the Elders was sheer spite and hatred. Undoubtedly he’d simply devolve into a seething fury about it. Fal-Mai... was a slightly better option, but Jax felt as if some of Mordenna’s despising of the Elders had imprinted on her. They were two of his three options in people who had experience with the Elders. His last, and with longer experience than he, was the Commander. Though she also spoke about the Elders with occasional upset, he took her as one to put it aside for reasonable discussion. It had happened on the field, once or twice before. Granted, her side was always opposing, but such was the nature of leading the resistance.

Mind made up, he turned to his siblings. “—While I would enjoy having you all here for further discussion... there is something I wish to talk over with the Commander immediately. Would you two grant me that?”

Mordenna had come to a pause in whatever he was on about before Jax spoke, thankfully, and he looked to his brother. He shrugged good-naturedly. “Hey, why not. Could even be my first act of goodwill by fucking off when I’m told!”

Fal-Mai looked as if she had more to say, but seemed to take Mordenna’s words well, inclining her head. “As should I... but less profanity meant in my sentiment. I wish to speak more later, Jax, but I will find the time for that. For now, I will take my leave as you ask.”

Nodding, Eliza went over and hit the panel on the wall, opening the door for them. “Thank you two again for wanting to do this. I’m glad with what all three of you are trying to do.”

“Well, someone’s gotta try and throw dirt on the hatchet,” Mordenna said, sauntering out, “otherwise we’re all just looking gormlessly at a poor axe someone’s tossed in a hole. But, still, you are ever so welcome, Lizzie.”

Eliza chuckled, and the two of them left as the door closed behind them. That left him and Eliza, alone. The Commander turned to him. “Alright, Jax. What’s on your mind?”

Taking in a breath to get his thoughts together, Jax began. “I believe I recall you offering yourself as a listening ear, did I not?”

“I certainly did.”

“... when I ask you this, Commander, I ask you to be as impartial as possible. Seeing as you have seen all of what has happened to me in my Stronghold...” He crossed his arms, looking to the side. He really couldn’t look at Eliza as he asked this. “Do you think there was any rational reason that Cronus—that He did what He did?”

The room grew quiet. He spared a glance back, and saw the Commander thinking, a hand to her chin. He face twisted with disgust for a second, but it faded quickly. It seemed as if she were trying to go about it impartially, as he asked. Finally, she looked up at him. “... judging from the most impartial standpoint I can muster, Cronus must’ve picked out a trend. Each Chosen I have captured, I’ve turned against ADVENT. Granted, through them wanting to fight back, but it isn’t my point. That’s an asset being turned back against the Elders. Cronus... must’ve thought that it was better to risk completely losing an asset than having it turned against him.” She let out a tension-filled breath. “And that is as impartial as I can make it. I want to make a thousand qualifying statements and explanations, but you asked for impartiality. That’s my rational take.”

Though each person he had asked beforehand had a slightly different answer, Eliza’s seemed to hurt the most. An asset. Down to the most impartial level... Cronus saw him as a mere asset. Not a son. Jax deflated and slumped, losing his posture he’d maintained in front of his siblings. Well, he supposed he had gotten the answer he had asked for. When it was anyone merely calling Cronus
“short-sighted,” “cruel,” or even “stupid,” it was easy for him to brush off or disregard. Failing that, it felt as if it wasn’t a complete reason. The Commander’s answer was truthful enough to sting.

She must’ve spotted his pain, as her shoulders went down. “—Hey. Even if I was supposed to give the least biased answer I could, I’m sorry if I was cold. You shouldn’t be looked at as an asset, Jax. You’re much more than that.”

He closed his eyes, mood dropping. “If a God declares me nothing more than an asset, then is that not merely what I am?”

“If a ‘god’ used me as a computer database, is that not merely what I am?”

The retort got Jax to look at Eliza again. The old part of him that would insist that the Elders had the best vision of her... kind of got shoved to the side when she had comforted him. A “computer database” would not rush to his aid when he was in distress, would it? Finding himself without an answer, he sighed. “That’s different,” he muttered, knowing that it was him conceding the point.

“How so,” she asked softly. “I’m no more a victim than you are, Jax. You have the right to question and even change your role in life. Anybody who tries to take that away from you... you should consider why they would want to do that.”

Jax really didn’t know anymore. Every time he tried to throw up another reasoning, Eliza poked through it. Not with the sledgehammer that Mordenna tried to wield, Void bless him. Rather, something more measured. It was hard to argue against someone who had just as much time spent with the Elders as him—even more than him, too.

His eyes remained on her... and they picked out the wisps of psionics clinging to her form. Instead of answering her question, he moved on to that. “I do hate to change the subject, Commander... but your psionics interest me.”

Eliza gave a tired smile. “Light blue, yeah. I didn’t know, myself, until recently. The Templars I know say it should be monitored... and trained, possibly. I’m for it, but nobody’s confident enough to aid me.”

It had been ages since Jax had last tutored someone in using their psionics—that was when the Gatekeeper strain was still being used in Priests. But, back then... he quietly deflected the memory. He was more trained, now. More controlled. It wouldn’t happen again, if he wanted to train the Commander. It was clearly her implication too, if Jax was reading her right. Relaxing a bit with the successful subject change, he huffed. “I suppose you’re implying someone such as myself could handle it... if that someone were to make a definite decision regarding his allegiances.”

“Implications are a form of art unto themselves,” Eliza’s smile grew more genuine, “but yeah. It’s pretty much what I’m saying. Give it some thought—you’ve still got a day and a half on your deadline. I’ve been keeping track.”

Jax was somewhat thankful for that—he wasn’t so good about it. “Of course. I can guarantee you my decision come then. For now, that was all I had for you. Do I have any more visits for today?”

Eliza tapped her chin, eyes flickering about. Just like Mordenna... “If I remember correctly? Odette at 1300, Bastet at 1700, and then Maria again at 1900.”

Jax gave a single chuckle. “She’s wanting to get her visits in, Commander. I do not begrudge her.”

“Oh, me neither. I’m happy she’s visiting so often, frankly. Happy that she’s willing to help out in the Infirmary, too! Leo’s—” She halted in her tracks, regarding Jax. Then, she cleared her throat.
“—I know you and Leo have a little spat, but Maria helped his psionics to heal.”

That made Jax raise an eyebrow. Leo took the rivalry more seriously than he did, so he was more inquisitive than anything else. “He had not healed yet from my attack?”

“Not fully, no. He still had some psionic ‘soreness,’ to the best of our description. Guess that rifle of yours is a really effective piece of kit.”

“Indeed. I rarely find use of it in that aspect.”

Eliza held back a snicker. “Or at all?”

The Warlock stopped up for a moment, then huffed, mock-pouting. “It is not my fault that my brother fashioned a firearm for me without stopping to think if I had any weapons training whatsoever.”

“Could always change that, y’know. We’ve got the Training Center here, and failing that, the shooting range.”

“A day and a half, Commander, though it is noted.”

Eliza grinned, but it fell into a softer look. “Alright. I should probably leave you to it, then. Bradford will be the one chaperoning Odette, but I’ll be back for the other two later today, alright?”

Bobbing his head, Jax straightened again. “Understood. And...” His hands dropped to his sides. “...thank you, again, Eliza. It was good of you to stay with me.”

Smiling and walking over, Eliza patted his side. “Hey. I’m always, always happy to help, ok Jax? No need to suffer in silence or alone. You can talk to me—or hail me on the pad—if you ever need that again.”

Looking at her with warmth in his heart, Jax nodded again. “I will remember that, Commander. I won’t keep you any more.”

Eliza patted his side again, then departed, hitting the pad before she left the room, leaving Jax to ruminate on his thoughts and the residual feeling in his chest.
Fal-Mai and Mordenna are sent on a Covert Action together.

Fal-Mai supposed it wouldn’t be long before Eliza sent her out on a stealthier mission. She just didn’t imagine it would be hand-in-hand with her brother.

Yet here she was, in her cloak and navigating through the dark, underground tunnels of a civilization quashed. She knew that Mordenna was some distance behind her; he had an impressively quiet stalk, but not soundless. Even so, she would have to strain to hear him over the hum of still-powered fluorescent lights and the muffled groans of metal. By all accounts, he would be unhearable to anyone else.

The purpose of this mission was intel extraction. The Reapers had sniffed out an exposed access point well underground—but there were other missions that had to be handled by the Commander, rumors of a haven about to be raided. To kill two birds with one stone, as it were, Eliza sent the two of them out on this opportunity. They would’ve had some assistance, but... Fal-Mai was there when Volk made it quite clear that he “wasn’t going to have one of his wolves caught up in a sibling spat.” Harsh, but fair, Fal-Mai supposed.

The relative silence of their journey left Fal-Mai observing what she could assume were storefronts, cleared of anything useful long ago. Humans and what interested them were strange at times, to her. As she passed a store seemingly named for conversations that had all manner of clothes and trinkets inside, she mused on how much she would come to understand them. She would be learning more, no doubt, if she was going to be staying at XCOM. Would she ever totally understand? There were still conventions of society she was coming to grips with. Subtlety, for one.

“Ey, sis, you feel like picking out new duds?” Speaking of subtlety. They were both on a local comms frequency, and Mordenna claimed it was masked enough that it’d slip right under most radars. In essence, Mordenna could talk under his breath and she could hear it.

Staying under her cloak, Fal-Mai continued on. “Outside of dying my armor blue, I have not foreseen any other changes to my wardrobe.” She paused to think, navigating over a fallen vending machine. “... perhaps a facemask. And those... headphones, you say you would like to make for me.”

“Correction, sis. I’m already making them for you. Remember when I asked to see that headguard of yours? That’s what it’s gonna look like. But yeah, noted. I’ll see what I can do about a facemask. Not like I’ve got much better to do until Lizzie hands down an order.”

Fal-Mai shook her head. “You are curiously charitable lately, brother.”

“Like I said. Bored. Also trying to lean into this ‘being a good brother’ thing. When are you gonna let me see that gun of yours, by the way?”

Though Fal-Mai did not begrudge Mordenna’s sudden goodwill, it made her suspicious regardless. She’d said that she was optimistic, yes. But Mordenna being Mordenna, she had her reservations.
“Perhaps soon. You will have to forgive me if I am rather stuck on the fact that it is you who suggests we all stop bickering. The Mordenna I know would rather foster it.”

When Mordenna came in again, his tone was a bit lower. “Hey. Don’t slam the door on my foot, here. As I said, I’m trying to get a little better, y’know? Maybe it wasn’t entirely for selfless reasons, maybe it wasn’t entirely my idea. But it’s the thought that counts, yeah? ”

Fal-Mai’s mouth settled into a tense line. She hadn’t meant to hit any nerves with him. Mordenna was... perplexingly easy to upset, nowadays. Before, he would shrug off most topics as if they were nothing. Still... she was curious. One more question and she would let the topic rest. Mordenna would be fine with explaining himself, yes? “Apologies if I offended. I simply wonder as to your motivations. What would drive you to such new action?”

“Beloved sister of mine.” Now his tone was venomous. “Is your precious hearing on the fritz, or can you not get a simple idea into your skull? I’m. Trying. To. Get. Better. Which I’m finding kind of hard when people like you can’t get it into their goddamn minds that I’m trying. What’s it matter what my motivations are?”

Her gut twisted into knots at his hostility, and unthinkingly, Fal-Mai settled into her old defenses. “It is not my fault that your previous actions against me and our brother leave me questioning how genuine your actions are. Do you forget your transgressions against us? Do you expect us to forget everything?”

“Did you ever stop to wonder why.” His voice was deadly low. “Did you ever maybe think ‘hm, there’s gotta be some reason my brother’s always acting like a dick.’ Even now, you know why. Oh, but you were just a tad bit too busy revelling in the slaughter you were built for, weren’t you?”

That sent a shard of ice right into her heart, and she stopped in her tracks, hand squeezing a nearby support beam. “I have changed! I was built for a purpose, as were you, Mordenna, and cooperation and care between the Chosen was not exactly encouraged! It is telling that even now you continue to abrase... but I’m sure that is your intention as it always is.”

“You think this is me aiming to hurt your feelings? Do you actually think—”

Over Mordenna, Fal-Mai heard something that made her ears prick. Raising her shroud just enough that Mordenna’s keen eyes could see her, she held up a hand. Despite her conflict with him, the mission was the mission. He began speaking again to the effect of “don’t you pull that on me” until he, too, heard the footsteps that garnered her attention.

Soon, a Trooper on patrol came into view, in front of what looked like an old administrative office. In their arguing, they had reached their destination, and the first patrol. She focused her eyes on the enemy. “Mordenna. Trooper up ahead. How shall we engage?”

Silence. Concern started to work its way into Fal-Mai. Yes, she had been vehemently arguing with him not seconds before, but it had been born of wanting to ask questions. She’d slipped back into her old, defensive self so easily it almost scared her. Maybe if she had apologized and let it drop after that, they wouldn’t be in this situation.

Mordenna continued to not say anything. The Trooper stopped in her patrol. Fal-Mai started to turn her head back. “Brothe—?”

The rest of her question came out as a hiss as a shot from the Darklance marked her cheek, making her drop in a defensive crouch. The sound of a body hitting the floor confirmed her suspicions.
“What is the matter with you,” she seethed.

Mordenna shrugged, a cold look on his face. “Had to take the shot, sis. Get moving.”

As much as she hated to bow to that kind of command... they were known, now. The Darklance was silenced, but at this distance it’d still garner attention. Turning back to the building and feeling blood run down her cheek, Fal-Mai hopped over her cover and went in to do her work. She could hear someone rushing in to her right—undoubtedly someone coming to check out the body. As the oncoming Stun Lancer came up, she readied her blade...

... just to get another close graze of a bullet as she lunged forward, her mark toppling before she could get to it. Her hand clenched around the grip of her sword. She was on a mission. There were enemies here. Fal-Mai couldn’t just drop everything and go threaten her brother.

As another shot screamed past her ears and undoubtedly cut a groove in her helmet, she resolved to do just that. With anger in her heart, she deeply wound her cloak around herself, thick enough that Mordenna would not be able to see her coming. Sprinting back, she vaulted over debris and refuse to get to her brother, approaching at an odd angle to catch him off-guard as she sent her forearm into his jaw, pinning him to a wall by his throat as he dropped his weapon. Her cloak peeled off and she met his icy gaze with a red-hot fury. “What is the matter with you?!” She repeated.

Mordenna drew back his lip enough to reveal his teeth. “I’m showing you what it’d be like if I wasn’t trying. Since you seem so set on questioning if I’m trying to better myself, fine. I might as well show you. I just ain’t got the fucking patience to get questioned by people like you who know just what kind of shit went on behind closed doors. You were there, Fal-Mai. Is it so fucking unreasonable that I want to put what Odin did to me in the past behind me?”

A good portion of Fal-Mai’s fury left her, and again she was reminded that if would’ve been best just to drop the issue and move on when presented the chance. But... she wanted to see this resolved. Yes, she may have questioned Mordenna, but it was because she wanted to wholly believe he wanted to get better. The ice in her heart melted, and she deflated, her grip weakening. She opened her mouth to apologize.

All that came out was a scream as she could feel mag shards embedding themselves into her shoulder.

Mordenna was quicker to act than she was, overpowering her in her agonized state and pushing the both of them to the ground. The shock of the fall sent another lance of pain up her arm and she cried out, squeezing her eyes shut. She was able to hear Mordenna take out his pistol and start firing back at their attackers, the crack of the Darkclaw so close to her ears drowning out anything else.

Of course. She had told herself that confronting him then was foolish. Then why did she do such a stupid thing? Once again, her emotions had overtaken her, leaving her floundering after the actions she took while influenced by them. She really, really would be better emotionless. There would be far less pain, far less questioning. But... if she was emotionless, would she have ever been punished by the Elders? Would she have ever questioned their methods? Would she have ever met Eliza?

The ringing of her ears subsided after a while, and she confirmed that Mordenna had stopped firing. His hand was no longer planted right between her collarbones—he wasn’t on her at all, actually. It wasn’t long before she could hear his footsteps towards her; when he crouched down beside her, she tried to bat him off, but he smacked her hand away. “No, drop it for a second,” he responded, “let me see your shoulder.”
Knowing she was injured and Mordenna probably had some means to help, she let her good hand fall. The pain in her shoulder was intense—Fal-Mai had bullet wounds before. This was something else. It felt like it had struck the exact joint in her shoulder, and goodness knows the kind of damage that had done. Trying to move it at all brought pain, and even Mordenna gently grabbing it to inspect it made her suck in air through her teeth.

There was some rustling, then Mordenna cursed under his breath. “Sis. I’ve got morphine, and that’s about it. Wait.” More rustling. “Alright, we’ve got dressing bandages too. But no forceps. You’re going to have to wait until we get back to get those shards out of your shoulder.”

Giving a quiet groan, Fal-Mai held her bad arm, opening her eyes and looking over at him. “If I had not foolishly dropped my guard, this...

She trailed off once she saw the mag wound in Mordenna’s shoulder, still seeping blood. If... if he hadn’t pushed her down, that placement... He caught her staring at it and his mouth settled into a line. “It’s nothing.”

“Brother... are you sure you don’t want your own supplies?”

“I’ve had worse,” he quickly countered, taking out a needle and a bottle.

“Yes,” she returned, “but that doesn’t invalidate the pain you’re going through right now.”

For a second, Mordenna’s face softened, and his hands stopped. That didn’t last long; he was back to working with his expression hardening. “Funny of you to care about my pain now.”

More reminders of the kind of hurt Fal-Mai had been projecting at Mordenna. Lidding her eyes and looking down, she angled her head away from her brother. Since she hadn’t taken her own advice earlier, now she would heed herself and stay quiet, letting the matter drop. Best to not agitate it for now... but it was still something she wanted to address. Granted, with a lot of apologies on her part, but she didn’t want to let this lie.

A small prick in her shoulder got her to look back, catching Mordenna emptying the needle into her shoulder. “Temporary measures,” he muttered, voice soft. “When we get back you need to check into the Infirmary. Probably isn’t healthy to have the shards stay in there.” Done with the needle and the dressing, he indiscriminately tossed the former, getting up and beginning to tie up his own wound. “Can you walk?”

Though she was sure he didn’t intend to bite, it came off as patronizing nonetheless. But, Fal-Mai took in a calming breath, reminding herself that Mordenna was in pain—and just saved her life, from the looks of it. She got up, mindful of her shoulder. “Yes.”

Mordenna finished up on his own wound, tucking the rest of the bandages away and retrieving his weapons. “I cleared out everyone. I don’t think any of them radioed in, but we should probably kick our asses into gear regardless. Watch the door, I’ll handle the access point.”

Nodding, Fal-Mai trailed behind Mordenna as he trekked over the debris, making his way to the front door of the building. Now, Fal-Mai could see what Mordenna had to take down—three more Troopers than she had seen, and a window that hadn’t been broken before probably belied another body inside. He could’ve let her die, and yet...

The Hunter opened the doors and left them there, presumably trusting that Fal-Mai would take her spot. Now that she could see more clearly inside, there was indeed the body of an Officer. Judging
by her placement, it was probably her who scored the shot on Fal-Mai. Grimly noting that, she leaned her back against the doorway as Mordenna went over to a terminal that stuck out against the rest of the dusty environment, sitting down and getting to work.

Casting her eyes outwards, Fal-Mai reflected on what had happened. Yes. Mordenna had saved her life... but that didn’t invalidate what he said before hand. Then again, none of that would have happened if she hadn’t slipped back into her old ways— which she learned from him. Wasn’t it what she was supposed to do when faced with his bile? If that was the case, why did it not feel justified? Why did she feel like she was the one in the wrong alongside him?

“I’m in.” Mordenna’s voice interrupted her thoughts and she looked back to him. He now had his personal datapad on the desk and to the side, and there was information filtering through on both screens. “Shouldn’t take long. Keep watch, just in case.”

“Understood,” she replied, voice low. She looked back outside, keeping her hearing sharp. The silence between the two of them was palpable, especially to Fal-Mai’s enhanced ears. She... wanted to apologize, but wasn’t it Mordenna who aggressed first in all of this? She had been merely asking questions. But... it did occur to her that maybe she wasn’t the best at asking. Maybe if he apologized first.

Judging by the continued quiet, it seemed as if Mordenna didn’t exactly have plans for that. Maybe he did, and they were exactly the same as hers. Fal-Mai wouldn’t know. Still, she wanted to address something, anything. Maybe not an apology... but there was something else she could touch on.

Keeping her vision outwards, Fal-Mai spoke up. “Thank you, brother. I... am not blind as to the angle of the wound on your shoulder. Had you not pushed me down, I may very well not be alive.”

First she got a grunt indicating that Mordenna heard her, but after a second, he replied. “I... may be pissed at you, but I mean it when I say I’m trying. Don’t really want you dead, anymore.” He sighed, and then Fal-Mai could hear the mechanical clicking of keys again. “Not like it would’ve felt lovely to see, anyway,” he muttered under his breath.

Fal-Mai... wanted to ask more about that, but was becoming more aware of her lack of subtlety. She genuinely wanted to know more, but she would have to make herself clear. Taking in a steadying breath, she looked inside at him. “Brother... I ask this because I am genuinely curious and I am not trying to guess your true motivations. If anything, I simply want this spelled out to me so I am not in the dark regarding your feelings. I ask this as kindly as I can; would you feel bad if I died?”

Mordenna stopped working again, and she could see him drum his fingers just to the right of the keyboard. After a moment of thought, he responded. “Yeah. It’d suck. I... know we just fought and all but... I really do want to try. It’s frustrating, I get angry, but I want to keep trying. What I’m saying is if you got killed just as I had resolved to try and actually be a good brother to you? I’d... feel bad. Yeah. That ain’t nearly enough words to describe it but... do you get what I mean?”

Fal-Mai nodded. “I understand, brother. Thank you for answering.” She could understand how inelegant and imprecise words could be. Still, Mordenna got his message across to her, and to know he would mourn if she fell? It made her feel better in a way. That all covered, she felt emboldened to do what she would next. “Mordenna. I’m... sorry for questioning you. I was only genuinely curious, but I realize now that my words were blunt and uncaring for your feelings. I want to believe you are trying—and I do, now. Regardless of your motivation. Even if you are just doing it for someone like Eliza...” She paused, smiling. “That is a noble motivation.”
Leaning back in his chair, Mordenna looked back at her, face soft. “—y’think so?” When she nodded, he looked back at the monitors. “... that’s. Nice to hear. Thank you.” It was a while, but eventually he spoke up again. “Sis, uh. I’m sorry for shooting at you. And about the whole ‘slaughter’ thing. And for insulting you.” He rubbed the back of his neck nervously. “I’m not doing the best out of the gate, am I?” He muttered.

“Well...” She clasped her hands in front of her. “You are trying, brother. Mistakes... are alright.” That was what Eliza had said, wasn’t it?

Mordenna looked back at her, and she could hardly believe her eyes. She’d never seen a smile so genuine out of him. “—yeah. I’m trying.” The moment was broken when a message flashed on both screens, and his attention was brought back to them. Righting himself in his chair, he picked up his datapad. “Well! The download’s finished. Probably best we get the hell out of here, yeah?”

Fal-Mai bobbed her head, shifting to stand on her feet properly. “Let us head home.”

“Hey Lily, do I... snap off too easily?”

It had been a day or so after Fal-Mai and Mordenna arrived home, successful in their action. Mordenna had quickly taken his place back in the Workshop once Sammy cleared him for injuries, leaving Fal-Mai in the Infirmary to get her shards extracted.

Which left Mordenna putting the final touches on the noise-dampening headpiece for Fal-Mai as Lily was getting started drawing up a facemask. Mordenna had gotten rather introspective, regarding what he’d said to Fal-Mai, and Lily was getting closer and closer to being a trusted confidant.

Lily looked up from her blueprint paper, pen in hand. “In my experience? Maybe. That time you went off at Eliza might count.”

Mordenna sighed, picking up the headpiece and inspecting it. “Yeah. Suppose it does.”

“Why do you ask, if... I can ask.”

Mordenna gestured vaguely with a free hand. “We might’ve made it back from the mission Eliza sent us out on all fine and dandy, but Fal-Mai and I kind of clashed out there. I know siblings are probably supposed to fight but the more I think about it?” He threw his hand out. “She said it herself. She was just asking questions. Granted, with all the subtlety of an ICBM, but still.”

Lily was quiet for a second, then resumed her work. “If I had to put my two cents in? She’s, like, one year old, Mords. She’s mature, but still has some basic things to learn. I don’t think Helena programmed societal subtleties into her, either.” She groaned. “The ability to play the harp, though? Apparently that was critical.”

Mordenna sat up a bit more, previous topic drifting off. “Wait. Seriously?”

“Yeah! I read over her file just because of how angry I was and the amount of superfluous shit Helena put in there is mind-boggling.” Lily always did get a bit more colorful when it was just her and Mordenna in the Workshop. Engineer solidarity, perhaps. “Not just the harp. Cello, flute, clarinet, and the violin. Seriously.”
“... I think I know why.” Mordenna set his project down, turning to face Lily. “It’s because Fal-Mai was made to one-up me and my brother—and Odin and Cronus in turn—in ways she thought was necessary. But—” He threw his hands up. “As far as I know, Cronus didn’t program Jax to play the violin and piano! He, like the pompous giant he is, learned how to play those himself!”

Lily stared at him with clear disgust for Helena, shaking her head. “I... I feel sorry for you guys. I am sorry for you guys. I think of having any one of them as parents for a second and I want to puke.”

Mordenna gave a bitter chuckle. “Yeah? Yeah. Be glad you don’t. So, anything else we can laugh at Helena about in there or is it all tragic?”

She reached over for a datapad. “That was just off the top of my head. I think I remember something else—yeah. Helena had like, all of her measurements down to the exact millimeter. And the comments she makes in here are absolutely maddening. I’ll spare you the details but it’s like she felt that she had to justify each and every change she made and she goes on and on about ‘perfection’ just about every other line.”

“Not that perfection exists,” Mordenna muttered, getting a twinge of apology for his sister.

“I know!” Lily exclaimed. “The Elders chasing something as shitty and impossible as ‘perfection’ just suits them, but it’s bullshit that you guys had to deal with it.”

Man. Would Eliza ever stop being right? Having Lily there and basically constantly going “that’s fucked up” at every new thing she learned that the Chosen had to go through was validating. He’d thought he’d never want to talk about again, but complaining about it? There was a charm to it. “I’m glad someone understands.”

Lily looked as if she was about to go more on about the subject, but it seemed something in Mordenna’s last statement clicked with her. She looked him over, studying him. “Let me guess. Fal-Mai was questioning you wanting to get better for that reason?”

“Nail on the head,” he grumbled, “though I don’t think she quite meant it that way. She was just asking why I’d want to get better when past me would be happy to salt the earth, torch it, nuke it from a distance and then sell the remains off on the Black Market.”

She threw up her eyebrows at the extended metaphor. “Pretty precise, there, but can you blame her?”

He groaned quietly. “No, not really. And it makes me feel like shit that I blew up at her then.”

“Did you apologize?”

He nodded. “Yeah. After she did, because it seemed like she wanted to take some of the blame for me going off at her. I wanted to apologize first, but she beat me to the punch.” Didn’t help that there was a part of his brain that had been justifying his anger and venom, making him hold off until Fal-Mai took the first move.

“Well, it’s a step in the right direction. I think, and I mean this as nicely as can be, you need to put some of that ‘infinite patience’ to use.”

“It’s not patience I’m deficient with,” he said somewhat sourly, “it’s tolerance. I can wait as long as is necessary for things to be set into motion, but the minute someone bugs me about it? All out the window. Odin raised me to be a creature of spite, which kind of goes hand-in-hand with the infinite patience. You want tolerance, you ask Eliza.”
“Don’t have to tell me twice,” Lily mused, “but, still. Tolerance, then. Maybe you still have some stuff to learn.”

“Not denying that. Always new stuff to learn. It’s whether if I’m interested to learn it or not that’s the sticking point.” He paused. “... not to say I’m not interested in learning tolerance. Seems like it’d help on the road ahead.”

“In my experience,” she said, picking up her pen again and setting her datapad to the side, “it’s stopping to think about why someone might be saying something like that or asking that kind of question. Just taking a second to think, y’know? With that brain of yours, I’m not accusing you of doing anything thoughtlessly. But if I had to take a page out of the Commander’s book, I’d say consider what you want to say before you say it.”

Mordenna nodded, running a thumb over his hand. “Got it. Might help.” His eyes flickered about a bit. “—thanks, Lily.”

“No problem. How’s work coming on the headphones?”

Mordenna turned back to his work, picking it up and examining it. It was as he had hypothesized a while ago—a headpiece like the one Fal-Mai was wearing, except it would dampen sounds above a certain decibel level. Mordenna had reinforced it as much as possible without sacrificing Fal-Mai’s ability to hear, but he had to make it minimal around the ears. His eyes focused on a spot of paint he’d missed. That wouldn’t do. His bench didn’t have the paints. Reaching backwards, he waggled his fingers. “Sis. Paint me.”

It was silent for a second, and it was about a half second later that Mordenna realized what he’d said. *Sis.* Did he really consider Lily that much of a sister? He looked back to Lily’s equally amused, equally surprised face. Soon, it broke out into a goofy grin, and she reached into a drawer, tossing him some pigments. “Sure, *bro.* I’ve got you.”

Mordenna snickered, turning back towards his work. Having Lily as a sister wasn’t such a bad outcome, in his book. Not like he was interested in her as he was Eliza... as much as he’d wish such thoughts would kick it. *We’ve run the numbers. It’s statistically impossible for her to be into you, or react well at all to any sort of confession you might field.* He could run the numbers all he wanted—there was a tiny voice of hope in his mind urging him to just *give it a try.* Then what? Live with the possibility and awkwardness of a failed confession? “Hard pass,” he muttered.

“You say something, Mords?”

He shook his head. “Technically yes, but just talking to myself, again.”

“Fair enough.” There was another moment of silence where Mordenna thought the Workshop was going to lapse into quiet hours of work, until Lily asked what she did next. “Oh, yeah. You go and see your brother yet? He’s out now.”

Mordenna shot up. “*What?*”
Chapter Summary

Jax makes the decision to join XCOM, but fears his heart may not be fully in it.

By the time Eliza had walked through the door of his cell, Jax had expected to have his mind made up. He’d expected to know firmly where he stood on the matter of joining XCOM, and resolute in his decision to do so.

But even as the door was sliding open to reveal Eliza beyond, Jax still wasn’t fully sure if he wanted to do this. He had a lot of reasons to join. His dear congregation was there, there was the chance to possible reconcile with his siblings—which appealed to him in a strange way he could not put a finger on—and the chance to study psionic powers the likes of which he had never seen in the Commander. There were other reasons, too—but thinking over them made the very same part of him that was making this decision non-unanimous kick a fuss.

Still, despite his relative indecisiveness, when Eliza nodded at him, he rose from his sitting position. “Commander. Are my five days finally concluded?”

“They certainly are.” She took a moment to fully step in. “How’re you holding up, by the by?”

“Assuredly better than before. I would almost half-assume that Maria wishes to lodge with me here, by the frequency of her visits.” Even as much as he brought it up, he didn’t mind in the least. Having Maria to come in and check on him was keeping his spirits up.

“Good to hear! Hate to beat around the bush, of course, but I wanted to make sure you were alright.” Eliza gestured to him. “So. What’s your decision?”

In response, Jax crossed his arms, tapping a finger. He would’ve preferred to be fully decided on the matter—it was best, in his eyes, to move forward without doubt and to believe in what he was doing wholly. Goodness knows it had dismantled him before. Did he want to do this? He certainly wanted to. Things still held him back, but... it felt as if it was the best course of action, for now. Perhaps after the war was over and Jax had built up trust with Eliza, he could go his own way with his followers.

Eventually, Jax gave a shallow nod. “I have given it much thought, Commander, and I will be honest; I still possess my reservations. However, it would take a man blinder than I to not see the benefits of this offer you have proposed. Yes, Commander. I will join with your forces.”

The way Eliza smiled alleviated one or two concerns, it felt like. “That makes me happy to hear, Jax. I’m just going to run one or two things by you—standard fare, basically what I’ve told your brother and sister. Firstly, and this is just because I told the others, try to be on your best behavior, alright? I’m certainly not asking for perfection; just try not to intentionally antagonize anyone and we should be good.”

He waved it off. “I fancy no conflict with your soldiers, Commander—and since Mordenna of all people has suggested I be kinder to my own siblings, I feel challenged to set an example, there. I believe you will find my cooperation well.”
Eliza bobbed her head. “Good to know. Secondly—well, I’ve already given you the whole rundown about coming to me for help, and you’ve seen I’m no stranger to leaping in there myself if need be.”

The Commander’s strange altruism regarding his *incident* still baffled him. Maria, he could understand. His followers, he could understand. But the Commander of XCOM? A woman who had not many dealings with him outside of the nuisance he was? Why would she rush to his aid? Jax shook his head, dismissing the line of thought. “As I know.”

“My point being, like everyone else, I’m going to have a communicator made for you so you can tune in during missions and the like. Also, just... feel free to approach me during the day, alright?” Eliza’s face softened as she went on. “It’s ok to need help. Everyone needs it, eventually.”

Before he could stop it, Jax could feel the contrarian aspect of him rising. “To need to *break down* marks a deficiency of being, Commander.” He blew a breath out of his nose. “And to give into it... a further fracture of the self.”

Eliza didn’t seem to mind the rebuttal, as she came in quick with one of her own. “Needing to break down means you’ve gone so long ignoring the warning lights that your body *forces* you to take a break, Jax. If you take breaks and care for yourself before then, you can avoid this ‘fracture of the self.’”

It was with a begrudging admittance that Jax’s more argumentative side could see her point. Deflating a little, he successfully wrestled it down—though of course, he knew he had to play it off. “Perhaps. I will take it into account, Commander. Do you have anything else to clear by me?”

Eliza seemed to think for a moment, then went “ah” as she hit upon something. “Two things, actually. Firstly, would you like your own room? We’ve got a few rooms kicking around on the Avenger we’ve been mostly using for storage—and even then, we can condense the rooms. Lily thinks there might be a ‘basement’ area in the ship she can clear out, and honestly I’m all for that...” She shook her head, getting back on track. “Anyway, my point being is that we can easily accommodate you.”

Jax nodded. “I would find that well, Commander. I’ve no need to sleep, but can still find it pleasant.” He... almost wanted to ask if there was a room big enough to revive the Studio in, but he somewhat doubted it. Best not to ask so much out of the gate—and he could always survey the area himself, when given the chance. “Your second point?”

“Mhm. I believe I remember you being possibly interested in helping me out with my psionics?”

Of course. His curiosity renewed, he regarded her. “—indeed. Yours of are a variety that I must agree with the Templars; they should be observed, and most of all, trained. If I am to take up lodging with you, I suppose I will give that goodwill back by guiding you through mastering your psionics. We can begin at your earliest convenience.” He paused. Even now, he could feel the lack of his amps on his head. “... I will, of course, require my amplifiers back, as well. I am accustomed to training with them on.”

“No trouble. I can swing you by the Workshop as I walk you out—it’s where we have them locked up at the moment. Safety’s sake, I’m sure you understand.” She spread her arms out. “That was about all I had for you, Jax. Any questions?”

After a moment’s thought, he shook his head. “No questions, Commander, thought I am sure I will have them later.”
“When you’ve got them, you can ask. Otherwise...” She grinned. “Welcome to XCOM, Jax. We’re glad to have you. Now—can I take you over to the Workshop so you can get your belongings? I don’t think we can begin with my training today, sadly, but I’ve got an open block tomorrow after my workout session that could be used for it.”

Well, his guess of her maintaining her form was correct. Thanks to the genetic modifications Cronus had performed, Jax would never need to maintain his figure—and indeed, he could not improve it any further, either. “Very well, Commander. Give me a precise time later and I will be able to show you to potential you hold. As for my belongings...” He inclined his head at her. “Lead the way. I have long wanted to stretch my legs.”

“I’d be happy to help you out. Right this way.” With that, Eliza hit the panel on the wall and the door opened. He watched her walk out, and he followed after her. Some thoughts caught up to him as he stepped off—Eliza’s hair had white streaks in her bangs. Was that a sign of her age, or a hint at her latent psionics? The light blue flecks in her eyes could also have foreshadowed it. Though, knowing her psionics were blue, it led Jax to another thought—

—or, it would’ve, had he not banged his head on the top of the doorframe. Stumbling back, he held off a curse that his dignity wouldn’t allow, rubbing his forehead. He’d... gotten distracted, and he was used to most doorways accommodating for him—or, at the very least, them being noticeably small enough that he knew he had to duck. The Avenger’s doors were just tall enough to catch him off guard. He was able to catch Eliza turning around before the door closed after her. It was a short moment before it was open again, Eliza leaned over and presumably keeping a hand on it. “You alright there, Jax?”

“Perfectly fine,” he muttered, this time properly ducking under the doorway. “Let us forget this happened.”

With a gentle chuckle, Eliza went back to leading the way. “Fair enough, I can do that. Just give me a second here.” Eliza pressed a finger to her ear. “Lily? You in your Workshop?” A pause, presumably for a reply. “Alright. Jax and I are swinging down for his personal effects and I figured you’d like to know so you can have the key handy. Alright? ... alright. We’ll be there soon.” Her hand fell. “Just letting Lily know we’re going to be down there so we can get ready. No unexpected surprises, and all.”

Jax nodded. “Understood. I would hardly wish to scare the daylights out of someone—that is more my brother’s territory. I would not be surprised if he now knows I am coming down... and if his new missions would be to scare the daylights out of me.”

“Actually,” Eliza said, stepping out of the room and checking to make sure Jax made it past the door this time, “he’s out on a mission with his sister, at the moment. Or, he’s coming back, I should be clear. We got word of mission success and now they’re in the last leg of coming home.”

He gave Eliza a stare with raised eyebrows. Incredulous, but trying to be dignified about it. “I had been willing to assume the mission to capture me was a fluke, Commander. Dare you lead me to believe you would chance fate twice and send them on a mission again?”

“We needed it done and I needed a loud team for the haven we had to protect.” Even as Eliza was turned away from him, she spared a hand to gesture. “Ended up being a good call, by all accounts. Menace One-Five got the jump on ADVENT this time around thanks to showing up early to a potential raid, and Wraith One—I’m sure you know that team, from the amount of times you’ve stopped them—reported some injuries, but nothing serious. More intel, a region in debt to us, and supplies I didn’t have to go through the Black Market for. Wish things went this smoothly earlier. Plus...” She glanced back. “Mordenna said it himself. If they want to try to be siblings, best they
try to cooperate together, yeah?”

On reflection, perhaps a trial-by-fire was the best bet for the two of them to settle their differences. Some things could not come about in peacetime. At the same time, Jax somewhat wondered if Eliza knew the kind of loose cannon Mordenna was. Quick to a hair-trigger temper, in his experience, and Jax had fifteen years of it. Granted, the first two or so were with a... very different Mordenna. Jax didn’t have to ask what happened to that early version of his brother; he could very well say he’d seen the inciting incident. Suffice to say... there was a bit of precedent as to why Jax had never really wanted to ask questions of the Elders.

Thought process ended, he nodded. “That does strike me as an effective methodology. I suppose you are not actively sought out by the Elders for no good reason.”

“I’ve had fifty-seven years to practice. Gonna be fifty-eight here, soon. You pick up a thing or two along the way.” Something seemed to occur to Eliza, as she looked back at him again. “By the way, speaking of age... I’d hesitate to place one on you, considering I was told in a similar manner to this that Fal-Mai is literally one year old. One and a half, by the date on her files.”

... how old was he? He’d never accessed his own files, and only knew he was “young” when he was taken and uplifted by the Elders. Old enough to show signs of his powers, and from what he’d read into and heard from his network, that could be as old as toddler years. A few detested fears of his could place a general age.

After a moment of thought, Jax came to a conclusion. “At the very least, twenty-four. At the most... thirty. I’d never learned the last age I was when I was still one of your kind, Commander.”

His gaze had wandered a bit, but when it came back to Eliza? Well, it would take a man blinder than him not to see the look of faint horror on her face. She quickly cleared her throat when he noticed. “Sorry if I sound a little flabbergasted, Jax, but whether you’re twenty-four or thirty, that still means the Elders took you when you were a kid. That... I really don’t know what to say to that. Other than ‘that sucks, sorry.’”

He gave a quiet, but not dismissive, “hmph.” “The sentiment is lost. I do not mourn for my early years—I have always appreciated the power gifted to me. It took some effort to reach this point, and no small amount of pain.” Psionic migraines were very crippling. “But so long as I measure out my powers and exercise restraint when needed, I find no downsides to most of the methods of my upbringing.” A thought struck him, and it made him somewhat contemplative. “... were I not taken in by the Elders, I would likely be simply one more name on a list of casualties in raids, disease, or otherwise. I remember some details of my former life—a home made in a haven, life in vigilance, terrorized by a threat I could only dream of.” It was... strange, to share info like this. He’d only ever stepped around it with Maria, on the small fear that somehow, the Elders could hear through her. By the time he got that out of his head, it had stopped being a worry for him.

Checking to make sure they were alone in the hallway, he continued. “I... understand, some of the ‘atrocities’ that the masses hold the Elders to. But in the end, the Earth could fare far worse. I could have been left to a far worse fate, Commander. There are checks and balances in all things, and no good deed goes unpunished. I do not mean to be defeatist at your ultimate goal—but I believe there is ultimately reasoning and justification to what They do. Even as you have had experience with Them, surely you can see this?”

The silence that followed his question spoke as loud as his own words. He could only watch as Eliza’s footsteps started to slow, and she looked forwards, away from him. Unbidden, he could almost feel a claw of ice seize over his heart. Was he afraid? What would Eliza do? She’s going to hurt us. You asked questions again. You keep being bad. Surely these childish notions couldn’t be
true, yes? So why was his breath stilled as he waited for Eliza to respond?

Eliza slowed to a stop. She clasped her hands in front of her, then nodded to herself. “I can understand having that kind of reasoning, lodging with the Elders for that long as one of their kids.” Even as she spoke, Jax was waiting for the other shoe to drop. “And I’m sure they’ve got reasons. Loads of them, at the end of the day. My problem is, they’re all terrible!” Eliza spun around, her expression far lighter than what Jax had been expecting. “Seriously! Had the Elders made peaceful contact with Earth, expressing a mutual exchange of knowledge—or even doing what they’re doing with the gene clinics on the surface—we would’ve been eating out of the palms of their hands! Doesn’t that seem like the most peaceful path, considering what First Contact was?”

Truth be told, the only things Jax knew about First Contact was what the Elders had drilled into the minds of the populace once They had established Their hold on the Earth. It struck him that Eliza was essentially a walking relic from twenty years ago—one of the last remaining people who actually went through the whole ordeal. He opened his mouth to give some sort of rebuttal about how “the Elders say that such attempts were met with hostility,” then closed it again. Even as he said that They had their reasons... maybe Eliza was right. Maybe not all of them were good... or even truthful.

For lack of anything to say to shoot the notion down, he crossed his arms, looking away. “You will have to forgive me for my lack of knowledge regarding events that transpired when I was little more than a babe, Eliza.”

“Well, would you like a basic rundown?” When he tentatively nodded, Eliza continued. “XCOM was initially a program for ‘worst-case-scenario first contact.’ We knew we couldn’t possibly be alone, and figured we had to have some sort of defence in place should extraterrestrial life end up not being so kind to us.” She sighed. “And for reasons I will leave lost to time, I was elected as best Commander for the initiative. Thus, the Extraterrestrial Combat Unit was born.

“As it turns out, and probably obvious in hindsight? What we could scrape together definitely wasn’t enough to hold off any aliens that were out for our blood. The first contact we had with the Ethereal Collective was a bunch of their ships showing up on our radars unannounced. The second was the pods. I’m sure you’ve seen the green devices in Lost Cities.” He had. That put far too much context to them than he would’ve liked. The Elders never did like to explain what happened there. “I did what I could—though, arguably, maybe I shouldn’t have. Six months, Jax. I held them off for six months, and by the fifth, I was doing things I’m taking to my grave. There was no negotiation, no terms of surrender. Just complete and utter annihilation of resistance.

“Finally, in July, it happened. Our underground base was overrun. By then, I’d started to realize what I had done just to keep what feeble scraps of XCOM were left alive. I was confident I’d die fighting.” A dark, troubled look shadowed her face. “Wasn’t so confident I’d go down with a Thin Man on top of me. After that... nothing. Presumably they hooked me up pretty quick—as far as Bradford says, the aliens got a lot smarter, real fast. I’m sure I’d remember more if not for a little thing that Mordenna calls the Network Severance Effect. You probably don’t remember most of what you accessed through the Network, right?”

Jax... couldn’t really put a finger on that. Most of his data-gathering had been physical. Though, what of the conversations he had with his former network of Priests? Jax couldn’t claim to have as eidetic a memory as a Codex, of course, but even then he had made it a point to file away what info they passed onto him when it wasn’t immediately useful. Yet, as he thought on it, there were strange... gaps. Places where it was as if he was trying to recall a word he knew exactly, but it was on the very tip of his tongue. He’d remembered even thinking on one of those conversations before
he’d been taken by XCOM. What had he been thinking on? What had that Priest told him?

He didn’t know. To confirm as much, he nodded to Eliza. “I figured,” she replied. “Mordenna and I have it the worst—being Network Admins and doing most of our work through there is lending to large holes in our memories. You say no good deed goes unpunished. Well... I did my time. Twenty years of it, in that Tank. I’m just about ready to start with some good deeds to justify that time.”

In the wake of what she’d said, Jax was left with silence. He’d been waiting for the whole time for her to devolve into screaming, to raise a hand in anger, anything. About the most menacing she had gotten was when she was detailing what took her down, in the end, and it hadn’t been directed at him. But... nothing. Just a calm explanation. He’d asked a question, a controversial one at that, and gotten a straight answer. Jax knew he shouldn’t think otherwise or be surprised... and yet?

His shoulders slumped. “... consider me at a loss for words, Eliza, and my question rescinded. I had not meant to imply the twenty years you spent in the Elders’ service to be a punishment of any kind.”

“... maybe it’s for the best that it was an implied punishment,” Eliza quietly muttered. “‘No good deed goes unpunished’ implies I was doing good deeds to earn good punishment. Maybe those twenty years...” Eliza trailed off, turning away from him. It was clear to Jax that it would be a statement unfinished for the foreseeable future. After another moment of quiet, Eliza spoke again. “So. To the Workshop?”

Jax nodded to himself, only able to wonder what Eliza did during—or before—First Contact to warrant her gauging her twenty years of captivity as justified punishment. “To the Workshop.”

Things were silent the rest of the walk—which wasn’t too far, as it turned out. Had Eliza kept walking instead of stopping, they would have likely been there before she finished. Eliza opened the door to the Workshop and Jax followed taking a quick look around before his eyes settled on Lily. When he’d entertained the notion of “Chief Engineer of XCOM,” he’d thought of something far more... rugged, for her line of work. Lily was practically a slip of a woman. Still, he could pick out how her work had shaped her and left her stronger, and whatever charm that brought wasn’t lost.

Though, mindful he might be interpreted as staring, he figured he should introduce himself properly. “Lily Shen. Undoubtedly you’ve heard of me, though perhaps not in such a positive light.”

Lily was currently tinkering with some variety of grenade—if he didn’t know any better, Jax would place it as Mordenna’s. She looked over to him, looked him up and down, then again, then wrenched her gaze back to his face. Jax wasn’t a stranger to being looked up, but it was always interesting to watch it happen. “—more than heard of you. I’ve seen you in the field, messing stuff up. It’s just ‘Lily,’ by the way, don’t have to call me by my full name.”

He nodded, noting it. “Acknowledged. Though I would love to entertain a discussion with you at length—and perhaps we might be given the chance, now that I am a part of your movement—I am sure you know what we are here for.”

“Yes. Eliza let me know,” Putting her tools down, Lily scooped up a key that was on her table, tossing it to Jax. Knowing that he might fumble it physically, he seized its flight midair with his psionics, plucking it from there. With a mutter to the tune of “interesting,” Lily continued. “Second locker over on that wall. By the way, and I feel like Mordenna would want to pass this on too—”

“If it’s anything about looking at my equipment,” Jax interrupted, making his way over to the
locker, “I will meditate on it. I do not doubt your abilities, Lily—you continue subversion of
ADVENT’s weapons proves them well enough—but psionics and their applications are a far
different field entirely.”

“Not to speak for Lily, or anything of the sort,” Eliza piped up, “but who do you think’s been
designing the Psi Amps? I’m certainly not advocating for you to hand over your weapons to her
right now, but she does know what she’s doing regarding psionics. Failing that, some assistance
from Tygan would puzzle most things out, I imagine.”

“Thanks, Commander.” As Lily continued, Jax kneeled down and unlocked the locker. “Like I
said; it’s your stuff and I won’t mess with it behind your back. That’s not what I do around here.
It’s more like this: if your equipment ever gets broken, or you... I don’t know, want a set of armor
that doesn’t look like it’s melting in the back, I can hook you up. Though the Commander’s right, I
don’t know if I could manage upgrades without some serious inspiration. That’s more Mordenna’s
field.”

The notion of replacing his armor immediately set Jax on the defensive, but he had the tact to not
speak about it. He’d seen the back of it as his Mystics had carried it away. As horrifying a
reminder it was, the thought of discarding it sent the more Elders-loyal part of him into a fury. So,
for now, he didn’t think on it. “I will remember as such if the need ever arises. As much as my
brother wishes to mend bridges between us, you will have to understand if I am not so willing to
lay down my personal possessions to him, given his former history with myself.” As he opened his
locker, he squinted at the Disruption Rifle. He really had no need to carry it around, and besides...
“—there is a reason he gave a master of psionics an anti-psionics rifle.”

“... what does—oh. Oh.” Lily seemed to get it, at least. “Uh, yeah. I can understand. Don’t feel
you’ve got to, of course, I’m just offering.”

“And as I said, I will keep it in mind.” With that said, Jax reached in and grabbed his horns—his
psi amps by any other name. Crafted and made for him by the Elders, a two-part set that his
gauntlets capped off. The horns were his strength, an amplifying lens for his already sizeable
powers. The gauntlets were his conductors, stabilizing his psionics and refining them. He set the
crown upon his head, taking in a cleansing breath as he could feel his psionic signature fan out to
its usual glory. There was always a low level of animation to his hair, as psionics tended to do—but
now it returned to its usual movements, settling him in to his comfortable norm.

As equipped as he’d like, he closed the locker and locked it again, rising to stand. Jax felt a little
more like himself again, and it certainly helped him to relax a bit more. He walked over to Lily,
dropping the key into her offered palm. “—thank you for safeguarding my belongings until now,”
he offered. “I will leave my rifle here until I find use of it again.”

“Gotcha.” Lily stowed the key into a drawer. “I’ll keep an eye on—”

Just then, a noise behind them made the whole group turn. The door to the Workshop had opened,
and beyond it... was Jax’s seemingly whole congregation. The Mystics at the front appeared
frazzled that the door had opened on them and there were already frenzied mutters to “close it!”
The door closed without any of them entering.

Lily was leaned around Jax, looking towards the door still. “... well, someone’s got fans. Wonder
how they all know you’re here?”

“Probably his psionics.” Eliza tugged at the collar of her uniform, seeming to readjust it. “Now that
he’s got his horns on, I feel like I’m before a god, or something else fittingly poetic. Probably
helps he’s out of that psi-null room, too. Practically broadcasting over here, aren’t you, Jax?”
Jax "hmphed." “It is no fault of my own that my followers would be able to locate me in the darkest sections of the Pit.” He turned his head to Eliza, who was still seeming to cope with his full signature. She looked... kind of charming, fidgeting like that. Someone certainly needed that training to get a little more used to him. “—am I beholden to your presence, Commander? Otherwise, I would imagine my disciples wish to see me.”

Eliza chuckled and shook her head, gesturing towards the door. “Nah. Go see your people—clearly they’re waiting on you.”

With a respectful nod, Jax parted from the two of them. When he arrived at the door, he took a moment to prepare himself before he opened it. Beyond, his followers looked to him.

Spreading his arms out, he let himself indulge in theatrics. “Your Holy Father is free of his bonds. Come! Let us congregate and reconvene.”

The chorus of cheers that went up was a salve to Jax’s soul.

Nobody, himself included, had expected Jax’s first day at XCOM to include utterly taking over the Commons.

Yet here he was, slightly lounged back on one of the more comfier chairs as his Mystics buzzed about him, his other followers talking amongst themselves in the generally lightened atmosphere. If pressed, Jax could spot a few human soldiers in the mix—Sherry, he readily recognized. The twin PsiOps were... newer, but he’d seen them before. Their names escaped him at the moment. There were a few others, but Jax was focused on more important things at the moment; namely, listening as the Mystics got him up to speed regarding how things went in the Avenger. Old habits seemed to die hard.

Currently, it was Iris who was filling him in. “—and Bastet and I have done a general survey of the rooms, Holy Father. We’ve both identified a room that Hestia and Demeter can use for their trade as well as a potential studio. Jeanne has run the numbers, as it were, and has reasoned that storage rooms can be condensed if they use a method she has penned.”

Nodding, Jax leaned on an arm of his chair. It was comforting to be surrounded by signatures like this—all familiar, with two or three foreign ones in there, but he could see who those belonged to. Perhaps life on the Avenger wouldn’t be so bad, with his assembly here. “Have there been requests made for these accommodations?”

“Not yet,” Iris replied, “but only because we were waiting for you. We would hardly want to establish ourselves somewhere where you would remain imprisoned.” She paused, and with her helmet off, Jax could actually see the sheepishness in her face. “Also... we were hoping that you may ask, Holy Father.”

With a gentle chuckle, he sat back up. “I am sure the Commander will be receptive to having a set of tailors take up shop in their ship—I can only imagine she would consider it mutually beneficial. As for the Studio... I will see what I can do. I wish to see it revived as much as you all do.”

“I guided them to save what they could...” Maria, sitting in a chair next to him, shook her head. “But we had no viable places to display the pieces, so they went to storage for now.”
Looking around for a second, Jax lowered the volume of his voice. “Did you, perhaps, manage to save the *Venus of Urbino* -inspired—?”

Maria chuckled tellingly. “Yes, my Chosen. We managed to take the *Warlock of ADVENT* with us.”

Clearing his throat to mask mild embarrassment, Jax moved on. “I will be happy to see the Studio raised once more, as soon as I can manage it. Have all of you—”

That was when the far door to the Commons entered, revealing Mordenna beyond. He seemed... a little out of breath, to be honest, gaze fixed on Jax. It was a moment before he said anything. “Jax. You... *son of a bitch*. You get released from solitary confinement and you don’t even have the decency to tell your brother?”

Jax, mildly amused, raised his eyebrows. “Hello, Mordenna.” It was then he noticed the hasty patch-job that was done on the shoulder of Mordenna’s shirt. There was a dark, orange-brown stain around it. “Trying out new colors for your apparel?”

“Oh, bro, you are just *hilarious,* ” he returned, walking in. As he entered, Jax could see out of the corner of his eye that Odette was retreating behind her sisters, cowering. The sight soured his mood somewhat. Right. There was that to attend to... Jax hadn’t forgotten what Mordenna had done to her, but it had slipped his mind in the camaraderie he’d taken up with his followers. He would see it addressed. “Looks like you’re all comfy and settled in. Practically taken over the place, have you?”

“As I am,” Mordenna must’ve heard the turn in his brother’s voice, as he slowed in his approach. “I will not beat around the bush, brother. You, *perhaps,* remember Odette.”

“Odette, Odette...” Mordenna stopped and rubbed his chin, eyes flickering about. Jax understood his lack of recognition; she only had a number under his care. Eventually, Mordenna seemed to remember, as his face shifted to something more apprehensive. “... is. Is she the Priest that I... y’know.”

“Shot at for her daring to ask a question of you, Mordenna?” Though Jax had wanted to give his brother a chance, part of it would be a proper apology for what he had done to Odette. Lacking her helmet, her one-eyed nature was clear for all to see. “It is all well and good that you wish to drop your grievances with me—but your damage far escapes being localized to me and our sister.” He moved to stand, looking down at Mordenna. There was just an inch of height difference between them, but it was enough. “I will concede to fully drop my grievances once you apologize to her properly.”

At all of that, Mordenna seemed to retreat a bit, hands shoved into his pockets. “—I never did give you the full story, did I? Or, one at all.”

“What matter?”

Grimacing, Mordenna rubbed the back of his neck. “... not particularly, no,” he admitted. “Some semantics. It. Yeah, it doesn’t take away from the fact that I shot at her because she annoyed me.”

Hunch confirmed, Jax nodded gravely. Odette had been down one eye and up one major fear of the Chosen Hunter when Mordenna had unceremoniously dropped her at Jax’s front door. She had been seen to, and Odette had told Jax... perhaps a version of the story colored by self-blame and fear, but he took it as truth. “I am not the one to begin your apologies to, brother.”
Knowing that, Mordenna lifted his eyes enough to scan the crowd. Sure enough, they caught onto the Mystic trembling behind Jeanne as the rest of his congregation gave Mordenna a collective glare to match Jax’s own. Mordenna leaned down a bit, enough to approach eye-level with her.

“Um. Hey—Odette, was it?”

Odette shrunk more behind Jeanne, but ended up nodding. Mordenna continued. “I... I want to explain myself about what happened then, alright? It’s... all still my fault, don’t get me wrong. But I’d been in a bad mindset at the time and you didn’t really do anything wrong. You didn’t deserve it. I’m—I’m sorry.”

The terrified Mystic still had a firm hold on her Centurion, who had her own hand back on Odette’s shoulder. But, eventually, Jax could hear the tiniest squeak. “— okay.”

Well. Void knows he had already put Odette on the spot as is. He nodded, waving for Mordenna to give her some space. As Mordenna backed up, Jax softened his tone. “You will have to forgive me for the relative chill to my tone—but I was not about to leave it unaddressed. No matter what conspired to the events, you inflicted wounds and fear in equal measure upon her.”

“Yeah. I was just...” Mordenna shrugged it off. “You’re right. Hardly matters. But, that was past me. Not about to go shooting at any of them now, s’hardly fair.”

After a pause, Jax blew some air out of his nose. He would let the matter rest, for now. An apology was one thing; working to lessen Odette’s fear was another. “So, brother. Have you reason to seek me out, or are you here for your trademark banter?”

Sensing the topic had passed, Mordenna perked up, wagging a finger at him. “Hey. Look. New banter, not old me banter. Begrudge me for wanting to talk to my brother now that we’re no longer legally required to kill each other, yeah?”

Jax looked around to his gathered followers. They were no longer glaring at Mordenna as they had, though Odette had absconded to the far corner of the room with Jeanne in tow. Motioning for them to part so he could talk with Mordenna more freely, Jax sat back down. “Very well. I’ve nothing else to occupy myself with until the Commander deigns to deploy me on a mission.”

“Su- *perb.* Hold on a second.” With that, Mordenna grabbed a folding chair and sat on it backwards, facing Jax. “So. The mighty Chosen Warlock, fighting for XCOM, working under Commander O’Leary. How ya feeling?”

Jax waved it off. “Your concern is noted, brother. I’m faring well. I believe I will come to more appreciate the opportunities presented to me here.”

Mordenna clicked his tongue. “Y’know, I gotta admit, I’m surprised. I didn’t think you’d cave this easily. Some part of me was holding onto the fact that you’d go down kicking and screaming about the Elders, but...”His mouth settled into a line. “I suppose an exit like *that* would speed up the process a little.”

Jax glanced around. Mordenna seemed to be under the impression that Jax had cast off all of his respect for the Elders in his joining of XCOM, and the truth was... that wasn’t the case. But he dare not bring it up here, in the midst of all of his followers who would try to roughly coax him out of it. Strangely, some part of him was rather craving for Eliza’s presence in that matter. She didn’t seem to press too much on the matter, even if she was against Them.

Eventually, he settled on an answer that would dismiss the matter. “My decision had been made, in a way, when I had discovered that the Commander had taken in all of my wayward followers. I
would hardly leave my congregation without their Holy Father—to do so would be tantamount to abandonment, and I shall not abide by that.”

Mordenna just shook his head. “Your vocabulary sounds like you ate a fucking thesaurus, bro. But, yeah, I get that. I didn’t really have anyone to come back to here—just Eliza, in a way. Ain’t like there was love lost for me with the Elders.”

Jax closed his eyes, taking in a deep breath to steady himself. “Enough love lost, I would think, to punish the rest of us for your loss.”

When he opened his eyes again, Mordenna was looking away, seemingly... guilty. What a strange look for him to wear. “—ain’t right,” he muttered. “Odin didn’t love me, he just. Wanted me as a fucking tool. Other Elders just took it as an excuse to break out the belt on you guys for the first time.”

For want of not triggering a memory, Jax sighed out that breath, and took to slightly related questioning. “—I never did learn why you are so vehemently opposed to being called Ref-Il. One year you answered to it, the next you shot at me for daring to utter it.”

Mordenna tensed up, then sighed himself. “Well... I guess we’re trying to bury the hatchet, yeah...” He sat up a bit more, looking at Jax seriously. “You remember what I was like, that early? Quiet, loyal, like a goddamn trained dog?”

Jax nodded. Mordenna had originally been almost meek, after his year of Ascension. Still as frighteningly skilled as he was today, but he was, dare Jax think it, submissive. “As I do.”

“Yeah, well... there’s a reason it didn’t last beyond what it did.” Mordenna gestured to Jax. “You fuck up sometimes, right? Not judging, hardly, but it’s just something that happens. Well, my old man didn’t take kindly to my first mistake. Lectured me, I nodded my head, went about my business trying to make it right. Then, I messed up again.” Dejectedly, Mordenna threw out his hand. “You remember what happened then. Odin called a meeting just so he could yell at me in front of you. I asked that damn question. Then he brought out the belt.

“Whole time of those years? He called me Ref-Il. I just... grew to hate it. Especially as the other Elders took the excuse of punishing me and Odin didn’t stop them. So... yeah. I just started going by ‘Mordenna’ because he hated it right back. Earned me a lashing a time or two but I think he gave up on it eventually. Having everyone else—including you—call me by my last name was about the only rebellion I could lead, outside of being lazy and shooting ADVENT troops.” He gestured vaguely. “So if you ever get the hankering of calling me it just to be proper... don’t. Gives me the heebie-jeebies. Hopefully Fal-Mai grows out of it. I can tell she wants to call me it.”

Witnessing such openness out of Mordenna was... strange, to Jax. It wasn’t lost on him on what it must’ve took to open up about it. Jax leaned over, feeling decidedly somber. “... thank you, brother. For sharing that. Now that I know, I will not mistakenly refer to you as a name you have chosen to cast off.”

Mordenna sighed, tension visibly leaving his body. “—thanks. Appreciate it.” It was a heavy pause that followed. “Do I get to ask something out of you, now?”

Jax gave it some thought, and nodded. “Since I have inquired about something personal, I believe it is merely fair trade.”

Mordenna crossed his arms on the back of the chair, resting his head against them in a way that hid his mouth. “... what was I like, when you picked me up sixteen years ago?”
Jax searched his memory. “... You still possessed the same hairstyle you do now—a shade of dark brown, then. Feisty, but I would not be surprised at anyone kicking up a fuss when I sweep them off the ground as I had you.” He frowned. “I did not catch much of your face—there was a large scar across it, that much I know. Outside of that... there is not much else I can describe. I do not remember the location, now—merely that it was wooded and snowing.”

Mordenna closed his eyes, bouncing one of his knees. He seemed nervous, anxious about what he was and wasn’t hearing. Eventually, he came with another question. “... my name. Do you remember my name?”

Jax rubbed at his mouth. That was a long, long time ago, and he’d accessed it through the Network. As he searched, that familiar feeling came up again, and he felt disappointed in himself. He opened his mouth to respond.

“Tomko.”

Both of them turned to Maria. She was looking away from them, eyes on the floor as she hadn’t left her spot. “Your name was David Tomko. I remember because I had told it to Jax in passing before he began his mission. I... do not remember anything else. I’m sorry.”

Mordenna looked at her imploringly, as if hoping she would remember more on the spot. Though he eventually slumped back down, he looked far less apprehensive than before. “—that’s fine. It’s enough. Thanks.”

The mood decidedly toned down, Jax leaned back in his chair. Searching for another avenue of conversation, he ended up finding one. “—where, pray tell, is our sister?”

“Infirmary.” Mordenna sighed. “Got some mag shards in her shoulder, pretty much thanks to me. We’re all sorted out now, but.” Mordenna didn’t so much as trail off as he did stop in his tracks. A moment of silence was followed by him suddenly standing up. “Well! I’ve successfully brought down the mood here, as I am wont to do. Think I’ll just remove myself before I make it worse, y’all have a lovely day.”

“Mordenna—” But even as Jax moved to get up, his eyes bounced off where Mordenna was, and just like that, his brother was gone.
Amongst all that had happened, five soldiers and a SPARK were gathered around a table in the Commons.

Having finished up early on her stock check and with no one to see to, Sherry had initially sat down to read her book and take ginger drinks of her water. She’d been not unkindly interrupted by the arrival of Rosa and SYN—Rosa took quickly to chatting her up as SYN served as her makeshift chair. Soon after that, Banel trekked in, asking what the gathering was about. After a while of small talk, the chain gang of Herod and Vlad had arrived, and the group tentatively accepted them in to join in the fun.

The conversation had been going alright, with the typical shooting the breeze going on as Sherry resolved she’d *never* get any progress on her book at this rate, slotting in a bookmark and leaning in on the topic. Rosa and Banel were chiefly keeping the banter going, with the occasional stab from Herod livening things up. With her chaotic life of healing at XCOM, Sherry appreciated moments like this. If only her wife were here.

“—and most importantly,” Rosa said as she tuned back in, “I’m fuckin’ flabbergasted you trusted Arsozu to not filch your keys.”

“Look,” Banel said, looking Rosa in the eye. He had his helmet off, revealing his longer-than-average black hair and darkened skin. Paired with a chiseled jaw and pale blue eyes, there were many a rumor that Herod was a chip off of his block. “I was willing to trust him, and I suppose that bit me in the ass.” He scoffed. “Not to mention the *thumbtacks*. How the hell did he get those?”

“He’s a Reaper.” Herod grinned. “You act like they can’t get their hands on anything.”

Banel huffed indignantly while Rosa laughed. Sherry smiled gently. Antics like the ones the Twins and Arsozu got up to really kept things light around the Avenger. It helped stave off the sense of cabin fever.

As Rosa’s laughter died down, the conversation stilled for a second. Sherry was halfway through opening her mouth to remark on something else before Vlad spoke. “Speaking of trust...” Oh no. Was this going to be some tired topic on the Skirmishers? Sherry leveled a cautious look at Vlad as he continued. “—is nobody else gonna kick a fuss about those damn Chosen?”

The mood, summarily, hit a brick wall. Banel’s mouth settled in a line and Herod looked half a second away from kicking Vlad’s shin under the table. Rosa got contemplative, and Sherry herself? She had to speak up. “What fuss is there to kick, V? The Hunter’s been good on missions, the Assassin’s shown her worth, and the Warlock...” The sight of March, controlled and afraid, flashed in her mind, and she sighed. “He’s got—”

“It ain’t just about what they’ve done,” he interrupted, making Sherry glare at him. “It’s about what they’re *going* to do. Can’t be long now before one of them fucking snaps and takes out five of
us before anyone can say ‘I’ve got a bad feeling about this, Commander.’ And I don’t wanna hear any of you defend them!” There was a thump under the table and Vlad cursed, but he moved on.

“You especially, Herod. That Assassin chick gave you a headache you had to walk off for six hours and captured one of our own!”

Rosa leaned forward, eyes hot. “Oh, so Sammy’s ‘one of our own’ when it suits you, huh?!”

“And you!” Vlad pointed at Rosa. “Nevermind Sam. First the Hunter shot out SYN’s leg, then that freak Assassin straight up kills him! Why the hell are you trying to defend her?”

“Shit. Happens.” Rosa’s glare hadn’t died. “And before you forget, I’ve got Mords to thank for putting SYN back together. Apologized to me and him, too!”

“Oh, well, that just makes everything fuckin’ better, doesn’t it? He said sorry. Now I have to drop every grievance I’ve ever known about the bastard.” He sneered. “How many times has he killed people right before your eyes? How many have we lost to him? Did all of us just fuckin’ forget Angela? What about Isaac? Are we supposed to fuckin’ forget that the Chosen slaughtered them?!”

“Vlad.” Banel stood up, fixing him with an icy stare. “We haven’t forgotten them. But lest you forget, the Commander’s made it clear that it’s her fight. We haven’t seen anything happen yet.”

“So you’re just going to wait?” Vlad stood up to match him, spreading out his hands. “And what the hell do you mean ‘nothing’s happened?’ I sure as hell wasn’t the only one around to see the Commander sprinting like a bat out of hell to the roof. Fuck knows what happened there!” His eyes set to Sherry. “The week’s not even up and you had to see to the Commander about bruised ribs. Right after she came out of the cell with that psychotic bastard. What’s to say he didn’t try to squeeze the life out of her, huh?”

Sherry firmly planted her hands on the table. Yes, Eliza had walked into the Infirmary asking Sherry and Sammy what they could do about a bruised set of ribs. The reason she’d given was “Jax gives out hardcore hugs.” Sherry had believed her in the moment, but... it sounded like the exact kind of response the Commander would give to keep a lid on things. She steeled her resolve. *Not her fight.* “If the Warlock had wanted to kill the Commander, he would’ve killed her just then. What was stopping him? We’ve all taken it on virtue she goes into those ‘interrogations’ alone. I’m willing to believe what she said on the matter.” She spread out a hand. “What are you trying to do? Make us all as paranoid as you are? Do you think the Commander lied to all of us when she said she could handle it?”

Vlad’s steam petered out a bit, but his gaze remained locked with hers. “She’s said we can ask questions, and I’m sure as hell not forgetting.” He jabbed a finger at her. “All of you trust too much. Mark my words; by the end of the month, you’ll see why I tried to warn you.”

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Jax had to admit, the prospect of teaching again was... daunting.

It was not as if he was unsure in his abilities as a psion; Jax never needed to be told about the vast power he harbored and his relative ease in using it. He was certain that it wasn’t his powers that might cause a problem. Rather...

He sighed, taking a moment to check if he was going the right way or not. When he confirmed he was on the right track, he kept walking. Rather, it was his teaching ability. Jax hadn’t taught in
well over fifteen years, now. The last time he had done anything of the sort, it... hadn’t ended well. 
*Far be it from you to lecture Mordenna on “damaging his own,” right, Jax-Rai?* Settling his
mouth in a line, Jax quietly dismissed the thought. He had far more control over his powers, and
it’d been years since the incident. He’d like to think he could manage without too much trouble.

He came to what he believed was his destination. Eliza said she’d been in the Guerrilla Tactics
School around this time and that she’d be free right after. He’d resolved to sit in on whatever she
was doing; his Mystics were busy still establishing themselves, anyhow, and he’d wanted minimal
distractions when training the Commander. He tapped the pad with a clawed gauntlet and stepped
in.

The GTS looked more like a gym than any image the word “school” brought to Jax’s mind. Sure,
there was a whiteboard on one of the walls, currently marked up with some plan he couldn’t guess
the meaning of at a glance, but that was it. Weights, treadmills, there was even two different
models of odd-looking Sectoids, presumably to be used as training dummies. Almost half of the
room was dedicated to what looked like a fighting ring, which he could see getting some use with
the soldiers he’d seen. In the middle of the room, using the pull-up bar...

*Ah.* Jax had a full view of the back of the Commander. Her traditional Commander’s uniform had
been swapped out for what amounted to a sports top that exposed her midriff and workout pants.
Her hair was pulled into a simple bun, preventing it from fluttering about as she did pull ups at an
impressive pace. Most notably, the different wardrobe highlighted just how *chiseled* she was—a
woman of army descent, her, and Jax would be embarrassed to admit that he took a second to
admire the physique on display.

Seemingly hearing the door open—or sensing Jax’s psionics—Eliza halted in her workout and
turned her head. When she caught sight of Jax, she grinned. “Jax! What, somebody going on sixty
can’t... stay in shape?” It was pretty clear she was a bit out of breath due to the pauses to breathe in
her speech.

Somewhat at a loss for words, Jax’s mouth hung for a moment before he collected himself,
clearing his throat. “C-certainly not what I had been supposedly implying, Commander. I was...
merely intrigued that a figurehead of a movement such as yourself would deign to continue to
maintain herself, despite not being one of the troops on the ground.”

Eliza gave a breathless chuckle. “Gotta... gotta keep myself going. Old Me would kick. My. Ass. If
I didn’t keep doing this. Gimmie just a moment. Wanna finish my set.”

Jax motioned that it was fine to continue, and Eliza did just that. Now, Jax counted himself a man
of relative wealth and taste. He was no scoundrel, no charlatan, no Mordenna as it were. But... he
couldn’t exactly tear his eyes away from Eliza as her muscles strained in the workout. That
uniform of hers did a lot to hide her build, and he almost considered it a shame. Almost.

After a few more pull ups, Eliza eased into a down position and dropped from the bar, dusting off
her hands and catching her breath. “Oof. Ethereals did something right—I’m still about... about as
sprightly as I was twenty years ago.” She took a moment longer to stabilize her breathing, and then
straightened, turning to Jax. With her stomach exposed, he observed an interesting set of scars—
one coursing down from her bellybutton, two to the side and middle of her abdomen, and one in the
middle, just below her top. Curious... “—Let me get some water and I’ll be right with you.”

Nodding, Jax stepped to the side as Eliza walked over to a water cooler he hadn’t spotted, filling up
a cup and taking a swig. When she was done, she looked to Jax and motioned to him. “So. How
you doing, Jax my man?”
“Faring well, doing what I am able to settle in.” His room hadn’t been cleared out yet, but Jax had eyes on what he wanted to do with it. “Having the company of my congregation certainly assists me in feeling more ‘at home,’ here.”

“Good! Good to hear.” Eliza took another sip, wiping at her forehead. “Your siblings been to see you at all?”

There was the incident yesterday with Mordenna... but Jax deliberated on bringing it up. It almost struck him as “snitching” to detail what happened... but it would be wise to tell the Commander what occurred. She was the one watching after him, after all. “—Just Mordenna, as of late, and our interaction yesterday... left something to be desired.”

Eliza’s cheerful expression turned more serious, and she stood up from her lean on the watercooler. “What happened?”

Jax extended a hand to gesture. “I had confronted him on what he had done in the past to one of his former Priests that came into my custody shortly afterwards. I had managed to get an apology out of him—a miracle in and of itself— but perhaps predictably, it had darkened his mood. Afterwards, I...” To detail something this personal, or not... Well, Jax trusted the Commander enough. “I had asked him why he did not go by his proper first name any longer, and I was told the story there. In exchange, he asked of me if I had known any details regarding his former life—I could not provide much, but my Matriarch was able to supply him his name.”

The Commander took a moment to consider all that Jax had said, taking cautious sips of water. After a while of thinking, she responded. “—do you think you forced the apology in any way? I suppose what I should be doing is asking just what happened, back then, so I know how to go about it.”

“I do not believe it was forced. If he did not wish to apologize, he could have left at any time—but, perhaps, with the knowledge that I would not wish to reconcile with him until he did. Why I would not do so is perhaps explained in what occurred so many years ago.” Jax moved his hand to the side. “From what I have gathered from Odette—the former Priest of this story—she had entered his foundry to ask a pertinent question, since his login on the Network was returning his standard ‘busy’ messages and the question she had wanted to ask was of value. She began to ask...” His mouth settled into a thin line. “... and my brother shot at her. Afterwards, he spirited her away to my doorstep with nary a word.” Nary a word but the feeling of a conclusion to one of his many episodes, back then. “Apparently, the gun he had used to fire at her was malfunctioning, and only robbed her of her eye.”

Giving a short “hmm,” Eliza raised a hand to her chin. “And you never got his side of the story?”

Sensing what Eliza was about to suggest, Jax’s hand fell to his side. “Regardless of his reasons, he fired at a Priest under his care, Commander. I would not try to hear what he might say to justify such a lowly action.”

“Alright. Did you consider hearing it out anyway might make him feel better?” When Jax had nothing to say to it, she continued. “You can still hear him out and then tell him ‘that’s fine and all, now apologize.’ From what I’ve gathered of Mordenna, he really needs to air out his thoughts and his reasonings for some of the actions he takes. Something tells me he wasn’t trying to justify himself—rather, he was trying to tell his side of the story. Considering you guys have been party to the Elders, who tend to twist things around... I think it was important to him to say what had happened.”

Jax deflated a bit, crossing his arms and looking to the side. Come to think of it... he’d taken
Mordenna dropping off Odette at his Stronghold as the obvious thing to do as someone who had just damaged his own “goods.” But if Mordenna had truly been acting maliciously, there would be no Odette to talk to today, would there? It would have been easier to him to leave Odette bleeding on the floor of his own Stronghold if he truly wished her gone. To take her somewhere he knew she would be fixed and cared for... well, it took a lot of the wind out of Jax’s sails. Voice quiet, he spoke up. “I... had not considered it. You must understand, Eliza, I am chiefly a shepherd to my flock. I had been concerned with Odette having justice done for her, first and foremost. But, I will admit, perhaps... perhaps I could have gone about it better.”

Nodding gently, Eliza leaned back against the watercooler. “I think an apology of your own would patch things right up. Hell, what might make things even better would be to properly hear his side of the story. Mordenna doesn’t do needlessly cruel things, just... cruel things to cure his boredom. If he was working on guns—and I’ve watched him at work—suffice to say, I don’t think he was bored. Maybe he... wasn’t in the best of moods.” Her face shifted, and she seemed to think on something. “If he’s asking you about his past...” Whatever line of thought she had, she took another drink and never expanded upon it.

Sighing, Jax could tell it was a conversation he had to field. He hadn’t meant to hurt his brother’s feelings... and for some reason, it now made him feel bad. What a twist of fate. “I will likely take that course, Commander. Consider your advice heard.”

“Good to hear, Jax.” Eliza downed the rest of her cup, placing it on the tank of water. “Now. If I remember correctly, there was some psionic training you wished to embroil me in?”

Former topic apparently dropped, Jax eased into the new one. “Of course, but at your discretion. If I am interrupting anything, I am able to wait until you are done.”

“Eh. I need to give my muscles a bit of a break before I go at it again, anyway.” Eliza stood up again, rolling her shoulders. “If you can stand teaching me right now, I’d be happy to go at it. I imagine someone of your expertise could work me over just fine.”

Not particularly wanting to acknowledge Eliza's possibly multiple innuendos, Jax cleared his throat. “I... would be delighted to do so, Commander.” He looked around for a good spot, and settled on the mat in the room, motioning to it. “Sit down with me. One of the first steps in training your powers is to grow used to them.”

When Eliza came over, Jax knelt down on his knees, watching as Eliza copied the action. He adjusted so he was closer to her, nodding to himself. He felt awfully rusty at this... but, then again, Eliza probably didn’t know training of this kind. Hopefully, and most likely, it would not show. “When calling upon your psionics, it is an obvious requirement to know what it is to do so. To try and harness your powers without knowing the exact delicacies of them is tantamount to asking for complications.”

Eliza nodded, offering no commentary. Good. That would help him along, not having to respond to everything she said. Questions, he could work with. Running commentary, of which his brother was versed in? Less endurable. He extended his gauntlets. “I will assist you in calling upon them—you have been in my presence long enough to learn what my signature feels like. By drawing yours out, I will also be able to determine their exact composition and structure, thereby aiding you in the exact training course.”

Bobbing her head again, the Commander closed her eyes. “Breathe deeply,” he began, “and think of yourself as an open, passive vessel. Do not struggle, do not strain against my power.” He certainly hoped the Commander trusted him. He could see something like this being potentially misconstrued as an attempt to invade her mind... but Jax only meant the best. He was also trying to
fight off the ghosts of what had happened before. It’s alright. You are much more versed in your powers.

In front of him, the Commander became the picture of relaxation. With a soft pulse, his powers came to life. Coursing up his arms and from his palms, they manifested as slow, languid claws, trudging through the air to Eliza’s head. He was attempting to do this as softly as possible. Not only that, but he was aiming for precision... which was something he would admit he lacked. Still, it was a quiet moment, and Eliza was being cooperative.

The claws reached her skull and pressed their way inwards. He watched as Eliza tensed for a second at the foreign feeling—something mirrored in the glowing signature he could now find—but her resolve must’ve been greater than her discomfort, as she sighed and relaxed again. Unhindered, he urged his powers forward. At such a close distance like this... he could very well approach a Meld, circumstances providing. At that point, he would have to clear his thoughts of nervousness, lest Eliza would be privy to it.

“Remain calm,” he breathed, voice low, “I have found your signature. In a short moment, I will attempt to draw it forth.”

When he heard no complaint from Eliza, he continued with his task. The claw-like reach of his psionics gently grasped onto hers. In that moment, when they gained proper contact, Jax’s mind’s eye bloomed with color and feelings. He knew what reading a mind was like—even what reading a PsiOp or a Templar’s mind felt like. This was far different. Eliza’s psionics were soft, for lack of a better term. Even as dim as her signature was, it was clear there was some measure of power underneath. Nothing that looked greater than his, of course, but impressive nonetheless. At this point, his signature would be readable to Eliza as well. Perhaps she caught some of his quiet admiration, as her own pulsed, and he could feel a warm glow suffuse his chest. These were very, very interesting psionics.

But, he was here with a purpose. He could not idly sit here all say and merely inspect her dormant signature. He could do his fare share of looking once he brought it out of its shell. With a pause to gather and steel himself, he renewed his grip on her power and tugged.

The result was like destroying a dam.

Far more power than he had ever been expecting suddenly overwhelmed the probe-like psionics he had sent forth, effectively slamming him and his access to her out. Physically recoiling, Jax cradled his head for a second in the aftermath of the psionic backlash before he opened his eyes. Eliza was now trembling fiercely, hands clutching her head as her psionics flooded out of her. The power was enough to undo the loose bun she had and her hair was thrashing about. Through the gaps in her fingers, Jax could see blood starting to stream from her nose.

Acting on instinct and with the past haunting him, Jax lunged forward and cradled Eliza closer to him, bringing his psionics to bear. But, no matter how hard he pressed them against her overwhelming signature, she was unconsciously shutting him out at every turn. Eliza was overloading herself thanks to him, and it was no stretch to guess that he had to solve this, fast.

Turning his powers outwards, he broadcast a wide distress signal. He didn’t care who picked it up—he intended it to be for his Mystics and his Matriarch, but if the PsiOps responded? He would need all the help he could get. With the rest of his power, he stalled the Commander’s wayward psionics the best he could. Without thinking, he found himself feverishly muttering a hurried stream of “I’m sorry, I hadn’t meant this.” Was there truly nothing he could do right? Was he doomed to curse all that he touched?
The first response came fast, and granted, she may have been on her way beforehand. Jax heard the door slide open and in seconds, Maria was by his side, adding her psionics to the effort to halt Eliza’s. It still wasn’t enough—but they were making progress, as Eliza wasn’t shaking as heavily. He could feel Maria’s go to work specifically in halting and repairing the damage caused by the overloading. There was no questions to be had out of Maria... and in all likelihood, she knew what had happened.

Soon, the doors kept opening, and more Mystics joined his side. One or two signatures he didn’t recognize came, and at that point, he stopped with his muttering. Eliza’s hair began to settle down, and she was no longer violently shuddering. Slowly, thankfully, the power brought on by multiple signatures was enough to calm Eliza’s rampant power.

Jax could not stand to see Eliza immediately, could not stand to look her in the face after what he had done. Focusing on her, his psionics reached out. Though her signature had simmered down, he issued one last command: sleep.

Eliza closed her eyes, slumping against him and breathing calmly. The blood from her nose had stopped and so had the tears that had began to flow. Jax himself felt like he could barely breathe as he was now party to so many people that had come in to see Eliza, collapsed in his arms. What would they think? Would they believe him to have tried to kill her? He hadn’t meant for this to happen. Not again...

He chanced looking up. Most of those who surrounded him were his Mystics, thankfully. The three signatures he hadn’t recognized belonged to Benald, Pattie... and the Templar Marlene. Though she had a helmet on, he felt as if her gaze readily met with his. The specter that hung above her head was retracting its tentacles from the Commander, its job done. Familiar, very familiar whispers now surrounded him. A fault, they said. A mistake. No malice. Trouble to be had.

Seemingly sensing his bewilderment, Maria took charge of the situation, Jax complied as she moved the Commander into her arms, standing up. “We need to get her to the Infirmary,” she said. “I need to see to her regarding her psionic overload.”

With that, Iris specifically dashed ahead of her and opened the door for Maria as she ran out, carefully holding Eliza the whole way. The Mystics funneled out after her with a few glances cast behind their back at him. Hestia and Demeter broke from the group, coming to either side of Jax and taking both of his hands into theirs. Benald and Pattie followed them, with Pattie already beginning to say something as the door closed behind them. That left Marlene, unmoving from her kneel.

Jax could only blankly ahead, still left in shock at what he had done. He had learned nothing. Fifteen years and he was still as inept as he was back then. There was no improvement, no honing of his abilities. Why did he ever think—

Jax jolted upright as the intriguing feeling of someone trying to scan his thoughts went through him, his surprise drawing the twin Mystics’ attention. He turned his head to Marlene, the being above her retracting a tentacle again. Marlene “looked” at him a moment before speaking. “It wasn’t your fault.”

He couldn’t believe that. If he’d been more cautious, if he had not moved so boldly... Jax shook his head. “You... you could not know.”

“And yet, I do,” she intoned. “You became distracted by her psionics, yes, but you set yourself on your mission anew. You could not have guessed at the power that lay beneath the veil. In the end, you have succeeded, and the Commander will be no worse for wear thanks to your Matriarch’s
healing. You will suffer the consequences of misunderstanding, but... this is all for the best.”

At the ominous speech Marlene presented him, Jax couldn’t help but stare. She... was absolutely correct in what had happened, but how did she know? The skim she had performed while he was distracted was only surface-level, enough to know what he had been thinking at the moment and nothing else. Her confidence in saying what would happen next was equally astounding. Jax, when he was young, had whispers of what would happen in the far, far future. The whispers that surrounded Marlene sounded eerily familiar. Was she, as her moniker suggested, a true Seer?

Figuring he couldn’t sit there, dumbstruck, he looked away from her. “... do you have any words of wisdom for me, oracle...?”

She was silent for a second before she spoke. “Your brother means the best. At heart, he is worried for and fond of Eliza. Do not be combative as might come naturally—let him say his part, and then you, yours.”

Nodding, Jax numbly got to his feet. Hestia and Demeter followed after him, still on either arm. “... Seer. You are welcome at any time to my congregation. And... thank you. For your assistance.”

“I will join you when Eliza confirms that she means you no harm.” From the sounds of it, Marlene got up as well and walked to the door behind him. “Good luck, Chosen Warlock. You will need it.”

With that, he heard the door open and close, leaving him to ruminate over his failures once more.
Protectiveness

Chapter Summary

Mordenna finds out what’s happened to the Commander.

What a life, Mordenna bitterly mused, to have to deal with me.

That was Mordenna’s main train of thought as he stalked down the halls of the Avenger, distraction field wound around him. Firstly he had to go and think he could actually try to hang out with his brother without his own shitty deeds catching up to him, then he had to go and lower the mood like a true killjoy. It seemed as if he was destined to dampen things, to either deliver cutting words or depressing tales. Yesterday was garbage.

Some part of him blamed Jax; something he was trying to move past at the moment. Jax had just been curious, and it was a valid thing to be curious about. It wasn’t like he asked just to call to that emptiness inside Mordenna around just who he used to be. You were the one who asked if he knew who you were. That, he might just strategically forget in order to feel just a tiny bit better about the whole ordeal.

David. David Tomko. No matter how many times he said it in his head, Mordenna felt only a haunting familiarity about the name. It was nothing like regaining memories from Severance Effect —proof that Odin had well and truly erased his past life. But even if he wouldn’t properly remember... Mordenna still wanted to know. There was a whole other person he used to be, and now that person was just gone. Turned into him. Who was he?

He rounded a corner, feet guiding him to his destination. He’d be talking to himself, but didn’t want to garner attention as he made his way to the Infirmary. Clint... he had to know something. Mordenna reasoned that you didn’t just invade a Chosen’s mind like that and not come away with something. Maybe Clint had gotten a few glimpses, maybe Clint knew even more. Maybe he didn’t get anything, a cynical part of his mind went, and he shook his head. He had to find out. He had to try. Mordenna felt like he’d never know otherwise.

The walk to the Infirmary was uneventful otherwise. Once he was at the door, Mordenna tapped the pad and made his way in. The interior was quiet, and darkened slightly. Only one of the beds was occupied, and it was where Clint lay, arms crossed as he stared pointedly at the ceiling. Bingo. Making sure the door closed behind him, Mordenna dropped his distraction field. When Clint still didn’t notice him, he cleared his throat.

That was enough to get the PsiOp to look over at him... and jump, appropriately enough. Clint calmed down quickly, but he still held a hand over his chest. “—when the hell did you get in here?”

“Just now,” Mordenna replied. “No joke. Wanted to drop in on you.”

Clint squinted at Mordenna for a second, but eventually nodded. The Hunter took it as a sign to approach further, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Only got word recently that you woke up. Honestly, it took you long enough.”
Clint scoffed, going back to crossing his arms. “Sam says I damn near killed myself with a stunt like that. But if the Commander asks, well... that’s really just the bottom line.” He angled his head a bit, looking up at Mordenna as he arrived at the edge of his bed. “—it’s probably a good thing that Sammy let me know about your whole allegiance to XCOM before you decided to waltz on in here. Don’t know how I would’ve reacted to seeing you walking about without knowing you’re on our side, now.”

Mordenna shrugged, hands remaining in his pockets. “I would’ve dealt with it.” Dismissing that as he had, he moved on. He... had to approach the question of this carefully. It felt a little strange to outright ask “do you have any memories that aren’t yours, now?” “Must’ve woken up with a ripper of a headache. God knows I did.”

“Yeah...” Clint rubbed his forehead. “Groggy with a migraine is the worst kind of state to wake up in. That, on top of feeling like I hadn’t moved in years. Don’t think a man lesser than me could’ve handled it.”

“Yeesh.” Half in performed empathy, half in genuine empathy. The state Mordenna had woken up in made him want to fall right back asleep—even if it meant he’d have to deal with all the psionic nightmare stuff again. “I feel you. Wouldn’t be surprised if anything else happened to you with a stunt like that. Psionic soreness, for one, apparently that’s a thing.”

“Trust me, I am not touching my psionics anytime soon. I think about using them and I feel like falling down a staircase.” Clint gently shook his head. “I’m never doing that again. Judging off of what Sam told me, I won’t need to, at least.” Clint then muttered something along the lines of “I didn’t sign up for the identity crisis, either.”

*Bingo.* Mordenna snapped up his chance. “*Identity crisis? Why, Clint, that sounds like something you should talk about.*”

Clint seemed to realize what he did, as he locked eyes with Mordenna. It looked like he was judging if he even wanted to share what he knew... but, faced down by the Hunter? Mordenna supposed he realized he didn’t have much of a choice. Sighing, Clint rubbed the back of his head. “Really, I already did with Samhien, but... since you’re related, I guess you get to know. I... think I ended up with some of your memories, Hunter. Mostly when you were a Reaper. You remember those, right?”

“No,” Mordenna stated plainly, “I don’t. Does the name ‘Odin’ mean anything to you?” At Clint’s telltale grimace, Mordenna’s mouth settled into a line. “Yeah. He’s why. Bastard decided I shouldn’t keep anything from back then.”

“... I don’t know Odin so much as the name just makes me... angry. Frustrated. Disgusted. All those kinds of things.”

“Join the club, buddy.” Now. Clint had his memories. In his pockets, Mordenna’s hands fidgeted. He had to know. “... what all did you get?”

The PsiOp narrowed his eyes, going quiet for a second. “Mostly, kind of innocuous stuff. Hunting, trading with Havens, a party or two with Reapers. And...” He paused. “Something that is likely you getting carted off by the Warlock, the more I think on it. It’s kind of brief.”

That was it? Then again, what was Mordenna looking for? Some defining memory that would tell him who he was? At the very least, he seemed good enough to join in the Reaper parties. Mordenna leaned forwards. “What were the parties like?”
“If I didn’t know any better,” Clint began, “I’d call them more revelries than anything else. Big, pretty wild, lots of cooked meat and alcohol. The meat... could be better but when your choices are birds, rabbits, or aliens, there isn’t much to go around. I... feel like there’s a certain way you can cook Sectoid to make it taste better?”

“Like venison.”

“Yeah. Like that. Not much there, either, but...”

“But?”

Clint crossed his arms again, rubbing them. “I don’t know much else there. Some faces I’d recognize if I saw them again. I think... one of them might’ve been Outrider?”

“Fair enough. What were the hunting trips like? The trades with the havens? I’m chomping at the bit here to know.”

He grimaced, looking away. “Quiet. Lots of snow. Probably was farther up north.”

“Anything that might tell you how far up north? Kinds of trees, animal variety, anything—”

“No. I don’t know.” Clint stiffened as he said that, still not looking at Mordenna. “Unsurprisingly, I don’t like living memories that aren’t mine, Hunter. I don’t want to think on them or else I’ll get lost in them. I don’t want to lose what I have trying to recount things that never happened to me.”

At that, Mordenna’s gut twisted. One of his few windows into his past life, and he didn’t even want to talk about it? “Listen here—”

Clint winced. Mordenna paused. A small, calm voice that had grown louder in recent weeks was chiding him. *If he doesn’t want to relive it and risk losing his own memories, then don’t press him. You know what it’s like to lose yourself. Do you want to subject him to that?*


It was a moment of silence between the two of them, but eventually Clint spoke up. “... thanks, Mordenna. I’m sorry I can’t tell you. I just don’t want to lose what I know.”

“I understand, totally.” The frustration of not being able to explain himself met with the melancholy of that statement in his gut, and he slumped. “Hold on to what you can. I’ll leave you to—”

Suddenly, the door to the Infirmary slid open. Mordenna immediately shot up straight again, looking towards the door. Maria was just beyond it, ducking under the doorframe and hurriedly making her way in.

In her arms was Eliza, unmoving, with a trail of blood from her nose.

The bottom of Mordenna’s stomach dropped out and he could feel his center of balance lurch. For a few seconds, all he could do was watch numbly as Maria set the Commander down on one of the beds, kneeling beside her and extending her psionics. Mystics filtered in after she had entered, gathering around the Commander and wordlessly lending their powers.
Mordenna’s fingers began to shake. What happened? A stroke, at Eliza’s fitness and age? It wasn’t exactly impossible, but the mere sight of Eliza unconscious was making Mordenna’s mind run faster and faster. His eyes hyper-focused on her head. She was absolutely bathed in her own psionics when it had taken him looking closely to even get glimpses of them before. But even then, amongst the glow of light blue... there were wisps of reddish-pink psionics.

Jax. Jax had a hand in this. Did Jax try to do something to her? His gut twisted as he could feel himself jumping to conclusions. Did Jax try to overload her and then chicken out, summoning his little servants to undo the damage? Did they intervene in time? Whatever the case, there was a cold fact staring Mordenna in the face; Jax was undoubtedly the cause of this.

He felt his lips move. “Where is he.” Mordenna’s voice was deathly quiet.

One of the Mystics—Iris—looked up. “Did you say something, Hunter—”

“Where. Is. He?” Mordenna repeated, leveling a gaze of cold spite at her.

Iris might’ve been one of Jax’s oldest and bravest Mystics, but even she cowered under the force of the stare Mordenna was drilling her with. “It... it was an accident—”

“I didn’t ask what happened.” There was a vitriol entering his voice, and more Mystics were looking up. In his vision, he could see Odette trembling worst of all. The sight sent a needle into his side, but the guilt was easily silenced by the wave of venom rising up within him. Jax hurt something close to him, something that was his that he could call genuinely good. He will pay in blood, as you have always meant him to. “Where’s Jax.”

There was silence amongst the Mystics, none of them wanting to be the first that spoke up to doom Jax to his brother’s resentment. The situation was enough to make Maria look up from her work. Though her gaze wavered a bit under Mordenna’s, she largely matched it. “Hunter Mordenna. What happened here was an accident in training and I will not—”

“The GTS.”

The eyes of the Mystics went to Odette, who was hugging one of her sisters. She’d likely spoken up just to get Mordenna out of the room and no longer torturing her and her own, whatever was going to happen to Jax be damned. It was an utterance of fear and terror.

Good in Mordenna’s book. Silently, he turned on his heel and strode out of the room, barely waiting for the door to open before he funneled out like a wraith.

Hitching his distraction field up, Mordenna’s thoughts were a violent storm of poison and rage. One day. Jax had been on the Avenger for not even a total of one day and he had already gone and hurt Eliza. No, he was no stranger to hurting the Commander. But Jax apparently couldn’t even wait to leave a mark. If Mordenna didn’t know any better, he’d say that Jax had it out for Eliza. He couldn’t let this lie—Jax had to learn eventually. Make him learn. Show him what kind of fool he is. Teach him his lesson and engrave it into his mind.

Almost punching the panel, Mordenna made it to the GTS, striding inside. Sure enough, Jax was standing with two of his Mystics with him, undoubtedly telling him it wasn’t his fault and oh, the Commander will understand. He hurt her. He hurt her. Blood for blood. He would get in his verbal lashings first before going for the eyes.

Mordenna dropped his cloak, icy gaze meeting Jax’s surprised one. “What. The hell. Is wrong with you. ” Jax opened his mouth to speak but Mordenna wouldn’t have it. “No, don’t even answer that.
I think I can make a pretty good guess. You never dropped the grudge, did you? Here I am, busting my back and literally bleeding to be a better sibling over here, and here you are, lecturing me on damaging one of my own and then turning around and flat out hospitalizing the Commander. Where do you get off? I remember you saying exactly that I ‘wouldn’t be satisfied until the Earth is a smoldering wreckage around me.’ Did you feel like that was some sort of challenge to yourself? Did you have to go and see what would cause me to not stop until everything’s salted and burned? Let me tell you—messing with Eliza is one. Good. Way. To do it.”

Jax seemed at an utter loss for words, hands gripping the twin Mystics’ arms. One of them—Demeter—was shaking, but mounted a defense. “Y-you th-think to t-try and lecture the—”

“Shut your fucking mouth,” he spat, making Demeter hide behind Jax. “The adults are talking.” With that, he turned his attention back to Jax. “You never stopped wanting to depose me, didn’t you? I thought I was one to hold a grudge, but here you are, doing your merry best to push me over the edge and show you just what it’s like to get beat within an inch of your last life. I shouldn’t even let you fucking explain yourself. God knows whatever you say won’t matter. But, y’know, I feel like hearing a joke.” He motioned to Jax, his dagger-like gaze never dropping. “Go on. What do you have to say for yourself?”

In the wake of all that Mordenna had said, he fully expected Jax to not even say anything, or get on him about lashing out at Demeter. He certainly didn’t factor that Jax was going to take a deep breath, level a calm gaze at him, and say what he did next. “She was Odette.”

Mordenna full on blinked, mind halting for a second before he could only ask; “What?”

“She was Odette.” Jax balled his fists, as if pushing himself to continue. “I harmed Eliza without intending to do so, and it may seem like an act of genuine malice on the surface—but, like you dropping Odette off at my abode so her life may be spared... I called for the psions of the ship, to come and aid her. I...” He deflated. “I understand now, brother. I know why you wanted to explain yourself. I never wished to hurt Eliza, like you never wished to truly hurt Odette. I’m... I’m sorry. I should have let you explain yourself.”

A thousand responses rose to Mordenna’s tongue at that. Oh, that’s rich, you think you can make things better now? You think you can go all “woe is me, I understand how you feel?” But, just a look at Jax certainly made Mordenna feel like he was being genuine. Plus, a fact from earlier caught up to him—when they were waiting to get into Jax’s room, Mordenna and Fal-Mai both had to suffer the echoes of one of his episodes. Granted, they recovered in time... but that was Eliza, in there, no doubt comforting him. Jax had probably grown attached to someone who would bear him at a time like that. To try and get at Mordenna by hurting one of his own pillars of support? The more Mordenna thought on it, the more backwards it seemed.

Mordenna’s gaze flickered between the two cowering Mystics and Jax. A few realizations caught up with him and he could feel the heat he had been so vehemently projecting back off. He slowly crossed his arms, eyes boring into Jax. “… what happened?” He asked, voice at a neutral calm.

Jax swallowed. “We... had both agreed upon psionic training for her powers. After she was done with one of her exercises, we settled down, and one of my first courses of action was to draw out her psionics. But, I...” Jax looked to the side, self-doubt written all over his face. “I should have known her psionics were far stronger than they seemed. I lifted the veil and... she overloaded herself. It took myself, my Mystics, Maria, Marlene, and two of the PsiOps in order to calm her.”

“And she agreed to this.”

His brother nodded. Mordenna looked over the three people in front of him once more before he
could feel most of his anger peel away. What replaced it was a stinging feeling about what he’d done, what he’d said to Jax’s Mystics. *Never could treat those little ladies right, could you?* Mordenna sighed, turning to the side. He really had a bad temper, didn’t he? He just couldn’t help it that the sight of Eliza, unconscious and clearly harmed, sent him into an anger and fear-fuelled state. Jax just happened to be the unlucky party on the other end of it.

Mordenna gestured vaguely at Jax. “... I. I might have... assumed the worst. Can you blame me, when I see Maria practically tossing her on a bed in the Infirmary? I don’t—I don’t want to lose her, Jax.”

Jax gave his own sigh, and Mordenna could see in the corner of his eye that his hands moved to comfort his Mystics. “I as well, Mordenna. It... pains me greatly that even accidentally, I caused harm unto her. I understand if you cannot forgive me for inflicting that on her.”

Mordenna was quiet for a moment at that. The part of him that made him march in and hurl abuse Jax’s way made him want to say that he certainly wouldn’t, and at least Jax had the common sense to assume so. Now that Mordenna knew the situation and could see the similarities... the urge was much less tempting. Feeling his body ease up on the tensed posture he’d assumed, he figured he could ask Jax a question. “Could you forgive me for shooting Odette?”

“... if I knew the reason. I did not let you explain before. If you would even feel like you wish to now, I would be happy to hear it.”

Mordenna looked back to Jax. “It was one of those days. The day started, the old man called me in... and he didn’t even lay a finger on me.” He looked away as the memory came to mind. “He just told me how ‘faulty a system’ I was. How he, even in his divine fuckin’ knowledge, didn’t know where he went wrong with me. He raked me over the coals and didn’t even have to break out the belt.” Mordenna wouldn’t hesitate to say he didn’t consider Odin his father, at all. But, as much as he was dying to say it... the worthlessness that clogged his system when he left that hall told a different story. Not a father in name... but Mordenna had damn well imprinted on him, that first year. “So I thought I’d cheer myself up by working. Had my hands on a gun I’d built wrong on purpose and was going to mess with it when...” He trailed off for a second, but knew he had to continue. “When Odette came in at a bad time. I didn’t even think. Just pointed at her and shot. She sure as hell didn’t deserve it. But when you’re dealing with someone like me...” Mordenna’s voice dropped. “You know the rest. I dropped her off at your place because I didn’t want her dying. Then I turned that gun on myself and made damn well sure it hit the mark.”

Back in the day, when death was meaningless and Mordenna had an endless number of lives to play with... suicide was a form of release. He’d die, a proxy Odin would handle his reformation, and Mordenna would be released back into his Inner Sanctum with a cleaner slate, his head set back to normal. He was still embarrassed at himself for taking “the easy way out” every time and that stopped him for a bit, but... On a scale of what caused his deaths, XCOM was second. He was the first.

He could feel Jax’s gaze burning into him. The silence was broken by footsteps, and Mordenna tensed ever so slightly. Was he expecting Jax to strike him? Was some part of his explanation even more infuriating than not knowing at all?

Mordenna would be ashamed to admit that he jumped a fair bit when Jax’s hand came down on his shoulder. The feeling of touch, even though fabric, spurred him to look Jax in the eye. Jax’s face was soft, his posture relaxed. “Hearing your explanation now, it is even more of a sin of mine to have barred you from telling your side of the story properly. I forgive you, brother. So long as you work to make amends with Odette, you will find no quarrel from me on this matter.”
On this matter, his cynical side bit, and he hushed it. Jax forgave him. That was about the only important part here. Letting some of his tension go, Mordenna nodded. “... then I forgive you too, bro. Now that I know the situation, I’m happy to drop my grievances. Just... sorry that it took me biting your head off to realize it.”

Jax shook his head. “What matters is that the understanding was reached, and that I properly apologized for never letting you shed light on your situation. It... it took Eliza imparting some knowledge unto me before our training session to realize what I had done to you.”

Mordenna could feel himself loosen up more metaphorically than physically. “You taking advice from Eliza, too? Good on you.”

“Of course. She is a woman of wisdom, despite our former differences. Now... are your questions settled?”

“Yeah. I’ll... go see to Eliza. And go say some more apologies.” Mordenna moved to leave, but his brother’s grip on his shoulder remained.

Jax raised an eyebrow. “Are you to imply that you do not owe further apologies in this room, brother?”

Ah. Right. Some of the Mystics he’d intimidated were in here, too. Mordenna looked to Hestia and Demeter and had the decency to look somewhat sheepish. “Yeah... you’re right. Hes, Demi... I’m sorry for both yelling at Jax and at the both of you.” He blew some air out his nose. “And for cursing at you in particular, Demeter.”

The twins seemed to mull over his words a bit. It was Hestia who nodded first. “Understanding your situation as I do now, I can understand that your words were from a place of misunderstanding and protectiveness. I forgive you, Hunter Mordenna.”

He looked to Demeter. She still looked unsure, and looked to Jax. “Holy Father?”

Jax turned back to look at her. “Yes, Mystic Demeter?”

“May... may I slap him?”

Both Chosen’s eyebrows raised, and they exchanged a look. With a silent question asked, Mordenna shrugged. “Hell. I deserve it. I’d say she can.”

With a knowing grin, Jax let go of his shoulder. Walking over to Demeter, Mordenna crouched down and presented his face, closing his eyes. He’d let her have the shot without his own body trying to react on what his eyes were seeing. God knows she deserved this, too.

The ensuing slap certainly stung, but it was clear that Demeter was still silently baffled that she got this chance in the first place. Rubbing his cheek for good measure, Mordenna opened his eyes and stood up. “Got your shot in?”

“Yes,” Demeter breathed, and it didn’t take an expert to say that she was caught somewhere between a rare thrill and the anxiety that came from striking a Chosen. “L-let it be known that I am the first Mystic to strike a Chosen.”

Mordenna gave an impressed whistle, smirking. “I’ll have to write that one down somewhere. ‘Mystic Demeter: Smiter of Chosen.’ It’ll be great, I tell you.”

That was enough to send an orange blush to her face, and she huddled next to Hestia. “Y-you don’t
have to do that, Hunter Mordenna.” It then seemed to occur to her why she slapped him in the first place, and she swallowed. “... I forgive you, by the way. I just... had to get that out of my system.”

He shrugged. “Totally valid. Now.” He turned to Jax. “Since you kept me here, it gave me an idea. Could you...” He sighed, realizing what he was doing. *Relying on your brother? Odin would flay you alive.* He’d better. Mordenna resolved to try and go against what Odin ingrained into him. The notion that his siblings were constantly against him was a good place to start. “Could you come with me and, like, I don’t know, put in a good word as I try to say sorry without Maria kicking my ass?”

There was some part of it that didn’t seem to sit well with Jax, but eventually he nodded. “I... will see what I can do. You must understand if I am hesitant to even reveal my face around Eliza after what I have done to her.”

Mordenna could feel that. If Eliza hadn’t literally jumped after him on the roof and he’d somehow survived, he wouldn’t want to make her suffer him, either. “She was still unconscious when I was in there. Think she’ll be out for a while—you just gotta stay until I’ve gotten my apologies in.”

“That much, I would be glad to help you with.” Jax gestured to the side. “To the Infirmary?”

“To the Infirmary. I’ll lead the way, just in case Eliza has woken up from her little nap.” After he said that, Mordenna headed towards the door, opening it up for him and his brother, making sure everyone was through before starting to walk forwards. This would certainly be a difficult situation to approach. He silently prayed to whoever would listen that Eliza was still asleep in there, so he didn’t have to make his apology and also admitted to her that he’d lost his temper again. Perhaps he could also try to work on that.

The only sound that occupied him as they walked was the lighter-than-he’d-assumed step of Jax behind him and his Mystics with him. He sure as hell hoped Jax’s presence would help. Mordenna wanted to clear things up to the point that he could stay in the room with Eliza until she woke up. Yes, he’d gotten over the fact that Jax had done it, but that still left his concerns for Eliza and her health. Would she be ok on waking up? Would a surge like that have done lasting damage? Granted, Maria was there and healing her, but...

*Look at you. Oh, great, here came the self-interrogation. Wanting to hang around her until she wakes up like some sort of lost puppy. You’ve really fallen head-over-heels for her, and let’s face it—you wouldn’t have gone off at Jax nearly as much if you didn’t go and catch feelings for her. Is this what you’re stooping to? Falling in love with the Commander because she showed you some decency?*

“Maybe that’s the case,” he muttered despite himself, keeping his voice low, “but at least she’s the best out of all possible options—and that’s saying something.”

“Did you say something, brother?” Mordenna didn’t want to let Jax in on his thought process, but didn’t want to blow him off, either. He wanted his good graces for what was about to come, after all.

Mordenna sighed. “—What’s your take on the Commander? Brother-to-brother, among Chosen.”

There was a bit of quiet, seemingly as Jax picked his words. When he responded, Jax took his time speaking. “I consider the Commander a worthy figure to follow, even if I am still questioning some of my own decisions. She has proven herself to possess a compassion I have not seen outside of my Matriarch thus far, and it is certainly apparent how she has managed to fend off the Elders for this long. Her attention to personal care is... also admirable.”
Ooh. Interesting inflection on that last comment out of Jax. For want of anything else to focus on, Mordenna’s mind latched onto that. The only “personal care” Jax could be talking about that Mordenna could fathom would be physical fitness—and considering they were both in the GTS, that could only mean one thing; Jax had stumbled upon Eliza’s workout session. Mordenna had seen them himself... and begrudgingly, he had to agree with his brother. But, that wasn’t the point, here. Jax was admiring Eliza, and like any good brother, he had to give him hell. Well, if you’re going to catch feelings for her, it seems you have competition. Right... that made a bit of Mordenna’s competitiveness rise up, but whatever. He was going to rib Jax anyway.

Knowing the way behind him, Mordenna moved to walk backwards, flashing a grin at Jax. “Her personal care is ‘admirable,’ huh bro? Tell me, was it a good look at her biceps you caught? Or did you get distracted by her trapezius? Here I thought it was beyond you to ogle a woman, Jax. Tut, tut.”

He’d hit right on the mark—Jax looked indignant, and Mordenna’s eyes could spot the ever-so-slight beginnings of a blush. “Th—there is no shame in the admiration of someone who keeps themselves physically maintained! Least of all someone who does not make appearances on the battlefield, herself. I take inspiration from her dedication to her physique.”

Maybe, maybe he should go easy on him. Jax was just too fun to torture when Mordenna hit upon something like this. With the knowledge that Jax was his backup against the scorned Mystics, Mordenna let up with a snicker. “Alright, bro. Whatever you say.” He turned back towards the direction he was walking in.

A little bit later, they were at their destination. Mordenna came to a stop in front of the door, eyeing it cautiously. He knew he said that he’d be the one to enter first, just in case the Commander had woken up in the time it had taken him to tear his brother’s head off, but... The Chosen Hunter? Nervous? This whole XCOM gig really has fucked you up. Setting his shoulders and determined to prove himself wrong, he tapped the pad, looking in.

Things were about as quiet as they were before. The Mystics were gathered around, trying to give Maria space as she stood next to the Commander’s bed. Clint himself was turned away from the door, probably trying to catch some sleep. As Mordenna scanned, Maria lifted her head, and her face twisted. “Dare you believe,” she began, voice hot but at a measured volume, “that you can come back without incident—”

“Maria.” Seeing that the coast was clear, Jax stepped in behind Mordenna. “He has made his peace. His actions were born of fear and worry for the Commander, and we have explained ourselves and settled our differences.” Jax then looked pointedly at him. “He still has his own apologies to deliver here, but he is intent on delivering them.”

“Yeah,” Mordenna quickly followed up, “what Jax said. I... really was kind of a dick, here earlier. And hey, apologizing seems to be in, this season.” When he didn’t get much of a response out of his half-joke, Mordenna gestured vaguely and continued. “So, right... Girls? Maria?” His eyes wandered to Odette, and his face fell. “Odette. I’m sorry. Really sorry. As it turns out, you girls are to thank for getting the Commander here safe and sound, and I... I really was ungrateful enough to intimidate the lot of you, wasn’t I? Certainly wasn’t conducive of me.”

He watched as they all regarded him a moment, then turned to discuss amongst themselves. Mordenna could catch a snippet or two—“he seems genuine,” “the Holy Father stands with him,” “but his duplicity is well known,” “but would the Hunter of old ever apologize?” Overall, it inspired a bit of confidence. They seemed more on the side of forgiving him than not.

Maria looked amongst her sisters, to the sleeping form of the Commander, and then back to the
Hunter. She cleared her throat, causing the discussion amongst the Mystics to stop. She leveled a calm gaze at him as she spoke. “I would be willing to forgive you, Hunter Mordenna... provided you either allow me to tell the Commander what transpired when she awakes... or you do it yourself. This is not something I wish to have swept under the rug.”

Alright. That was a lot better than the other outcomes he’d briefly calculated. Still, the notion of telling Eliza what exactly he’d done didn’t sound like a prospect he’d jump at... but better he tell her than Maria did it, in his mind. He nodded. “I’ll do it myself when she wakes up. She needs to hear it, anyway.”

Looking a touch surprised, but not by much, Maria relaxed. “Then I forgive you, Mordenna. Sisters?” The current congregation nodded. Mordenna almost wanted to breathe a sigh of relief. Instead of doing that, he clasped his hands together in front of him. “Good to hear, good to hear. Would you mind me hanging around? I’d like to let Eliza know as soon as possible.” That was one reason, at least, and the only reason he was fine with telling them. He’d tease Jax over his attraction to Eliza, but no word on his own.

Maria shook her head. “I find it well that you wish to remain. Simply allow me my space to monitor her.”

“Splendid!” With that, he turned back to Jax, who was looking upon the Commander’s sleeping form with hesitance. “Bro?” That seemed to snap him out of it, and Jax looked to Mordenna. “You gonna hang around, or?”

Jax shook his head rather quickly. “I—I have... other things, to attend to. The clearing out of my own personal space, for one—and on the topic of space, I need not further crowd the Infirmary with my presence. No doubt, the rest of my followers will wish to see me, and that could greatly bloat this room’s numbers. I will abstain, for now.”

That definitely didn’t sound like Jax’s main reasons for not staying... but then again, Mordenna knew exactly why he didn’t want to stick around. Maybe he needed this space. Mordenna inclined his head towards his brother. “Alright. I’ll have someone let you know when she’s awake and kicking. If you see Fal-Mai, tell her what’s going on, yeah?”

He nodded. “I will if she appears in front of me... but knowing our sister and her abilities, I would not be surprised if she was in this very room, ensuring the Commander’s safe awakening as well.”

A poignant silence followed. If Fal-Mai was there, she wasn’t making herself known. When it was clear she wasn’t going to show, Jax turned towards the door. He caught what looked like a flash of pain on Jax’s face, but he hid it well. Must’ve been a lot of psionics he used, getting Eliza under. He was probably feeling a migraine coming on. “But I digress. Farewell, brother. Keep watch over the Commander.”

“Don’t gotta tell me twice.” With that, Mordenna watched Jax leave, and after a moment of hesitation, the tailor twins filtered out after him, as well. Mordenna took the chance to find an open spot on one of the beds near Eliza and occupy it himself. He sat on it cross-legged, keeping his eyes trained on the Commander’s sleeping face.

Truth be told, she looked kind of... tense. Her eyelids were pushed together a little bit more than normal, and Mordenna’s sight could pick out her eyebrows straining. Well, Mordenna could related. When he got psionically knocked out, he didn’t exactly have the best of dreams, either. He could understand why the Commander might be feeling a bit under the weather at the moment. Still, he’d keep watch for any changes.
Something occurred to him, and he focused on Maria out of the corner of his eye. “Did you let either of the medics know about this? This strikes me as the type of thing they’d like to know about.” Or Bradford, for that matter. Man, either Jax, Eliza, or both of them were in for it when she woke up, if he knew the man well at all.

Maria shook her head. “Unfortunately, not yet.”

“There’s an emergency button on the beds.”

He watched as Maria looked over to Clint, who had just spoken. Bending over, Maria sought it out before Mordenna could hear something click, and the pad next to the bed lit up with a confirmation notice regarding the message. “Well,” he added, “they know now, at least.” At least, they knew to come in. Shouldn’t be too long.

Eliza’s face tensed further. Mordenna was still intently observing her, waiting for any moment that he might have to do... *something*. He didn’t quite know what. *I’ll burn that bridge when I get to it*, he resolved. He... kind of wished he could be closer to her. *Oh, what, you want to lay down next to her and tell her everything’s going to be alright?* Well, actually, that didn’t sound half bad, so long as he could vacate everyone from the room. *You’re pathetic.* That was an established fact. Would his brain do anything else with it, was the question.

He kept watching. At some point, Maria turned away to talk with one of the Mystics. He was the only one with eyes on Eliza at the moment. But, hell, he could deal with that. He’d waited hours in place on hunts before. This was practically nothing. Not like much was distracting him or anything was out to get him, after all.

Eliza’s eyes shot open. *Well, good morning, sleepyhead,* Mordenna wanted to quip... but there was something wrong. Eliza’s eyes were wide open and she wasn’t moving a muscle. Mordenna saw her eyes flicker over to him, and then distinctly focus on something just above her chest. Gears in his head were turning. This had to be some sort of condition, he could swear he’d seen something on it before. If she were properly awake, she’d be moving around and talking, right?

He got off the bed, walking over to her and putting a hand on her shoulder. “Lizzie?”

All at once, whatever spell she was under seemed to break. Her hands flew to his and she squeezed them, taking in a gasping breath. It was enough to draw the attention of the rest of the room, and soon the Mystics were turned towards her—keeping at a distance as to not crowd her, of course. Eliza’s grip on his hand was far too tight to still be out of the shock of waking up, and she was rapidly sitting up in the bed.

Maria leaned over. “Commander, are you—”

“*Out.*”

Eliza’s expression was unreadable. She turned her head away from the gathered crowd and towards Mordenna, but didn’t meet his eyes. The grip on his hand was shaking. She was clearly in some form of distress—and when the Mystics stalled, he picked up the slack. “You heard the Commander. Give her some space. One of you, draw the curtain around Clint. I’ll leave after—”

He didn’t think it possible, but the grip around his hand got even tighter. “Don’t,” she whispered under her breath. “*Please.*”

“—Ok,” he said after a brief pause. “Everyone *else* out.”

After that, the group complied pretty quick. Apparently sensing the need for privacy, Maria drew
the curtain around the Commander’s bed first. Over the sounds of shuffling footsteps and mildly muted conversation, he could hear the other curtain being drawn as well. All the while, Eliza was steadily shaking more and more. Mordenna’s full attention went to her, and he didn’t bother to check if everyone else was out yet. He lowered his voice, crouching beside her. “Eliza. Is everything alright?”

Shallowly, Eliza shook her head, taking shuddering breaths in and out. “I—where—wh-where am I?”

“The Infirmary.” Eliza looked like she was in a real bad way. Mordenna added his other hand to the back of hers. “What’s going on?”

With his other hand added, she moved hers so she was grabbing his. “Wh-what year is it.”

He blinked, and suddenly recognition fell upon him. *Eliza’s PTSD.* Something about the whole ordeal must’ve tripped a part of it. With that in mind, Mordenna drew closer, doing his best to sound comforting. “It’s 2035. You’re on the Avenger. Jax accidentally overloaded you and Maria brought you back to the Infirmary to heal you. That’s where you are, nowhere else.”

Seeming to process that fact, Eliza was silent for a moment—as silent as labored breathing gets. Then, she rested her forehead on their hands, closing her eyes. “I... I can’t believe I’m... this weak.” There were glistening patches under her eyes. “T-twenty years and I just... I can’t...” Eliza’s voice was breaking up, and it didn’t take Mordenna long to see what exactly those patches were as they developed into tear tracks.

Overcome by a burning in his chest and a need to comfort Eliza, Mordenna went ahead and capitalized on the idea he had earlier, sitting on the bed and moving to hug Eliza. “Hey. I... I don’t know what’s going on, frankly, but I can tell you you’re not weak. Wouldn’t have made it this far if you were.”

Eliza readily hugged him back, arms squeezing him as she tried to speak through suppressed sobs. “*Twenty years.* I-I can’t get over something... something that happened twenty years ago.”

“That’s the thing about memories,” Mordenna muttered right back, “If you don’t handle them, well, they’ll kick your ass. You ever do any talking of your own about what ails you?”

“I... I shouldn’t have to.” She further buried her head into his chest. “I should be able to shoulder this. Not—not break down and *cry.*”

“Is this the Eliza that picked up the Chosen because she knew what we’d been through?” His hand gently sought for her face, turning her head to face him. The movement came so naturally he didn’t even realize how intimate it was. “Is this the Eliza who came running and *jumped over the edge of the Avenger* after a Hunter? Is this the Liz who told me it was ok to get upset about things that happened long ago? Liz, Liz, Liz...” His expression softened. “You don’t practice what you preach, do you?”

That was too much for Eliza, who sunk her face back into him again. “—no. I-I don’t. I—” she hiccupped, “—I should be strong for everyone else.”

“And where does that leave you at the end of the day, Lizbeth? Who cares for the watchdog?” Mordenna could hardly believe the situation he was in right now. If anything, it should be him breaking down against Eliza... but wasn’t that the exact thinking that perpetuated Eliza’s stance on going for help? “… not even Bradford?”
“G-god knows how he’d worry...”

“I’ll bet you my left eye he worries anyway, Lizzie.”

Over their conversation, he could hear the sound of the door opening, and two sets of footsteps walking in. “Eliza?” Speak of the devil—that was Bradford. Eliza tensed in his arms.

“He can’t—”

“Eliza. You’ve got to let him know. You let me know. The Chosen Hunter.” Even as he was saying that, he didn’t want to give Eliza up. He didn’t want to pass her onto Bradford and simply have to watch as she poured out her heart and soul to him instead of Mordenna. That feeling was what spurred on his next statement. “—I don’t have to leave. But you can’t send him away forever.”

Eliza was quiet. Her frantic grip on him had waned, but she was still hugging him securely, her shoulders occasionally jerking in suppressed sobs. Eventually, she spoke, and at a louder volume than their conversation. “I—I’m here, John.”

The footsteps approached their position, and when the curtain was thrown back, Sammy and Bradford were revealed. They both looked rather surprised at the kind of embrace he and Eliza were in, but Bradford wasn’t stopped for long. He rushed over to the side of the bed that Mordenna wasn’t on, a hand reaching over and seeking Eliza’s shoulder. “Liz. Are you alright?”

Eliza shuddered. “I—M-Mordenna, could you please...”

He nodded, looking to Bradford. “Jax started a psionics training session with her. He’d underestimated what she had under the hood and she overloaded herself. He got the Mystics and a PsiOp or two to help him put her to sleep, and when she woke up, she... wasn’t in the best of states.”

Sammy walked behind Mordenna to the pad, running through a few menus. His statement was quiet. “… they put her down on her back, didn’t they.”

Both Bradford and Mordenna shared a look before Mordenna could feel Eliza nodding against him. Bradford looked to her, concern written into all of his features. “Liz... why didn’t you say anything? All those lost nights of sleep.”

She took a deep breath, withdrawing one of her arms and putting it against Mordenna’s front—a quiet sign to break off the hug. Complying, Mordenna watched as she moved to Bradford, resuming the embrace on him as he pulled her close. So. It ended up happening anyway. Woe is you. Woe is him indeed—Eliza was her own person, and god knows Bradford had a vested interest in her, too. He wouldn’t get in the way of this.

He caught Bradford’s gaze and motioned to the curtain. “Should I...”

Bradford looked down to Eliza, then back to him. “Just... just for a little bit. I want to talk to Eliza privately for a moment. But I’m not blind to what you’ve done, Mordenna. Just... give me a moment.”

Mordenna nodded, sliding off the bed. “I’ll be outside.” With that, he pushed the curtain aside, returning it as he took a moment to reflect. Eliza... he wouldn’t have really guessed that something like that was going on for her. Yes. Tygan mentioned PTSD. But hearing it and seeing it were entirely different things. The new revelation almost gave him a headache.
... well, actually. As he was walking out, Mordenna could feel the familiar ghost of a headache coming on. Ouch. Jax must’ve been really feeling it. Closing his eyes and taking in a deep breath, he considered his options. Wasn’t like there was much he could do about it, and if Maria wasn’t directly outside, he was just going to have to endure it. He opened the door of the Infirmary, stepping out.

As luck would have it, the congregation was still out there, minus a member or two. Maria was there as well, looking impatient in a concerned way. He caught her eye, walking over. “Maria.”

“Hunter Mordenna. Is everything...?”

“As alright as it gets, for now. She’s in good hands.” He sighed. He still really, really wanted to be the one in there, and his heart was very busy telling him how it was already craving more close contact from Eliza like that. Not his place, not right now. “But as for Jax... I’m getting that very specific phantom pain that tells me he’s wrestling a migraine. You might wanna go, I don’t know...”

He trailed off, but it was enough info for Maria. She nodded. “Thank you, Mordenna. I will see to him.” With that, the crowd followed after Maria as she set off, presumably knowing where Jax is through sensing his signature.

That left Mordenna, alone in the hallway and to his thoughts. He went over and leaned against the wall outside the door, blankly staring up at the ceiling.

Sad that it’s not you in there, holding her as she bawls her eyes out? “Well, yeah. That’s not something we’re disputing.” Oh, poor Mordenna. You know Bradford’s got more of a shot in hell than you do. “Hell, he might be better for her than us. God knows he’s more stable than we are.” That’s the truth, at least. Still, isn’t it awfully delicious to have to hand her off and accept the fact that you’ll never be that kind of confidant for her? “Maybe. Ain’t about us, though. It’s about her feeling better. If she wanted Bradford, she wanted Bradford. I don’t know about you, but I’m more invested in her feeling alright than I am our feelings for her. I don’t really see the point you’re trying to make. Unless you’re trying to degrade Eliza, in which case I’ll crawl in there and kill you my damn self.” We both know the only way you could do that is to put a bullet in your brain. “Would that even shut you up?” Probably not.

He sighed. “When even did I start this whole ‘talking to myself’ gig? Can’t help but feel like I didn’t always do this.” Whatever the answer was, he wouldn’t know.

The door to the Infirmary opened, and Mordenna stood up from his lean on the wall. It was Sammy who greeted him when he looked to his side. “Hunter Mordenna. You can come back in.”

Mordenna nodded, following in after Sammy. The curtains were still closed on either bed, but Mordenna knew which one Eliza was in. Walking over and drawing the curtains aside, he was met by Eliza and Bradford. Eliza was sat up in her bed and looking a lot better for wear, though her eyes were reddened. She looked to Mordenna, nodding. “Mordenna.”

“Liz. How’s things, now?”

“Better,” she replied. Her voice was more steady, too. “I... I want to thank you for being there for me. For getting everyone else out, as well. Maybe I do need to address these memories of mine... but I’m not breaking down in front of that many of my soldiers.”

He shrugged. “Understandable. And hey, you were there for me first. Only seems fair.”
“Well, I’d like to thank you, too.” Bradford said, and Mordenna looked over to him. “I had my reservations about you, as you know. I was worried that you might not be the best influence on Eliza.” He rubbed at his stubble. “Clearly, I was wrong. For staying with her as she woke up and apparently fostering enough trust that she’d tell you about her sleep paralysis... thank you. It’s... good, to have more people looking after her.”

Mildly humbled, Mordenna bobbed his head. “Not like I’d abandon her, Bradford. She deserves more than that.”

“Damn right. You hear that, Commander?”

Eliza sighed softly, putting a hand to her head. As relaxed as she’d gotten, her face was still tensed. “Boys. Please. I’m dealing with a headache here and you two aren’t helping.”

“Ah, yeah. Psionics got you hard, yeah?”

Nodding, Eliza closed her eyes. “Not as bad as the one I had when I first woke up, at least. If I’d known making my psionics stronger involved this, I might’ve politely declined.”

“Well, overuse tends to do that.” Mordenna gestured back towards the door. “When Maria’s done with Jax’s migraine, maybe you could go see her about it. Apparently she’s a wiz at those kinds of things.”

At the mention of Jax, Eliza’s mildly-joking face fell, and she sighed again. “I hope he doesn’t think that it’s his fault...”

“He, uh.” Mordenna rubbed the back of his head. “He does.” Don’t you have something to tell her? Yeah, he did, he was getting to it. “And... I know this because I might’ve seen Maria carry you in here and immediately assumed the worst? And kinda... intimidated his Mystics into telling me where he was at and then verbally biting his face off?”

Bradford’s face set, and Eliza cast a glance up at him. “... did you apologize?”

“Oh, yeah. To everyone. Jax, honestly, handled me being an asshole to him pretty well. I was kinda surprised. But, uh, part of the deal of the Mystics forgiving me was to tell you what I’d done when you woke up. So... there.”

Letting go of an anxious breath, Eliza gave a gentle smile. “I’m glad to hear it, Mords. You handling the situation like that makes me happy.”

“If it so pleases the crown, I’ll keep doing it.” Mordenna returned her smile with a grin. “But, enough about me. Jax probably just needs his space for now, and you... you need to rest, missy. I can’t imagine a psionics-induced headache is doing you much good.”

“For once, I’m in agreement with the Hunter.” Bradford leveled a pointed look at Eliza. “You should stay in the Infirmary. I’ll handle your work until you’re better.”

“Bradford...”

“Don’t ‘Bradford’ me. How’re we going to rely on you if you drive yourself into the ground?”

 Seems Eliza didn’t have a response to that. She took a deep breath, laying back on the bed. “... alright. But once this headache is gone, I’m back to work. Mark my words.”

“Words marked,” Mordenna shot back, “but you’re not getting out of that bed a minute sooner. I’ll
set Sammy on you, so help me god.” Sammy, having otherwise been quiet through the conversation, gave Eliza a genuine smile. Eliza sighed dramatically in response.

“Alright, alright. I’ll take five. Just... send someone I can talk to my way, alright?”

“Oh, Lizzie, Lizzie, Lizzie.” Mordenna sat on the edge of the bed again, tousling her hair gently, mindful of her headache. “I’m still here, ain’t I? Bradford, you can handle her duties. Sammy, you can check on Clint. I’ll stay here and keep the poor Commander company.”

Bradford crossed his arms and gave Mordenna a convincing stern look, but he relented. “Well, I can’t really say no to that. No funny business, and let me know if you need anything.”

Eliza nodded at him. “I know. Thank you, John.”

“No problem. Get some rest.” After that, Bradford walked out.

Sammy tapped one or two more things on the pad, then turned to the two of them. “Commander, please let me know if your headache lasts longer than six hours. There is a sink in the back of the room with drinkable water; keep your exposure to light to a minimum. There is an emergency button on the side of the bed. With that said... please get better soon.”

The Commander’s smile was warm, and made Mordenna relax. “Of course, Sammy. Take care.”

After Sammy left, Mordenna took the chance to lay down in a relaxed recline on the bed. “Oof, this is some comfy stuff. No wonder Clint over there can lay here all day.”

Eliza chuckled. “I’m sure he gets up and moves around! You, on the other hand, I’m sure you’d never move if you could.”

“Why, Liz!” He pressed a hand to his chest, mock-offended. “How could you ever say such a thing! Me, the Hunter, known for definitely not slacking off on the job when I was with ADVENT!”

The laughter he was able to pull from her seemed to make his phantom headache ease up. She rubbed her head, shaking it. “Oh, don’t make me laugh too much, it makes my headache worse.”

“Sorry, Commander. I like doing it. But, just this once, I’ll let up.” His eyes roamed over her for a second before locking with her own. “... are you going to be alright? For real?”

She nodded. “Eventually. Figures that I’ve still got a few things left to learn.”

Mordenna could feel himself smile in a way that he rarely ever, if at all did; genuinely. “I’m glad to hear it. I’ll be happy to stay here with you and keep you entertained, and don’t you forget that.”

With a smile, Eliza patted his side. “Alright then. Entertain me, cowboy.”

As he grinned and started in on a conversation topic, in the back of his mind, he could hear that cynical side of him start in on just how much of a hopeless fool he was. But, Mordenna didn’t care at the moment. He was with Eliza, and Eliza was enjoying having him around. She was safe, and she wanted him there. There was really only one fact to derive from the whole thing.

He loved her.
The Assassin makes a resolution, and shortly sees it through.

Perhaps, Fal-Mai would admit, her admiration for the Commander went beyond mere respect.

It was not as if she still didn’t hold it for the Commander, of course; based on the things Eliza had done and how she carried herself, Fal-Mai highly respected a leader such as her. Her actions put the Elders in perspective and helped to reinforce the notion that they were not truly concerned with her wellbeing.

But... Fal-Mai knew what respect felt like. She felt it for Sammy, who set aside his differences—if he had any in the first place with her—to do his job and even reach out for her. She felt it for Bradford, who kept Eliza guided through her conquest against the Elders and showed a measure of compassion for the Chosen. She would even begrudgingly admit that she felt it more, nowadays, towards her brothers. However, what she felt for Eliza was... different, in a way she could feel but not name.

The difference was something Fal-Mai could experience when the Commander did certain things. Eliza smiled, and Fal-Mai felt the keen urge to smile along with her. The Commander laughed, and the Assassin’s chest felt weightless. When the two shared contact... that was when her heart raced. She couldn’t understand it. She had no words for what Eliza did to her. “Nervousness” was the closest she could put it as, but she’d never associated nervousness with the joy the Commander made her feel. There was something different that stirred in her heart and made her want to know more.

The only way to know more, as far as Fal-Mai was concerned, was to spend more time with Eliza and try to name the feeling on her own. She wouldn’t concern anyone else with what she felt—for all she knew, it was something obvious or even worse, something wrong. Sammy’s reaction to feeling her experiencing it had to be indicative of something. So, Fal-Mai would investigate this on her own, and if it did turn out to be incorrect in some way? She would not need to bother anyone else with it.

With it all in the back of her mind, Fal-Mai was quietly roaming the halls of the Avenger, cloak down. She would normally keep it up, but she was searching for Eliza at the moment. The Commander hadn’t been in the Resistance Ring, and with her recent... incident, Fal-Mai didn’t take her to be in the GTS. That left one last possible location in her quarters, all things considered. Perhaps she would encounter the Commander along the way.

That was growing less and less likely as Fal-Mai went on, keeping her eyes forward as she ignored any soldiers that crossed her path. Hopefully Eliza wasn’t too busy. Fal-Mai would hate to interrupt any of her duties—and she seemed to have a knack for keeping busy throughout the day. It hardly seemed as if there was a moment where Fal-Mai could pop in without stopping her in the middle of something.

When Fal-Mai reached Eliza’s door, she reasoned that she would quickly step in, see how Eliza was doing, and if she wasn’t too busy, the Assassin would simply... what? Talk with her? Hang
around and say nothing? Truthfully, outside of remaining in Eliza’s presence, Fal-Mai hadn’t come up with much of a game plan, and it embarrassed her slightly. She shouldn’t be rushing into these kinds of things unprepared! Though, Eliza seemed to have a knack for conversation. Fal-Mai would probably be able to rely on her to keep things going.

Still thinking and a little distracted by it, Fal-Mai opened the door to the Commander’s Quarters, leaning in. “Commander? Are you—”

Eliza wasn’t at her desk. She wasn’t over at the chairs. Rather, Eliza was over by her bed, her back to Fal-Mai. The Commander had pants on... and that was about it.

Recognition flashing through her mind, Fal-Mai practically tripped over herself backing out of the door as it closed, throwing a cloak over herself in a flustered haste as she pressed her hands to her eyes. Of course. Of course she wouldn’t have the decency to knock and would instead barge in on Eliza changing!

She could hear footsteps coming to the door... and what sounded like the tail end of Eliza laughing. “F-Fal-Mai!” There was a thump, like Eliza had slumped against the door. “Fal-Mai, I’m,” Eliza breathed, still laughing, “I’m sorry! I need to—to lock my door more often!”

Fal-Mai could hardly respond. What she’d just did was still flashing through her mind, and judging by the heat rushing to her face, she was probably turning entirely orange. She lifted her cloak enough to be heard. “I-it is s-simply a—a fault of my own that I...” Oh, she couldn’t answer anymore, mentally tugging the cloak down again in a fit of embarrassment. She had half a mind to run herself through with her sword. What was she thinking, simply barging in? Yes, she had been distracted by her thoughts, but that was certainly no excuse!

From the sounds of it, Eliza was still against the door. “H-hey, it’s—it’s fine.” A bit more chuckling, then she wound down. “I was just changing out of my workout clothes since I could finally make it over to my quarters. Give me a minute to finish dressing and I’ll be right with you, ok?”

Fal-Mai nodded, realized Eliza couldn’t see that, and then gave a squeak of affirmation. Oh, whatever gods could listen, spare her now. She could hear Eliza trek away from the door, and only then she lifted her cloak and took in a deep breath. Goodness. Perhaps she could’ve stopped at the door and listened, or knocked, or asked what Eliza was doing... well, it had happened. All she could do now was resolve to not repeat the mistake in the future... and try to get that image of Eliza out of her mind. For a human who didn’t fight of her own accord, Eliza kept in shape. A noble pursuit, Fal-Mai thought, but that was all she thought of it until she forcefully hushed her line of thought.

A little while later, and she heard Eliza’s voice through the door. “I’m done now, you can come in!”

Letting the breath she’d taken in go, Fal-Mai tapped the pad and slowly walked in, eyes remaining on the floor for a bit before she raised them. Eliza was back in her Commander’s uniform again... and her eyes were far more vibrant than they had been before. They had been a washed-out blue, but now they were more electric, more light and saturated. Her hair was a few shades lighter, with more notable white streaks. Were Fal-Mai’s eyes tricking her, or was the Commander’s hair a bit longer, as well? Still, inspection done, Fal-Mai had apologies to get to. “I-I must apologize, Commander, it is deeply embarrassing of me to do what I just did...”

Chuckling lightly, Eliza waved it off. “No, no, I need to lock my door more often. Most people kinda just come in anyways, so I need to adapt around that. Hope I didn’t scar you for life, at least.” She grinned. “Though, judging by the shade of orange you’ve turned, perhaps I did.”
Oh. Fal-Mai knew she was blushing, but for the Commander to see it was another story. The urge to jump back in her cloak was strong. “N-nevertheless. I i-intruded on your privacy.”

The Commander shrugged. “No harm, no foul. What can I do for you, Fals?”

Taking in a steadying breath, Fal-Mai stood up straight and grew the courage to look Eliza in the eye. “I merely wished to shadow you in your duties today, Commander. I feel as if I will grow more comfortable in sharing my personal struggles with you if I know more about you.” That was part of the reason, at least. Fal-Mai couldn’t bring herself to let Eliza know the true reason. Perhaps part of you getting more comfortable in sharing will result in sharing that. It was a hope, at least.

She nodded. “Sure! But, hm…” Eliza clasped her hands in front of her. “Part of my duties today involve picking up a new recruit over at the main Skirmisher camp. You can hang out with me afterwards if the prospect isn’t so grand, of course, but I wanted to let you know.”

That explained why they’d landed earlier today, at least. But, still... the notion of showing her face in front of the Skirmishers was a daunting one. She knew what she was to them—the Butcher of Freed ADVENT. Nightmaiden. A quiet whisper of the grave on the wind. If she were to show herself there, even beside the Commander, it was asking for trouble. Even so, the prospect was promising. If Mordenna was going around and apologizing to those who he had wronged, what excuse did she have? If she truly wanted to make herself shine in Eliza’s eyes, it would be a good place to start.

Shaking her head, Fal-Mai subconsciously mimicked Eliza’s pose. “No, Commander. I would be happy to accompany you if they would have me. You will most likely have to give them advance notice, of course, but I have amends of my own I wish to make.”

The smile the Commander gave her was encouraging. “Good to hear, Fal-Mai. In that case, follow me to the Resistance Ring. I’ll place the call there so Betos knows you’re coming, and of your own accord, at that.” With that, Eliza walked past Fal-Mai and over to the door. Fal-Mai followed after her, gently ducking under the door as she did. It was easy to guess that the Skirmishers would not receive her apology so easily. She had been a butcher of their kind for the year that she was alive, and had shown no signs of redemption. It took one such as Eliza to see the discontent after what had happened to Mordenna and Jax...

Hugging herself, Fal-Mai blew a quiet breath out of her nose. She preferred not to linger on the memories of such a time... but all it was taking was remembering the agony that Jax had experienced and equally, the grief that Mordenna put forth in the midst of the pain. It had almost been an echo chamber, with all of their suffering resonating in each other. Fal-Mai was glad she had been left alone to endure it, in a way. Aspects of it still hurt, though, like a wound not properly treated. She’d wanted to discuss them with Eliza when it was clear she could trust the Commander with such subjects, but other things had come up. Later. Perhaps before you both contact Betos. Right now, walking through the hallways? Far too risky.

The walk was quiet as they made their way to the Resistance Ring, Eliza occasionally checking over her shoulder to make sure Fal-Mai was indeed following behind her. She did have a rather quiet step, but it almost felt as if Eliza was trying to figure out an avenue of conversation to open. When we get to the Ring. When we get there. The tension was mounting.

The door to the room opened, and the two stepped on in. Eliza made her way over to the table. “This is going to be interesting. Stand over here with me so she can see you.”

Alright. Now was her chance. Fal-Mai stepped over to Eliza. Now.
She watched as Eliza tapped a few buttons on the pad that was on the table. *Now’s the time.* A list of contacts popped up, and Eliza chose Betos. *Ask her! Say something! Don’t just watch!*

No matter how hard she willed herself, Fal-Mai couldn’t bring forth the words to stop Eliza and ask her to sit down with her. She knew why—she would be interrupting Eliza, possibly inconveniencing her. This meeting had to be at least somewhat time-sensitive. Fal-Mai didn’t want to delay it. Besides, there was the underlying reason as well... Fal-Mai didn’t want to admit the ghosts of the past still haunted her. She had her talk with Eliza. Everything was supposed to be fixed. Why was this still a problem for her?

The screen at the end of the room lit up, and the image of Betos came to life. She seemed moderately surprised to see the Assassin hanging over the Commander, and Fal-Mai did her best to look dignified as she remained in sight. “Commander. Assassin.”

“General Betos,” Eliza replied. “You probably know we’re in the area, depending on how many buildings Bradford knocked over.”

That got a smile out of the Skirmisher, but not much else. “As we are aware. I see the Assassin is with you on this day.”

She nodded. “She’s as willing to fight back against the Elders as you are, Betos, and I think you’ll be intrigued to hear what she wants to do as I pick up my new recruit. Fal-Mai?”

Seems it was her turn to speak. Fal-Mai leveled a calm gaze at Betos. “It is no secret that I have wronged you and your kind, General. I have been a messenger of death to your kind for the year I have been alive, and my crimes against your people are numerous. Now that I am no longer controlled by the Elders and their false pretenses, I wish to apologize to you and yours, in person if you will allow me.” She took in a deep breath. “Even as I speak about being ‘controlled’ by the False Gods...” That was the term that Sammy used at one point, right? “... that does not excuse my actions fully. I understand if you will not accept my apologies—you are owed that much after how much I have wronged you.”

It was a quiet moment of staring between her and Betos, and Fal-Mai felt as if she was being judged. She fully expected Betos to rebuff her apology—not everyone was Eliza, and not everyone knew the kind of treatment Fal-Mai had went through. She did not think it justified her actions in the slightest; she was still Chosen, and performed cruel actions of her own accord. She would gladly bear her sins, as it was only right that she did.

After a while, Betos began to speak. “—Were you to ask me at the beginning of this year if I would accept a reformed Assassin, I would answer negatively. But, presented with the Chosen in front of me now, and with the implicit endorsement of the Commander...” She spread her hands out, then clasped them again. “I find myself leaning more towards accepting your apology, Assassin. However. The damage you have done to me and mine cannot be fixed with one apology after a year of violent transgressions. I find it well that you wish to come and express your apologies—in person—but I cannot say that neither I nor my Skirmishers will accept it right away. Rightfully, you have caused much harm with your actions, controlled by the Elders or not. I will gladly accept you coming to our camp to lay out your apologies—provided you are accompanied by the Commander.”

A weight leaving Fal-Mai’s shoulders, she nodded. “Of course. Consider myself honored that you would even consider to accept my apology.”

Betos gave a knowing smile. “Admittedly, half of my willingness comes from the way Combat
Medic Samhien speaks of you. If I did not know any better, I would say he considers you a friend.

That was enough to make Fal-Mai smile ever so slightly. “Since I consider him one, I would only hope that is the impression you receive from him. Still, it is humbling to be talked fondly of behind my back.”

“Something all of us can hope for,” Eliza added, hands clasped in front of her. “That cover everything? I’d love to come down and see you in person again, Betos.”

If Fal-Mai didn’t know any better, Betos seemed a little flustered with what Eliza said, but she recovered quickly. “Of course, Commander. I look forward to it.” With that, Betos reached for something below the desk she was at, and the feed cut.

Eliza turned and headed for the door. “Well, you heard her. Let’s go down and facilitate a bit of goodwill, yeah?”

Fal-Mai nodded… but found herself rooted to the spot even as Eliza moved on. You have to tell her. You have to. But they’d already told Betos they’d be right down. Fal-Mai couldn’t interrupt this, especially now. She didn’t want to inconvenience Eliza. She told you that you could talk to her at any time. This should be no different! Any other time she would just be interrupting paperwork and logs that Eliza could get back to without a strict time schedule. This was different.

Eliza got as far as getting to the door before checking over her shoulder to see if Fal-Mai was following. When she spotted her still over by the table, she turned to her. “Fal-Mai? Everything alright?”

Tell her! “… everything is… fine, Commander. I am merely… thinking, of what to say.”

That certainly wasn’t enough to convince Eliza, whose hand fell away from the pad. “—Fal-Mai, if there’s something wrong, you can tell me. I think Betos can handle us being a little bit late—I can just tell her afterwards that we had a bit of a delay. We’ve got basically all day to go down there.”

Despite everything, despite Eliza out-and-out telling her that it would be fine to be late… Fal-Mai still felt pressured to assure her that everything was fine and they could move on. But, that need to tell her, that need to be comforted won out. Fal-Mai crossed her arms defensively. “… there is something I wish to speak with you about. It… it is not related to today’s task. It is something I have been thinking of for a while.”

In response, Eliza walked up to her and gently took one of her hands, looking up at her with soft eyes. “I’m all ears, Fal-Mai.”

Looking down at her, Fal-Mai eventually held the Commander’s hands, walking over to one of the couches and sitting down with her. She took in a deep breath, breathing it out slowly. Approaching this was difficult. It was an open admittance that their last talk hadn’t solved the problem, and it made her feel ashamed. Knowing this, Fal-Mai started to speak. “I… I know this will tell just how little I have been able to learn from our last talk, Eliza, but I still feel as if I am… fractured. Unable to come to terms with myself.”

“Hey,” Eliza squeezed her hands. “Almost nothing serious gets fixed with one round of repairs. If we need to have a few talks on a subject, that’s completely fine. You aren’t weak for needing help—everyone does, eventually.”

While it didn’t remove Fal-Mai’s hangups going forward, it was still soothing to hear Eliza say that it was fine. Fal-Mai took her as a voice of reason, and tried to remember her words as she spoke.
“—perhaps that is true. Nevertheless, I wanted to speak of this.” She took in a deep breath again. “I am... struggling, with feeling inadequate, again.”

Eliza nodded seriously, her thumb rubbing against Fal-Mai’s hands. “Anything in particular?”

Fal-Mai looked away. “It is a matter of my brothers. Specifically, Jax-Rai. I...” Right. Eliza probably didn’t know about their linkage. She turned back to the Commander. “All three of us Chosen, we share a very weak mental link. Enough to know if one of us has died... or is undergoing extreme distress or pain.”

The Commander looked somewhat disturbed at the info, but the look was traded for a sympathetic one. “—I suppose that means you felt that, last week, when I had went in to check on him.”

She nodded, confirming as much. “That is what I wish to speak of. It is not often that I feel Jax’s emotions though the link—mostly Mordenna—but when I had felt his pain, his sorrow, his fear?”

Fal-Mai closed her eyes. “I had wanted to enter and make sure he was alright. What the Elders had inflicted upon him, no being should suffer. Let alone Jax, who only followed them with admiration in his heart. I am fully aware you were with him, but even as I think over not entering in the end now...” She opened her eyes, but kept them lidded. “I can only think of myself of being an inadequate sister. If we are to get along, surely we should be there for each other, yes?”

After she was done, Fal-Mai searched Eliza’s face, expecting to find some measure of understanding. What she saw instead was a quiet pride. “Fal-Mai. Let me first say that your thinking towards Jax is exactly what you should be thinking as a good sister. I can understand hesitating to enter because you don’t know what to do because of your former history. But the fact that you’re establishing that as what you should do speaks volumes. As always, you’re not inadequate, Fal-Mai—you’re learning. This is the first time you’ve encountered situations and feelings like this, I’d wager. Considering that, you’re doing well.”

To hear assurances and praise like that out of Eliza, even as she was sure she was failing at handling the whole situation... Fal-Mai felt no small measure of relief. Although there was a part of her that was still unsure, a part of her that still argued that she should’ve been there for Jax, she chose to heed Eliza’s words. She threaded her fingers between Eliza’s, squeezing her hands. “Please let me say how thankful I am, Eliza, that you are now the one seeing to me, rather than the Elders. I... I do not think I could ask for a better confidant and supporter.”

Eliza’s smile felt like it could melt ice with how warm it made Fal-Mai feel. “I’m happy to be here for you, Fal-Mai. It makes me happy to know you’re happy. If you’re looking for what to do in the future for Jax... if you feel that link of yours telling you he’s going through an episode again, find him and comfort him. I know things between the three of you are still tentatively getting better, but I think it would speak worlds to him if you showed him you feel empathy for his plight and wanted to help him as he went through it.”

Fal-Mai bobbed her head, taking the advice. Eliza just spoke to her, in so many ways. What Fal-Mai had been sure would be a tense conversation was anything but. Satisfied and happy that she’d covered the problem and now had solid advice she could follow, Fal-Mai freed her hands of Eliza’s—just long enough to draw her in for a hug. “I do not think I can thank you enough, Eliza. My debt to you is a hundredfold, and I am glad to be your blade.”

With her psionics now exposed and somewhat active, Fal-Mai could feel Eliza’s signature practically hum with happiness at this distance. “I’m glad to have you, Fal-Mai. Resolutely and firmly. Just don’t feel like you owe me—you deserve to have someone looking out for you.”

Was it possible for this warm feeling in Fal-Mai’s chest to grow any further? As it stood, Fal-Mai
was teetering on the edge of being downright *giddy* at Eliza’s assurances. It was enough to make the Assassin smile and hug Eliza closer. “Thank you, again.”

“It’s no problem.”

Fal-Mai simply held Eliza like that for a few more moments. Truthfully, she didn’t want the embrace to end. It brought her so much comfort to be this close to her. But eventually, she remembered that they still had tasks to attend to today. With a content sigh, Fal-Mai let go of Eliza, continuing to smile at her. “Now. I believe we have a new recruit to pick up?”

If Fal-Mai didn’t know any better, she’d take the subtle hue of Eliza’s face to be a *blush*. Couldn’t be. “Yeah. Is that everything you wanted to cover?”

Nodding, she moved to stand. “Yes, Eliza. Until I wish to have a talk with you again, of course.”

Patting her side, Eliza got up with her. “Good to hear, good to hear. Let’s head out for our new soldier.”

The dark gray clouds that hung in the air seemed to echo what Fal-Mai felt as she walked behind Eliza towards the Skirmisher camp.

Fal-Mai did not think herself fearful of Skirmishers. Before, she loathed them. Now... she felt a sense of kinship. Having discovered the Elders’ true nature herself, she now no longer blamed them for wanting to run from that reality. She knew that they would not see her in the same light, for all that she had done to them. Even so, she wanted to extend the possibility of forgiveness... and perhaps that was what scared her. As at peace as she was with the idea of them rejecting her, the sheer notion of being rejected in her reformation scared her. Even for as much as she thought she would deserve it, there were parts of her still frightened at what would happen, where she would turn.

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, she set her eyes forward. The camp in front of her was one of the largest she’d seen. Skirmisher camps largely shared the same look and feel, in her experience —squat, purpose-built buildings that echoed the aesthetics of ADVENT construction even in their scavenged nature. Skirmishers, some with helmets on, some without, were patrolling the perimeter. Up high in watchtowers, she watched as one or two tracked her with their gaze, undoubtedly unsettled at the Butcher of Freed ADVENT being in their camp, despite her allegiance. Through the alleys and air, her ears caught whispers.

“She is here. Why has the Commander brought her?”

“What would the Assassin have with us?”

“Why has she been allowed in?”

“She must’ve planned this.”

At such whispers, Fal-Mai kept her gaze near Eliza, doing her best to not make eye contact. Didn’t want to seem as if she was staring any of them down, after all. Eliza herself walked with an admirable confidence, defusing a bit of the atmosphere as she nodded to passing Skirmishers. Fal-Mai was sure that she was no stranger to such suspicion. The Commander must’ve had to fight
through a lot of friction as she rallied allies to herself.

Eventually, they approached a heavily-fortified building, something that looked more like a repurposed ADVENT facility than any of the other buildings around. As far as Fal-Mai knew, it might’ve well been. Twin guards at the door had their weapons held at rest—though their fingers twitched towards the triggers as they laid eyes on the Assassin. One of them looked to Eliza and spoke up. “Commander. You would bring the Butcher before us?”

“No by her own will,” Eliza replied. “And only because I am confident in her.”

“You may be confident,” he returned, “but even you know the atrocities she has committed. She has laid thousands that just wished for peace dead. You would allow her to walk beside you?”

Though Fal-Mai couldn’t see Eliza’s face, the expression on it was enough to get both soldiers to back down slightly. When Eliza spoke again, her voice was level. “If you’re anything more than a yearling, then you would know the atrocities I have committed. You would know that I was the one in your ear, guiding you on as you fought against those who wanted peace.”

“We were controlled, Commander,” the second guard spoke, rushing to her partner’s defense. “As were you. You were imprisoned.”

“As was she, a prisoner to the Elders’ will. If you want to shoot her for what she’s done, you’re going to have to kill me, too. Do you want to get that out of the way now, or later?”

That sent both of them into an embarrassed silence. The fact that Eliza was so willing to leverage the crimes she, too, had committed while the head of the Network for the Elders was curious. Most would argue what she did during that time wasn’t her fault—yet here she was, arguing against that in a way, directly calling to attention what she did. A dangerous gamble, especially around Skirmishers.

A gamble that paid off, as the male Skirmisher gestured to the door with his gun. “... the General is waiting for you.”

“Excellent. The two of you have a nice day.” With that, the guard opened the door for the two of them, and Eliza stepped inside, with Fal-Mai trailing behind her. The interior of the building confirmed Fal-Mai’s suspicions—under a cover of wires, maps, and weaponry, the telltale makings of an ADVENT facility were present. Near the center of a room, standing at a table with communications equipment spread across it, was General Betos. Her... former sworn enemy.

Curious enough was the Sectoid standing near her. It was dressed in makeshift armor, fitted for it, with a Skirmisher flag being used as a shawl to cover it. A quick glance at the blaster on its arm told of modifications already done. It locked eyes with Fal-Mai and stumbled back. “Who is the Assassin here for?” It spoke in ADVENT, clear to Fal-Mai’s ears.

Eliza walked over, looking to Betos. “Does she know English? If not, I can manage—my ADVENT’s just a little rusty.”

Betos shook her head, then addressed the Sectoid. “Arachne. She comes on peaceful terms, and walks with XCOM, now.”

“I had known the Hunter to be with them,” she replied, slowly approaching the table again, “but not her. I’m... I’m surprised you let her in.”

“Times change, years pass, the strange becomes normal.” Eliza sounded like she was having a bit of trouble remembering her words, but otherwise her ADVENT sounded fine. Fal-Mai guessed she
must’ve picked it up during her time in the Network. The Commander went over and extended a hand to Arachne. “Arachne, is it? I am Eliza, Commander of XCOM.”

Cautiously, Arachne took the hand offered to her. Eliza shook, and then she took it back. “You already know my name, I see. I suppose Betos told you.”

Eliza nodded. “She did. What’s your story? I didn’t get that.”

Arachne cleared her throat. “I was part of a squadron when the Hunter was severed. I was already having ‘deviant’ thoughts when you were disconnected, but largely kept them at bay out of fear. With him severed, the chip that held sway over me no longer spoke.”

“One of my doctors took it out,” Betos added. “He found it completely fried.”

“That seems to be a trend.” Eliza gestured to Arachne. “I assume you made your escape after that and went to the Skirmishers?”

Arachne bobbed her head. “I... did not want to approach any havens. For good reason, I felt they wouldn’t trust me. I couldn’t find any other possible XCOM outposts, so my next thought was the Skirmishers. I approached this camp, not knowing I’d directly found their main headquarters. Suffice to say the welcome was... tense.”

For good reason, Fal-Mai knew. The paranoia that must’ve arose when Arachne approached... nevertheless, Fal-Mai shook her head. “It is good that they allowed you in. In this war, I believe the Commander will take any allies she can.”

“I suppose I have to believe that too, with you standing there.” Arachne’s tone was not unkind, but there was some air of mild disbelief to it. “Nevertheless. Commander, may I join with your forces?”

“Of course.” Eliza nodded to Arachne, smiling. “Welcome to XCOM, Arachne. We’ll get you situated after Fal-Mai finishes her business here.”

Straightening, Fal-Mai took that as her cue. She looked to Betos. “I come as I am, General. I wish to extend my apologies once more, and hope that my showing up here attests to that.”

In-person, Betos’s judging stare was even more powerful. “And I repeat my sentiment—time will tell regarding forgiveness. Though the gesture of you coming here yourself is not lost on me. Even so, my Skirmishers are not wrong to mistrust and fear you.”

Fal-Mai inclined her head respectfully. “I understand. If there is anything more I can do to assist the process, I would be grateful to know.”

“Perhaps coming with the Commander whenever she needs to visit in person will help. The more that my kind see that you pass through here with no intention to harm, the more used to you they will grow. Assuredly you know that this process will take some time.”

“Of course. I would not expect their opinions to change overnight, especially with what I have done.”

Betos nodded, then something seemed to occur to her. She turned to address both the Commander and the Assassin. “There is another matter I wish to discuss with both of you. Two concerning missions have made themselves known.”

“Interesting.” Eliza clasped her arms in front of her. “Let’s hear them.”
“Firstly, Arachne came to me with the coordinates to the facility her allies were protecting.”
Walking over to one part of the map, she pointed to it. “She has identified it as a potential Blacksite, though she did not know what it was being used for.”

“Probably another lab. Still, I’d be happy to take on the mission. The more we can disrupt their efforts, the better.”

“I will send the coordinates to the Avenger as soon as I can. As for the other mission...” Searching, Betos eventually found the paper she was looking for, draping it on the top and gesturing to it. “We have recently lost a patrol or two around this area, with no known cause. Observation from afar reports the entrance of a cave, with skulls—human and alien—stacked around it. My scouts could not confirm this, but there appeared to be a facility just beyond the mouth of the cave. If your soldiers could approach and determine what’s going on, it would be much appreciated.”

“That’s certainly an odd location.” Eliza rubbed her chin. “ADVENT typically don’t bother hiding their facilities outside of the standard ‘building them out in the middle of nowhere’ strategy. About the closest I’ve seen them get was Mordenna’s Stronghold, and even then, he’s said that was more him than anything else. And the alien skulls... I’d want to investigate based on that alone. Send me the coordinates when we’re done here and I’d be happy to check it out.”

“Of course, Commander.” Betos stood back up from her lean over the table. “That is all I had for you. Do you have anything more to impart?”

“Other than it’s good to see you again? Not much else, Betos.”

With a smile, Betos crossed her arms. “It is good to see you as well, Commander. I hope the path ahead finds you well. You may depart.”

Nodding, Eliza walked away from the table, looking back at Arachne. “Well, come on. I’ll get you settled in on the Avenger.” Soon, they were exiting the main building, Arachne following behind them. Eliza grinned back at Fal-Mai. “I like it when everything comes together. Back to the Avenger?”

Fal-Mai gave her a gentle smile in return. “Of course.”

Not wanting to intimidate the new recruit by hovering as she was being shown around, Fal-Mai had broken off from the Commander for the moment, walking towards the Bar of all places.

Her interest had been drawn when she could sense Jax of all people hanging out there. He was the exact last kind of Chosen she’d expect to be taking up residence in such a room. Naturally, she had to investigate and see what was going on. She made it there quietly, opening the door and looking on.

The Bar was relatively empty—the memorial wall was currently covered by a curtain and there were only three people at the bar itself. Jax and Mordenna were seated on stools, while Bradford leaned on the counter, behind it. Mordenna sounded like he was in the middle of a conversation when Fal-Mai stepped in; he must’ve heard her enter, as he turned back and caught sight of her, grinning. “Fals! Sister of mine! Join us, we’re in the middle of a great discussion.”

“If you count ‘what does and does not classify soup’ as a great discussion, of course,” Jax
grumbled, but without his usual distaste.

“Of course it is!” Mordenna pointed at him, revealing he had a beer in one of his hands. “You haven’t gotten up and left yet, so obviously you’re hanging off of my every word and waiting to hear more.”

Jax groaned, and the whole scene instilled a cautious optimism in Fal-Mai. Indeed, if Jax was sitting through Mordenna’s usual ramblings after what had happened, it was a good sign. She looked over to Bradford, who gave her a dead stare back. “No, I’m trying my hardest to not be involved in this.”

“Despite my best efforts.” Mordenna sighed and looked downcast for all of a second before he beckoned Fal-Mai over, smiling again. “C’mon, sis. I wanna hear your take. Puddles—soup or not?”

The frankness of the question struck Fal-Mai dumb for a second before she shook her head, coming over and joining the two of them with sitting at the bar. “What... what is your definition of a puddle being a soup?”

“Ok.” Mordenna set down his beer, gesturing as he set up his definition. “A soup comprises, as far as Jax and I have boiled down, a bowl, the broth, and optionally fillings. In the case of chicken noodle, you’ve got the bowl, the chicken broth, and then the chicken bits and noodles, naturally. You can have soup without fillings, of course—that’s how plain ol’ tomato soup exists. Under this logic, Jax and I have tentatively agreed that cereal counts as a soup. However!” He pointed back at Jax. “He won’t accept that puddles are natural soups. Think about it. The earth is the bowl, the water’s the broth, and whatever pebbles that have been kicked into it is the filling.”

For a second, Fal-Mai deliberated even contributing to the discussion. Surely this was the kind of madness that would see no end. But, as she looked to Mordenna, excitedly waiting on her answer, to Jax, trying and failing to hide a begrudging grin, and Bradford, shaking his head amiably, she could tell that this was something they were all enjoying. Taking part would be a good sibling activity, yes?

Something occurred to Fal-Mai, and she smiled gently. “By your logic, the brain is a viable soup.” At Mordenna’s fascinated expression, she continued. “The ‘bowl’ is your skull. The ‘broth’ is the suspension fluid. And the ‘filling’ is the brain itself. That scans by your reasoning, yes?”

It was Mordenna’s turn to be struck dumb, blankly staring at Fal-Mai for a few seconds. Then, he erupted in laughter as Jax looked on, groaning. “See what you’ve done, sister? I would think you against encouraging Mordenna’s antics.”

Fal-Mai shrugged. “It is a harmless activity. Amusing, even. I find Mordenna’s curious debates interesting.”

Mordenna took a second to recover from his uproarious laughter, wiping at his eye. “Oh, god, Fal-Mai, you’re great. At least you’re willing to play ball.”

Jax huffed. “And our eventual conclusion that cereal is, indeed, a soup was not me ‘playing ball?’”

“Dude.” Mordenna turned around to face Jax again. “I had to argue you to that conclusion. You were the one saying it wasn’t while not having an alternate conclusion!”

“It is ridiculousness, is what it is!”

“Oh, so now the purple Pope is going to lecture me on ridiculousness!”
“Enough, you two,” Bradford interrupted, rubbing his forehead. “Mordenna, if you keep talking, your beer’s going to get warm.”

Mordenna wheeled around to face Bradford, fully utilizing his stool’s swiveling nature. “You think I care how cold my beer is? All I’m doing is drinking it for that sweet, sweet bitterness. Everything else can get out.” After saying that, he grabbed his drink and chugged back a fair portion of it, setting it roughly back down on the counter when he was done.

Bradford eyed his beer. “Do you Chosen even get drunk, anyway?”

“Nah.” Mordenna shook his head. “As far as I know—haven’t dissected myself or my siblings yet, but I’m working on it—our livers are advanced to the point where they can effortlessly filter out the alcohol. Elders did something right, though I’d really pin the advance for that on Argus.” He pointed at Bradford. “Don’t tell the soldiers that, though. Poor Pattie is locked into a bet the next time everyone convenes into the Bar. She thinks she can drink me under the table and I’m about to serve her up some life experience.”

Central sighed. “Please don’t give the soldiers alcohol poisoning trying to outdrink you, Mordenna.”

“Hey. It’s her fault for making the bet without all the facts.” He took a sip of his beer. “I’ll reveal my secret after I’m done showing her up, anyway, just so nobody else gets any bright ideas.”

“Fine. But you know how Pattie gets about stuff like that.”

Mordenna shrugged. “Sure.”

Sighing again, Bradford turned to Fal-Mai. “Thanks for escorting the Commander out to the Skirmisher camp, by the way. She was adamant about getting stuff done despite just coming out of the Infirmary.”

“Is that woman overworking herself again?” Mordenna pounded a fist on the counter. “Next time I see her I’m roping her into one of these debates, see how much time she loses to it.”

As Bradford moved to speak, Fal-Mai couldn’t help but see how uncomfortable the topic was making Jax, who had turned his head away and gave a quiet sigh. Fal-Mai knew Jax blamed himself for it, but how long he’d leave it there for was the question. Seemingly unknowing of Jax’s discomfort, Bradford continued. “If you could, that’d be grand. Need someone other than me around here to tie her down before she goes and overworks herself. Poor woman doesn’t give herself enough of a break.”

Watching Jax become so distant was worrying Fal-Mai. She opened her mouth to ask him if he was alright, but a beeping from Bradford’s datapad stopped her. Unclipping it from his belt, he gave it a quick look before dismissing the alarm and putting it back. “Sorry to interrupt, but that’s my alarm for the ‘DJ’s’ broadcasts. I try to keep an eye on what he’s saying so he doesn’t incriminate anyone. Mind if I turn on the radio?”

Mordenna waved him off. “By all means, Bradford. Let’s hear what this madman has to say.”

Giving a short chuckle, Bradford walked to the radio behind the counter, turning it on. He pressed a button on it, which seemed to auto-tune it to a saved frequency.

“—and to those of you just tuning in; welcome to the broadcast of the resistance, telling you what our fine heroes are up to whenever, wherever.” At that, Bradford rolled his eyes. “Now, there’s been a fair few rumors floating around about that mysterious Commander who’s running XCOM.
Based on the disappearance of all the Chosen and the noted reappearance of two of them on XCOM’s side, I think it’s safe to say that whoever they are, they’ve got the skills to talk the Chosen into shooting back at their former masters. ”

There was the sound of a chair groaning, as if he’d leaned back. “Of course, there’s some concerns. I mean, these are the freaking Chosen we’re talking about. Everybody’s talking. Some people are wondering just how the Commander’s done it. Chips? Death threats? Coercion? Well, judging by some first-hand accounts of the Commander... maybe it’s something else entirely. I mean, we’ve got those Skirmishers, right? And apparently there’s a few other ADVENT forces turning tail and running from ADVENT. Maybe—and hear me out here—maybe the Elders are such douchebags that even the Chosen figured it out. I know what you’re thinking—‘DJ! That can’t be! Did you ever hear the Warlock for like, five seconds?’ Well, here’s my take—that dude’s had twenty years to think over them. Probably wouldn’t look too good to the Elders if he started mouthing off about them, right? So he kept his mouth shut—no, even better. He sang their praises ’till the cows came home... those metaphorical cows being XCOM coming to his doorstep. Now, we ain’t seen him out and about yet, but I’ll bet my equipment that he’s on the Avenger with his sibs. Maybe he’s listening right now!”

At that, Fal-Mai looked to Jax again. He didn’t seem as if he’d entirely recovered from his earlier uncomfortableness—but he looked like he was considering what was being said. Perhaps the DJ’s reasoning was more right than he knew.

“Well, listening or not, that’s how I see things. Outside of pulling off the fantastic feat of recruiting the Chosen, XCOM’s proven to our alien overlords that they can be one step ahead of them. I’ve got reports from ‘Justice Falls’ here that XCOM was stationed in anticipation of ADVENT coming in to crash the party—and sure enough, XCOM got the jump on ADVENT this time! I’d say that’s good news to end the night on, right? I’ve been, uh, advised to keep my broadcasts short. Never know who might be listening out there, and sometimes even I don’t know what I’m gonna say. So, to cap it off? This is the DJ of the resistance, bidding you all a good night, and remember: Vigilo Confido!”

With that, the broadcast went silent. Bradford had his hands on his hips, still watching the radio as he spoke. “Well, he’s at least managing to not leak too much info, though him covering you guys is interesting even for him.”

Mordenna, having drank all of his beer, tapped his drink. As Bradford moved to get him another, he talked. “Eh. Something tells me he had to cover it eventually—from what I’m getting, he’s one of the biggest mouthpieces of the resistance. People probably got questions about us, and it’s not as if they’re unwarranted.”

Fal-Mai nodded, hands clasped in her lap. It was... interesting, to hear herself be talked about in such an indirect manner. It almost made her wonder... “If the resistance itself is discussing the matter of our allegiance, how fares ADVENT’s propaganda machine?”

“Oof, yeah, that’s a question.” Grabbing his new bottle, Mordenna physically wrenched the cap off of it, taking a swig. “Can only imagine how they’re trying to spin us defecting.”

“Funny you ask.” Bradford jerked a thumb back at the radio. “There’s a frequency for their broadcasts, if you feel like listening in.”

Mordenna spread out his hands. “Well, why the hell not? I feel like a good laugh. Turn it on, Central.”

Walking back to the radio, Bradford hit another button. They seemed to have tuned to the middle
Mordenna scoffed, talking over the radio. “Same shit as usual. Don’t know what I was expecting. The ‘news reporters’ they use are so sanitized. I swear...”

He went on like that, ranting to the three of them. As no doubt interesting as Mordenna’s rants were, Fal-Mai was more concerned to listening to the radio underneath him. She hadn’t been too much of a listener to the propaganda ADVENT spun—mainly taking interest where she was concerned. A self-centered thinking, she would admit, but there was always a curiosity about what others were saying about her. As Mordenna launched into a slightly related subject, she kept listening.

“... and now, a word from our Speaker.”

Fal-Mai quickly shushed Mordenna. He looked half a second away from giving Fal-Mai grief before the familiar voice of Joseph, the Speaker, reached his ears. “Citizens of ADVENT. I am sure it has reached your attention that the Elders’ children, the Chosen, are missing. Gone, stolen from Their embrace.” The Speaker paused for effect. Out of the corner of her eye, Jax tensed. “The loss of them echoes through all of us. Our dear Saints—Jax-Rai Tessura, Ref-Il Mordenna, and Fal-Mai Neylor, taken from Them. Taken as XCOM intruded upon their own sanctuaries and kidnapped them!”

Though Mordenna rolled his eyes, Jax hadn’t relaxed since Joseph started talking. That... was worrying. “Dear citizens, I wish that was the only bad news I had to impart on this day. No, a far worse reality has come to the Elders attention.” This must be about the defection, right? He’d probably spin it as “XCOM is forcing them to fight back against ADVENT” or something of the sort. Fal-Mai listened attentively. “Were it mere captivity that they suffered, the tragedy would be great enough. No... they have done something far worse, themselves.”

Fal-Mai blinked, thrown off her predictions as the Speaker continued. “Instead of staying resolute in their loyalty to the Elders, the ones who gave them form and life... the Chosen commit the ultimate sin: treachery. They have been seen, fighting in the field for XCOM, striking out as traitors against the loving arms of the Elders! Despite the Elders giving everything to them, raising them and nurturing them, they have decided to follow the path of betrayal. Given everything, they chose the path of Judas! To turn their back on those who would revere them! It pains me greatly that, in part of my duties today... I must inform you that the Chosen are no longer one of our own. They have decided on their path. The Chosen, the Saints we worshipped, are dead. These monsters have taken their place. In the honor of our fallen Saints, memorial services—”

That was when Jax rose out of his chair, arms shaking. “I-I...” He choked out, shaking his head. “I a-appreciate the company, brother, s-sister, but I...” Saying nothing more, he pushed away from the counter, practically stumbling out of the room. Fal-Mai rose to her feet. Clearly the Speaker’s address had touched a nerve with him. All the talk of betrayal...

Wordlessly, and with the voice of Joseph droning on behind her, she walked to the door herself. A moment later, and she heard more footsteps behind her. She didn’t care who was following her—Jax was most likely looking to isolate himself. Fal-Mai couldn’t leave him alone with a good conscience—especially not after what she had confessed to Eliza. She followed the sound of Jax’s tread out of the Bar and through the hallways. He’d gotten enough of a lead to be out of sight, but Fal-Mai knew what his step sounded like.

Eventually, and with ghosts of sadness and loss rising up in her mind, she tracked him to a door in
one of the hallways, which was closing by the time she got to it. She was at the pad and about to open it when a hand came down on her shoulder. Mordenna was there beside her. “Fals,” he said, voice low enough for just her to hear it, “I get what you’re trying to do, but...”

Whatever point Mordenna was trying to imply, Fal-Mai didn’t get it. She shook her head. “Our brother is in need, Mordenna. I am not about to leave him to his demons.”

“Do you know what you’re going to do?” Mordenna’s look was one of concern and apprehension. “I mean, good on you for wanting to help, but what are you going to do when you’re in there? Do you even know what’s set him off?”

A stab of being betrayed and told off by a parental figure flashed through her mind. Mordenna must’ve felt it too, as he cast his eyes to the side. Undeterred, Fal-Mai continued. “I will go in there and comfort him as he needs it. He has isolated himself to suffer alone, and that is not what he needs. I understand if you are hesitant to go in there yourself because you do not have a clear plan as to what you will do. I, however, know that my brother is in need, and I will do what he requires of me. If you would like to help without stepping in, go find his followers. I will be with him, comforting him.”

Mordenna’s mouth settled into a line, and the hand on her shoulder tensed. He blew a quiet breath out of his nose. “Yeah. I get it. Don’t gotta...” He shook his head, hand falling from Fal-Mai. “No. I’ll... I’ll go get his people. You... you do what you can.”

Nodding, Fal-Mai turned back to the panel. Slowly, Mordenna started to walk past her. Unheeding of what he was going to do, Fal-Mai opened the door and stepped inside.

The room she had walked into was definitely a storage room, with crates piled high and a dolley off to the side to cart them out. Stationed on one of the crates, partially obscured by more in the front, was Jax. He was sitting with his knees drawn to his chest, horns discarded and face pressed against his legs. Fal-Mai had never seen her brother in such a state—the closest he had come had been the time near her Ascension Facility. She could see him shaking and feel the psionic storm that was beginning to brew, along with the feeling through the link resonating within her.

She couldn’t stand simply sitting there, doing nothing as she watched her brother suffer. Coming over to him, she sat down and cast an arm over him. Jax jumped in place at the contact, and slowly angled his head to look at her, revealing a single, wet eye. Fal-Mai’s shoulders slumped in empathy. “Brother... I’m here. I want to help.”

Jax simply looked at her for a moment, hiccupping as he stared. Slowly at first, and then lunging, he brought her in and squeezed her, pressing his face into her shoulder. His grip was tight and brought some discomfort, but his ensuing sob dashed any notion of complaining from her mind. She wrapped her arms around him. When he choked out an “I’m sorry” she quickly hushed him. “This is not your fault,” she spoke softly, voice low as his sadness affected her, both through the link and her own empathy.

“B—but Joseph—” he hiccupped again, “—Joseph was there. He— he is the o-one who raised me. Wh-why would he—?”

Giving him a squeeze, Fal-Mai shook her head. It was easy for her to say that it was merely there to assuage the citizens... but she could understand how it would hurt him, if what he was saying was true. If the Speaker had been the one to oversee his Ascension, then his words must’ve stung more than ever. “You know what the Elders have to do in order to save face. It is still terrible, and I... I understand why it hurts.” In a way, to be declared dead to them was both vindicating and... sorrowful. “I’m sorry.”
It was Jax’s turn to shake his head, readjusting his grip on Fal-Mai. “Y-you should not f-feel guilty for... for what...” With a sob and with his voice breaking, Jax trailed off. Guilt echoed in the link.

Focusing on that guilt and knowing why it was there, Fal-Mai went on. “I am here because I want to be, brother. What was done to you—what was done to us is a tragedy. And... and we should not face it alone. Do not feel guilty for my presence.” Her grip on him tightened as her own emotions rose. “I want to be your sister. I want to be there when you need me... because it is what good sisters do, yes? You are deserving of having someone there for you. If not Eliza... then I would be happy to take up the flag.”

In her grip, Jax gave a shuddering sob. The guilt abated, though his sorrow remained. Fal-Mai knew she could not simply assure that away. Jax needed to go through it. If she was to be a good sister, like she wanted, she’d sit there with him for as long as he needed. Good siblings should stick together, in her mind.

The sound of the door opening pricked her ears and she looked over, ready to shield the both of them from prying eyes if need be. Though the door was partially obscured, it became clear who was there when the door closed and Mordenna stepped into full sight. His eyes seemed to have more bags than usual, and they even looked somewhat rheumy, as if he was on the verge of sorrow, himself. Jax looked up as well, just in time for him to speak. “... I don’t suppose there’s room for one more here, is there...?”

This time, Jax didn’t hesitate in offering an arm to Mordenna, who gladly accepted it, crouching down and joining the sibling huddle. Fal-Mai spared an arm from Jax to include him, and the contact seemed to embolden him into speaking further. “—I’ll be clear. I don’t really share in being sad about what Joseph said. But... seeing as I’m getting a big hint as to why you’re sad about it... I at least want to make an attempt, here. I don’t have much to say. It sucks. Least I can do... least I can do is be here so we can all say it sucks, together.”

Jax took a deep, shaking breath. “I... I don’t c-care if you don’t have much to s-say. You—you being here i-is enough.”

Mordenna let go of a tense breath, nodding and patting Jax’s back. “Then I’ll be here, Jax. All of it ain’t fair. But... Fal-Mai. You were right. I did some thinking.” He brought the two of them closer to him. “Me, walking away, getting someone else... it’d be just what the Elders want, right...? They wanted to separate us. They didn’t want us to cooperate. I was just playing to what they wanted if I walked away, right?”

“Brother...” Fal-Mai shook her head. “If you believed you weren’t ready—”

“No. I’ve come to a decision, Fal-Mai. I’m done playing to whatever the hell Odin wanted me to do. You guys are my family. I don’t have anyone else. Elders took them away from me.” He angled his head up to smile as tears ran down his face. “M-might as well make the best of what I’ve got now, right?”

The sight of Mordenna in open tears, and hearing him refer to them as a family... Well, Fal-Mai’s eyes weren’t particularly dry, either. Securing her hold on him, she brought him closer. “... you’re right,” she whispered, voice raw. “We... we should stick together.”

Jax hiccupped again, but Fal-Mai could feel the storm lightening. “I... I never thought I-I would live to—to hear my brother saying that...”

“We live in some strange times,” Mordenna softly muttered. “But I mean it. Fuck what they wanted out of us. They said it themselves—the Saints are dead, and honestly, good. We can choose
what we want to do, now. No standards. No Elders breathing down our necks. Just us. I know you’re still torn up about them, bro, just... you understand?”

Slowly, Jax nodded. “I... I still find myself wondering i-if there was anything I could have done. Something... something to make Them happy.”

“They never would’ve settled,” he softly replied. “They held us to standards we’d never meet. I won’t go on about them—now’s obviously not the time—but just know that your life’s your own.”

Jax simply took deep breaths for a minute or so. They still shook, he was still sorrowful... but the arrival of his siblings definitely had its effect on him. “You are right, b-brother. I would rather have you here than be a-alone.” He raised his head, revealing orange-tinted eyes and fresh tear tracks. “Th-thank you. The both of you. For coming.”

Fal-Mai closed her eyes, her own tears falling, leaning against him. “I would not abandon you, brother.”

If that gentle thump told her anything, it was that Mordenna had joined her. “I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t. Maybe literally. No stupid expectations in this household anymore. Just us, picking up the pieces. Sound good?”

She nodded, and she felt Jax bob his head as well. She, too, thought she would never live to see the day they would truly rally as a family. She’d hoped for it, she had hoped that one day they could set aside their differences under the Elders... but she knew that now, it was an impossibility under them. Only now, that they were free and with XCOM did her hopes come true.

They were a family.
Meetings

Chapter Summary

The Chosen are called to the Bridge.

Life with XCOM seemed to be presenting all sorts of new impossibilities.

Not even a few days ago, Fal-Mai had found herself comforting Jax, alongside Mordenna of all people, and resolving that they could be a family without the rotting influence of the Elders. That was already no small miracle in and of itself. In a few ways, Fal-Mai was still coming to terms with the events that had transpired.

Perhaps it was comparatively lesser, but now here she was, walking alongside one of her brothers and holding a steady conversation.

“—and you truly never held onto the dresses that were designed for you?”

Jax’s words brought her back to the present. The topic had drifted to the many PR events that the Elders had held. She knew Jax to revel in them. As for her? She attended and held a calm face when she was required. She did not begrudge them, but she did not find joy in them, either. A little too gaudy for her tastes, with so many pretenses she had to uphold. As for those dresses... she scoffed. “They presented an ungainly amount of my skin. I chose not to hold onto them because they were not practical.”

Jax chuckled, shaking his head. “Practically-minded as always, I see. Though, if I remember correctly...” He brought a hand to his chin in thought, the other tucked behind his back. “Did not most of your dresses merely expose a shoulder or your collarbones?”

“Yes. Far too much skin, as I have said.”

At that, it was clear Jax was holding back further laughter. Instead of laughing, he continued with his questions. “—might I ask why? If the answer is merely a conservative mindset, I can understand such.”

Fal-Mai looked forwards, rubbing her upper arm. “I am not sure if you know this, but my skin is extraordinarily sensitive. My face has grown somewhat used to it through exposure, of course.” Before that? Those first few months or so were a sensory nightmare. “The rest of my body? Not as much. Even having those regions exposed was causing me no small amount of distress.”

Nodding, Jax looked forward as well. “Very understandable, in such a case. Would you think a lace mesh would alleviate the problem somewhat?”

Fal-Mai winced. “Not lace. Unless it is made out of the softest thread it can be made of, I simply cannot stand the texture of lace on my body.”

“Is it the texture of the more commonly-used threads that bothers you, or is it the intricacy of the designs that you can feel so personally?”

“Somewhat more of the former, though I will admit to the latter being a problem.”
“Mhm.” Jax let his hand return to his back. “If you ever wish to have such dresses remade to your tastes—or any other clothing, for that matter—I have had Maria contact Eliza in regards to setting up my tailors. They will be able to acquaint you with what you desire.”

As much as Fal-Mai was interested at the prospect, it did remind her of two things. One, as far as she knew, Jax hadn’t properly approached the Commander to apologize yet—or even handle the matter at all. Two, and related to the first... they had been called by Eliza to the Bridge in regards to an upcoming mission. Jax couldn’t delegate dealing with Eliza to Maria forever, especially with a meeting such as this. She looked to her brother, face shifting to concern. “If I may derail the subject slightly, when are you going to reconcile with Eliza, brother?”

Jax’s mood shift was palpable. He went to a calm joviality to hushed dread, looking away from her. “... I have wronged the Commander. It is best I show my face in front of her as little as possible. If she calls for me, I will come, but...”

Her mouth set into a thin line. His behavior would be appropriate for avoiding the ire of the Elders. Eliza, however? She didn’t strike Fal-Mai as the type to react so badly as they tended to do. “What makes you so afraid to approach her?”

“Have I not already stated that...?” He sighed. “I have wronged her. She has every right to punish me, and even as I know that... I still fear the consequences.” He placed a hand on his forehead. “If I had not been so presumptuous of my power and her own, we would not be in this situation. But, as it stands?” He left the statement there, rubbing his forehead.

Fal-Mai drew closer, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Jax. Eliza is not the Elders. I am confident in saying that she has no desire to punish you.”

“You have not wronged her, sister;” he muttered. “I have. I am certain of what will happen. She might have the mercy to not punish me in front of you when we enter the Bridge, but if she catches me by my lonesome...”

Fal-Mai caught something in that statement, and she latched onto it. “If you are certain she would not punish you in front of me or our brother, then I will come with you when you will reconcile with her.”

Jax shook his head. “She will order you out of the room, and then events shall transpire from there. I have wronged her, Fal-Mai. Before anything else, punishment awaits me.”

“Then I will stay even as she orders me to leave!” Fal-Mai looked up to him with determination in her eyes. “Nevermind the fact that this is Eliza we are speaking of. Brother, Mordenna has wronged Eliza and faced no punishment like what you are rightfully afraid of.”

The conversation was stalled slightly as they came to the door to the Bridge. Jax stopped in front of it, clearly not wanting to go in. His hands dropped to his sides. “It will happen,” he dejectedly muttered. “I have wronged her. Punishment is what I deserve for harming someone so selfless.”

It looked like Jax wouldn’t be budged on his mindset. Remembering her previous failures on brute-forcing topics like this, she sighed and her hand fell from him. “It won’t be that way,” she offered, knowing he wouldn’t listen. “Please, trust me.”

He closed his eyes and shook his head, offering nothing else. Even as the conversation had been ended, he did not advance or go in the door. After a moment, he opened his eyes and looked to Fal-Mai, pleading evident in his features. “Could... could you go in? I’ll... wait outside.”
“Eliza will wonder why you’re not there,” she softly countered.

“I am already due for punishment.” He slumped against the wall next to the doorframe. “What is one more transgression...?”

As much as Fal-Mai wanted to stand here and argue with him that he would be perfectly fine going inside, she could see it going nowhere fast. Jax was already locked up into repeating statements. She didn’t think anything she’d say would be able to convince him to go inside. Shoulders slumping, she shallowly nodded. “—ok. I will let you know what she wanted to impart.”

“Thank you,” he muttered.

With a heavy heart, Fal-Mai opened the door and stepped on inside. The Bridge had a few operatives at the various workstations in the room. At the Hologlobe, Eliza and Mordenna stood. They both looked to her as she entered, though it was Eliza who beat Mordenna to the punch for a greeting. “Good to see you, Fal-Mai. Sorry for calling you down on such short notice.”

She shook her head, walking up to join them. “It is no problem, Commander. What do you require of me?”

“Well...” She crossed her arms. “I was hoping for your other brother to get here before I got into that. Have you seen him on your walk over?”

Feeling her stomach plummet, Fal-Mai averted her gaze. If she told Eliza he was just outside, she might go to confront him, and Fal-Mai knew that would distress Jax greatly. If she lied and said she had not seen him... she dare not think it. In the end... “I... I was with him on my walk, but—but he did not wish to come to the Bridge.”

At that, Eliza’s shoulders slumped and she looked down. Initially she didn’t reply, and it was Mordenna who picked up the slack, shaking his head in mild disbelief. “He’s really still hung up about that, ain’t he?”

Fal-Mai looked to him neutrally. “With the reaction you had, I would not be surprised, myself.”

His face twitched and it was only then that Fal-Mai caught how she worded it. Instead of “going off on one” as she had heard one of the soldiers say, Mordenna closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and blew it out. “Nah. Nah that’s valid. Wasn’t saying I was surprised, of course, more just... sad. Lizzie he’s really taking that whole situation hard on himself.”

“As I can see,” she murmured, looking into the light of the Hologlobe. “I wanted to give him space because he seems, for lack of a less demoralizing term, afraid of me.”

“If you don’t approach,” Mordenna replied, “he’ll never give that space back. If it ain’t a problem related to one of his little ladies—or any of his other followers—he’s not going to deal with it on his own terms.”

Eliza sighed at that, squeezing her arms. “Guess I’ll have to confront him sooner rather than later— I’m just worried he’ll think I’m hunting him down to punish him and that’s the last thing I want him thinking.”

“Ain’t that the rub.” Mordenna rested a hand on his hip. “I’m sure I could finagle getting you two into the same room without him thinking he’s due to be hanged, if you’d like.”

“Sounds like a plan. After this I’ll talk to you about times and the such.” Taking in a steadying breath, Eliza moved her hands, clasping them in front of her. “Well, seeing as this is our meeting
attendance—as Bradford is off handling some of my duties and Jax has opted to skip out—I’ll get
down to brass tacks.” Eliza unclipped the datapad from her belt and started working it, the
Hologlobe shifting into a roster. “Part of the package we got with Arachne was a pair of missions
—the first one was an ADVENT Blacksite of indiscernible purpose.” She regarded the two Chosen
a little grimly. “Far be it from me to pick out trends, but signs point to it possibly being Jax’s
Ascension Facility.”

“Could be any old suspicious facility out in the woods, Commander,” Mordenna offered to lighten
the mood, but it was clear by the look on his face that he was resigned to the possibility. “I mean,
what’re the odds that it’s any old Avatar Project facility?” He paused. “—if you’re curious it’s
81.37%. With a margin of error of 4.3%. Admittedly I’m fudging the numbers a bit.”

Mordenna’s supposedly accurate calculations aside, Fal-Mai took her chance to speak. “I would
assume we are gathered here regarding our opinion on attending the mission?”

“Essentially so, yes.” Eliza looked between the two of them. “Do either of you ever get tired?”

Mordenna shrugged. “Not in the long term sense, no. At least, the brand of ‘tired’ I know you’re on
about. I’ll be happy to march off on any number of missions.”

Fal-Mai nodded. “As with I. I can be momentarily exhausted, but we as Chosen were built for
constant conflict. So long as I get even an hour’s rest, I can be fit for the next battle.”

“Right, noted for the future.” Both Mordenna and Fal-Mai appeared on the roster. “... you think
Jax wants to come?”

Fal-Mai couldn’t stop herself from looking towards the door she had entered from. Assuming
Mordenna caught the action, she spoke. “I... can ask him, if he is where I think he is.”

“No, please do. And...” Eliza trailed off, as if there was something more she wanted to add, or request.
Nothing ever came though, and she shook her head. “Nevermind. Go ahead and ask him.”

Not pausing to look back, Fal-Mai drifted back towards the door. Sure enough, Jax was still leaned
on the other side, looking contemplative and somber. He turned towards Fal-Mai. “... what of the
meeting?”

“It is regarding an upcoming mission. The Commander asks if you are willing to attend.”

Closing his eyes, Jax breathed deeply, as if he were giving a fair amount of thought to it. If he
agreed, it would be the first time that all three Chosen appeared on the same side, fighting together
without clenched teeth. A momentous day in history, indeed... but Fal-Mai could imagine why
he’d be hesitant in going. This “family” prospect was still new to all three of them, and there was a
bit of awkwardness when they weren’t all in the heat of the moment. Plus, it would be his very first
combat mission. After hearing what Joseph had said...

In the end, Jax nodded, opening his eyes. “Tell her I would be willing to march into battle for her.”
He looked to the side, confidence leaving him. “Perhaps a fair show in battle will be cause for a
lesser punishment...”

“Brother...” But from the way Jax tensed up at that and pointedly looked further to the side, he
wasn’t intending to discuss the matter any further. Knowing she was at a dead end for this, Fal-Mai
let it drop. “I’ll let her know.”

After that, Fal-Mai reappeared in the Bridge, taking her spot again at the Hologlobe. “He says he
is willing to attend,” she said, somewhat avoiding Eliza’s gaze.
Silently, Eliza tapped her pad, and Jax’s name joined the roster. Her moment of melancholy ended as she further considered the list. “Close range, scouting, long range, psionics... jeez, you guys are a squad, yourselves. All you guys are missing is a medic.”

Mordenna gestured to one of the empty slots. “Fuck, Jax has Maria. Give her a rifle, have one of the Rangers show her how to use a blade, and she’s got her healing psionics. Would be worth.”

Taking the suggestion, Maria joined the roster. “Four. Banel will be your fifth until you design Jax a minigun and Baal loses his job.”

Clearly it was a joking suggestion, but a particular spark seemed to be set off in Mordenna’s eyes, and he tapped his foot aggressively. “Of course. Of course! Why didn’t I think of that? Liz, you’re amazing.” Whipping a notepad out of one of his pockets, he got a pen from another and started writing something down. “Obviously I’m probably going to have to teach him to fire it—along with his rifle, come to think of it—but I think some heavy-duty ordinance is just what Jax needs. Plus the dude’s so jacked he could have it and his rifle for range options. Oh but if I want it to use different ammo types, maybe I could have a backpack to feed the—”

“Mordenna,” Eliza interrupted with a smile on her face, “I love to hear you ramble—no joke there—but let’s get this roster finalized before you go talking until the cows come home.”

“Right, right, right.” Mordenna finished writing, stowing his tools away. “What else even is there to bring? You’ve basically got the whole damn shooting match, here. Anyone else is just extra.”

“Gotta have six people for insurance, Mordenna.” She tapped her chin, looking to the last slot. “... I think I’ll pencil in that last slot as Wiki. She might like whatever’s available in there.”

“Good lord, Eliza, you’ve assigned more aliens than humans.” Mordenna shook his head in mock disbelief. “What will the tabloids say about this one?”

“Something, something, debauchery of the highest order?’ Eliza tapped a few more things on her pad and the roster turned back into the globe. “Well, that was all I had for you lot. We’ll be heading out to the mission location here shortly.”

“Right! Now, what was I saying—” Mordenna stopped dead in his tracks as he looked over to Fal-Mai. The pause made her worry that he had something serious to say, but he shook a finger at her, like he was remembering something. “Wait. Mission coming up. Fals, I’ve got a thing or two for you down in the Workshop. Mind coming with me?”

Relieved that there was no serious matter afoot, Fal-Mai nodded. “Of course.”

“Fantastic! Lizbeth, I’m gonna be heading down there. After that I’ll come back up and talk your ear off, since you like it so much.”

Eliza chuckled, putting the datapad back on her hip. “Well, you’ve got me there. Always nice to know what my engineers are up to—and you tend to pare things down into terms I can get, so I do like listening to you, thank you very much.”

Grinning, Mordenna walked over to Fal-Mai. As he got closer, her keen hearing could pick out his heartbeat... and how it was slightly quickened. Curious. “Ah, the sky’s falling in, Fals. Someone’s happy to hear me ramble. What is with XCOM and bringing about the end of the world, huh? Anyway...” He looked to the other door at the far end of the room, and then to the one Fal-Mai came in. His jovial mood seemed to slip and he knitted his brows. “—Let’s head out.”

Wordlessly, Fal-Mai followed after Mordenna, but not before giving a proper wave to Eliza as she
departed. Mordenna walked towards the door with purpose, tapping the panel without looking and navigating beyond. He looked around and heaved a sigh. When Fal-Mai stepped through and got a look herself, she could see the reason for his frustration; Jax was gone.

“Goddamnit Jax,” Mordenna grumbled without any real heat to it, “we’re all family here and I’d very much like to discuss this behavior, thank you very much.” He turned his head back to Fal-Mai. “He was here, right?”

“The last time I spoke to him, yes.” He must’ve disappeared sometime after that. It was... interesting, to hear Mordenna go on about discussing behavior without some kind of implied insult behind it. It was something she would have to get used to. Mind turning back to matters at hand, she loosely clasped her hands together. “—to the Workshop?”

Mordenna looked back ahead, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Yeah. I’ll go find our cowardly lion later. No... no insult meant, he just...” Mordenna sighed. “To the Workshop.”

They shoved off, and the beginning of the trip was quiet, leaving Fal-Mai to her thoughts. She had already fought beside her brother twice before—and only one of those times involved them shooting at each other, which was far better than she would have guessed before. To have all three of them fighting as a united force? Fal-Mai would’ve wondered what the Elders would think had her mind not drifted back to the radio broadcast. It seemed they had already assumed such a possibility.

A bit into the walk, it seemed Mordenna could handle the silence no longer. Fal-Mai could hear him fiddling with something in his pocket as he spoke. “Breaks my heart, it does.” After a momentary pause, he continued. “What Jax is doing to himself, I mean. Is he really that afraid he’s gonna get the belt?”

Fal-Mai rubbed her thumbs against each other. “Yes. He is certain to the point of arguing that Eliza will punish him should she get him alone. Despite my efforts, I could not argue him out of that thinking.”

Mordenna gave another sigh, letting his head lean to one side. “Can take the rabbit out of danger but can’t tell it to stop looking for predators. What gets me is that Eliza is like, the last person he should be afraid of. Well... no, Sammy is, but Eliza’s second to last. The most Liz would want to do is give him a stern talking-to regarding blaming himself for things that aren’t really his fault. But...”

“... when you have the Elders as former parents,” she finished for him, “it is hard to not jump at every shadow.”

“Exactly. Elders are bastards and fucked us up, but I can’t help but believe he got the shortest end of the stick.” He reached into his hood and rubbed his neck. “So of course he thinks Lizzie’s going to go mental on him for hurting her. Well... it’s a tiny ship, relatively speaking, and he can’t hide from her forever. Or me, for that matter. I’ll get the two of them talking, seeing as they need it.”

Thinking on something she told Jax, Fal-Mai spoke up. “Do you think either of us should be there as they talk?”

After a few moments of consideration, Mordenna shook his head. “I don’t think that, no. I can understand why, but this is really something they need to talk about privately. Chosen to Commander. I think he’d be even more spooked if he had an audience.”

At that, Fal-Mai nodded. She could see the logic behind that reasoning, even if she felt as if she
wouldn’t be standing by Jax when he needed it most. Some moments needed privacy, and it wasn’t as if the Commander was incapable of comforting him after the fact.

Pretty shortly after, Mordenna reached the Workshop, stepping on in after making sure Fal-Mai had followed him. He walked over to his own table, where two different cases lay. He gestured for Fal-Mai to come over as he began speaking. “Now, I’m pretty sure you know what I’ve got here for you, considering I’ve literally talked at you regarding them. Open ‘em as you’d like, though I recommend the one on the right first.”

Taking her brother’s suggestion, she undid the clasp on the case, opening it. Inside was a helmet that looked visually similar to the one she was already wearing, perhaps a little bit differently shaped here and there. She picked it up and inspected it further. Around where her ears would be, there was an interwoven, soft mesh, and the outside of the helmet was thicker around that area. She turned to Mordenna, who gestured to put it on.

Putting the new headpiece down on the table, she braced herself as she took ahold of her old one, unclasping it from her uniform and sliding it off of her head. As she took it off, she could feel the parts of her skull that usually never saw too much sensation protest, and that spurred her to be quick about replacing the old with the new. She put the new headpiece on and found the clasps perfectly locked in with her suit. Nothing sounded different, at least, but it did feel slightly heavier. The inside of it felt the same as the last, easing her slightly. No new sensations to tackle outside of weight, and she would easily grow used to that.

“Everything fit alright?” Mordenna sounded like he always did. She nodded—and it was then that she really felt the absence of the tubes on the back of her head. Mordenna must’ve caught her expression, as he chuckled and started to unclip the tubes from her old helmet. “I made sure that your old ‘accessories’ would fit into your new digs. Stand still.”

Complying, Fal-Mai even turned so that Mordenna would have a clear view of the back of her head. With quick, accurate motions, she could feel Mordenna hooking up the tubes to her new equipment, completing the exchange. “You say ‘accessories’ as if they are a fashion statement.”

“Well, shit, aren’t they? They’re practically stand-ins for dreads. Don’t tell anyone I said this, but objectively it’s a good look. Maybe—” Mordenna paused for a second, leading Fal-Mai into looking back towards him. She was starting to get a feel for these “eureka” moments he was having. “—hey, shit, maybe they can be accessories. Does the idea of having slightly different ones appeal to you at all?”

Mulling over the question a bit, she shrugged. “If they were to my liking, perhaps. It is nice to have a bit of variety.”

“Consider it a project of mine you can bug me about. Now!” He gestured to the second case. “Go on.”

Fal-Mai undid that case as well. On the inside was what looked to be a facemask, with the edges of it clearly connecting to the helmet she just put on. It covered the bottom half of her face and her nose, and even had a visor for her eyes. It was somewhat stylized, with the engraving of a fanged mouth that had curved, protruding canines on it. She raised an eyebrow at it, but otherwise it looked like quite the marvel.

Not needing to be spurred on this time, she flipped it and eased it against her face. Pleasantly, it both felt like the inside of her helmet and didn’t contact her skin more than what was necessary. What was a little less pleasant was that the sound of her breathing had changed—it was like there was a filter in some part of the mask, which she could understand the use of. The visor didn’t affect
her vision too much save for the edges, and the mild tint that was on the outside didn’t seem to come through on the inside.

Well, if she got used to the white noise in her ear, she could get used to slightly different breathing. She turned to Mordenna again, smiling gently. “It is a good ensemble,” she said, noting how her voice sounded slightly different, as well. “Thank you, brother.”

Mordenna’s own smile was a little softer than what she was used to. “Glad you like it. I tried to design it to be as familiar as possible, considering I know your skin is a little janky with the hypersensitivity and all. You’re interesting to design for, and I have to say I like the challenge.”

Her brother seemed to know her well. Still, the fact that he would go out of his way just to make sure it would be easy for her to adopt was heartwarming. “… you certainly put a lot of yourself into your engineering, don’t you?”

He shrugged. “Hell, why not? Plus…” His posture softened and he gestured to her head. “Engineering is the one place that I can do something good, guaranteed. I don’t trust myself with my words too often, but with what I make? I know what I’m doing there. I can make good things for the people I like.”

The implied statement wasn’t lost on Fal-Mai. Coming forward, she pulled Mordenna into a hug. “—thank you again, Mordenna. It means much to me.”

A little awkwardly at first, then leaning into it, Mordenna returned the hug. “No problem. Like I said, I want to do better. Best to start with what I’m good at and work from there, in my opinion.”

She nodded, stepping back from the hug after a moment. “Can you inform me as to what my new equipment can do?”

“Oh, as always!” He clapped his hands together. “Starting with your facemask, it’s got a built-in filter that will widen the range of areas you can operate in and still have oxygen. The tech’s a little new, so let me know if you get any problems. The visor’s made of a glass that’s both hilariously difficult to shatter and even then it’ll favor busting outwards above all else. I’d say under normal circumstances—and that includes getting shot at on the battlefield—you shouldn’t have to worry about it breaking.” He pointed to her helmet. “Your helmet’s further reinforced and I decided you getting crippled by your sensitive hearing is unfair for you. The helmet will dampen any noise above a certain decibel level, which is why I called you in that one time about noises. Explosions, gunfire, whatever the hell, it should make things easier to stand without nerfing your ability to hear.”

The lengths at which Mordenna had gone truly astounded her. She clasped her hands together. “Thank you again, Mordenna. Perhaps... after this mission, I really should allow you to tweak my shotgun. You made it, after all.”

He grinned. “I’d be happy to give it a pass or two. Made that thing a long time ago, so it’s bound to need an upgrade. And…” His smile fell to give way to a more uncertain expression. “If you ever, like... need anything made for you, hit me up, alright? I can’t do everything but I can come pretty close. I... kinda owe you after all the bullshit out of me you’ve had to put up with.”

Though she knew he couldn’t see it, Fal-Mai’s smile grew. It was nice to have a brother who would make just about anything, if you asked for it. Getting right down to it, it was nice to have a brother. She’d almost ask herself why they didn’t do this sooner if not for the fact that she knew exactly why. “I will remember that, brother. Nothing comes to mind at the present, but if I glean something I might want made for me, you will be the first to know.”
“Make sure you do! I’ve got like, a thousand projects down here but I ping pong between them, and most of ’em are personal projects, anyway. Speaking of which!” Closing the boxes and setting them on the ground next to his workbench, Mordenna rifled through the drawers. He came up with a roll of blue paper and a marker. “I have a gun to design! Maybe some armor to support it, too, but I don’t think I’ve seen an upper limit to what our bro can do. Physically, anyway. Boy needs some close combat lessons, though, he’s like an uncoordinated sledgehammer.” He seemed ready to continue on that thought process, but he looked back to Fal-Mai. “I’m... kinda feeling a few connected rants going on. If that ain’t your thing—"

“Do you intend to send me away, brother?” She tipped her head up at him. “I intend to stay here and listen until we are called to our duties.”

That stopped Mordenna up a bit as his eyes flickered, but eventually he broke out into a grin. “—alright. Alright. Ok, you ever seen our brother fight, like, physically?”

Coming over, Fal-Mai leaned gracefully on an unused portion of the table. “Only once. He was... to put it lightly, heavy handed.”

Mordenna snickered. “Oh, ain’t that an understatement. Bro hits like a truck but he’s got all the coordination of a drunken brawler who’s shotgunning his last five drinks. If he can fit any time in his schedule between getting his ego stroked by his followers and thinking Eliza’s gonna jump him, I wanna teach him how to fight for a laugh. Set him on Elena when she gets back, see how she reacts to a Chosen fighting like a neo-Reaper.” Scoffing, he flipped up the marker and caught it smoothly. “If I were Jax I’d be hankering to get a chance to get jumped by Eliza.”

If Mordenna was meaning any kind of metaphor by that statement, Fal-Mai would be ashamed to admit that she didn’t know if it was any kind of euphemism. Figuring she could share that in this company, she shook her head. “I... could not imagine why you would like to be ambushed by Eliza in such a context. Is there some sort of double-meaning...?”

Seemingly catching what he’d said, Mordenna opened his mouth to respond, then closed it. He rubbed the back of his neck as his eyes flickered away. “Look the metaphor isn't important because I sure say a lot of shit, y’know?”

Fal-Mai couldn’t claim to be an expert on subtext and the nuances of conversation, but the way Mordenna reacted to having to explain himself suggested that it was a little bit more of a risqué expression. She tilted her head. If it was an expression for something more suggestive and Mordenna was embarrassed at having to explain it... “—Brother? Do you like Eliza?”

“What? Yeah. Everybody does.” He gestured wildly, his lopsided smile more nervous than anything else. “Don’t see your point there, Fals, I think anyone could agree that Eliza’s pretty terrific. Shit, I’d think you’d know that especially, yeah?”

“No, I mean...” She rolled her hand. “More than that. You seem far more fond of her than a mere admiration and friendship would express.” Far be it from her to blame him. Eliza was just... right, in so many ways. She made Fal-Mai feel right at home.

“Well the woman saved me from one of my famous swan dives. Of course I’m gonna feel like she’s a little bit more to me.” He pointed the marker at her. “What’re you getting at? Trying to say I’m in love with her?”

“What is wrong with such a statement? If she makes you feel uplifted, cared for... confident...
nervous…”

Oh. The pieces were starting to slide into place. As Fal-Mai trailed off, she stared blankly at some point around Mordenna’s chest. Her own heart would speed up when Eliza did something more tender, admirable, or even cute. If what Mordenna seemed to be going under she could say was love, was what she was experiencing…?

“…oh, great,” Mordenna softly grumbled. “Don’t tell me we’re both in love with her.”

Love. Fal-Mai was in love with Eliza. Maybe that was why Sammy had been so confused. For a Chosen to fall in love with a human… for a Chosen to fall in love at all must’ve been outside of the realm of possibility. She could hardly believe it, herself. Was that what that kind of love felt like? Giddiness and admiration?

Mordenna pressed his hands together in front of his mouth. “I’ll be honest, I really, really don’t want to think over this or any of the implications. If you want someone to consult regarding what you’re feeling, I’m not your guy. Ok?”

Her head was spinning a bit from realizations and questions, but she’d respect her brother’s wishes. It would be something she would have to ask someone else, at a later time. For now... “—Ok. Now. I think you were on about our brother?”

“Right. Yeah. Let’s focus on that. At least until Eliza summons us to do glorious battle, and all that.”

Mordenna launched into his rant and Fal-Mai listened attentively. She still had so many questions about what she was feeling—and what her and Mordenna being in love with the Commander meant for things going forward. If it would turn out to be some sort of competition for the Commander’s rightful hand... well, she didn’t want to strain the budding familial relationship she was building with her brother. Nor would she want to acquire her feelings without knowing more about them. Another time, of course.

All she could do now was wait for the mission ahead.
Jax unknowingly arrives at his Ascension Facility, where things are not as they seem.

Though he knew he should be focusing on the battle ahead, Jax couldn’t help but linger on the fact that most things simply weren’t built for the Chosen.

That fact was shown to him clearly as he was slightly hunched over in the Skyranger, hands clasped together in front of him, staring at them. He had to maintain this posture lest the slight shudders of the ship make him bump his head against the ceiling of it. Being deployed into battle like this was miles different than what he was used to—the vast Network and his Sarcophagus were his twin allies in simply teleporting into battles he was required in. But now that he lacked such assets, something more traditional it was.

At least he wasn’t alone in his mild discomfort. Jax’s eyes rose from his hands to his siblings. Fal-Mai was seated next to him, in a new facemask and somehow making even what should be an awkward position look elegant. Mordenna, however, had even more to contend with—with his Darklance being as long as it was, he had it strewn across his lap and partially angled downwards just to make it fit. When their gazes locked, Mordenna threw him a lopsided smile. “Getting cold feet, bro?”

“Nonsense,” he grumbled back. “I am simply remembering a time where I would not need to practically fold myself into a neat cube in order to enter missions.”

“What, you telling me you don’t like pulling off new and exciting yoga positions in order to fit inside a ship? Honestly I don’t see why you’re so adverse to it—I sure do love having to sling my girl across my lap and practically put one of my legs to sleep.”

That was enough to earn a chuckle from Maria, of whom the sight of brought some ease to Jax. She’d brought her slightly-modified rifle from her time at ADVENT—and although apparently she was suggested a blade, she opted instead to carry a medkit at her hip. Her situation was slightly better than the Chosen’s, but even she had to lean over slightly.

Spirits raised somewhat, Jax shook his head. “As appalling as I am sure it sounds, I certainly do not. If it is to your liking... then consider me not so surprised.”

Mordenna pressed a hand to his chest in mock shock. “Jax! My god, you wound me. How am I gonna recover from such a cutting remark? Fal-Mai, please, save me.”

“What’s the matter, Mordenna?” Their sister tilted her head upwards at him. Her voice sounded slightly filtered through her mask. “Are you unable to fight your own battles? Are you trying to goad me into doing something as cowardly as ganging up on our other sibling? Have some shame.”

“Shame? Me? In what square mile radius?” He threw up his unoccupied hand. “Jeez, talk about ganging up on Jax, I’m the one getting bullied here. Is anybody else seeing this blatant misjustice going on here?”
“I can certainly hear it.” Firebrand chimed in over the speakers, “and as funny as it is, you’re going to have to continue it on the ground. Entry point’s coming up fast, get ready to drop.”

With that, the members of Menace One-Five performed weapon checks around him. Jax himself watched them work, unclipping his safety harness as they did. The thought of the upcoming mission was giving him a small bit of nervousness. Not much; a battle was a battle. He was sure he could handle it. You’ve been sure you could handle a lot recently, and each time you’ve been wrong. What does that say here?

He shook his head as the lights in the cabin turned red. Too late to be having worries, even if they tried their best to brew in his gut. Jax could feel the Skyranger move into a hover, and the connections on the hatch disengaged. The back swung open and cords unraveled, though Wiki forewent them in favor of simply teleporting down. Taking inspiration, it was a short trip through the Void later and Jax found himself on the ground, in a snowy forest. The rest of the squad landed in front of him and the Skyranger flew off.

Rising from the crouch he landed in, Mordenna rolled his shoulders, Darklance holstered for now. “Hopefully that masking tech I helped Firebrand out with means we’ve got a shorter walk. The less time you lot have to step on every branch in the area, the better.”

Fal-Mai huffed, the action pushing steam through her mask. “Please. You speak as if I do not walk among you.”

“Suffice to say, if I’m talking about sneaking, you’re automatically excused from my shittalking.” He motioned with his finger in a circle and then pointed it forwards. “Alright. One alien facility in front of us, let’s raid it. Company march.”

The walk wasn’t too long, at least, but it was long enough to make Jax question if he should cover his biceps for cold weather. He was able to stave off the cold via minorly channeling his psionics to keep warm air close to his exposed skin, at least. Still didn’t stop things from feeling a little bit more nippy than usual. Some vain part of him balked at the idea of covering them, but he’d rather not get frostbite, honestly.

He figured the walk was starting to come to an end as the forest grew thinner and thinner. Jax hadn’t noticed it before, but under the layer of snow, all the plant life was heavily warped. Telltale signs of the Blight—the psionic radiation that mutated flora and fauna—were present everywhere, and it was only getting progressively worse as they drew closer to their destination. Jax had seen Blight as bad as this before, elsewhere. But here, it was... strangely familiar. He dismissed the feeling, keeping his attention forwards.

Fal-Mai was leading the way, with Mordenna just behind her. Wiki and Banel hung around the middle of the group, and Maria was hanging back with him near the rear. He kept his step light as they advanced, eyes scanning the scenery. Though he trusted his siblings to be alert, he kept his own eyes out on principle. There was always a chance that he would spot something that they didn’t.

That idea was slowly becoming a bit more real as they kept going. They had gotten to a point where their destination beyond was visible, and something in the back of Jax’s mind was kicking him about it. Eyes fixed on the facility, he kept moving forwards.

“Fal-Mai, stop.”
Mordenna’s words were enough to bring the whole squad to a halt. Fal-Mai paused where she was and turned to their brother. “What’s the matter? The way forward seems clear.”

“Yeah. Seems. Come over here, I need a clearer look at what’s in front of us.” When Fal-Mai did as asked, Mordenna straightened, taking a step or so forward and squinting at the ground in front of them. Near the facility, the grass thinned out until nothing was left but the dull, purple earth. If Mordenna was seeing something, Jax wasn’t in the loop. Mordenna rubbed at his mouth. “... interesting. There’s disturbed patches of ground, evenly spaced, with nigh-identical shapes and sizes with all of them. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think they put landmines here.”

“... landmines?” Banel, previously quiet, lowered the barrel of his gun slightly. “Are you sure, Hunter?”

“Not quite, but I don’t know why else they’d have these spots unless they’re growing crops. Really only a few ways to find out.”

“I think I know one.” Wiki stepped more towards the front. “Can you mark out where it is?”

Nodding, Mordenna leaned down and picked up a rock. He took his knife and scratched the top of it, marking it. Then, he crouched down and gingerly tossed it. It came to a rolling stop, marked-side up. Jax looked at the area where it had stopped, but still couldn’t claim to notice any disturbance of the earth. Wiki zipped over to it, and a small part of Jax braced for the supposed landmine going off as she went over. No such thing happened, however, and she lowered herself down to inspect the ground. “... yeah, from this distance? A specialized tool has been used to dig up the ground—and the disturbance goes fairly deep. One moment, please.”

With that, Wiki seemed to teleport into the very earth itself. A few moments later, she was back on the surface. “Sure enough, there’s a mine down there. I went ahead and disabled it.” She gestured back out towards the rest of the area around the facility. “I took a quick look and it seems they’ve mined the place up. Given the time and a few more copies of me, I could defang this place pretty quick.”

“A regular minesweeper, eh, Wiki?” Mordenna grinned.

“Actually,” she said, wagging her finger at him, “‘minesweeping’ is the act of clearing naval mines. I’m a regular deminer.”

“Smartass.” Leaving the banter aside, Mordenna gestured at two wide points in the field. “Clear from there to there. I don’t think we’re going to be making a full trip around. Besides, it’s... empty, here.” He went back to squinting, but this time it was at the facility ahead. “I kinda assumed once we knew it was landmines that maybe they’d have Archons and a Gatekeeper or two on hand, but... I haven’t seen any trails to indicate heavy psionic afterburn, save good ol’ Jax here. Sis? Hear any thrusters?”

Fal-Mai shook her head. “I have not heard any Archons... nor any other patrols. It would seem the facility is deserted.”

“Deserted and filled to the gills with landmines.” Banel readjusted his grip on his gun. “Seems they knew we’d be here.”

The notion that ADVENT knew they would be at this facility was just making Jax’s sense of foreboding worse. He was sensible enough that he could pick out patterns, which was how he was able to arrive at Fal-Mai’s Ascension Facility at the same time they did. He’d been doing those patrols for a few days before the raid nearby happened—it was simply too convenient. If trends
Jax swallowed thickly. “There... there does not seem to be much use in simply waiting here and discussing the nature of it all. I believe we should advance once Wiki has rendered the path ahead safe.”

Mordenna looked over his shoulder at Jax, no doubt catching the hesitation on his face. With a quick nod, he looked back ahead. “You heard the man. Get demining, Wiki.”

Just a few moments later, there were a few more clones of Wiki flying about, teleporting into the ground and coming up moments later to submerge at a different spot. As Wiki worked, Jax slowly walked over to Mordenna. Knowing how to disable the communicator in his ear, he did just that, motioning for Mordenna to do the same. Once he did, Jax began. “... this. This would not happen to be my facility, would it...?” Jax asked at a low volume.

Mordenna’s mouth pinched uneasily, and he looked at the building ahead in favor of looking at Jax. “All evidence kinda points to that, yeah. Something tells me the Elders knew we’d find our way here eventually, hence the landmines. Wouldn’t be surprised if we had more stuff waiting for us on our way in.”

Jax crossed his arms, eyes flickering downwards. “—truth be told, I... I do not know if I am ready to destroy this place, myself. I know you and Fal-Mai have abandoned the Elders and I do not begrudge either of you for doing so, but I...”

“I know.” Mordenna’s finger tapped his side, fidgeting. “I don’t blame you, at least. If I were you, I’d be antsy about this too. I think you should come with us, to be honest—getting something like this out of the way is freeing. Makes me kinda regret that I wasn’t awake to smash my own.”

That assurance simply sent Jax back to the time where he was defending Mordenna’s facility, and how he’d abjectly failed to do so—and even lost more of his congregation in the process. Jax sighed. As much dread as it put in him, he wanted to follow his brother’s advice. Even if it seemed like a bad idea, destroying this place would be affirming his decision to join with XCOM. It wasn’t as if he didn’t harbor bad memories of this area, of course—that he had dismissed it for a long time, his time here was... trying. Very trying. Probably what spawned his fear of being alone in the first place. If he destroyed it, he could not be hurt here. Not anymore.

With a heavy heart, he nodded. “I will accompany you all. It... only seems right.” He closed his eyes for a heavy moment. “Especially if you and Fal-Mai are with me.”

A grin worked its way onto Mordenna’s face and he reached over to pat Jax’s shoulder. “That’s the spirit. Me and sis will be with you the whole way. Isn’t that right, sis?”

He raised his voice for his question. Seemingly having heard the whole conversation, Fal-Mai offered them both a nod. Turning his communicator back on, Mordenna let his hand slide off Jax’s shoulder. “Keep your chin up, we got this.”

Flipping on his own, Jax took a deep breath. Of course. If he was here with his siblings, that made things better. The thought of having them beside him was now a comforting one rather than one he looked at with disdain—and perhaps that was proof enough that he could change. Strange times make for strange bedfellows. Are you sure they’ll want you forever? It’s only a matter of time before you hurt them like you hurt the Commander. Jax didn’t want to think on that, so much.

After a little while longer, Wiki’s clones all came up and merged back into her, and she approached the group again. “The area you specified is clear. I’ve jammed up the whole system for
the landmines—they’re not going to activate unless someone fixes them.”

Banel gave a single chuckle. “To think there’d be a day I would be happy a Codex jammed something up. Nice work, Wiki.”


Tellingly, nobody advanced. Mordenna stroked his chin at the ground in front of them. “Look, Wiki, I’m not saying I’m putting in a vote of no confidence, but you have to understand—”

“I will go.” As Jax spoke up, the group looked to him. He took in a deep breath. “I have perfected a shield that can stave off any explosive might brought to bear against me. These mere traps set before us should not prove a challenge to it.”

“Atta boy, bro.” Mordenna gave him a grin. “Forward with confidence, yeah?”

Simply offering a nod at that, Jax cleared the air from his lungs, then took in the deepest breath he could. Walking forward, he summoned a Stasis around himself a few steps in. Navigation on psionics would usually be a difficult feat to those unused to how slippery they were—but Jax was a master of constructs, and thus, a master of the form of his psionics. This Stasis was firm, almost rough, but flexible where he needed it in order to calmly walk across the open field. He had often used a shield like this on-demand when XCOM had tried to use explosives against him in the past —maintaining it like this was new.

His walk, though he was braced the whole time, was uneventful. Jax reached the area outside of the facility with no interruptions, letting the Stasis drop as he took measured breaths. When he was sure he was fine, he turned around to look to the squad. “Well?”

It was Fal-Mai who first walked across the ground he cleared, head held high in her implicit trust. Mordenna followed after her and Maria after him, and soon the whole squad had joined him. Mordenna took up his spot again at the front, head on a swivel as he scanned the area. “Alright, Wiki, you’ve got a little bit more confidence in you from me. Now. I’m gonna go ahead and lead this effort because who better to spot potential traps than me, eh?”

Fal-Mai fell into place behind him, nodding. “I find no flaws with this plan... so long as I am the ears to your eyes.”

“Hey, I’ve got no problem with that.” Mordenna slowly moved forward—doing so at a pace that anyone else could describe as an “amble,” but Jax had watched him stalk like this before. They had landed at one of the doors into the facility, and Mordenna was looking high and low for anything that might be brought against them. The rest of the squad followed behind him, and Jax himself was on the lookout—for as much as it would help. He was not the trap-minded sort, and admittedly didn’t know what to look for. It just made him feel better to be on guard.

Mordenna got to the door and crouched down in front of the pad. “Alright. Clear the door.” Once everyone did, he went to work, tapping away. When the door opened, there was a heavy silence that followed as Mordenna looked in. After a minute or so of looking, he shrugged. “I don’t see anything, and you can take that for what it’s worth. I’m heading in.”

With no objections, Menace followed in after the Hunter... though Jax stopped at the doorway. Memories were coming back and calling to him; though it all happened twenty years ago, the phantoms of what had occurred still came around. He had told the Commander that he did not mourn for his Ascension. Yet, as he looked at the interior, of the solitary confinement cell visibly clear from his angle... Jax found his hands shaking.
He was raised, in a way, in this facility. Childhood to adulthood, the process accelerated to the span of mere months. Rounds and rounds of psionic therapy sessions, to bring out and temper what he was born with naturally. Yet, he could not claim to be raised at all. The only one who seemed to tend to him with a caring hand was Joseph, and he... he had made his opinions clear, it seemed. This was not a place of glory. This was not a place Jax could claim pride in. This was not—

“Jax?”

Remembering to breathe, Jax sucked in a breath through his nose, closing his eyes. “I’m fine,” he replied to Maria with. “I... I am alright.” He opened them again to meet her imploring gaze. He wanted to say more, to assure her... but the mere aura that surrounded this place seemed to sap his words. Clenching his hands into fists, he set his eyes forwards, looking at nothing as he walked into his facility proper. He would not acknowledge the phantoms of what he used to sound like, screaming and crying in that cell. He would not think on what had happened. Surely, if he kept repeating it to himself...  

“Hey, uh, bro.” Mordenna’s words were something else to focus on, thankfully. He looked to his brother, and though Mordenna was trying to seem casual, the undercurrent of concern was clear. “Now that I think about it, I think you can sit outside if you want. Considering ADVENT left this place open, I think I’m gonna let Wiki pilfer what she can and then put some explosives down.”

Jax shook his head. He had entered. His stubborn pride would not allow him to leave until the deeds that Mordenna had laid out were done. His presence mattered—and the fact that there could still be another threat looming was not lost on him. “I will remain, and leave no sooner than when we have ensured this place will fall.”  

“Alright, alright.” Mordenna did not sound as if that was alright. “We’ll make it quick, then. Wiki?”

“Already on it.” Wiki was at one of the stations in the area. She plunged her hands into one of the many machines, and the black cloud billowing off of her head started twisting and twitching. “Data’s coming to me. I’ll get what I can through here.”

“Nice. Banel? You got the C4?”

“X4, thank you.” Jax turned, and Banel took out a device and attached it to the nearest supporting beam in the area. A few button presses later and it beeped, assuredly meaning it was armed. Even though he knew it wouldn’t blow when they were gone, it still sent a chill up Jax’s spine. Which... it shouldn’t, should it? The one that was used on him was different. But... the memory persisted. Why did he have to be hounded by his past at every opportunity? Mere months ago he was free from this torture. He knew what had changed—it was him—but it still left him wondering. Nevertheless, he remained wary of the explosive placed.

“Got what pertains to this place.” Wiki speaking brought him back to looking at her. “There’s... a few other files here. Think I should pilfer them?”

“You kidding?” Mordenna threw out his hands. “Take everything. If they left it here, their loss.”

“Right then.” The act of a Codex hacking something was a little visually unimpressive outside of their hands being merged with whatever they were hacking, it seemed. A few seconds later and Wiki tilted her head. “Hm. That’s. A weird file to have here. What’s the Si—”

Wiki seemed to phase out of sight for a moment. When she stopped flickering, she staggered, but kept her hands in the terminal. “Shoot. Tripped a security measure. Might have company here...
Soon.” Mordenna took the rifle off of his back. “Goddamnit Wiki. Oh well. Guess I’ll actually get to—”

A sound from Jax’s future nightmares set off behind him—that damned high-pitched whine. What happened next, Jax would later attribute to intuition and mindless fear. One second, psionic claws shot out at the various members of his squad, dragging them close to him. The next, he gasped in a breath and put up his blast shield around them.

The next second, the X4 charge went off.

His shield and mind were rocked from the force of the explosive, testing the true limits of his powers as he shuddered, whole consciousness put into the effort of maintaining the dome he had created. Mere moments later, he was tested again as debris began to fall upon his psionics, each crash and impact sending another jolt of pain across his mind. The shield wasn’t built for rubble, and the strain was wearing on him. But he had to keep it maintained. His eyes were screwed shut from exertion, but he knew that he had his allies under him. His siblings. If he let up on this shield, they would likely die from the collapse. He couldn’t fail. He couldn’t give up.

Eventually, the cascade of rubble seemed to settle, and Jax now only had to put his efforts into keeping the shield strong under the weight of his former facility. It was quiet now, compared to the cacophony of sound earlier—a part of him wondered how Fal-Mai was holding up. That spurred him into opening one of his eyes, looking over the group under him.

They seemed to be alright—a few knocked to the ground from the force of being pulled, but alright. He knew that wouldn’t last for long; the shield was airtight. They’d run out of oxygen, and even if not, he would need to breathe eventually.

“Menace One-Five, do you read?!?”

Eliza’s voice came over comms, and Jax wished he could respond to say they were alright—but it was taking all of his willpower to keep the shield maintained and the urge to breathe at bay. He made eye contact with his brother, who got the hint. “We’re alright. In a shield under the rubble.” He looked around frantically. “Don’t know how we’re going to get out.”

“I don’t know what happened.” That was Lily, and she sounded fairly distressed. “The X4 shouldn’t have gone off—even if it was shot, it’s a stable compound. None of us up here gave it the clear to blow.”

Wiki righted herself, making electronic buzzes and crackles of what sounded like frustration. “I should’ve known. Those files were plants. I must’ve tripped a protocol that interfered with the X4 signal and set it to explode with us there.”

“Alright. We know what happened.” Banel propped himself up on a knee. “How are we getting out?!?”

“I...” Mordenna’s hands pressed against the inside of the shield. With the contact came his normally-mute signature—and it made clear the panic Mordenna was masking. Jax’s heart twinged with the mutual feeling of terror. If Mordenna didn’t know what to do, that didn’t speak well. “There’s...”

“Can...” Maria swallowed thickly. “Can Wiki teleport out and—I don’t know, move some of the rubble?”

“I doubt she can—” Because Mordenna had inadvertently linked with Jax, he could feel his
brother’s revelation firsthand. His head whipped over to Wiki. “Wiki. Can you bring other people with you when you teleport?”

“Hypothetically, yes, but...” Her form flickered. “Not this many. I’ve never tried.”

“Well it’s a good time to learn!” Mordenna grabbed Wiki, bringing her to the center of the squad. “Everybody get a hand on the Codex. Wiki, grab Jax’s leg!”

Jax watched as Wiki leaned over and got a grip on one of his greaves. At the same time, the rest of the group planted a hand on her. She began to glow brightly. “Hold on!”

When Jax could feel her tug upon him, he waited until the last second to drop his shield. Just for a moment, he could feel a piece of the ruined facility impact him before Wiki launched him across the Void, back the way they came. Wiki’s guidance was rough, strained by the effort of bringing so many passengers. Had she had to go any further, Jax knew they would have lost someone on the way. As it stood?

The next moment, they were all tumbling across the ground in their reality.

Jax landed on his back, but he quickly rolled to brace himself on his hand and knees, gasping for air and coughing up a storm, each one agitating his oncoming strain headache. To his side, he could hear a majority of Menace One-Five doing the same, now that they weren’t sharing a tiny pocket of oxygen. Well, at least the more human-ish members. Wiki was most likely fine. Right?

Catching his breath and his coughing reduced to a mere tickle in his lungs, Jax looked over to the rest of the group. They were picking themselves up off the ground, Fal-Mai being one of the first to recover it seemed.

In the middle of them all was a Codex brain.

The sight stunned Jax for a moment. He knew that transporting that many passengers would’ve taken its toll on Wiki, but was she truly dead? As he started staggering to his feet, Mordenna was the second to notice their downed ally, and rushed down to scoop up what remained of her. He turned over the remnant of her in his hands for a tense time, then settled his mouth into a line. “She’s gone dark. I don’t know if she’s ‘dead’ in a literal sense, but... she’s not coming back, not right now.”

“The poor thing...” Maria was on her own two feet now, somber at the development. “That was a noble act of her. If that was her last action...”

“Never say ‘die,’ not with these sorts of things.” Freeing up a hand, Mordenna picked his rifle off the ground and put it back, handling Wiki’s brain carefully. “I can... I can run a few tests, see what might bring her back. I’m not a miracle worker, but at her core, she’s a machine. I can work with machines.”

“ That’s... that's good to hear, Mordenna. ” The equal parts relief and exhaustion in Eliza’s voice were palpable. “ Is everyone else all right? ”

“I do not believe we’ve sustained injuries otherwise.” Fal-Mai was in remarkable shape for someone of her hearing that was just at the center of that blast zone. Did the new mask have something to do with it? “Merely... the potential loss of a comrade.”

“Hey.” Mordenna’s protest was weaker than it normally was. “What’d I just say about not saying ‘die’?”

“But... I did not use the word—”
“Hush. Don’t.” He took a flare from his belt and cracked it off, tossing it in front of them. “Commander, please get Firebrand out here. I’ve got some repairs to do on sparky here back home.”

“Understood. Firebrand’s coming in. No signs of hostiles on the scanners—take a moment to rest, Menace.”

Now that the chaos had settled and they were simply waiting on their ride home, Jax took the chance to look upon his ruined facility, his worsening headache progressing as he did. The building was nothing but rubble—the X4 charge had done its job well. Just where they used to be, there was a noticeable concave area in the debris—a clear indicator of what would’ve happened had Jax dropped the shield while they were there. It was nothing, now. Nothing but bent and warped metal, a final monument to the feelings festering inside of him. Once again, the Elders had decreed death to be his punishment.

Jax could feel himself waver on the spot as the realization of everything caught up to him, magnified by the pain throbbing in his skull. Failure. It was nothing but failure for him at every turn. There was nothing, nothing he could do right. If he had his wits, he could’ve teleported them out of there. He could’ve picked up on the fact that there had to be another trap. He had so many chances to make a better choice, and yet, Jax found himself so, so inadequate. He was nothing. He would be nothing.

“Jax. Hey... hey.” Mordenna was next to him now. If Jax was projecting, it would explain the slight pinch to Mordenna’s features. “Everything alright up there? Firing correctly on all cylinders? Not that I’m saying you’re not thinking, the opposite, actually...”

He wanted to return the slight banter. He wanted badly to say he was fine. But how could he? How could he bold facedly lie? Jax’s eyes wouldn’t move from the rubble, and it felt as if his ribs wouldn’t move to let his lungs expand.

There was a moment of silence on Mordenna’s part, during which Fal-Mai and Maria approached the two of them as well. Mordenna leaned his head slightly to one side. “Hey. Liz? Cut the feed. Turn it off, whatever. Give us a moment.”

“Understood. Be safe down there, Menace.”

Right after Eliza said that, Jax was hugged by Mordenna, followed by Fal-Mai and his Matriarch. Their actions restored a bit of presence to him and he took in a shuddering breath, trying to wrench his eyes away from the rubble, trying to just stop. It was a good thing Mordenna could apparently see what was wrong, as he spoke up again. “Hey. Bro. Fals and I are going to turn you so you don’t have to look at it anymore, alright? That sound good?”

At the very least, Jax found he could nod shallowly. With that, he could feel Mordenna and Maria—and Fal-Mai as she picked up on what she needed to do—start to nudge him into turning around. Numbly, he followed their guidance, eyes staring straight forwards until he was now looking at the Blighted forest behind them. It was like a Stasis had worn off on him—he found himself able to breathe again, screwing his eyes shut as every beat of his heart seemed to make his migraine worse. He could feel his knees wanting to buckle underneath the weight of it all, but the pillars of support around him wouldn’t let him. His arms sought for those closest to his sides—his siblings—and he buried his head in the closest object he could find: his brother’s hood.

This round of tears and crying was stifled by the migraine he was currently housing. Maria cottoned on to his pain and extended her healing psionics, but even then he did his best to hold back every sob as they sent knives into both his chest and his head. He could hear Maria whisper
assurances and comfort, but it was lost on his ears at the moment. He just needed to grieve. He did not hold his brother accountable, but what had happened did not bring him any joy or satisfaction. His respect, his sympathy for the Elders still remained and it ate away at him. Some part of him wanted to be free of Them, but how could he accomplish that? It seemed as if he never would be able to, especially if things like this that had worked for his siblings merely brought anguish to him. He was lost.

Underneath his brewing thoughts, he could sense Maria guiding his siblings into linking with him psionically. The notion of the action was enough to temporarily pause his thoughts. His reading of Mordenna’s signature earlier had been more of a one-way affair with Mordenna likely unable to tell his own feelings through it. To have his siblings know him that personally? Well... they had resolved to try to help each other. To try to be a family. If he rejected them now, how would that help what they promised to do for each other? With a breathless sob, he tentatively opened his mind. If they truly wanted to be subjected to his headspace, Jax figured he couldn’t stop them.

Maria’s signature was the first, one that he was very familiar to. Warm, with an underlying strength and overlying care for him, a positively healing presence. The flame of her signature was soothing and eased the storm.

Next was Fal-Mai—dark, quiet, like a whisper on the wind. Something normally keen at hiding, stepping out into the light. In that light he saw a concern for his being, a want to be good and be there for him. There were barriers around her—ones that were not of her own making. He knew where those came from, at least, and she did not have any trouble navigating through them to uplift him and comfort him.

Finally, with well-meaning hesitation, Mordenna joined. Even as he was presenting himself openly, Jax found it difficult to get a read of him; his naturally-evasive nature bleeding into his signature. But above that, Jax could feel him trying to open up and be there for his brother. Though his signature defaulted to misdirection, to Jax, the worry and empathy Mordenna was feeling shone through. Knowing that they were now very privy to his emotions, he didn’t let his surprise last long.

He could feel them all take ahold of his grief and pain and take some of it into themselves with Maria’s guidance. Their holds on him grew tighter, and he squeezed them in turn, his gratitude pulsing through his signature. Perhaps he was something more than nothing. Someone who was nothing would not have this kind of support. If he was nothing, they would want nothing to do with him, and certainly wouldn’t take it upon themselves to ease his suffering.

Eventually, the storm broke, the dark clouds of his thoughts subsiding. He could feel those around him relaxing through the link. Mordenna was the first to ease out when the coast was clear, followed by Maria and Fal-Mai. He was... relatively fine, now. He could get the rest of his resting done on the Avenger, where he could lose himself in the midst of his Mystics and take some time to himself.

As he let up on his hug, they all pulled back from him. Opening his eyes, he was just able to catch Mordenna wiping discreetly at his own. Jax took a moment to simply breathe. Maria’s psionics had eased the worst of his migraine and left him with simply a moderate headache. His arms fell to his sides. “... thank you,” he muttered, voice quiet and raw. “It... it comforts me to have you all.”

“Ain’t right to leave you hanging.” Mordenna’s voice was similarly lowered, missing its ever-sarcastic undertone. “‘Sides, we’re in this together, and other similarly cliché phrases.”

“Is it cliché if it is meant whole-heartedly?” Maria looked up at Jax and gave him a warm smile. “I think it is only natural.”
“I must agree with Maria.” Fal-Mai crossed her arms. “I would not think it ‘cliché’ if we truly mean to stand with each other.”

“Alright, alright.” Mordenna waved it off. “I get it. We can be sibs without me trying to joke about it.” He paused. “I’m, uh. I’m not being sarcastic about that, I should mention. I know I come off as a piece of shit a lot.”

“I would merely think it your first line of defense, brother.” Jax himself understood defaulting to something when presented with a situation he was unfamiliar with. In his case, it used to be a calm, regal mask. Now? He was unsure, and could understand Mordenna falling back on humor.

When Mordenna nodded and didn’t offer much else, Jax looked up. There was a dot on the gray horizon that suggested the Skyranger, and it was getting closer. Right. They were on a mission. Even if they were about to head home. That in mind, he cast his gaze over to their fifth member. In his grief and sorrow, Jax had forgotten Banel was even there. But there he stood, partially turned away from them all as he held what was left of Wiki, helmet turned down to look at her. What were his feelings, seeing the Chosen so vulnerable and close? What did he think of it all?

Unless he wanted to go over and check, Jax didn’t think he’d know the answer so soon. A calm silence fell on their group as Jax watched the Skyranger approach. As it did, Mordenna pressed a finger to his ear. “Commander? We’re all good. Visual confirmation of Firebrand.”

“Good to know, Hunter.”

Mordenna paused, as if thinking about something. “Did you get the files that Wiki uploaded?”

There was a moment of quiet over comms. Then, “Yes. Including the extra files that tripped security.”

“What were those extras?”

More silence. It went on long enough that it seemed to fall to Lily to respond. “It... it turns out that Cronus must’ve... been using the Siren files as reference for Jax. The files Wiki found aren’t the original ones, but they’re exact copies.”

The gravity of that statement dug a pit in Jax’s stomach. In that moment, he couldn’t help but feel that he had hurt Eliza again, however inadvertently it happened. Were he in any worse mood, he felt as if he would’ve spiralled back down into a storm again—but as it stood, he merely took in a deep breath and quietly sighed it out. He would... he would simply bear his punishment on his own time. There was nothing to be done.

“... hey, Commander?” Mordenna turned away from the group. “Mind if we talk when we get back? Got a thing or two to discuss with you before I start working on Wiki.”

“That can be arranged. I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Roger. Take it easy up there.”

As he said that, the Skyranger came in at a hover. The cords dropped down, and Jax couldn’t find the energy to teleport up and in there. He merely advanced with the rest of the squad and took ahold of his cord, returning to the cramped, calming embrace of the Skyranger.
Banel had seen a lot of things in his life. His own kids grow up and move out, the business and
deals of the “family” he had once led, and indeed, all the sights of the alien war.

He didn’t know if he’d ever see the Chosen like that.

After handing off what was left of their Codex friend off to Mordenna, Banel simply found himself
walking through the halls of the Avenger. Though he’d been through the Armory, he never got
around to taking his WAR Suit off, what with all the thoughts brewing in his head. He’d kept his
helmet on too, mercifully masking his expression.

In some ways, he felt that the explosion was his fault. If he’d waited until they got what they
needed, the security protocol would’ve had nothing to trip. Then again, it could’ve just as easily
detonated it where it lay on his hip, and that would’ve been far more difficult to handle. No matter
which way he came at it, Banel just couldn’t see what he could’ve done to prevent it, save for not
taking the X4 at all. In a way, it made him feel a bit better; if there was truly nothing he could have
done about it, he didn’t see any reason to beat himself up. It happened. Now they just needed to
move on and heal. Banel was an expert at moving on, at least. Had to be, in his former line of
work.

His feet stopped, and he found himself in front of the door to the Commons. Well, if he wanted to
take a load off, this would be the best place to do it. Second best place would be the Bar, but Banel
didn’t feel like drinking himself to death. He was sure his buddies in the Commons could give him
a moment of peace as he thought over just what had happened, that mission. Even if he was an
expert at moving on, he wanted to give some thought to it. He could move on and learn from it. He
tapped the panel, thankful that the screens around the Avenger largely didn’t need skin contact to
work.

The Commons were quiet, with the screen at the far end of the room showing the XCOM symbol.
They must’ve been watching the mission. Eyes turned to him as he entered, walking to one of the
empty seats at the round table and taking his place.

Leo was the first to walk over, leaning on the table next to him. “—how are you feeling?”

“Like someone’s punched a hole in my gut,” he answered honestly.

Leo’s brows furrowed, the way they always did when one of his “patients” gave him a concerning
response. Before he could speak up again, Banel shook his head. “I appreciate you, I really do,
Leo... but give me a moment to think over it all. Saw some... pretty somber stuff down there.”

“If you ask me, it’s about time.”

Oh, god. Vlad was here. The absolute last thing Banel needed after seeing the Warlock laid bare
like that was any of Vlad’s rhetoric or his xenophobia. Banel knew the Chosen were their enemies
before, and rightfully, he was wary of them when the Commander first brought them to her side.
But they’d shown they were more concerned with themselves than making trouble. In a good way,
of course—they seemed to have turned around rather well if that field interaction said anything.

Regardless, Vlad kept flapping his gums. “Look, I know apparently all of us have rolled over and
accepted the Chosen, but that doesn’t mean that they’re absolved of everything they’ve ever done. I
think a little humility needs to—”

Honestly, Banel didn’t know what happened for a moment or so. One second, he was reclined in
his chair. The next, he’d slammed Vlad on his back on the table, a single gauntlet around his
throat. Vlad was kicking and clawing at his hand, but Banel wasn’t budging. He applied a bit more
Banel’s voice was quiet and deadly in the silence that followed his action. “I’m going to be completely honest with you, Vlad. I don’t like you. You’re lucky that Herod even likes you half as much as he does. But what makes me hate you is your refusal to read the goddamn room.” He leaned in, helmet-to-face with him. “I saw the Chosen, down there. They already know humility. They already know guilt and pain. I don’t know what happened between them and the Elders, but suffice to say, they’re walking around with the scars of what happened. I know an abused kid when I see one. And I won’t stand here and just listen to you slandering them when they’re trying to get better. Now. I’ll give you two options, simple, really. You reshape your attitude.” His gauntlet clenched just a bit more, the servos on his suit sound off as he did. “Or I reshape your spine.”

With that, he let go of Vlad’s throat. He gasped in a breath and started coughing, clutching his neck. Banel eased into standing back up, and then looked at his audience. Everyone was quiet, with some people in various states of probably wanting to stop him, but not really feeling like taking on the man in a WAR Suit. He waited a moment more before addressing them, Vlad’s struggles at breathing again underlining his words. “You can disagree with the Commander taking in the Chosen. I know some of you do, and that’s fine. You can disagree with wanting to work with them in the field; I’m sure the Commander will accommodate that. But if I catch any of you spouting off the exact same shit Vlad here is saying... we will have words, you and I. The Chosen are trying, god forbid. They may not be trying to make up with us so much, but I saw what happened down there, when the feed cut for you guys. They’re trying to pick up the pieces again. I know what people coming from a broken home look like; I’ve adopted a few in my time.”

More quiet. Nobody seemed to know how to respond. Looking back to Vlad, who had staggered away from him when presented the chance, Banel turned towards the door. “That’s all. Exercise decency. Even the folks I used to run around with could do that.”

Having imparted what he wanted to, Banel walked away from the table, letting what he said hang in the air between them all.
Confront

Chapter Summary

Mordenna puts a few plans into action.

The minute Mordenna made sure that Jax was alright and with his followers, he made his way to the Bridge.

Eliza hadn’t been there to greet them at the Armory, and probably for good reason. Wouldn’t want to spook Jax right after an experience like that. Mordenna still harbored a bit of guilt over it all; if he had been the one to infiltrate the security, he could’ve worked around the trap in the files. Wiki—her brain currently hanging from his hip—wouldn’t have tripped it and subsequently gotten herself... not killed, Mordenna was determined about that. He could bring her back. He just had to figure out what was wrong.

More important than that, but with no insult meant to Wiki, was Eliza. Having those Siren files in her possession couldn’t be good for her, and what he had said to her back then reared its ugly head. You just had to go and call her the Chosen Siren, huh? Lest he forget it was his more contrarian side that pushed him to do it. You don’t have to act on every urge you get. It wasn’t so much an urge as it was a command, was it?

Tossing out his internal monologue, Mordenna entered the Bridge. The staff were still there, along with the usual suspects—Eliza, Bradford, Lily, and Tygan. Tygan looked like he was packing up to leave while Lily was at one of the monitors, staring blankly at a screen of information. Even from this distance, Mordenna’s enhanced sight caught the word “Siren” and without looking and seeing what Bradford and Eliza were doing, he strode over. Leaning over and closing the file, he turned to Lily, voice low. “Hey. Sis. Mind, uh, mind not pouring over that in the vicinity of Eliza?”

Lily blinked, broken out of the spell she had entered looking at the info. She breathed a sigh, running a hand through her hair. “Yeah. Probably wise. I just... couldn’t help but look at it. The things Argus was going to do to her—”

“Ah, ah, ah,” he said, wagging a finger. “Don’t wanna hear it. Lips. Zipped. You can unzip them back at the Workshop but for now keep them closed on this matter. Capiche?”

Getting the message, Lily stepped back from the terminal. “I got it. Just... be careful with Eliza, ok?”

Mordenna nodded, straightening. Policing of Lily done, he turned to look at where Bradford and Eliza were standing. They were close together, like they’d been talking somewhat privately. Seeing Mordenna look over to her, the Commander gave him a warm, but weary smile. Girl’s barely holding herself together. Could he blame her? “Hunter.”

“Commander.” He sauntered on over. He wanted to be casual about this but his concern for Eliza felt like it was coloring his presentation of himself. “Everything smooth sailing up here?”

“As smooth as it gets,” she returned.
Even as she was trying to assure him that she was alright, Mordenna could see in the tiredness of her features that what all just happened was weighing pretty heavily on her. Cut to the chase, then. “Right. I’ll believe that when I see it. Anyway, remember that talk I asked about while we were on the ground?”

“I do. But...” She turned to Bradford, who took a sudden interest in something off to the left. Seems he didn’t want to stop her regarding this talk. The implicit trust from Bradford was... something, alright. At Bradford’s feigned disinterest, she sighed. “Alright. Looks like I’m free.”

“Perfect!” Mordenna clapped his hands together. “Let’s move this conversation to your quarters. No peeping toms, and all that.”

That was enough to get a bit of a smirk out of Eliza. She walked off in the direction of her quarters, and Mordenna followed along right after her. The trip was quiet and only broken by Eliza’s footsteps as they made their way over.

Once they were inside, Eliza took her place on the couch, and Mordenna plopped down next to her. Casually throwing an arm over the back of the chair behind her head, he angled his sight down at her. “Alright, Liz, I have a total of two things I’d like to cover. You’re a clever girl, you probably know the first but I’ll say it anyway; you shouldn’t—”

“—look at those files. I know.” She rested a hand on her hip. “You weren’t exactly subtle, beelining over to Lily and chiding her. I don’t really want to, anyway.”

“You don’t really want to... but I know what it’s like to have horrific info at your fingertips, just waiting to be accessed, Lizzie. Bullet point two of my first topic...” His hand on the back of the couch gently came down to be placed on her shoulder. “I’m here. If you wanna just get anything off of your chest regarding it all, postpone looking at that stuff until you might truly be ready, I’m happy to have my ear talked off. No bottling this shit.”

At that, Eliza pressed her lips together, crossing her arms and looking away. “I’m fine.”

“Oh, that’s a lie. Commander, please, this is a two-way street.” He took his free hand and planted it on her head, using his fingertips to angle her back into looking at him. “I can’t, with a good conscience, continue confiding in you if I know you’ve got shit you’re dealing with and are possibly pushing to the side to take care of me. If you’re going to sit here and tell me you’re fine after all this, then when you ask me how I’m doing, all I will answer with is ‘I’m fine.’ Do you see what I’m getting at here, O’Leary?”

She managed eye contact for a few seconds after he was done speaking, then broke it, looking down. “I just... I should—”

“—be able to deal with this alone?” Where does it stop, Eliza? What problem will finally be so massive and overwhelming that you’ll finally cry uncle and submit to people helping the shit out of you? C’mon. I’ve got a wild idea. How about you try opening up a bit and letting someone hear your problems and see how that feels? Trial period. Don’t gotta worry too hard since you’re not going all in.”

“Alright, alright.” She sighed, tucking some hair back behind her ear. “Just, let me get this out of the way. I don’t want to appear weak. There’s a lot of people depending on me at any given time. I can’t give off the impression that I don’t have everything under control—a lot of havens and other people I’m dealing with would pick up on it very fast and use it against me. I don’t take the three main factions to doubt me too much anymore, but I’m always fearful that it’ll... that I’ll get preyed upon.”
Well... that was fairly reasonable. Someone like Eliza who was at the top and was essentially the non-revealed face of the resistance couldn’t exactly be seen as needing support. Still didn’t make it any less bullshit that she had to bottle everything, and besides... “I get that. But you can be weak in private. Break down to somebody in a confidential room. Have a feelings jam away from the public eye. Hell, I’d imagine being able to vent all that bottled-up shit would make putting on a strong face easier because you feel better about all of it. But, to the point—” He let his hand drop from her head to gesture at her. “What’s on your mind, Commander?”

Turning more towards him and leaning her head against his arm, Eliza took a moment to get her words together. When she did, she closed her eyes as she spoke. “I’m... afraid, of what Argus has done to me. I just... have this feeling that I’m changed. I can’t explain it. But when you told me I was going to be the Chosen Siren, things just made sense to me. A name like ‘the Siren...’ it doesn’t make me the most confident about my leadership ability. I’m... I’m half afraid that now, everyone’s only following me because I’ve lured or charmed them against their will in some way.” She opened her eyes, gazing at him imploringly. “Do you understand?”

Mordenna could understand that, even if he couldn’t really empathize with it. It must suck, to have the niggling doubt that everything you’ve accomplished really wasn’t because of your own skills, but because the game was rigged from the start. Especially for someone in power like Eliza. But, Mordenna was an expert at poking arguments full of holes, and he knew just a few ways to do it. “I get that, Eliza, and let me tell you that you’re pretty damn valid to have those concerns. But, I got a problem or two about them being real. First of all, I haven’t seen shit regarding any controlling psionics coming out of you. I didn’t see psionics at all until you jumped after me. I got some real special eyes, Eliza. If I’m not seeing it, chances are it’s not happening.”

Eliza opened her mouth, but Mordenna held up a finger. “Not done! I’m proving this beyond a shadow of a doubt. Second of all, wouldn’t Fal-Mai say something? Her, with her extra-special hearing, who has on more than one occasion complained about how loud Jax’s psionics get when they sounded soft to me? If she’s not hearing any siren song outta you, I’d be willing to believe there isn’t one. Third of all: Jax. I bet my left eye he would’ve pounced on the chance to reject you so fast if he got even a whiff of the fact that you were swaying everyone to your side through that kind of trickery. He was chomping at the bit to prove to himself that Fal-Mai and I were brainwashed, remember? So just keep that close to your chest—three Chosen, all with their individual abilities to detect it, haven’t seen evidence of foul play outta you. So I want those self doubts to shut the hell up. They, quite frankly, don’t know what they’re on about.”

It seemed to take Eliza a while to digest all that, but when she did, she nodded and relaxed a bit. If that was what it took to help the Commander, this therapy business was easier than Mordenna thought. Now if only you could figure out how to handle your brother. Hush.

“... you’re probably right,” Eliza muttered. “I just always have that fear at the back of my mind.”

“I get it, I really do. Just know your doubts don’t have too much grounding and also—I support you. Beat that, inner demons.”

Eliza laughed and it took a weight off of Mordenna’s shoulders, hearing that out of her. God, he loved her so much, it wasn’t funny. Maybe that tragic kind of funny, but whatever. “Ah, whatever shall they do in the face of Hunter Mordenna?”

“Die, probably.” He shrugged in a carefree manner. “Got anything else, Liz? I’m happy to sit here and consistently dunk on your negative thoughts.”

Eliza’s mirth faded away as she considered her next avenue of conversation. “Just one other thing for now, I suppose. I... can’t help but feel like a major asshole, assigning Jax to his own facility and
having all of that go down.”

Oof. Well, that was valid. Not like he could blame her—and here, he could empathize. He very much intended to handle the tension between the two of them today, but he couldn’t exactly let that slip to Eliza. He needed her in the dark if he wanted his plan to go off without a hitch. “Yeah. For one, we couldn’t have possibly known the Elders would retaliate like that; there’s been no precedent to it. I know it’s popular to beat yourself up for stuff you couldn’t change—hell, I want to do it over the mission, too—but all you’re gonna accomplish in the end is a bunch of bruises that were for nothing. As much as saying this is like prying my own teeth out of my mouth with my bare hands; unless one of us up and invents a time machine and even then that gets convoluted, we can’t exactly change the past. Just gotta accept what happened, learn, and move on. So from now on we’ll keep an eye out for mines and explosive countermeasures to security protocols. Also, we’ll avoid sending Jax on missions that look like they might actively harm him, but even then that has a judgement point. Some things we just can’t call all of the time. The Ascension Facility? Alright, could’ve made a different call there. A future, innocuous mission? Not much we can do about that. Alright?”

Eliza nodded, looking him the eyes. “I got it.” She then frowned. “I hate how reasonable you are. It feels... weird, to discuss all of this. I’m waiting for you to laugh off whatever’s bothering me at any second. Not because I expect you to, but because I don’t expect my problems to be serious.”

“Well, Liz, you’re learning just how wrong you are here and now. And let me tell you how wrong you are; I am always willing to listen to whatever’s knocking around your skull and giving you grief. A happy you is typically a happy me. Don’t sweat it.”

“If you say so, cowboy.” Cowboy! She’d used it as a nickname for him before but he was still living it up. “I think that’s about it for me, for now. What’s that second item you wanted to bring forth?”

Oh, boy. Here came the plan in action. Mentally initiating his acting mode, Mordenna gestured as he spoke. “Honestly, ‘item’ is a good word for it. I’ve got a certain project that’s developing in the Proving Grounds that I want you to have a look at personally. It’s... a bit of a surprise and I can’t exactly move it out of the room. Hazmat, and all. I think you’d appreciate the extra firepower it brings—” He slapped his forehead, a planned action along with his planned “forgetfulness.” “Ah, shit. I’m gonna need something from the Workshop as well. Forgot it down there. Tell you what—I’ll save you the trip of having to walk with me over to the Workshop to get it. Could you head over to the Proving Grounds and wait for me?”

Eliza tilted her head, but he watched the gears turn as she seemed to gradually accept it. “... alright. I think I can take a look at whatever project you’re working on—so long as it doesn’t explode in my face.

“As long as everything goes as planned, it shouldn’t, really.” He meant that, in a way—if he handled all the variables correctly, Eliza and Jax should see a resolution to the space that had grown between them. Eliza was handled, now he just needed to get Jax. “So! Off to the Proving Grounds, Great Commandy One?”

She chuckled at the nickname, standing up. “Sure thing. Want to see me out?”

“Actually,” he said, popping up and sauntering over to the middle of the room, “I’m going vent-ways. It’s faster, anyway. You can stick with your primitive human methods of walking down hallways, yeah?”

Eliza snickered, shaking her head and making for the door. “Alright, if you insist. See you in the
Proving Grounds when you get what you need.”

“Oh, sure thing, Liz.” Not that she’d be seeing much of him. He reached up, undid the hatch, and was off into the vents as he closed it behind him. He certainly told Eliza a bit of a fib—he wasn’t going to be going to the Workshop at all. Where he was going was the little area Jax was tentatively carving out as an art studio for his band of ducklings. He was in there the last time Mordenna checked, and it wasn’t like the business with Eliza took too long. A few turns and a slight descent later, he was at the hatch for the room. Undoing it, he dropped in.

The proto-art studio still had a few storage crates lingering in it, and a few tables had been set up with some of the pieces from Jax’s Stronghold set up on them. Paintings hung from the walls, and it was clear there was some area near one of the walls they were planning to use for modeling. Jax was sitting at one of the tables, looking reserved, but otherwise alright. What interested Mordenna was the inclusion of two PsiOps he recognized: Benald and Pattie. They were somewhat close to the Warlock, but there was a clear, uncertain distance to it. Jax’s little ladies were there as well, but that was to be expected. What Mordenna was concerned with was his own brother, who was looking up at him because of his vent entrance.

Smoothly, Mordenna ambled over and leaned over on the table. “Good ol’ brother of mine. How, uh. How you holding up.” Ok, maybe this therapy thing was a bit harder than he thought.

Jax nodded. “I am well, for now.”

“Good! Good.” Silence was quick to follow as Mordenna tried to figure out what to follow up with. It was harder to think of things to say when emotions weren’t running red hot. What was he supposed to say now that the situation was over and things were ostensibly fine? *Might as well just move on to your scheme. Not like you’re accomplishing much just sitting here, staring at him.*

“Right! Right. Hey, I hate to pry you away from your ever-so-lovely supporters, but I might have been cooking up something for you, too, if you noticed Fal-Mai’s fancy new digs.” Somehow, lying to Jax just felt more wrong. Something about him coming off of such an emotionally charged situation. “You feel up to coming with me to the Proving Grounds?”

Jax considered him for a moment, then looked to the Mystics on either side of him. Mordenna was half-afraid that he was going to try to bring them along as he looked back to him. “... Of course, brother. It makes me glad to know you are also designing equipment for me, as well.”

Oh, Jax. He just had to go and say that. The gnawing guilt in Mordenna’s stomach grew. Hoping it didn’t show on his face, he stood back up and put on a grin. “Happy to have you along! Just follow me and I’ll present your little gift to you.”

He watched as Jax slowly got to his feet, muttering a gentle assurance that he’d be alright to the Mystic on his right. Iris, if he remembered correctly. After making sure Jax was following him, he confidently made his way out the door, shoving his hands in his pockets as he walked. His mind was buzzing as he was considering how things would go once Jax opened the door and saw Eliza hanging out in there. *Probably is gonna stop dead in his tracks. Can’t just ask him to close his eyes, either—he’s bound to see Eliza’s psionics in his mind, or however that works. I hope Eliza’s just around the corner or maybe he won’t be paying attention as he walks in, but it’s a possibility. Of course, he had a solution or two in mind for that. He wouldn’t be the Hunter otherwise.*

Jax didn’t say anything for the duration of the trip, and even though Mordenna felt compelled to break the silence... what was there to say? That guilt in his gut made him stop from rambling disjointedly about what he had supposedly been working on, even if it’d make the whole lie more believable. In his mind, it would sting less for Jax when he eventually found out Mordenna had lied to him if he didn’t hype him up so much. He just hoped he’d be able to properly apologize to
Jax once this all sorted itself out.

They got to the door of the Proving Grounds, and Mordenna stopped by the panel of the door. Standing so Jax couldn’t see him tap over to the option to force-close or open the door, he gestured grandly. “Well? Step on in—I’ll handle the door.”

“Very well.” Jax walked over to the door, and Mordenna opened it up for him. As he predicted, Jax took a step in—and then his eyes widened, threatening to bug out of his head as he froze on the spot. Mordenna had to act, fast.

With a quickly muttered “sorry, bro!” Mordenna stepped back and then rushed forward, shoulder-checking Jax into the room. To make sure he’d make it far enough in, Mordenna put plenty of force behind it—enough that he could feel his brittle body complain and his shoulder ache. It was enough; Jax stumbled in, far enough to clear the door. Hastily, Mordenna rushed back over to the panel and closed the door, furiously tapping through the options until he was able to lock the door there. A few trips through the ship’s code later and he locked the other door to the Proving Grounds—thank god that Wiki wasn’t there to watch intrusions.

Heart racing and the guilt growing, Mordenna leaned against the door, listening. All he could do now was wait.

That left Jax on the other side of the door, and he was quick to back against it.

His own heart pounded in his ears as he fixed his eyes on Eliza, not registering anything more outside of her presence. She had Mordenna lure him here! He knew it. He avoided her for too long. Why did Jax think he could delay his punishment any longer than he had? Now it was coming and surely she would take into account his evasiveness when doling it out. He shouldn’t have hid. He should have just presented himself! Was it not best to get it over with quickly? Yet he had ran, he had hidden himself away—

Eliza was approaching quickly and he could feel the dread and anxiety multiply. He was going to be punished. He was going to be punished. She had every reason to, he had been bad, he hurt her! He was sorry and he could feel apologies spill from his mouth but he knew it wouldn’t be enough, it would never be enough, because he would never stop being bad and deserving punishment. It was his fault and it would always be his fault.

She raised her hand and that was too much for Jax’s panic, too much for his fear and terror. He flinched, turning away and shielding his head with his arms as he screwed his eyes shut.

He sat there, trembling, waiting for a blow that would assuredly come. It was only a matter of time. A time that was stretching further and further on, Jax’s muscles tensed in anticipation. Yet, as each moment passed... nothing. Eliza had not struck him yet. She had not brought her psionics to bear, she was not doing anything to him. The silence was palpable as Jax’s fear was steadily replaced with confusion. Sheepishly, he moved his arms just enough to crack open an eye and look at her.

Eliza looked, in a word, horrified. Now that he wasn’t assuming the worst, Eliza’s hand had not been raised in any threatening capacity—just reached out towards him. Was... was she not going to punish him? Slowly, realizing the undignified position he had taken, Jax began to straighten with
shaking movements. Eliza retracted her hand, holding it close to her chest. Her look of horror softened into sorrow. “Jax...” Now that his heart wasn’t drowning out all other noises, he could understand Eliza. “Did... did you think I was going to hit you?”

He opened his mouth to respond, but... by the way she was putting it, it was if the thought had never entered her mind. It was as if it had never occurred to her to punish him for what he had done, even if it was what she should be doing. Gathering his thoughts, he went to reply again. “—it’s. It is what you should do. I... I have wronged you, Commander. I have hurt you. Surely I deserve punishment.” So much stammering. Even if he’d recovered slightly, he couldn’t stop his hands from shaking.

She shook her head, approaching slowly and carefully. Jax didn’t flinch away... for now. “Oh, Jax... You have it on my life that I would never, ever hurt you like the Elders did. I never want to emulate them—intentionally or not. You don’t deserve punishment. What happened was... both of our faults, if anything. Even then I would rather say it wasn’t either of ours.”

“I...” He couldn’t accept that. Not when he could still so clearly see her bleeding and crying, could still feel her shaking in his arms. “No. I should have been more careful, I should not have assumed—”

“Jax,” she stated firmly, fixing him with a serious look. His breath caught in his throat and he stopped, staring at her. She lifted her arms. “I want you to pick me up. Right now.”

Her demand caught him off-guard for a second, but he would not disobey a direct command. He reached down, gently picking her up with his hands underneath her shoulders. Once he had her at eye level, it was then she lunged forward. He flinched again, but this time his concerns were immediately abated—Eliza was hugging him. Her arms were wrapped around him and her hand had found its way into his hair, and she was close enough to his neck that he could hear her breathing. “Jax,” she whispered. “Please, stop blaming yourself. I don’t ever, ever want to lay hands on you with intention to hurt. You don’t deserve that and you will never deserve that. I want to move on and heal, but the only way I can do that is if you do it with me, ok?”

For a minute, Jax simply held Eliza there, her words sinking into his mind. He wanted to say he was wrong, he wanted to struggle and be defiant, but... there was that young part of him that was tired of being afraid. Tired of being scared of her. She said she wants to get better. She doesn’t want to hurt us. Don’t wanna hurt. No. He... he did not want to suffer. He wanted to be close to Eliza, he wanted to share in comfort with her. He wanted to do right by her, and if doing right meant dropping his assumptions, he supposed he could.

Slowly, he moved to hug Eliza close to him, embracing her gently and closing his eyes, coming to sit down with her in his arms. “—ok. I... want to believe you, Commander. I truly wish to believe you. I...” There was something more he wanted to say, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. He settled for something he could. “I trust you. I just... am used to such treatment.”

“Regularity does not constitute acceptability, Jax.” Her hand ran through his hair and he relaxed. He was always somewhat weak for hair pets. “Not on my ship. I want you to know that. I will never punish you like that. And I’ll always be here to talk. Please know that I’ll always make the time for you.”

He nodded, leaning against the door and being mindful of her arms. She wouldn’t hurt him like that. He just had to keep telling himself and eventually he would believe it. It wasn’t that he took Eliza to punish him, but... there was always that fear, now. He tried not to think about it, but the one who set that precedent...
Jax hugged Eliza tighter. "... may we please stay like this?"

"As long as you need, Jax. I'm here for you."

He nuzzled into her shoulder, taking deep breaths. Eliza was here. Her psionics were familiar and soft, full of something that made his chest glow and warm. He was safe. She wouldn't harm him.

In the quiet atmosphere of the Proving Grounds, the Warlock and the Commander shared a moment as long as the day would let them.

Who knew that working on the last hope of salvation for your species would be so foreboding?

Well, Argus did, for one. The Avatar Project was something they always had a complicated relationship with. True, they were dying of the very same muscle degeneracy that their fellows were suffering from. The Avatar would be their only escape from a dying body—for as much as they wanted to do that, anyways. But what of when it was completed? It was no secret that Argus was detested by the rest of the Collective for just being the way they were. True, they had a somewhat conscious decision in it, but... they had hoped the circumstances would be clear to their fellows. Of course not, however.

So that all spelled out into a clear vision of what would happen once Argus finally completed the Collective's precious Project. They hadn't bothered to ask how many Avatars they should make—they figured it was best to work with the notion that they might be allowed to live after they had completed their greatest scientific feat. Besides, practice made perfect, and four Avatars for the first run was a good amount of practice. Well... technically five. One of them was stolen.

Thoughts turning, Argus brought up feeds of the Avatar facilities. Their little corner of the Void was set up how they liked; all conveniences close at hand, links to the facilities where they mapped out their research, and located in the most remote part of the Void they could possibly manage. No construct master were they, but they had even molded the shimmering form of the Void into a bit of a living space. On the screens in this little home away from home, Argus could see that progress on the Project was... tentative. XCOM had been a thorn in their side regarding the facilities. Were there no interference, Argus highly suspected they'd be done by now—and perhaps dead by now. Did XCOM know their continued interference meant that Argus had to pull from more "genetic donors" to replace what was lost? Did they know their prolonging of the war simply meant more disappeared civilians? Did Eliza know?

Argus didn't want to underestimate Eliza. Ever since she had discovered the Refinery, she probably knew that the more time she wasted, the more civilians that were used as fuel for the Project. It wasn't as if Argus fancied using humans in this—if First Contact hadn't been the mess it was due to "standard procedure," they could've had something... slower, but less wasteful in place. But, no, hostile invasion and Plan B it was. So long as Argus had to perform this dance to not get shafted, they supposed they would be party to every atrocity committed.

Speaking of atrocities... Argus, in a fit of self-reflection, called some files up that only they could access. The Siren files. They gazed long into them, thoughts running as they did. They were no saint. They were just as complicit in everything as the Trio were, as the Collective was. Even if these files had been equal parts misdirection... and Plan B. They supposed they didn't matter what they were now—Eliza had escaped, but not without being marked. The Chosen existed because of
them. Did that not make Argus party to every sin committed afterwards? The abuse they faced? Argus was, honestly, glad the Chosen were out from under the thumbs of the Trio. No word on their hiding place being XCOM, but even Argus could say that what the rest of the Elders were doing was reprehensible. Of course, it was easy to throw stones when Argus had the emotional capacity to.

Some data on the Siren files caught Argus’s eye and halted their thought process. Strange. They remembered there being one copy of a few of these files because Cronus needed a template for Jax-Rai. But here the information marked them as the only ones with no copies. Did Cronus finally tire of having them around near Jax-Rai’s Ascension Facility? He didn’t strike Argus as the type to clean house.

“Argus.” That was Helena, communicating telepathically. She did not sound the least bit pleased. Argus felt dread settle over them. “We require you at the meeting spot. Now.”

Her anger could be for any number of reasons, and while Argus didn’t particularly want to find out... not going would only exacerbate the issue. Feeling a heavy sympathy for Ref-Il, Argus pulled the Void around them with the help of their Phantom and disappeared into the aether.

When they re-emerged where they were requested, Argus’s concerns were, strangely, alleviated. All three of the Trio were here and they all seemed cataclysmically angry at each other. Not them. Angry enough that the normally Phantom-free space of their meeting point was currently being intruded on. Cronus’s Phantom was out and doing a convincing job of trying to intimidate both of the others at the same time. Odin’s Phantom—a myriad of Codices—looked like they were all seconds away from jumping on the others and beating the daylights out of them. Finally, Helena’s Phantom, a simple image of herself, had its arms crossed and was bleeding off an aura of annoyance and anger. Argus could feel their Phantom retreat behind them, non-combative as it was. They hardly blamed it.

Now that Argus had arrived, the Trio’s attention turned towards them. It was Cronus who spoke, running over the others verbally and drowning them out under his orchestra of a signature. “Argus! Tell these imbeciles that my plan was sound and if it had not been for the vile interruption of that bastard son of mine—”

Helena mustered her voice over Cronus, which Argus would’ve been impressed by in any other situation. “Your plan was doomed to fail from the start and cost us a facility and important data! How could you ever think it would succeed? Did you think to take a leaf from your son’s book and simply not send guards?”

Cronus’s Phantom turned fully towards Helena and roared as he projected himself as larger, towering over her. “How dare you compare me to that worthless whelp! He is not my son, not anymore! Did you put any plans in place when XCOM came for your Chosen’s facility?! Did you, Helena?! Or did you sit idly by while more of our secrets fell to them?!”

While Cronus waited for an answer out of Helena, Argus watched as Odin turned his attention fully to him. “I would almost think no plan at all would be better than letting vital data remain in that location and installing a safeguard hastily cobbled together. It was sheer luck that Codex tripped it at all. Ah, but you’ve never been really successful, have you? Couldn’t even kill your son right.”

Wheeling on Odin, Cronus rushed at him. It was then that Argus’s Phantom surged out from behind them as they held out an arm. Every Ethereal had different strengths in psionics—Argus’s was telekinetics. Cronus was frozen in place along with his Phantom, arms out. Cronus was psionically strong but even he couldn’t shake off Argus’s absolute hold on him. When Argus
spoke, they were measured and calm. “I can see why I was called here, to put it gently. Cronus, as much as I am the troublemaker of the Collective, I do not think they would look kindly upon you throttling your fellows.”

Despite not being able to get out, Cronus still struggled against Argus’s grip. “If it is completely deserved I would be excused! Do you not hear what spills from Odin’s mouth?”

Argus shook their head. “He is not excused either. None of you are. It is clear that problems have arose and they need to be dealt with—but this is no way to go about it. What would the Collective say, should they be party to these shouting matches?”

Odin scoffed. “You’re one to talk about being shamed in the eyes of the Collective, fool.”

“Lash out as you might,” Argus said, getting the ever tiniest spark of vindication as they went on, “but the truth of the matter here is that the three of you are reaching new lows if I am able to lecture you on behaving.”

That was enough to send an embarrassed silence into the Trio. Wordlessly, Argus replaced Cronus back at his spot, and Cronus settled back down into a normal projection. Adjusting their robes to put all that behind them, Argus began. “It’s clear we need an impromptu meeting to cover an event that has just transpired, as this doesn’t strike me as the kind of confrontation from tensions boiling over. Thus, let me begin; Elder Argus, in attendance.”

“Elder Cronus,” he grumbled.

“Elder Odin,” he muttered.

“Elder Helena,” she sighed.

“Good. All Elders overseeing the matters of planet Earth are found to be in attendance. Now.” Argus gestured to the three of them. “What is the subject of today’s meeting?”

It was Cronus who took the chance to speak. “That wretched bastard came to his Ascension Facility and made off with his files, along with the files I had requisitioned from you.”

Oh. That would explain that. It also meant that the Siren files were now in Eliza's possession. If Eliza hated them before, it must've reached new heights now. Suppressing a sigh, Argus nodded. “Then is this meeting regarding the defection of the Chosen?”

“Might as well be.” Odin’s Phantoms had settled and were now congregated around him, generally skulking like a gang of delinquents. “Just a few days ago we had to make Joseph release a broadcast telling the public we’re no longer behind them.”

“Not that it matters,” Helena lamented. “The fact that they were taken from us and then summarily turned against us speaks volumes, even if the angle of them doing it themselves cushioned the PR blow.”

“An... optimal measure, regardless.” By the Void. They spoke as if the Chosen would have no reason to defect, and that was testimony to why they would. Having no empathy probably didn’t help. It wasn’t as if they could truly be familial in the first place if they lacked the true ability to do so. Sensing a need to follow up and continue the meeting, Argus clasped their hands together under their robe. “Are there any other measures in place to rectify and/or improve this situation?”

“There is hardly much more we can do outside of finally prising the Commander from the hole she has retreated to.” Odin straightened. “We are being far too passive in regards to XCOM. I propose
we launch *multiple* UFO initiatives.”

Helena tilted her head up, as did her Phantom. “And what if they come to stop them? They have been expedient in halting our plans in the past.”

“Simple. *Misdirection.*” Odin spread out his hands. “Not all of them need be labeled as plans to launch UFOs. If given the choice between minor armor upgrades to our forces and plans to hunt the Avenger itself down, which one do you think XCOM will be pulled towards to stop? Yet the entire time, it matters not which one they choose—the UFO will come for them regardless.”

As vile and spiteful as Odin was, Argus had to admit he was the best at underhanded plans like that. “That strikes me as a solid initiative, Odin. Would you be able to handle such a thing?”

“Dare you doubt me? Of course I can—and I’ll make sure the mistake I created cannot see through the trick that is being presented to him. Nor the Codex that is party to XCOM, if it still lives.”

Argus nodded. “If you are confident into leaning into those plans at full force, I have no objections. Are there any from either of you?”

Not a word out of the other two. Odin’s plan was solid and very helpful to their goals. Still, as always, there was the bitterness of “why didn’t I think of that” hanging in the air, hence their silence. Still, it was not a “yes” to a protest. Taking that, Argus nodded. “Are there any other matters that should be addressed?”

The Trio shook their heads. *Really? All this fuss over their children rightfully fleeing from them?* Argus was fully aware that entitlement was written into the Collective’s veins, but the lengths at which it went to truly amazed them. Still, this was as good a chance to leave as any. Pulling the Void around them, Argus made to leave. “Then I call this meeting to a close. *The Empire, Eternal.*”

“*The Empire, Eternal,*” they heard back before they went, happy to be rid of the three of them.
Learning

Chapter Summary

Mordenna makes good on lessons he's had, Eliza talks with Tygan, and the soldiers consider their new allies.

Chapter Notes

Hey, all. I've recently set up a Patreon to support myself between jobs. If you enjoy SFTD and want to keep a poor soul going, consider donating. If you like my writing, I do writing commissions. https://www.patreon.com/bigdemoband

Mordenna had pulled off a robot resurrection before. He wasn’t entirely sure he could do it again.

A SPARK was one thing. Lily had the specs for SYN on-hand, which made repairs trivial. Having someone who had built him there and assisting him also helped in defragmenting everything he’d compressed as he got stabbed. In the end it’d been pretty easy, if a little time-consuming to repair SYN and bring him back into this world.

A Codex, though? That was another kettle of fish entirely. Codices were more under Odin’s realm of supervision... and Mordenna had gotten the belt for trying to tamper with one before.

“Old man made the damn things,” he muttered, staring at a console in the Shadow Chamber. Wiki’s brain was suspended in the middle of the containment tube, uncertainly floating as he ran diagnostics. “Of course he gets so protective about them. Which means I ain’t got a fucking clue how these things are really put together. I can make some guesses, but unless I up and ask another Codex, I have to go through this blind.”

It wasn’t as if they didn’t have a brain spare or two—but they wouldn’t work for Mordenna’s purposes. Codices tended to be specialized here and there, set up minorly differently depending on what Odin had intended them to do. That much he gathered by looking at the supply they had. Wiki could be unique—she looked different to what they had in stock. God knows maybe she modified herself, if that was possible. So that left Mordenna to chuck her into the Shadow Chamber to see if it could figure out what was wrong. He had some guesses, but he wanted to be as sure as possible before he went through with this.

That meant he was staring at the terminal as it scanned the brain and compiled data. Mordenna knew that would take a while, and was busy trying to think of what he’d do as it scanned for him. Bothering his siblings was always an option on the table, of course, but he felt a bit... nervous, to go and see Jax. He’d gotten his apologies out of the way when he unlocked the Proving Grounds’ doors for him and Eliza, and he’d been excused and thanked then, but he still couldn’t help but feel like Jax was holding a grudge. Mordenna knew that he, himself, might’ve. It was an action uncalled for in a lot of aspects. Granted, it had the effect he intended for, but...

“No this rabbit hole again,” he sighed. “Look, so seeing Jax is off the table, and god knows where
Fal-Mai usually haunts. Maybe go bother Eliza for a bit since we’re still desperate fools?”

Actually, the thought of Eliza brought up a... dangerous line of thought. Fingers hovering at the terminal, he contemplated what he was about to do for approximately half a second before rapidly tapping through screens to access the files he wanted to see. He couldn’t help it, and he could feel the words he said to Eliza echoing back to him; he knew what it was like to have dangerous information at his fingertips. That dangerous information was now staring him right in the face as he looked at the screen in front of him.

*The Siren.* The name was everywhere as he scanned through the files that Wiki had managed to get into the Avenger’s systems as she was rooting around. The files there were pretty much her planned Ascension process... and Mordenna had to say, he was slightly underwhelmed. From what he knew of the process for he and his siblings, Eliza’s ordeal would’ve been rather tame. No intensive psionic “therapy.” No year of overloading information. No multiple, defective clones of herself coming before her. There were no planned modifications to Eliza’s psionics at all, in fact. Amplification, yes, but no changing of what they were. About the most notable thing in the files he could spot was the addition of an extra set of arms for “expert manipulation of tools at hand.” That brought up some Elders similarities to Mordenna and he tried not to think on it.

Maybe to someone like Lily, not as scarred as he, these changes would seem extreme. Changing Eliza, fundamentally, as a human? Keeping her in custody? Taking away her choice in any of it? Horrifying. To Mordenna? To a Chosen? This seemed far too light. Argus’s methods were far too friendly.

Argus was an Ethereal that Mordenna could never quite put his finger on. They seemed detached from all proceedings and really never had a Chosen to call their own—though they would’ve if XCOM were any later. From the few files the Elders forgot to keep Mordenna from, Argus seemed in charge of the Avatar Project almost exclusively. That put a lot of human blood on their hands, as well as no small amount of atrocities in the name of saying a dying race. He’d never seen them at the meetings—it was only through their meddling with Eliza that he was sure they existed at all. These files and how mild they were painted a strange picture. Mordenna just couldn’t wrap his head around an even slightly kind Ethereal. They seemed genetically incapable of feeling empathy or anything that might’ve let them see what they were doing to their “children.”

Yet, here a different perspective lay, staring him in the face. He didn’t know what to make of it. In lieu of giving it any more thought, he simply tabbed back to the diagnostics info. So, his little venture into the truth just left him with more questions than answers. He was back at square one with no idea of what he should be doing other than blindly staring at the screen in front of him. Maybe he could make something to pass the time—but what? *Perhaps you could be truthful for once and actually make something for Jax.* True, true—but what? Unlike Fal-Mai, there was nothing quick he could do for Jax that would help out a lot. Covering Jax’s weakness was harder as it was a little bit more mental and harder to control than Fal-Mai’s sensitive hearing. Perhaps he could ask about making modifications to his gun? *Maybe you could teach him how to fire the damn thing.* That was also valid.

“Guess it’s settled,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s either that or a few new gadgets for myself, and I might as well do something nice for someone else.” *Might be a little hard for Jax to believe you this time.* “We’ll, uh. We’ll burn that bridge when we get to it.” *Always destroying, never rebuilding, hm?* To that, he could offer nothing. He rubbed at his mouth before double-checking to make sure there was nothing he needed to handle at the Shadow Chamber. That confirmed, he made his way to the ceiling vent and escaped the room.

A short trip later and he was back at the Studio—or, at least, the hallway outside of the Studio. For
some reason, he couldn’t really bring himself to drop in as he did before. He walked up to the panel on the wall, and... nothing. Mordenna found himself gently leaning on the wall right next to the door with his forehead, staring blankly ahead. You lied to him. You know damn well he won’t believe you when you go in there and say ‘I’m building something for you, no really, I mean it this time.’ Sure things between him and Eliza are fixed but that’s the price for harmony around you, isn’t it? Betcha your reaction to finding out he hurt her just made it all worse.

To his disparaging thoughts, Mordenna didn’t have much of a reply, burning holes into the metal of the ship with his gaze as they ran without him stopping them. It’s the truth. And it’s why you’re not stopping me. Odin was right when he said you were worthless. Despite what ‘good’ you do, you always gotta mess up and make it all for naught eventually. It’s just what you do. You’re always going to fail. You’re always going to hurt someone. You might as well save everyone the trouble and just kick the—

Mordenna suddenly bolted upright, turning on his heel and striding in the opposite direction. No. Yes. Yes, he was absolutely making for Eliza’s Quarters. Why bother her? Why even get her involved.

“Because we’ve been here before,” he feverishly muttered to himself, not acknowledging anything but the path ahead of him. “We’ve been here before and we saw how it went and you may be right about a lot of things but the one thing you never seem to grasp is that I can learn. Eliza said she’d listen to us.” She was just telling you that to make you feel like less of a failure. “You want to call Eliza a liar?” Not necessarily, but— “My point exactly. Shut the hell up. I’m not going to take another dive just to satisfy you. She’s here for me. Me. I’m not going to be another corpse on her conscience.”

If his thoughts had anything else to say, it was all white noise. Mordenna had spite, if nothing else, and one of his new tricks was doing things to spite those nasty, anti-recovery thoughts that sprung up when he felt low.

He passed the door to the Resistance Ring and a hunch made him stop. With a moment’s hesitation followed by a burst of determination, he practically smacked the panel. The door slid open, and sure enough, Eliza was reclined on one of the couches with a cup of something hot. She looked up as Mordenna entered, giving him a calm smile. “Hey there, cowboy. What’s up?”

“Not much.” No, there was definitely something up. He took in a deep breath, blew it out, and then closed his eyes. “Alright I lied. There’s. A little more than ‘not much’ going on right now. Do you... do you got a moment?”

“Of course, Mordenna.” When he opened his eyes, it was to a genuinely concerned Eliza, who set aside her mug and patted the space next to her. Taking the invitation, he sat down roughly. He hesitated before he spoke, fiddling with one of the clasps to his armor.

“Liz, I...” He trailed off. How even to start this? Plainly, probably. It was best to come clean, but he just felt so goddamn bad about smacking her with it right out of the gate. He felt like he had to soften her up with a bit of joking before easing into the matter at hand... but he had nothing for jokes. Nothing to make this feel any softer. He sighed, unclipping his armor vest and dropping it to the floor. He needed a bit of support before he got into all of it. “... before we begin, can I. Can I...” God, it always felt so awkward to ask. Asking for a hug felt pathetic. Giving another sigh, this time in frustration, he sat up and opened his arms, hoping his question would be clear.

Thankfully, it was. Eliza came forward and wrapped her arms around his chest, and he quickly returned the favor. The hugs always made him feel better—he could never claim to be a touch-
starved person, but Eliza made it feel alright. He knew exactly why that was the case and didn’t particularly feel like acknowledging the reason. Regardless, the hug made him a little more bold, and he took in a deep breath to start. “Liz. I’ve been having bad thoughts again. And by bad thoughts I mean bad thoughts. And... and I remember you saying that going to you about them would be ok, so. Here I am. I want to talk this out instead of—instead of heading up to the damn roof.”

That got a squeeze from Eliza, who angled herself to look up at him comfortably. “I’m proud to have you coming to me instead of trying to ‘handle’ it yourself. I’m happy to talk about what’s bothering you. That being the case, any reason these thoughts have emerged?”

“One or two reasons.” His eyes slid to the side for a second. “I... I know you two forgave me for lying to the both of you so I could get you guys in the Proving Grounds together, but... but I can’t help but feel like I’ve rightfully lost Jax’s trust. No,” he said, anticipating what Eliza might say next, “I haven’t talked to Jax yet. I wanted to. Not even about the whole potential mistrust thing, I just genuinely wanted to see if I could actually make stuff for him. But I got to the door, and I just thought about how he had no right to believe me and how I’m so hard to be around and just a whole bunch of other shitty thinking on top of that.” He let out the rest of his breath, looking back to her. “I want to feel that he still trusts me. I want to believe that I’m not painful to be around. I just have a hard time committing it to memory.”

Eliza nodded seriously. “If it helps at all, I find myself liking being in your presence. You tend to come at things with a fresher eye than I do and you’ve got inventive ways to solve problems—even if they are a bit combative in the moment, it clearly worked, and everyone understood why you did what you did afterwards. You’ve also got a jovial attitude, and I admit, I’m weak for your brand of sarcasm. Doesn’t mean you’re painful to be around when you’re not feeling the best, of course—I’m happy to be with you like this, as well. I want to help you, Mordenna. And I’ll say all of that as many times as is needed.” She patted his back. “If you want, I can come with you when you ask Jax about making stuff for him. You don’t lie maliciously, in my experience—and regardless, I’m sure Jax would believe you.”

“Glad you’re such an optimist, Liz,” he replied. “I just get to beating myself up so often that it’s hard for me to stop without outside intervention. It... it took some willpower to up and beeline for wherever you were when I started on that downwards spiral.”

“And I’m still proud that you found that willpower when that happened. It’s incredibly strong to reach out for help than try to deal with it on your own. That said, how are you feeling?”

Mordenna gave a lopsided smile. “Better. I... still want to hang here for a bit, and think on bringing you over as I ask Jax a few things. Maybe get another thing off of my chest.”

“I’m here until the Elders croak, Mords.” She returned his smile. “I’d be glad to hear out whatever you’ve got for me.”

“Right.” There was the matter of the other thing he wanted to talk about. Really, it was something he and Eliza shared—and something he hadn’t thought much on when Eliza had initially brought it up. Still, it was a problem for him, and he might as well say something about it while he was on this streak of handling what was bothering him. “... y’know how you’re afraid to rely on others because you think it’ll put a bad image of yourself on everyone else?” When Eliza nodded, he continued. “I... I think I’ve got a shade of that. It’s not as grand as you needing to appear strong because you’re leading a resistance—and perhaps I’m less valid in that regard—it’s just... me not wanting to be weak. Or seen as weak.” He sighed. “My old man drilled a lot of concepts into my head, and unfortunately, a few of them stuck.” Almost all of them stuck, really. “One of them was
just... being...” He hated saying it out loud. Every time he even thought on that word he heard it in Odin’s voice. Which brought the whispers, which brought the memories of the pain. But... he couldn’t have that. He’d gotten over it all, right? It hurt in the moment but afterwards he was fine. It was different to Jax’s episodes. Or Eliza’s. It was different. Of course it’s different. They have valid reason to feel and experience that pain. You’re merely—

“Mordenna?” Eliza’s voice snapped him out of his thoughts, and he blinked rapidly a few times. He spared a hand to rub at his mouth for a second as Eliza gave him a concerned look. “... is it hard to talk about?”

“Yeah,” he managed quietly, settling his arm back around Eliza. “I’ve said it before, I know, but... Odin made me feel like nothing without him. Worthless.” He took in a quiet breath, letting it out calmly. “Just hearing that gives me the creeps. He used it like a goddamn stick whenever I went out line, and now I can’t not associate it with him. That’s why I’m so hesitant to go to even you for help. He made me think having to rely on anyone by him meant I was just... yeah.”

“I very much understand, Mordenna.” Eliza leaned against him a bit more, which he wished she wouldn’t do—as serious as the moment was, the extended contact was getting a bit dangerous for him. “It’s... hard, to imagine that you can reach out for others and you won’t be seen as lesser for it. It’s easy to think you can handle it all yourself... until you’re at the end of your rope and it’s almost too late to call for help. Just know that he isn’t here, and neither are his ideals. If you want to seek help, know that you can and should do it. I’d be happy to hear you out, and I bet that your siblings would be happy to help as well. I’d imagine it comes with the whole family package, yeah?”

Eliza was way too good at this. Even if a rousing speech wasn’t enough to completely clear the notion from his mind, it made him feel a lot better about seeking out Eliza like he did. Not getting judged—hell, getting supported for reaching out for help did a lot to make the thought of doing it again in the future more relaxing. A lot more relaxed than he had been at the start of this conversation, he playfully tousled Eliza’s hair. “Damn, Liz. How am I supposed to stay down in the dumps at all of that, huh? Can’t let a man angst in his own household.”

That was enough to earn a laugh from Eliza, which made him feel even better. Eliza practically radiated serotonin. Which, might be more real than he thought—now that those psionics of hers were unleashed and revealed, they kind of coalesced around her, like the beginnings of a Solace. Well, if she was going to master any psionic ability, he supposed, it’d be the world’s greatest Solace. When she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, he went back to paying attention to her. “No sad faces on my Avenger—not for long, anyway. You can get a good cry out of the way before I’m here to help patch things up.”

A noble attitude, definitely. Mordenna leaned back against the couch with Eliza in his arms, simply soaking in the moment a bit. Maybe he’d never have Eliza romantically. But, sharing moments like this may very well be enough for him. Certainly helped that she was so free about giving hugs away—and didn’t seem to see any awkwardness in this one lasting as long as it had. As long as Eliza wasn’t going to point it out, Mordenna wasn’t going to let up any time soon. Still, if the Commander was in the Resistance Ring, she had to be in here for a reason. His eyes lazily slid over to the table. “Mind me asking what you were doing in here?”

“Oh, not at all.” Eliza freed up a hand to gesture at the screen. “I’d been meaning to stop by the Reaper HQ a long time ago to pick up Elena—Volk borrowed her a while back for an important operation—but he got discovered around the time I was going to go visit and he had to relocate. Something about ADVENT finding their current perch in a Lost City. Well, then a few missions happened after that, we went and got Jax, and then there were other places I had to be. But, my schedule’s clear for a second—until we go investigate that cave, that is—so we’re going to be
stopping by there soon.”

The mention of Volk always stirred up those old, forbidden memories in Mordenna. He half-thought to ask the old bastard if he knew anything about Tomko, but he somehow doubted that he’d find anything out from the old wolf. Volk probably didn’t look kindly on him still, for being the bane of the Reapers for a solid fifteen years. Might as well give Eliza some good-natured guff about it. “Oh, Eliza, you know Volk and I don’t play nice, why make me attend his birthday parties?”

She chuckled. “Because I’ve got business there, naturally. Put on a strong face and it’ll be dealt with sooner than you’d expect. Unless he ropes me into one of those Reaper feasts of his. That might stall things a bit.”

“Didn’t take you one to eat alien, Commander.”

“Trust me,” she said, pointing a finger at him, “I don’t. I make it a point not to because even back then I was contending with the fact that I might have some unlikely allies that I wouldn’t like to look in the eye and say I’ve eaten some of their kind before.”

Mordenna snickered. “Oh, don’t knock it ‘till you try it, Liz. I think you’d like Sectoid—pleasantly sweet if you cook it right. Tastes like venison.”

“No, thanks. I even think of Arachne witnessing me do that and I’ll die of shame.”

Mordenna laughed again. Bantering with the Commander was just the best thing. Still, he’d let up on her. “Alright, alright, I’ll stop badgering you. I just barely can help it with how fun you make it.”

“Mordenna, please. I’ve got enough white hairs as is without you adding a few more.”

He smirked, patting her shoulder. “White’s a good look for you, Commander. I wouldn’t sweat it too much.”

She sighed in mock-exasperation. “If I wanted to look like a sorceress I’d be taking fashion tips from Jax, thank you.”

Speaking of Jax! Might as well hop off the current train of ribbing he’d jumped on. He’d given it a bit of thought, and well... he was at least feeling up to trying to talk to Jax again. He just didn’t know if he wanted to bring the Commander along. This wasn’t even his want to not rely on anyone talking; he just... didn’t want to seem like he was bringing Eliza to pressure Jax into agreeing with whatever he wanted. Rolling his hand at the wrist, Mordenna switched topics. “Now that you mention everyone’s favorite wizard... I think I made up my mind about going back and talking to him. I’m fairly certain I can manage it... but I also want to do it on my own. Not that I don’t want your help! But I think Jax will feel more free to deny me if you’re not leering... under my shoulder, I suppose.”

Eliza nodded, understanding. “If you find that you still can’t make it, I’d be happy to walk in there with you regardless. Warms my heart to hear you considering your brother’s feelings that much, I must say.”

“What can I say?” He shrugged. “XCOM’s changed me, as horrifying as that is. I’m hardly recognizable! But, yeah.” Oof. He didn’t want to break off the hug, but it was now or never for talking to Jax. He’d need all the feel-good energy coming off of this conversation with Eliza if he hoped to make it into the Studio this time. Slowly, he disengaged from Eliza, and she leaned back
as he did. “Thanks, Liz. Don’t think I can say it enough. I’m damn lucky to have you.”

“And I’m lucky to have you, too,” she returned. “Goodness knows I wouldn’t be able to vent, myself.”

“Can’t have that,” he muttered, standing up and collecting his discarded armor. “I will toss you into a pit of friendship and sympathy, I swear to god.”

There was that giggle out of Eliza, which always made his heart soar. She waved him off, going for her abandoned mug of what smelled like coffee. “Oh, move it, would you? Don’t just stand there and taunt a tired Commander!”

Hearing that, he pointed at her. “Get some rest, then. It’s all fine and dandy to tell me to take it easy every once in a while, but I want you to at least take five every now and again too.”

“Alright, alright,” she relented. “I just have one more thing to do today and then I’ll take the rest of the evening off as we fly over to Volk’s. Ok?”

“Good by me.” Mordenna gave her a casual salute, walking off. “Good luck, Commander.”

“As always.”

That left Eliza in the room by herself with a lukewarm mug of coffee. She took a drink of it and mulled over her options as the silence Mordenna left in his wake was palpable. She was glad she was able to help him out—it always put her at ease to settle someone else’s problems. Better than to focus on her own, after all. She sighed, idly gazing ahead. Her own problems... come to think of it, she never was going to resolve these feelings she had for Mordenna, was she? Or the ones she had for Fal-Mai, and Jax, and Bradford, and... well, it would be easier for her to list who she didn’t have romantic feelings for. Her soldiers proper, for one. Firebrand, but that was because Jolene made her preferences for no one clear, which Eliza would respect. The DJ guy, even if he seemed to have a crush on her, despite knowing nothing about her.

She massaged her head with her free hand. “Really? Is that where the list ends, Eliza? Faction leaders, your own staff, Chosen, is there anyone else you’re not willing to kiss? What are you, Captain Kirk?” Eliza gave a tired chuckle. “Regardless...” Speaking of staff, there was one she was meaning to visit today. Taking another moment to simply sit around as she was doing, she then stood up, mug in hand, trudging out of the room.

Her walk towards the Lab was quiet, though at this hour there was a wandering soldier or two, who she nodded towards as she passed them. She felt pretty low-energy today, even more so than usual. Recent events had taken it out of her somewhat, but even then she just felt exhausted. Eliza hoped it didn’t come through too much as she made short work of the rest of her coffee. Hopefully that caffeine kicks in. It was Bradford’s Death Rattle Coffee, so it’d have her hands jittering within twenty minutes. If it would do anything for her exhaustion was yet to be seen.

Knowing the ship like she did, it wasn't long before Eliza was at the entrance of the Lab. As much as she enjoyed the quiet interior and the sterile scent that hit her nose, there was just... Too many bad memories of this place. Granted, none of them were Tygan’s fault, but it couldn't be helped. He was over at the large monitors at the area of the Lab where she was, and he angled his head to look at her as she entered. “Ah, Commander. Do you require anything?”

“Maybe.” Eliza walked closer, setting her mug down on one of the nearby tables, hands then clasped in front of her. “How's everything going on your neck of the woods?”
“Progress is slow, but sure,” he replied. “I’ve been working on the coordinates in tandem with Shen that we were able to extract from the Codex Wiki was able to interrogate.”

“And the greenhouse? Heard you were experimenting with grafting.”

“Ah, yes.” Tygan turned his head to one of the corners of the Lab. The far area of the room had been converted into a greenhouse not too long after Eliza had been rescued on recommendation of one of their soldiers—Sherry, if Eliza remembered correctly. It helped provide some food they didn’t need to acquire from havens or the Black Market, and put some variety in the soldiers’ diets. “Being more inclined to fauna rather than flora in my studies, I am truly amazed at how accepting trees are to other branches of different species. I’ve managed to graft a few fruit-bearing branches onto the base tree we’ve had. I cannot say for myself if the fruits are of high quality, but as always, something is better than nothing.”

“Of course!” Eliza grinned. “Honestly, you managing what you have amazes me. Always glad to have you with us, Tygan.”

One of Tygan’s rare smiles came around, and Eliza cherished it. He was quick to be professional again, as was his wont. “I appreciate the sentiment, Commander. I am always looking for small improvements and innovations to make—after all, there is always room to make up for past... deficiencies.”

Right. Eliza’s smile faded and she crossed her arms. She really wasn’t down in the Lab as often as she’d like—and as much as she’d hate to admit it, half of it was those “deficiencies” Tygan was on about. At the end of the day, and in her eyes, however? “What happened then wasn’t your fault,” she began, looking at him seriously. “If you didn’t get that chip out of me, I would’ve given away the location of the Avenger in all likelihood. There was no time to do the proper surgery—and how were you supposed to know I had a primal aversion to lying unconscious on my back?”

The light caught Tygan’s glasses as he turned his head slightly to the side, making his expression unreadable. He moved his hands behind his back. “—but I could have made some logical deductions. Such as afterwards, regarding your reaction, having the tact to not invite you to look at the chip I had extracted from you when I had completed study on it.”

Ouch. Yeah, she... she would’ve appreciated it if he did. It wasn’t really something she held against him and it wasn’t maliciously meant, so she didn’t blame him. What hurt was that he had a minor point, there, and Eliza wanted to distract from that. “... so it happened. You’ve learned and we can move on. Tygan, take it from the woman herself; I don’t blame you. Nor do I hate you or think anything that’s happened is your fault. You’re a valued member of this team and I want you to know that.”

Tygan was quiet for a while, the hum of the ship’s engine behind him filling the silence. Between her staff, the Chosen, the Factions, and the havens... there was no wonder Eliza never felt she could take time to herself, or lean on anyone else. There was always someone who needed help, someone who needed a strong rock. Not to mention the Elders breathing down her neck at all times. She didn’t begrudge any of the people she cared for needing help—it was part of being human. Or, in the Chosen’s cases... human enough. Her, however? You’re not exactly human. Thus was her thinking. God knows that Siren file held the truth on how much of her was left...

“If you insist, Commander.” Tygan’s dismissal cut her out of her thoughts. “I simply cannot help but feel as if I am coming up short of what I wish to be.”

“Can’t be perfect,” she shot back softly. “Perfect... just doesn’t exist. The fact of the matter is that you’re trying. And being largely successful at it, too. It’s not like I wasn’t going to have a quirk or
two coming out of the Suit, anyway. You’re the one responsible for saving me when Bradford and Shenh wouldn’t have been able to get the chip out. We make mistakes, grow, and move on. It’s not a secret I’ve made a few even during the course of this war. I’m not exactly infallible. Bottom line?” Eliza took in a deep breath, then put on a gentle smile. “What I said holds up. I’m truly glad to have you on the Avenger.”

There was another pause of silence out of Tygan—but at the end of it, Eliza was rewarded with another smile. “I can heartily return the sentiment, Commander. It’s truly hard to maintain a self-defeating attitude in the face of your reasoning.”

“That’s half my job. The reasoning gets a lot easier nowadays now that I’m not concerned with putting on a face for the military.”

Tygan shook his head. “Bradford warned us all to watch ourselves when you were first coming to your senses. Judging by his reactions afterwards, I am sure you surprised him a fair bit.”

The memory got Eliza to chuckle, even if the past she was putting behind her made her a little bit more sullen. “Twenty years makes you consider a lot, Tygan. Old me... wasn’t someone I wanted to keep around or introduce to anyone else.” A little bit of her levity faded. “The military ruined me and the kind girl I’d been going into it. First Contact was a mess. I’m kinda glad, in ways, that no one remembers who that woman was. Outside of Bradford, of course, but the man has a heart of gold and isn’t holding it against me.”

As he turned his head, the light stopped shining in Tygan’s glasses, and Eliza could see the inquisitive interest in them. “—apologies if my asking is rude, but what actions make you regret your acting at First Contact?”

Hm. This topic. Eliza was, as she said, glad that only Bradford was a remnant of what she’d done during that time—and he seemed all for her new self. Raymond Shen was dead, and Vahlen... hard to say, but Eliza hoped she was dead. If, out of her two other staff members, Moira was the one to survive, Eliza would have words with whoever the hell was governing the ways of the universe. Regardless, talking about what happened was somewhat dangerous in her eyes; a reminder of the self she had been. Eliza didn’t think she’d ever fall back to her old ways, but Old Eliza haunted her.

But, Tygan was asking a question, and Eliza didn’t want to brush him off. She took in a breath, nodding as she thought of what she could bring up. “What’s there to say, I wonder...? Old Eliza favored efficiency and effectiveness over petty things like morality. It got results, yes, but—for me for being dramatic—it was like selling my soul to the devil.” As she thought more over it, she looked to the side to avoid pinning Tygan with the sour expression she was gaining. “Of course people lapped it up—we were at war, I should be pulling no punches, was the sentiment. But there are some things not worth the price of victory. Some lines that shouldn’t be crossed. Luckily I had Bradford trying to scrabble for my choke chain and Raymond Shen adding in a supporting hand or two, and just a little bit of my former morality left preventing me from doing something stupid like glassing countries. I was cruel, but not idiotic.

“I’m not going to divulge what I was doing, but let’s say that Old Me let Vahlen run amok. I’m sure Bradford’s related a tale or two of her before, so I’ll spare you the details, but she ran her own interrogations for a reason. For six months our underground bunker was like working in the pits of hell. And eventually... the devil came to get his due.” Eliza sighed out a tense breath. “Around that sixth month I was realizing what I was doing. If the aliens hadn’t found us... I had been getting close to ending the war myself. Can’t win without the ‘greatest tactical mind humanity has to offer,’ after all.”

She let the implication hang there, eyes skirting back to Tygan. He seemed deep in thought,
Tygan’s response took some weight off of her shoulders, and Eliza relaxed. “I’m glad that’s your thinking on it, Tygan. I never want to be that woman again, and I don’t intend to turn into her anytime soon. Empathy, understanding, and a slightly less omnicidal hand seems to be doing wonders for this war, so I’ll keep doing what I’m doing. I trust I can keep my confidence in you strong?”

“Of course, Commander. I have no reason, nor want to emulate my predecessor.”

“Glad to hear it. And if you ever get the hankering to do so—not that I’m accusing you, of course—talk to me and we’ll straighten things out. Get out of this Lab occasionally, yeah?”

“And stop working myself down to my last waking will?” When it got down to it, Tygan could be as dryly sarcastic as Mordenna or Lily. “I cannot comprehend what you’re implying, Commander.” Clearing his throat, he then straightened his glasses. “In all seriousness, I’ll take your suggestion. Perhaps you and I could talk more often if we met someplace outside of the Lab.”

“Like the Mess Hall, for instance? I know you drink Bradford’s coffee mix, too—we all do—so we could chat as the pot boils.”

“I see no reason not to.” He nodded. “I will keep it in mind. Do you have anything else for me, Commander?”

“Other than to keep me updated on those coordinates? Not at the moment, but I’ll let you know if I think of something else.” She then looked at him pointedly. “Do you have anything you need out of me?”

He held up a hand. “Not at all. I will send a message to your datapad if I come across anything notable.”

“Alright, then. I’ll get out of your hair.” Tygan raised an eyebrow at her for that, and she snickered in response. “Oh, you know what I mean! I’ll leave you to it, and all.”

“Good luck, Commander,” he said after her as she retrieved her mug, and the Commander left to be about the rest of her day.

It was a rather quiet gathering of soldiers in the Commons.

Now that the Warlock largely had his own place to hang out, the more human soldiers had
gradually been settling back into their favorite hangout place. The current crowd was Rosa, SYN, Herod, Clint, Leo, Sherry, and finally March. They were all sitting at their usual places at the table, quietly sipping drinks together and simply being.

March found herself mulling over recent events. It was undoubtedly why the atmosphere was so silent; what Banel had done and said was hanging over them all. March had her own objections to the Chosen, ones she had held onto as being reasonable. She wasn’t like Vlad, she supposed—she wasn’t xenophobic. It was just... the Chosen reminded her of something that was difficult to get to grips with and move on from. All of her alien allies did.

She looked up at her company—Sherry beside her, Rosa sitting in SYN’s arms, Herod without his misbegotten friend, and the two finally-recovered psions. It was something she needed to get off of her chest, but... she was unsure about her company. Was this what Vlad felt before he opened his mouth? March just hoped that they would understand what she was truly going for. She took a fortifying drink of her beer before starting. “—hey. Mind if I talk of something? I know we’re all enjoying the silence but there’s something I just want to discuss.”

Her friends looked up, and it was Rosa who nodded. “Sure enough, March. What’s getting you?”

She tapped her chin, thinking of how to open this up. “... I’m. I’m worried about talking about this without some clarifying statements, so let’s get this out of the way; I don’t agree with Vlad whatsoever. Nobody else here does, right?”

People shook their heads. Sherry herself leaned on the table. “I don’t think anyone wants to, love. If he even had any good points in what he was saying, they got smothered beneath a layer of his toxic personality.”

“She’s right,” Leo replied. “That being the case, it makes me wonder what you’re about to bring up.”

“Yeah, I know.” March sighed, muttering something in French that made Sherry lay a comforting hand on her arm. With that support, she continued. “We all had lives before the war—some of us more than others. Sherry and I, we had our own home away from everyone else. Even so we kept up with our culture and enjoyed what we had. And Sherry...” She turned to her wife, yet couldn’t look at her. “You especially know I owe my life to Samhien almost as much as I do to you. I count him as one of my friends. And yet... when I look at him... I can’t help but think of what we’ve lost. What ADVENT took from all of us. I see any of our alien allies and I think of what we could’ve had if the aliens never invaded.” She looked back to the group. “I don’t want these thoughts. I respect our allies and god knows Sammy doesn’t deserve having a grudge held against him. But... it still hurts. A lot.”

Quiet settled over the group—but it wasn’t a chilling silence. All of her friends looked like they were contemplative rather than disgusted. Sherry herself leaned on her, and March threw an arm around her wife. Interestingly, it was Clint who spoke up first. “I feel you completely, March. We... we all know that the Hunter took Angela from us. Right in front of me. Whenever I see him, whenever I think that Eliza took him in, I just...” He balled his fists on the table. “I get angry. I think ‘how dare he be allowed to walk here after everything he’s done.’ But the worst part is...” Clint clutched his head. “I’ve... I’ve got some of his memories now, and not all of them were from before the Elders took him. It’s easy for me to imagine him as a faceless monster right up until I even think of what the Elders were doing to him. What he was doing to himself. Even then... the anger doesn’t go away. It’s more frustration, I think. I want someone to blame and normally, he’d be perfect, but now...?”

With his point made, Clint got sympathetic nods. Herod himself stared at his hands. “... I’ve been
around Vlad a lot. Probably not the best idea I’ve had, but I wanted to at least not completely ostracize him. I think, like Sherry said, he had a hint of a point with what he was spewing. Which, ironically, makes it hard for the rest of us to talk about things like this without being associated with him. So, yeah, March. I understand. Used to have a family myself—still do, I guess. Used to have someone to call my own. Don’t even know where he is, now. Knowing him, he’s found some way to survive, but…” He rested a hand over his mouth. “It hurts. It really does. I want to be happy that people like the Chosen are turning themselves around. I want to be happy that we’re finding allies in the Elders’ forces. But we’ve lost a lot to people like them. I think… I think it’s natural to be angry.”

“If I may?” All eyes turned to SYN. “What Herod said is a completely natural human reaction to have when faced with allies that were previously your enemies. Having that anger only strikes me as what most would be faced with in these sorts of circumstances. I believe what is the most important step is to think critically—our allies do not want to be associated with the crimes of the Elders anymore, and some of them even actively work to fix what has been broken. I, myself, know that Codex Wiki is amalgamating all information and cultural records that she can acquire. Or, will resume doing so, if Hunter Mordenna is able to bring her back online. Having been injured by the Hunter, killed by the Assassin, and then fixed by the aforementioned party? Anger is natural. It is what you do afterwards with that anger is what defines you.”

Poignant message dropped on their heads, the group silently considered it. Except Rosa, of course. “SYN, I swear to god you’re a fountain of cheesy messages. I love you but christ.” She then gestured to the rest of the group. “As afterschool special as SYN got on us, he’s got a point. I absolutely hated the Chosen, especially the Hunter and the Assassin for roughing up SYN. But SYN’s taken a fair few lumps in his day, and hell, Mordenna brought him back from the dead. I think Banel said it best and maybe it was because he had the background of Vlad coughing his lungs out. They’re trying. Ain’t we all?” She rested her head on her hand. “—not like we haven’t probably killed people close to them, either. The Hunter and the Assassin had those little Priest ladies in their Stronghold. What’s to say they didn’t bond with them? The rest of their soldiers? What’s to say they have every reason to hold a grudge against us and yet ain’t?”

That was something that March, honestly, hadn’t thought of before. But it was natural, wasn’t it? With how many followers Jax came in with—and how empty his Stronghold had been, from Sherry’s recounting—it was pretty likely they’d snuffed people that Mordenna and Fal-Mai were close to, as well. Leo let out a breath. “—if the Chosen are doing a better job of managing their grudges than us, I feel as if I’ve fallen short of some standard. Granted, none of us save Vlad have tried to shaft our alien allies before, but it still says something, does it not?”

“Pretty much,” Herod replied. “I think, at the end of the day, we’re all mourning over something. Humans, aliens, Chosen… A lot of shit’s going on. At the end of the day, most of us are trying to get our lives back. I heard Mordenna say this and I think we can all agree; the Elders are bastards.”

“Elders are bastards,” Rosa concurred, and the rest of the group said it afterwards. Many took a sip of their drink in solidarity.

“At least that’s one group we’ll never have to think over the ethics of,” March concluded. “So, general consensus, I’m not xenophobic for being a little sore?”

“Not at all.” Sherry shook her head. “I think dealing with it healthily is the most important part, and the fact that you still want to look at our more alien allies like friends is a good sign.”

To that, March nodded and took another drink. Maybe things weren’t so different at the end of the day.
Mordenna handles his brother and one of his flock, then mingles with the Reapers.

It was just a hunk of metal, Mordenna kept telling himself. It was just a hunk of metal calling itself a door that separated him and his destination. He shouldn’t be afraid of it—it probably could smell fear. Probably.

Mordenna found himself once again on the other side of the door to the Studio, hesitating. He’d just gotten here and already he’d stopped up and started second-guessing himself. He couldn’t really help it—even with Eliza’s pep-talk and with the assurance that Jax wouldn’t hold anything against him, approaching his brother during off times... never seemed to go down well. He was built and trained to work with the facts and probabilities, and both were telling him he shouldn’t even bother.

“Well,” he said to himself, “either we stand here like a loon until someone else finds us, we turn back and kick this can down the road, or we can be proper and actually walk in there and start talking to our brother. Y’know, the thing we said we’d do?” He sighed, looking at the pad for the door. “Just a button press, Mords. Press a button, they’ll see you, and you’ll be naturally inclined to walk in. C’mon.”

He waited one more second before taking in a deep breath, closing his eyes and tapping the panel. When he opened them, the door had slid to the side to reveal the Studio beyond, and he stepped in as he looked at the gathering taking place. Mystics and the rest of Jax’s congregation scattered about, standard fare, but there were more people present than he’d expected. The ravens perching in the room led his eyes naturally to Edgar, who was sitting down with Marlene, that weird specter above her seeming to acknowledge Mordenna’s presence. Banel was off to the side, a few of the birds huddled close to him.Interestingly, that Sectoid recruit—Arachne, if he remembered correctly—was off at the far side of the room, sitting alone. Jax himself had been granted a comfier chair and was now lounging like a true man of power.

His stance changed as Mordenna walked in, of course, and he sat up. “Brother.”

Well, Jax didn’t seem agitated—if anything, he looked pretty happy to see him. Mordenna relaxed, letting himself slip into his usual trickster persona. “Oh, lordly brother of mine, amassed followers and all. I see you’re just living the high life in here.”

Jax scoffed good-naturedly, waving for him to step further in and get himself comfortable. As he did, Jax continued. “Please. What else would you ask of me to do with my leisure time? There are few things I find more enjoyable than attending to my flock and seeing that they are well off.”

“Ah, shit, I don’t know.” Mordenna flopped into a chair, giving a lazy wave to the Mystics near him. They waved back and he grinned. “Get creative? Indulge with your followers a bit and make a masterpiece that’ll bring tears to the eyes of jaded chumps? Of course I always have a few ideas of buffoonery you can be getting up to, but that’s because I know what’s fun in the mischievous sense.”
“I’ve entertained...” Jax looked over to the modelling area. “At least, I have entertained assisting whoever needs it once that area is fully established. I’d also considered dabbling in composing again, but without instruments, the practice leaves something to be desired.” He sighed, looking back. “And I’ve no inspiration, nor particular want to pen or do sermons at the present. It’s quite vexing.”

No instruments, hm? Mordenna was slightly amused at the fact that while his first thought was to make some for Jax, he hadn’t the slightest clue how to do so. Could always learn was the quick counter thought to that, but with Wiki offline he didn’t particularly know where to start with that prospect. “Bummer,” he offered. “I can feel not feeling for a specific aspect of creativity, of course. Sometimes, even with engineering, there’s things I don’t wanna do jack shit with at times.”

Which... included something he hadn’t been thinking much of, especially after rescuing Jax and the emotional rollercoaster that had followed. Mordenna wasn’t stupid—with a shattered Sarcophagus came the opportunity to study the material itself and he’d squirreled away a few chunks for later analysis. He just didn’t even want to look at them with what had been happening recently. Maybe when things get a tad bit steadier.

Still, there were other things he could still suggest. Mordenna leaned on the table next to him, palm on his jaw. “—ok so creativity is out the window until I can pull some sort of daring heist to rescue that grand piano of yours from your Stronghold.” That got a smile and Mordenna felt a bit better about not being able to do anything about it at the moment. “So! It falls to me to have to retread old ground. Which is to say; bro. You can’t aim for shit.”

Jax bristled, but it was in a clear performative way. “I have had no need for sharpshooting. Why can you not leave me to my psionic arsenal in peace?”

Mordenna chuckled. “Because it’s a damn travesty, is what it is. I can’t have you be my brother and also be unable to hit the broadside of a barn. It ain’t right. So, the point I’m torturously dragging myself to is this.” He straightened and leaned over in his seat, looking Jax dead in the eye. “You. Me. Shooting range. I teach you the finer points of making the nasty men fall down. Doesn’t have to be right now—you’re clearly having a riot of a time here—but I think it’s high time I straightened out your fire accuracy. Whaddya say?”

His brother relaxed when it was clear Mordenna was leading into something with his ribbing, a hand coming to his chin. “... I will admit, despite my tenacity in sticking to my more mental armaments, I think it would be wise if I learned a simpler implement. I find merit in honing my shooting ability, especially for targets normally out of range.” He nodded to himself. “Fine. Find me at another moment and I will be more than happy to take a few tips from you.”

That went over well! Satisfied, Mordenna bobbed his head and leaned back in his chair. “Grand! That leans neatly into something with his ribbing, a hand coming to his chin. “… I will admit, despite my tenacity in sticking to my more mental armaments, I think it would be wise if I learned a simpler implement. I find merit in honing my shooting ability, especially for targets normally out of range.” He nodded to himself. “Fine. Find me at another moment and I will be more than happy to take a few tips from you.”

That went over well! Satisfied, Mordenna bobbed his head and leaned back in his chair. “Grand! That leans neatly into my next point—I kitted out your gun a lot when I first made it, but that was like, fifteen years ago. There’s definitely a thing or two I can do to it to make learning how to shoot it proper easier. Re-tooling the scope, for one. Think I can use a few of the tricks I used for mine for yours, now that I don’t have a stick up my ass about us being siblings.” He gestured vaguely. “That’s just a lot of words to ask if you’d like me to take a look at that rifle of yours again. So, well, can I?”

Jax shrugged, adding a hand to the gesture. “I see no reason as to why not.”

So, uh. That was it. Jax said “yes.” Mordenna felt both thoroughly underwhelmed and relieved at the same time. No hesitation, no “well I don’t know,” nothing. It was almost as if his brother didn’t hold a grudge, which was weird. But, hell, Mordenna had his answer. He could add another project to his endless list, which he didn’t mind so much. It meant that he always had something to do. “—
Right then,” he said, after what he knew must’ve looked like a stunned silence—because it was, “I’ll get around to handling that after I’ve got Wiki back online. Maybe even sooner if I get a free moment.”

That was all Mordenna had for conversation topics, honestly. It was hard to just shoot the breeze with Jax, it felt like—he didn’t really think he had much in common with his brother. He was halfway to picking out another debate topic to pick over Jax’s brain with when his eyes caught one of the tentacles off of Marlene’s... whatever it was lazily extending towards one of the ravens in the room as she was still talking with Edgar. Topic thus gained, he lowered his voice. “Hey. Uh. Jax. Hate to raise alarms but you do see that thing, right?”

Jax followed his gaze, and he watched as he distinctively locked onto it. Nodding, Jax looked back to him. “Of course. As far as I have been able to observe, it is some psionic conglomeration that follows her. I cannot discern for certain if it is sentient on its own or not—but I have heard it speak. It doesn’t seem dangerous, in any capacity—more protective of Marlene itself, than anything. Admittedly, I have not asked about it.”

“Don’t blame you.” He watched as one of the faces turned towards him, and even without eyes it seemed to stare him right down. He met its gaze without backing down. “Makes me curious, though, and you know how I get when I’m curious. Don’t suppose you’d be against me going over and asking, myself?”

He shook his head. “Go right ahead, brother.”

“Fantastic.” With that, he mosied on out of his chair, casually walking over to the Templar and the bird man. When he got close, their conversation stopped.

Edgar smiled gently. “Hello, Hunter. Haven’t seen you for a bit.”

“Same to you, Edgar.” He snickered. “I want to call you some ridiculous nickname but honestly you calling yourself ‘Edgar’ has me beaten out. Consider yourself lucky.”

Edgar’s laugh sounded every bit like a raven mimicking it. “I consider it one of the benefits of my moniker. So, have you anything to do with Marlene and I?”

“Yes, actually.” He shifted his attention to Marlene, considering how to approach this. If Edgar couldn’t see it through his ravens, this might get a little awkward to talk about in front of someone else. Plus, as he thought, his ears pricked with a rather familiar whispering. Mouth settling into a line, the uncanniness of it spurred him into just going for it. “Yo, Marlene. Got a question for you.”

He made sure to point very specifically at one of the faces that was still “staring” at him. “Your buddy there going to concede that it can’t win a staring contest against me, or am I going to have to call a judge in on this?”

Marlene was a hard one to read. She didn’t move too much when he pointed it out, and the helmet naturally made her face impossible to judge. She simply wove her fingers together, looking at him. “... They are merely curious that you seem to be able to see them.”

“Ah, can you?” When Mordenna looked back over, Edgar’s eyes were glowing, and so were Nevermore’s. “I was wondering if I was the only one able to—well, Nevermore, by any extent. The other ravens get a hazy outline.”

“I don’t got special eyes for nothing,” he chipperly responded. “Anyway, outside of the staring contest, I really am curious. You know what that thing is?”
“If I ask,” she began, voice maintaining its smooth intonation, “they call themselves by many titles, all of them true.” The lips of the faces moved and the whispering grew a touch louder, making Mordenna’s nerves shake. “But the shortest and most identifying would be ‘The Oracle.’ They are my connection to the Earth and Her prophecies.”

“Prophecies?” Mordenna didn’t believe much in fate. Really, he didn’t believe it at all. Things were just too variable on all levels for things to be so assured. You could predict a scenario down to the last second, of course, and sometimes you could be absolutely correct—but there was always the possibility of being wrong, always the chance that things would go completely differently. Suffice to say, he wasn’t convinced, but Marlene didn’t have to know that. “Sure enough. Say, I’ve seen things like it before. They were a little different—”

“Your ‘father,’” she cut across him with, “I have seen his. Multiple Codices, yes?”

Uh. She really, really wasn’t supposed to know that. Despite himself, Mordenna could feel himself bristling. It took him observing with all his might to see what hung around Odin, and here this chick just knew? On top of that, the whispering was frying his nerves. “Uh-huh. Yeah. Gonna just skip on past how you know that.” That thing was haunting him like a— “Revenant. We’ll call them Revenants. Sounds great. Gets across that vaguely threatening aura. Really just nails the whole unsettling vibe they give off. Hey what the hell is with this whispering?”

That was enough to get a visible reaction out of Marlene, who crossed her arms. As she did, it dropped down to almost imperceptible volumes, the Revenant’s tentacles withdrawing and curling defensively around her shoulders. “... I apologize,” she began, voice quieter. “The whispering is a byproduct of my psionics being in a near-constantly active state. I do not mean to unnerve.”

He could see Edgar off to the side nervously rubbing the back of his neck. Yes, Mordenna could see that maybe he was losing a bit of control over his emotions. It just didn’t help that the whispering reminded him so much of Odin, and that whispering only ever came out when Mordenna was about to get the belt. He rubbed at his mouth, forcing himself to calm down a tad. “... right. Yeah. Gotcha. Anyway I think that was about the extent of questions I had for you. You, uh, carry on your business.”

With that, he promptly stood up and spun on his heel, walking back over to Jax without looking back for a second. When he got back to his brother and he gave him an imploring gaze, Mordenna sighed. “I don’t know what I was doing trying to interrogate a prophet,” he began. “Don’t take much to set me off after she just... names Odin as my father like that.”

Jax sympathetically winced, motioning to sit down. But when it was clear Mordenna wasn’t going to, he began to speak regardless. “I do not believe she intends to touch any nerves—it is hard to even begin to fathom what we have been through, from an outside perspective.”

“Yeah, I get that. Half of why I disengaged so quickly.” He rubbed at his jaw. “... anyway I gave that and by extension its ‘species’ a moniker. ‘Revenants.’ Sound snappy enough?”

Jax considered it for a second. “A name as fitting as any, I would imagine. Curious that there seems to be so few of them.”

“And why something I’ve only seen on Ethereals is hanging off a human,” he muttered, staring not at but through Jax. Jax himself... there had been mentions of a certain “suppression” in his files but it was quite vague what it was referring to. Jax’s psionics were a weird color, all told—not quite as weird as Eliza’s blue, at least—and they gathered around him strangely. Not quite the pattern of a Solace. Remembering he was staring, he shook his head. “Whatever the case. I think—”
His line of thought was interrupted by a gentle lurching of the ship. Seems they landed. Giving a short “huh,” Mordenna remembered where they were at. “Well, looks like we’ve hit the ground. Dunno about you but we’re in Reaper territory and I have to attend the grudge match of the century. Have any reason to keep me here or can I go kick Volk’s teeth in?”

Sighing, but with a smile on his face, Jax waved him off. “I see no reason to keep you from your bouts of sudden violence, brother. Just try not to get yourself killed, will you?”

“Oh please,” he assured Jax with as he started to walk towards the door, “If anyone’s getting killed around here, it’s Volk.”

By the time Mordenna reached the ramp leading down to the outside, he could see Eliza was already up ahead, in conversation with Volk. Whatever they were talking about, it had a smile on both of their faces—and he didn’t quite like the particular way Volk was looking at Eliza. Interference it was. He let his boots loudly ring off the metal of the Avenger as he sauntered down, making absolutely no effort to disguise his presence. His descent led him into a rather idyllic countryside at dusk, what he recognized as a temporary Reaper camp set up between the trees and in the valley of a hill, giving it natural cover against prying eyes.

He didn’t have time to sightsee for long—Volk turned and he had to have set a record for how fast his expression turned from warm friendliness to a cold, hard stare. He crossed his arms. “Hunter.”

“Volk!” He clapped his hands and then spread them out wide. “Oh, it is just a joy to see you. How’s the pack? Any of them learned how to aim? Y’know if they ever need advice—”

“Commander,” he interrupted with, “I don’t remember you saying you were going to be bringing in the Hunter for a surprise visit.” His distaste was pretty clear, which just further made Mordenna grin.

Eliza gave Mordenna a sidelong glance. “I didn’t, of course, but you know that any soldier of mine is prone to walking down that ramp and mingling. I think I remember you on a former occasion inviting them to...?”

“Yes. Your soldiers.”

“And Mordenna isn’t one? He fights for XCOM. He’s just as willing to pull the trigger on ADVENT, if not more because of the Elders.” Eliza got a glint in her eye Mordenna could swear he could hear in her next statement as she calmly smiled. “But, of course, if the mere presence of the Hunter is bothering you so much, I could always kindly ask him to not hang around and cause you such distress.”

There was a war raging in Volk, that much Mordenna could tell—between taking Eliza up on her offer and banishing him back into the ship so he wouldn’t have to deal with the antics of the Chosen Hunter... and staying strong because Eliza was making a clear challenge that he wasn’t strong enough to endure something like him just hanging around. In the end, one side won out and he sighed, rubbing his forehead. “No. He can stay. It’s just not on me if any of my wolves want to shoot that smile right off his face.”

“If they want to,” she smoothly followed up, “they can take a crack at me first. Anyone trying to shoot one of my own around me is going to have bigger problems than trying to land their shot on
their original target. Surely you understand, yeah?"

What a curiously familiar verbal tic. Still, the point was clear, and Volk weakly threw out his hands. “Yeah, I get it. I’m just still baffled you’d do that for a Chosen. ”

“Chosen or not, he’s a cherished soldier.” Aww. Eliza was going to give him a sugar headache. “Now. Speaking of soldiers, I believe there is one here I am due to pick up?”

Volk pointed at her. “Hey. You’re not just taking my best wolf and then just leaving. I believe you still owe me that dinner.”

“I owe you?” Eliza laid a hand on her chest, but her grin was clear. “Last I remembered you were the one offering it to me in regards to several missions well done. Don’t go saying it’s a favor owed!”

“Favor or not, you’re staying grounded here until I can get done putting you through a feast.” His smile came back as he focused on Eliza entirely, seeming to totally ignore Mordenna. “I know you don’t do alien but there’s plenty traditional meat to go around for you. Your soldiers can come, too, if they want.”

“I’ll let them know. As for food—”

“—I would be more than happy to chip in a few recipes!” Ah, Mordenna couldn’t help it. Something about Volk made him want to relentlessly rib him. “Betcha those cooks of yours don’t know a good rib from a flank. I’ll help them out, how about it?”

Seemingly remembering that the Hunter was there, Volk pinned him with an exasperated look. “You can come but you’re not touching any of what the cooks are making. I don’t trust you as far as I can throw you and as far as I see it, you’re only here because Eliza trusts you so much.”

“With my life, actually,” she gently reminded, making Volk’s stare falter.

Regardless of Eliza’s touching sentiment, Mordenna cocked his head a little. “Oh? What’s that? Old wolf doesn’t think he can throw scrawny little me that far? For shame, Volk, the man I knew would’ve punted me an acre given half the chance.”

Volk’s face hardened considerably, and his voice dropped. “What would you know about me, Chosen.”

... what would Mordenna know about Volk? The statement he’d said came so naturally he didn’t even really parse how loaded it was. Mordenna didn’t have to strain to guess he was a Reaper before he got snatched—too much evidence in that direction to make him think otherwise. He probably did know a Volk from fifteen years ago, maybe even before that. Honestly, it was a good question, though he didn’t like who was asking it.

Thankfully, Eliza came to his rescue, putting a hand on Volk’s chest as if to hold him back. “Volk,” she softly began, “back to the subject. When will this feast start?”

Volk blew some air out of his nose, eyes still trained on Mordenna, but eventually he relented and looked back at Eliza, patting her hand. “Just about as soon as I whip my own into starting it up. Shouldn’t take longer than thirty minutes to get everything in place—we always try to have a gathering area set up in our little emplacements. Just hang around, kick up your feet, maybe come check out what I’ve done with my tent?”

Oh, hell no. Mordenna crossed his arms and—was that jealousy? “Yo, Liz.”
But before Eliza could respond, Volk drew closer and angled her head towards him. “When’s the last time you spent a night under the stars? No hum of an engine to keep you up at night. Maybe a companion by your—”

Ok, that was it. In a flash, Mordenna took the Darkclaw off his side, switched the safety off, and cracked a shot into the air. It had the desired effect—Eliza and Volk jumped back from each other. As he could see heads in the camp turning towards him, he lowered his gun arm. “Yo. Liz. If Volk isn’t going to interrupt me again I’d like to talk with you about something. Y’know. Privately?”

Recovering from her startle, Eliza tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. Volk looked just about ready to go over and punch him, but Eliza started speaking first. “As much as I hate that method of getting my attention, he’s got a point, Volk. If he wants to talk about something I’m going to give him my attention. Now, I’ll be back after I talk with him, alright?”

He looked on the verge of putting up a fight about it, but he merely hissed out a frustrated sigh, throwing up a hand. “Alright. Fine. I’ll see you in the camp later.”

Mission thus accomplished, Mordenna switched the safety back on the Darkclaw and holstered it.

“Fantastic. Liz, you, me, inside?” When Eliza nodded and followed after him, he trekked back inside. He was hoping to skate past into a hallway...

... but naturally, Lily was there, giving him a strange look. “Mords? Did you just fire your gun out there?”

“Funny story about that!” He paused. “I did. Now excuse me and the Commander, here, important things to discuss.”

Lily looked to Eliza, who shrugged and nodded. Seemingly at a loss, she shrugged back. “Alright. Guess I won’t question a discharged firearm this close to the Avenger. Just catch me later to tell me what’s up—and also, I need a bit of explanation of this project you’ve dropped into the working log?”

“God, which one?” She was likely talking about the minigun concept he put forward. He knew he originally planned that for Jax—which was a great answer as to what he’d make for Jax—but if Jax couldn’t aim so much as an assault rifle, a minigun was a little out of the question. Still, he wanted to get it done, maybe as a proper gift for the future? Who even knew. “Whatever, I know which one you’re on about. Keep it down about that one, it’s gonna be a gift. As for my explanation...” He threw his hands out. “Can always use more gun. You’re talking to the guy with a sniper rifle about as big as a railgun.”

Lily rolled her eyes. “Right. I’d almost forgotten. You two go ahead, that was about all I had for you.”

“Right then!” He gestured to the Commander—as if she needed a signal to follow, and slipped on past, into the hallway. When he’d cleared the door, he leaned against the wall. Honestly, he’d just wanted to get Liz out of that situation so Volk couldn’t put any more moves on her, but now that he was thinking about it... Volk brought up a poignant question. If Mordenna was going to be out there, disturbing some Reapers, he could be unintentionally harkening back to who he used to be. To Tomko. Maybe, just maybe, he could open up to Eliza about that.

But, it seemed so... strange. So hard to open up about. Hey there, Commander, ever had your entire personality and most of your memories wiped of a past life and then thrust into a horrifying new one where all you were meant to do was kill and manage a Network that would make any lesser being’s head explode? Admittedly, she’d probably be able to relate to the Network part, but still.
“Mordenna?” Right. He’d went into another deep thinking session again. He looked over at Eliza, who had clasped her hands together in front of her. “Everything alright?”

“... eh,” he responded. “Kinda... kinda deciding on that. I don’t think Volk meant to, but he brought up an interesting point. You’ve... you’ve probably guessed or thought about the fact that I had a life before this one.”

“I ended up reading your file.” She blew some hair out of her face. “Fifty years old, huh?”

“Yep. Thirty-five when they took me. Odin didn’t have the mind to record who I was before, just my initial age. But, uh... he didn’t exactly erase everything. And there are some things he can’t account for, as much as he’d like to say otherwise.” He vaguely gestured at nothing in particular. “Odds are very heavily weighted to the fact that I used to be a Reaper before I was taken. Clint... Clint got a few of my memories due to that overload you carried out. He confirmed as much, and I’d had a hunch beforehand with how familiar I was with some of their systems and structure. Plus, just, how easy it was to talk about them. You saw how I was able to talk at Volk like I’d known him forever. Fact of the matter is I probably did.” He rolled his hand at the wrist. “The point I’m trying to stagger to here like a man with shrapnel caught in his head is that being around those Reapers, in that feast... it’s asking for trouble. It’s asking for one of them to start prying, to start getting suspicious as to how familiar I am with everything in general.”

Eliza nodded sagely, taking it all in. When she responded, her voice was soft. “I can’t say I truly relate, but I sympathize. If it makes you uncomfortable, don’t feel as if you have to be down there with the rest of them. Lord knows you’ve always got a home on the Avenger.”

“But Liz,” he protested, a note of mock concern creeping into his voice, “If I’m not there who’s going to protect you from Volk getting all creepy on you? God knows he was half a second away from sticking his tongue down your throat had I not gotten both of your attentions.”

She chuckled, shaking her head. “I’m pretty sure he was doing it just to piss you off. But, fair point—I suppose I could use a friendly face down there to keep me company and keep me safe.” Her voice went from warm to gentle. “I really did mean what I said, you know. I trust you with my life. I’m a little far in to not trust you that much by this point—you’ve had too many chances to take advantage of me and you haven’t.”

“Just basic decency,” he replied, but honestly the whole message warmed his heart, and he could feel his face relaxing. “Besides, you’re too good a gal not to go to bat for. You’ve done so much for me I’d feel bad not returning the favor.” He ran a hand through his hair, eyes darting away from her. Eliza just... made him so weak. She made him weak in a way he wasn’t protesting against. He thought maybe it’d go away with time, as the shock of someone caring about him in that way wore off. But it never left! If anything, it got worse. He couldn’t reveal these feelings, god knows it’d ruin their friendship. To top it off, he had at least three other people he was battling for her affections with. Fal-Mai, Jax, and Volk—and he was half-tempted to add Bradford to that pile. So he was just left with this unwanted pining over someone he’d never realistically be with and it was eating him alive.

But, he wasn’t a creep. He just railed against Volk being weirdly intrusive. They were friends—and Eliza was a hell of a good friend. He’d take that for all it was worth. He’d deal with this longing himself and not put Eliza through an unwanted confession. After all, she had far greater things to worry about than romance. He let out the breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. “So, yeah. That was essentially the extent of what I wanted to talk about, here. We can go back to the Reaper camp... but. Mind if I shadow you? Not just to tell Volk to simmer down, but I don’t want any of those pups getting any ideas about shooting me. For their sakes, not mine—you know damn
well I’d beat them in a quickdraw.”

She smiled in that way that communicated she knew exactly what he meant. “Sure thing, cowboy. Like I said, I’d appreciate having a buddy down there.”

“Super!” He snapped his fingers at her. “Ready to go back down and experience the several-of-a-kind Reaper feasts?”

Eliza laughed. “As ready as ever.”

Mordenna had to admit, for all the shit he talked of the Reapers, they held some damn fine revelries.

Dusk was fast approaching and after a quick sweep of the area, the “gathering grounds” of the camp had been set up into a decent, almost fairgrounds-like affair. There were plenty of seats to go around, but even then some of the Reapers and Eliza’s soldiers elected to stand or even sit on the earth. A few fire pits were dug out and spread around, all with fires blazing, some even having meat roasting over them. Mordenna and Eliza were sat at one of the farther pits. Even though there were a fair few Reapers at the gathering, they shunned the area he was at. Fair enough by him—it left more peace and quiet in their wake... and more room for the soldiers he could actually stand. Banel was here, for one, and Leo was sitting suspiciously close to him. Benald and Pattie were chatting about something at length he hadn’t bothered to tune in to yet. As for himself, he was holding a stick with a hunk of what his taste buds identified as either chicken or Chryssalid. Considering the ban on the former, it was probably the latter.

He took another identifying bite of it. Yeah. Probably Chryssalid. It had that stringy consistency with no fat whatsoever. As he chewed, he could see Eliza looking at him with the most “I don’t know why this man is doing this but I don’t feel like stopping him” expression he’d ever seen. Swallowing what he’d eaten, he jokingly offered the stick to her. “Want some? I’m pretty sure it won’t kill you.”

Eliza gave a single chuckle, raising a hand as if to ward off the alien meat. “Thanks, but no thanks. I’ve resolved not to eat stuff I can’t identify, as you know.”

“What? It’s Chryssalid.” He was pretty sure, anyhow. “There, you know now.”

“If anything that makes me less likely to eat it!” She shuddered. “I don’t care if it’s been so cleanly prepared you could serve it to someone with a weak immune system—I’ve dealt with too many Chryssalids in my time to ever want to put any part of them in my mouth.”

“Hey, they’re safe to eat so long as you avoid the head and the legs—and even then you can prepare the head to be edible.” Still, taking her request, he angled the stick back towards him. “But I don’t blame you. I’m pretty desensitized so as long as it’s food and won’t kill me, sure.” He had a fondness for all things bitter and sour, with a small soft spot for chocolate. The meat was neither, so he was mostly eating it for the hedonistic pleasure of it. His body would completely absorb it with nothing to pass, in his experience, so it wasn’t like he was inconveniencing himself.

Speaking of bitter, he reached down and took a swig of whatever the hell was trying to pass itself as beer that the Reapers drank. He rested it on his leg, staring into the fire afterwards. All told, he was getting a small sense of... nostalgia. Not anything that was bringing back memories, but some
small déjà vu. How many times had he sat at one of these feasts, he wondered? Did Tomko cook any of the meals they would eat? He knew a “recipe” or two, but it felt more like general knowledge to him.

"Holding up alright, there?"

He blinked, looking over to Banel. Mordenna took another drink, shrugging. “Thinking, I suppose. Wondering who here will bet they can take a shot at me. The usual.”

“Suffice to say,” he continued, leaning over with an arm supported on his leg, “I don’t think any of the Reapers here will want to try anything with us around.” As if he’d prepared for the occasion, Banel was in his WAR suit, forgoing his helmet. “If they try, we’ll be here to back you up.”

“Appreciate it.” After that, he tore another hunk out of his meal, letting it sit on his tongue for a bit. He was almost anticipating the conflict. He certainly wasn’t blind. He could see the gathered wolves looking over at him and whispering in the corners of his vision. Mordenna wasn’t his sister—but he could take a few good guesses as to what they were whispering about. Still, nothing concrete, and nothing to pick a fight over, as if he wasn’t getting any details of his past life out of any of them, and it would be foolish to try. Best not to even start.

“Didn’t know they were letting ADVENT into these gigs.”

That voice. Mordenna looked up, and sure enough, Elena was standing right beyond the fire, across from him. Her mask was off and just a few touches of short, blond hair showed under her hood. She looked at the Hunter coldly, crossing her arms. “You’ve got a lot of nerve, sitting where any Reaper could put one through your eyes.”

Honestly, Mordenna hardly knew how to respond. He was automatically inclined to be snarky as he finished chewing his morsel, but some part of him leaned otherwise. In which direction, he didn’t really know. He swallowed, gesturing with his hands out. “Nobody’s shot me yet. Honestly I’m waiting for one of them to try. Would certainly liven up the evening.”

“I might be the first.” She seemed to have no inclination to sit down. Her words made the twins shut up and look to her, and Banel sat up straight, giving her a warning stare. She ignored it, continuing. “I don’t know what Volk’s thinking, allowing you in here. Honestly, Commander, I don’t know what you’re thinking letting him run around in XCOM. If my sources are right, you’re letting the rest of the Chosen do the same, and that’s asking for disaster.”

As expected for having her commanding challenged, Eliza rose in her seat, dwarfing Elena by a few good inches. “If you don’t know,” she began, voice level and calm, “I’ll inform you. The Chosen, time and time again, have proven themselves to be loyal and cooperative to XCOM. As things turn out, if you’re not degrading their work and taking them for granted amongst other things I will choose not to name, they are reliable and dependable. The most any of them have done in XCOM’s employ is make a few mistakes, and if I threw out every soldier who made a mistake, I wouldn’t have a single soul left in my barracks.” She tilted her head upwards slightly. “Including myself. Now do you have any other questions? As always, I’d be happy to answer them.”

Under Eliza’s judging gaze, Elena did falter somewhat, but not by much to an untrained observer. “You’ve gone soft, Commander. I don’t doubt your abilities—we wouldn’t be talking if you were anything less than skilled—but there’s such a thing as being too sympathetic. Not every alien with a sob story needs to go on your ship.”
“Ah.” Eliza’s voice went cold. “So should I throw Mox out the next time we touch down? Or here? I don’t suppose the Reapers would like to take him in.”

Now that was enough to punch a hole through Elena’s defense, and Mordenna withheld a low whistle. Her shoulders slumped and she looked away. “Look, Skirmishers are different. They’ve proven themselves.”

“And yet, so have the Chosen. So have the aliens in my employ.” Eliza’s voice went back to its usual cadence. “I understand the points you’re making. But trust me—every concerned haven leader and the Chryssalids stalking outside their walls have made that very point. Coldness and cruelty is not the way to win this war. You’ve got to extend a little trust to get anywhere worth getting to.” She nodded respectfully, closing her statement. “Have anything else to ask me?”

Elena was quiet for a moment or two. She then looked back to Eliza. “Nothing else. I’ll see you on the ship.” With that, she turned around and disappeared into her fellow Reapers, gone as quickly as she came. Honestly, Mordenna had expected to fight for his own life right there, but it seemed the challenge against Eliza wouldn’t go unanswered.

Well, the less he had to deal with people potentially turning his past against him, the better. He chuckled as Eliza sat back down. “Maybe one of these days I’ll get to fight one of those battles for you. C’mon, Eliza, I’ve got ten thousand witty retorts and you’re holding them back.”

“Sorry, Mordenna.” Just like that, she was back to genuine, soft smiles and a warm voice. God, he loved her. “Can’t let people think I’m soft for no good reason. Or too soft, for that matter.”

“Honestly I don’t see what they’re all getting at.” He took a sip of his drink. “From minute one you had me locked up in a high-security cell and wouldn’t let me out until I swore a blood oath and let you plant a chip in my neck.”

She laughed. “Well, at least one of those is entirely correct.”

“Ooh!” Pattie jumped forwards in her seat. “Is it the blood oath part, Commander? Didja make him spill his on the Avenger before you let him in?”

“Pats,” Benald said, resting a hand on her shoulder, “I’m pretty sure Commander O’Leary just had him go over a few rules before he joined.” He leveled a pointed, humorous look over his sunglasses at Eliza. “I’m pretty sure.”

There the Commander went, laughing again, her face illuminated by firelight and the glow of the embers dancing in her hair. Such a charm! Mordenna had to pry his eyes away and focus on finishing his cooked Chryssalid for fear of obviously staring. She tucked a lock behind her ear, shaking her head. “You can be ‘definitely sure’ on that one, Benald. Mordenna can tell you himself.”

Oh, bad idea. Mordenna finished off his meat and grinned, pointing his stick at Benald. “Sure can! After I agreed to be part of XCOM, Eliza took me into this separate room on the Avenger—”

“Mordenna.”

“—and there were these runes on the ceiling and walls, and her eyes turned back inside her head—”

“Mordenna!”

“—and she started talking about the Old Ones and how they’d be pleased with—”
With that, Mordenna found a hand clamped over his mouth and laughs all around him. As he chuckled and gently removed Eliza’s hand, there was the small thought that maybe, just maybe, this was where he could be content. The soldiers on the Avenger seemed alright to him, now, and there was no better companion than Eliza.

Still, he had to know. He just wanted to satisfy one curiosity, and then he’d be happy to live this new life.

Eventually, the festivities died down. Mordenna watched as everyone packed up the cooking implements and snuffed out the fires. The other soldiers had retired to the ship after a while leaving him and Eliza to simply shoot the breeze as everything wrapped up. He got through a few more bottles before deciding against draining the Reapers’ entire liquor stores, simply content to chat with Eliza.

Wasn’t long before they were interrupted, though. Volk himself walked over to their dying fire, nodding to Eliza. “Liz? Something’s come up that I need to discuss. Mission-related, I assure you.”

“Why, a mission?” Mordenna cracked a grin. “Mind if I tag along, old man? Killing stuff and sneaking around is basically my thing.”

“The first debriefing,” he said, never looking away from Eliza, “is private. This is confidential information we’re handling here and it concerns you and yours specifically.”

“Ouch.” He shrugged. “This is somehow even worse than the silent treatment. I feel myself just withering away on the spot without the attention of the almighty Konstantin Volikov!” He then leaned over to Eliza, stage-whispering. “Sure you wanna be alone with this mug?”

Volk sneered, but Eliza just chuckled. “Well, if it’s truly mission related—and you better not be lying, Volk, because I’ve got a long memory, too—I can always give you the details afterwards. Who knows what I’ll say with my loose lips in my ship?” She stood up. “I’ll be back. Mordenna, you can head back to the ship if you want.”

Mordenna got up as well. “Eh. I’ll tail you as close as Volk allows and then wait for you there. I’ve got unlimited patience, Lizbeth. I can stand to wait while Volk blabbers at you.”

“Fine,” Volk grumbled, “but when I tell you to stop I don’t want to see you a step closer to the tent.”

Mordenna mockingly held up three fingers on his right hand. “Scout’s honor.”

The action, though Mordenna didn’t intend the specific effect, seemed to unnerve Volk. He quickly hid it under thinly-veiled disgust, waving the two of them after him. “After me, Eliza.”

Mordenna trailed after Eliza as they moved out of the gathering grounds and deeper into the camp. They wove through temporary structures, things he could see at a glance were designed to pack up as small as possible and be ready to be deployed elsewhere. For how primitive Reaper tech could get, they were certainly one for innovation where it counted.

Eventually, he could more clearly spot what was obviously the control center of the camp. Around that time, Volk stopped in his tracks and pointed as Mordenna. “This is as far as you go. Wait
He shrugged again, palms out. “Sure enough. Liz, holler if he tries anything funny. I won’t get any closer but if you do anything sneaky...” He crossed his arms. “Well, you heard her. If she trusts me with her life I’m going to make damn sure she can count in that trust.”

Volk went “hmph,” but didn’t say much else. When he went back to walking deeper into the camp, he stayed as Eliza followed him. Uncrossing his arms, he stood still for a good five seconds before he took a pencil out of one of his pockets, twirling it about and idly spinning it.

He wasn’t lying when he said he could do patience. Mordenna found himself automatically surveying the landscape, watching for potential threats. Pretty much all of the Reapers were still at the gathering grounds, wrapping up the feast, getting things put away, or just hanging out with their supposed friend groups. There was no movement in his area of the camp, but he didn’t relax. The more he stood there, the more it steadily crept up on him, like a zeitgeist of a time long forgotten. He knew this place, somewhere deep in his subconscious. Maybe not this place in particular. But the setup of the tents, the spacing, the familiarity of it all, it spoke to him. Though it wasn’t the Avenger, he felt... at home, here. Even while he knew every Reaper there wouldn’t hesitate to kill him if given the chance.

Over to the side, he watched as one figure broke off from the crowd, walking in his direction. Something to focus on thus gained, he caught the pencil in his hand after another flip and held it there, watching as the form of Elena came closer. Their eyes locked as she was halfway to him and neither of them backed down as she came right up, stopping in place.

Mordenna opened his mouth to say something, but Elena was faster. “What are you even doing here?”

He tilted his head. “Waiting for Eliza, naturally. I’m not going to—”

“You know what I mean.” She jabbed a finger at him, eyes burning. “You chose to come down that ramp and stand in the middle of all of us like you belong here. You are the last person on Earth who would ever have a place in the Reapers. Do you know that?”

Hm. This was seeming strangely personal... and what was this hollow in Mordenna’s chest? This shouldn’t get to him nearly as bad as it was. “... You’re acting like I’m trying to fit in here,” he began, voice steady, “and honestly I just can’t fathom why. So, yeah, I know that. Got anything new for me, Ellie?”

What? What was that nickname? Whatever it was, it set Elena off like nothing else, and she marched a few steps closer, voice hot. “Do you think you can call me that?! Do you think you can stand there and call me what he called me? You aren’t him! You will never be him! The fact that you walk around here acting like you’ll even come close to him is a joke.” Mordenna tried to say something but she wasn’t having any of it. “And don’t try to tell me you don’t know what I’m talking about. Why else would you be here?” Well, he had a reason for that, but she wasn’t going to let him say it. “Do you think it’s funny to stand there and call me ‘Ellie?’ Huh?”

By the way she stopped, staring him head in the eye, this seemed like his chance to actually say something. He opened his mouth, and... nothing. The hollow in his chest throbbed and took away anything he might defend himself with. Whatever Elena was saying, it was getting to him far more than it should.

When he didn’t respond, her face twisted in disgust. “Nothing. You’ve got nothing. All those taunts, all that wisecracking and you don’t have shit to say. What is with you. I can’t tell what’s
worse, the fact that you’re either doing this for sick kicks or trying desperately to be him. I’ll tell you something; you won’t. You won’t ever be and if you’re scrambling for something that’ll make people like you now that you have to live with yourself, you will never get it. ” Her voice dropped. “You won’t, and will never be Tomko. ”

Oh. The coup de grace. Mordenna physically staggered back a step, breaching the line he was supposed to respect. This should be nothing. Nothing. Maybe the second to last part would sting a little coming from anyone else, but from Elena? Mordenna’s hands shook. He didn’t know what to do. It hurt to hear this all from her, like he was being betrayed by someone he considered a true friend.

“I’ve heard enough. ”

Both of them looked behind him, to where Eliza was standing, eyes hard and posture firm. She strode over, moving past Mordenna and standing between Elena and him. He could hear footsteps behind him—assuredly Volk coming out of the tent. He focused on Eliza, though. “Elena Dragunova. May I remind you that Mordenna is a soldier under my care just as you are, and should it come down to it, I will defend him if his character is being attacked unjustly. Just because you are one of my soldiers alongside him does not mean you are above having actions taken against you for antagonization and attacks regarding events he likely doesn’t even remember. What were you hoping to accomplish with your words? Mordenna is a person just as the rest of us are. He is no less deserving of being treated kindly now that he fully intends to better himself. Would you like to explain yourself?”

Elena’s stare was tough, but whatever front Eliza was putting on that he couldn’t see from his angle, it was tougher. She backed down. “He’s here pretending to be someone he isn’t—”

“I’m going to have to correct you there,” Eliza interjected. “Mordenna is here as my bodyguard. Although, judging by today’s events, it seems to be him needing my protection. He is here to shadow me as I go about my duties, and indeed, keep me company. Whoever Mordenna was before, whoever he was to you... does it matter? You made it very clear that he is not who he was. And will never be, if I remember correctly. That should mean you have no reason to bother him about this, and yet you went out of your way to corner him while he was waiting for me. Consider yourself lucky that I am sentimental and soft, or else I would think your actions becoming of Reapers as a whole, or entertain more punishment than what is deserved.”

Elena didn’t say anything after that. Mordenna felt like a statue, simply forced to stand there as she got the life chewed out of her by the Commander. Eliza took a step and leaned past him, assuredly addressing Volk. “Send the rest of the info to the Avenger. We’re leaving.”

“Commander—”

“No, ” Eliza said, in a tone of voice that sounded entirely unlike anything he’d heard out of her. Far harsher. “You’ve made your opinions very clear, and even I have my breaking point. I’m aware of Elena’s relationship to Mox and will allow her back on my vessel, but unless you intend to keep her here to discipline her yourself, she will have a punishment I deem worthy of the pain she has caused. Is this clear?”

There was silence. Mordenna’s hands were still shaking and all he wanted to do was disappear into the night, never to be seen again. Eliza must’ve caught his distress, as she went ahead and started to walk, patting Mordenna’s side as a sign to move. “I’ll take your silence as a yes. Elena, either come and answer for what you’ve done or stay here and delay it. Your choice. If you’re not on the ship by the time I close the ramp, I will consider your stay indefinitely extended.”
Numbly, Mordenna followed Eliza, the pencil he was playing with earlier held limply in his hand. If Elena was following behind them, he didn’t hear her, so focused he was on not fleeing or even breaking down in the middle of the Reaper camp. Elena had shoved a knife right into his ribcage and it felt as if every breath was just making the wound bleed more and more.

Eliza cut a quick path through the camp, and they were at the ramp in no time. She walked right onto it, casting a glance behind her. “Elena. Go to the Resistance Ring and wait there. That’s an order.”

“Yes ma’am.” So Elena did follow. She overtook them as they walked, passing in front of them and into the ship beyond. Lily was working on ROV-R, but she seemed deterred from asking what was going on by the expression on Eliza’s face. They passed through the Workshop without issue.

Once they were in the hallway, she looked back again, this time with a much softer expression. “Just a little longer. I want to get to my quarters so this can be private. Is that alright?”

Mordenna could only manage a nod, as determined as he was to shake it off before then. It shouldn’t bother him. It shouldn’t bother him. But what Elena said, what she meant stuck to him. Who was he kidding? He wasn’t anybody. All he could be was the Hunter. Someone meant to maim and kill, and nothing else. The fact that he managed this far was just as she said; a joke. She knew Tomko. She’d know more than ever that this new version of him would never make it with the kind of path he was trying to cut. He’d never be really liked. He’d never be loved.

He didn’t even register where they were until Eliza was taking his hand, guiding him over to one of the couches in his room. “Just a moment,” she softly assured, her thumb running over the back of his hand as she pressed a finger to her ear. “Bradford? Need you in the Resistance Ring. Elena’s there. The situation is that Mordenna was down in the Reaper camp, waiting on me as I was getting info from Volk. Elena approached him and began harassing him over who he was before he was the Hunter, insinuating he was down there to be someone he wasn’t and making it very clear he would never be his former self. I want you to chew her out.” A pause. “Thank you. I’ll be there soon. Drag it out.”

With that, she turned her attention to Mordenna. Before she could speak, he started, despondently muttering. “She’s right, you know. Who am I outside of the killing? Take that away from me and I’m nobody. I’m only here because one of the Elders figured out I was really good at it. I’m nothing. I’ll always be. You shouldn’t waste your breath on me.”

In response, Eliza propped herself up on her knees and pulled him into the firmest hug she’d given him since the roof incident. She pressed her head close to his. “Mordenna,” she said, voice soft and low, right next to his ear, “you are somebody. You’re the man who made a dampening headset for his sister so she wouldn’t have to suffer from something the Elders forced on her. You’re the man who got me and Jax to finally talk and sort out a situation that was never going to see a resolution otherwise.” Eliza placed a hand on the back of his head and ran it over his hood in calming, repetitive motions. “You’re the man who got me to open up about the things that were bothering me that I hadn’t talked anybody else yet. You are so much more than what the Elders intended for you. I know you want to know who Tomko is, and that’s ok. It’s ok to want to know more about yourself. But you don’t have to be him. You are Mordenna. And Mordenna has done some wonderful things.”

... what was he to say in response of all that? Mordenna didn’t think he could do anything—right up until he felt his chest constrict. He wrapped his arms around Eliza and buried his face into her shoulder, trying desperately to fight off the oncoming wave of sorrow. He hadn’t openly cried in fourteen years. He didn’t intend to start now.

Tears were weakness. Weakness was to be punished. But you are not there anymore, he heard that tiny voice of hope say. You are on the Avenger, with someone who loves you enough to comfort you. To let you cry. Grieve.

It happened. His first sob was silent as he still protested against the show of emotion, chest aching as he held it back. But as he felt Eliza give him a squeeze and assure him it was alright, the next was louder. He could feel the patches he was soaking into her uniform with her tears and wanted to stop. He couldn’t as the years of repressed sorrow came roaring out and he clutched Eliza for dear life, sobbing his veritable heart out against her.

It was weakness. It was freeing. To be able to so openly express that he was hurting and needed to vent took a weight off of his shoulders even as he was still crying into Eliza’s. Her patience outshone his as she stayed there with him, stroking the back of his head and keeping him held tight. She was there for him. She wasn’t leaving, or calling him pathetic. She was just whispering gentle reassurances and giving him someone to pour his soul out to.

Eventually, tentatively, his sobs relented. He could feel the tears slow to a stop as he was left merely holding Eliza, gently rocking with her in his arms. Though his chest still ached, it was a hell of a lot less than before, and he felt so light. Now that he’d regained his words and his wits, he angled his head just enough so he wouldn’t be muffled by Eliza’s uniform. “... I-I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” She gave him another squeeze. “You’ve got nothing to be sorry for. You vented, and I’m happy for it.”

Well, if “I’m sorry” wasn’t the answer, this was his second guess. “—thank you, then.”

Eliza nodded. “Of course, Mordenna. You deserve someone to cry against. And I’m happy to fill that position.” She gently pushed him back, just enough to look him in the face as they continued to loosely hug. “Did you get what you wanted out of your system?” When he limply nodded back, she smiled warmly, which made him feel even better. “I’m glad. Is there anything you’d like to talk about?”

He took in a deep breath in an attempt to steady his voice out. “I... I think I-I’ve already decided that being Mordenna is... what I’m going to do.” He leaned forward, closing his eyes. His heart stilled when Eliza didn’t move, allowing him to rest his forehead against hers. “I don’t know what I’d do without you. Thank you, again. I’ll... I’ll be fine eventually. Maybe... I can go find Jax. Or Fal-Mai. Hash it out with them.”

“A good idea. I’ll be letting Elena know what she said was uncalled for.”

Mordenna opened his eyes just enough to look at the wet patch he’d thoroughly soaked into her shoulder. Yeah, that was... that was pretty obvious as to what it was. “... sure you wanna go without changing?”

“Oh, absolutely.” She looked him in the eye. “I intend to show her just what she’s done without saying a word.”

Killer. Eliza was the whole package and so much more. He wiped at his eyes, taking another steadying, deep breath. “I, I can’t stop saying ‘thanks,’ can I? I just... yeah.” He was out of words again, but this time, he was happy. He’d gotten to grieve.
Eliza ever so gently nodded, mindful of their contact. “Anything else before I head off to handle some commanderly duties?”

He gave a single chuckle, leaning back from her and letting go of her. “Nah. I’ll gather myself and then go have a chat with my siblings. Anything... anything upcoming I should know about?”

“Just an investigation mission, with possible fighting.” Eliza stood up, tousling his hood. “I’ll let you know the details in a better moment. For now... I know you don’t need to sleep, but feel free to relax in here, alright? I feel bad about not giving you a proper room, so consider the couches, at least, yours.”

“Will do, Liza.” He leaned back on the couch, letting himself relax. “... take care of yourself as well, alright?”

She nodded, making for the door. “Will do.”

Mordenna watched her leave, sinking into the soft cushions of the couch. He really wasn’t thinking on anything in particular, which was a comforting first. Just relaxing in the relief of having thrown that weight off of his chest. Soon, he was sure his brain would find something else to bug him about, but for now?

He was happy.
Downtime

Chapter Summary

The Avenger gets a few moments of peace.

Jax found himself filled with a rather *domestic* kind of content as he watched his twin tailors work.

Hestia and Demeter had finally gotten themselves fully established in a somewhat small, but serviceable room provided to them by the Commander. With some machines both theirs and on-loan from one of the soldiers, they were able to begin work anew. They didn't have much to work with at the moment, but as Hestia was saying...

“... and Dr. Tygan was rather cordial about my asking about synthetic fibers,” she replied to Jax’s asking about materials. “Given time, we should have some fabrics through him. I will admit, I... rather miss the ready supply we had under ADVENT, but I will readily trade conveniences for following you, Holy Father.”

“Sister is certainly right.” Demeter passed Hestia a spool of thread. At the moment, they were catching up on patching holes and mending the casual clothes of the soldiers. “ADVENT could tempt me with all the niceties of the world, but they would mean nothing if I could not be with you.”

Jax chuckled warmly, leaning forward on the chair he was on. “I very much appreciate the sentiment, my Tailors. Still, are you two certain there is nothing I can do to help you further settle in?”

Demeter shook her head. “Other than asking the Commander about the materials she might be able to acquire? Nothing, my Warlock.” She smiled gently. “Your occasional visits are more than enough.”

Hestia hid a smile behind her sewing machine. “If you could send Briareos down this way at some point I’m sure Demeter would appreciate—”

“Hush!”

That got Jax to laugh again, shaking his head. “I will entertain the idea of it... but if you are sure there is nothing else I can do, I will wait until you think of something. That being said—”

The tangent he was about to go on was interrupted as the door opened, causing the twins to look up. It was Mordenna who leaned in, looking around until he saw Jax. “There you are! For being eight feet tall and built like a brick shithouse you’re rather stealthy.”

He rolled his eyes. “I would not think myself ‘stealthy’ in any capacity of the word, self-deprecatingly I will admit. Perhaps more self-deprecating is that, at my size and build as you say, you were unable to find me. The mighty Hunter, unable to track someone that is... what was the phrase?”

“Oh, shut up.” Mordenna batted a hand at him dismissively. “This is a huge-ass ship and doesn’t exactly have a natural floor I can track footprints in. ‘Bout the only thing I can track you by is your
hilariously huge psionic signature and even then that gets a little inaccurate.” He then looked over to the twins. “Oh, hi Hesi, hi Demi. Mind if I borrow the big lug over here for an hour or so? Maybe more depending how much he sucks.”

Demeter cocked her head. “And what do you intend to do?”


In lieu of answering him, they both looked to Jax, who nodded. “Very well. Hestia and Demeter were just letting me know that they had nothing I could help with at the moment. My schedule is certainly free for the particular brand of tomfoolery you wish to engage me in.”

“Hey.” Mordenna pointed at Jax. “Accuracy is no fool’s activity! I need to teach you how to shoot. There’s also another thing or two I need to teach you, but that comes later. Basic accuracy is what we’re aiming for here.”

“Aiming for, brother?”

“And you will never know if I intended that pun or not and you will just have to suffer.” Mordenna motioned for him to get up. “C’mon! I’ve already got your gun down at the firing range, move your ass.”

Rolling his eyes again and bidding a quiet farewell to the Tailors, Jax got out of his chair and followed his brother, who expertly navigated the ship until they were passing through the Workshop and entering another door he’d never had the pleasure of going through. It lead down into what could be called the basement of the ship, which had storage containers packed to the ceiling. Before that, however, was a counter, and just beyond it, a cutout of a rather odd-looking Sectoid propped up against two of the boxes, the boxes themselves looking rather reinforced. His Disruption Rifle was on the counter, and he and Mordenna came to stand at it.

Mordenna gestured to him. “First things first—posture. Pick up your rifle and hold it like you’re about to fire it but haven’t seen a target yet.”

What a strange specification. Still, Jax complied, picking up his gun and holding it about the only way he knew how. At his posture, Mordenna almost physically recoiled, shaking his head furiously. “Ok, ok, ok, this is worse than I thought. Well! First of all, finger out of the goddamn trigger!” He batted at Jax’s index finger, which was indeed resting on the trigger. “A little thing called ‘trigger discipline’: keep your finger off the trigger until you are certain you want to start shooting. Rest it on the outside.”

When Jax did so, he continued. “Alright. That’s basic safety, but you have worse problems. That’s... that’s not how to hold a rifle at all. Stand still, I’m going to move you like you’re a G.I. Joe.” Jax thought the idea of being touched by his brother in a non-combat situation rather strange... but he kept his mouth shut. Mordenna was undoubtedly the expert here, and if he wanted his fire accuracy to be better, he would swallow his pride to listen. Mordenna reached over and brought the gun up, resting the stock against Jax’s shoulder. He then made a few adjustments from there. “Christ,” he muttered, “I hope you know I’m not ragging on you for your poor training. This is just some of the worst posturing I’ve seen.”

“Apologies that I was never entered into a gun training college,” he grumbled back, knowing that he wasn’t being personally shamed but getting a little miffed nonetheless.

“Don’t gotta say sorry to me. I’m angry at Cronus more than anything else.” When Jax tensed up at
that statement, Mordenna shook his head. “That’s all I’m saying on it. Not mad at you.” After a moment of silence and not being adjusted, he nodded. “Ok. I want you to mentally memorize this posture. Let your muscle memory copy it. Also if you’re looking for compliments, at least you weren’t holding onto the magazine for stability. I’ve seen resistance fighters do that and on more than one occasion I’ve watched them pry the mag out of their guns unintentionally while firing. Barrel support is good support.” He then tilted the Disruptor Rifle a bit more towards Jax. “And look through the scope! I might’ve designed this as a thinly-veiled insult but I designed it nonetheless. The scope will help with your accuracy.”

Giving a well-meaning “hmph,” Jax leaned over to look through it. True enough, there was an aiming reticule, which he focused on the head of the Sectoid. “There you go,” Mordenna chimed in. “Think you’re ready to fire?”

“Mhm.” With that, Jax put his finger on the trigger, squeezed, and... nothing. The trigger wouldn’t even go back. After another failed attempt and examination of the gun, Mordenna shook his head.

“Safety’s on. I’m surprised you’ve never complained about accidental discharges with it. Poor thing probably hasn’t been flipped to in twenty years.” Jax leveled a look at Mordenna to communicate his earlier grumbling, and Mordenna put up his hands. “Hey. I know I said I was going to teach you accuracy but knowing how to operate a gun comes with that. I’m not going to release you onto the field not knowing much else than murder death kill. They did that with me and it was terrible.” Mordenna leaned over, pointing to a dial with four options that his eyes had glazed over. “Here’s your mode select. Lowest is safety on. Second lowest is semi-auto. Next one is burst fire. The one after that is full auto, and pretend that one doesn’t exist for now. Switch yourself up to semi-auto for the moment—that’s a mode that fires once per trigger pull. After that, try again.”

Sure enough, Jax switched to semi-auto and went back into the stance Mordenna showed him, looking through the scope and remembering his trigger discipline. This time, when he went to fire, a single shot roared down the range and struck just a little up and to the right of the bullseye on the Sectoid’s head. Still, according to the cutout, he would have hit his target.


This, at least, Jax thought himself somewhat decent at. After Mordenna set down the bag, he unhooked his magazine, slotting it into the first strap and taking one from the back, hooking it in. Admittedly, he was used to having it on his hip, not on a table in front of him, and he felt a bit slower for it. Still, Mordenna nodded encouragingly. “Nice, nice. Y’know, since those things recharge themselves over time, I was wondering if I could cut out the bag entirely and just give you two bigger, sidecar mags.”

At the terminology, Jax furrowed his brow. “‘Sidecar...?’”

“Ah, yeah.” Mordenna gestured as he spoke, picking up two of the other mags to demonstrate. “It’s when you tape the mags together like this. Speeds up every other reload, since all you gotta do is flip it for the new one. With a few improvements to the recharge mechanism and a little counter in your scope to let you know how many shots you’ve got left, I think it’d work well. Thoughts?”

Indeed, Jax gave it a moment of thought. True, it would take some getting used to as he certainly wasn’t familiar with it. Having just two mags would mean that if he started relying on his gun more in the future, he’d have to take it easy. But, as he always said, didn’t he quite pride himself on his psionics? He could easily use his powers as he gave his gun a moment or so to recharge.
Nodding, he put his gun at rest. “I believe that would work quite excellently. If you require my consent, consider it given.”

“Fantastic!” Mordenna set the mags back in their place. “Now, let’s track over to the Training Center. We’ll get you some slightly more lifelike targets to shoot at and I’ll help you get used to going from cover to firing position in a snap.”

Making sure this time to snap to the safety on his gun, Jax followed Mordenna out. Perhaps this could be some rather nice bonding time.

Even as she vaguely know she had a “reputation” to uphold, Eliza had to admit that she rather liked hanging out with her soldiers.

The Commander was currently situated in the Commons, sat back in a chair and simply soaking in the atmosphere as the circle of her own soldiers she was a part of laughed, regaled her with stories, and bantered. It was nice to mingle with her own like this. Granted, she tried her best to reach out to Arachne and let her know she was wanted—but much like Firebrand, their Sectoid made it clear she was fine on her own, and would only be more comfortable with integrating with the other soldiers when she had a more comprehensive grasp on English. Since Wiki was teaching her... learning went on hold.

That left Eliza to talk with her usual soldiers. No Chosen, Schro was laying low, but with Sammy and a few of Jax’s followers... it half-felt like old times. As old as “a few months earlier” was. It still filled Eliza with a comfortable nostalgia that kept her grinning as Benald and Pattie went back and forth over the specifics of a story, debating what was true and what wasn’t. At this point, random people were chipping in with their version of events or offering alternative explanations, the real meaning of the story being lost under gleeful interpretation or practical joking.

Fine by Eliza. She was content to simply be, to be there as a physical presence amongst her own. Still, speaking of no Chosen... it’d certainly be a joy if any of them were here. She’d heard from one of the soldiers that Jax and Mordenna were last seen heading towards the Workshop, which put her heart at ease. The fact that the siblings were willingly hanging out with each other and Mordenna seemed to have gathered the will to be around Jax again gave her pride. Now, if only she could figure out if Fal-Mai was mingling with her brothers as often as she should. It was hard to tell—the other two she’d passed in the hallways occasionally. She’d never seen Fal-Mai without being directly approached by her. That shroud was certainly handling the work there, she knew that... but there was always the small worry at the back of her mind that Fal-Mai was avoiding her for some reason. She wanted to be optimistic and think that Fal-Mai was staying in her cloak as a force of habit, but ever since Jax had started avoiding her... the thought was there.

She must’ve been frowning, as Benald stopped where he was at and looked to her, cocking an eyebrow. “What, Commander, you think ten Chryssalids didn’t seige up that tower and try to pull off Shen’s ears?”

“Yeah, of course she doesn’t think that, dumbass.” Pattie crossed her arms. “It was fifteen. I’d know because five of them came after me.”

Eliza went back to grinning, knowing Benald was trying to keep her included and her spirits up. “Ah, sorry. Lost in thought think about how, no, I don’t think it was Chryssalids... you lot sure it wasn’t ten or fifteen Faceless disguised as Chryssalids?”
That version of the story was enough to make Pattie slap her thigh in revelation. “Of course. Of course! Yeah it was fifteen Faceless! They just climbed up the tower and started fighting us and the robots!”

“Pats, I’m pretty sure they didn’t fight the robots. If anything, the robots fought them.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Well.” Benald shrugged. “I thought you knew, but I keep forgetting you’re not the brightest crayon in the shed.”

“Hey!”

“Don’t hear you denying it.”

With that, the story was forgotten as people focused on the back-and-forth between the two of them, summarily amused. That left Eliza to go back to her thoughts. Perhaps she could do the mature thing and simply ask Fal-Mai the next time she saw her if everything was alright? Then again, she was afraid of spooking Fal-Mai like she had Jax. Maybe there was a way to gently approach the issue without throwing up any perceivable red flags. *Goodness, you’re certainly putting a lot of thought into this.* Well, yeah. Kindness and sensitivity took actual work. It was a lot harder to be nice than to be cruel. So Eliza knew she’d have to put the work in. Didn’t make it any less rewarding when everything turned out swimmingly, of course.

Ah. Benald had Pattie in a friendly headlock. Knowing the two of them knew how to keep a camaraderie up without getting out of hand, she allowed a gentle chuckle at it. She’d had personal encounters with her soldiers before, of course, and she had practiced the same carefulness then as she did with the Chosen now. They knew her, she knew them, and it was the most likely reason Eliza could think of why they’d follow her this far and allow who she’d brought onto the ship. She’d like to think she fostered an atmosphere where they could bring their concerns up without fear of dismissal or rebuke. But, Elena’s outburst combined with the general complaints she’d heard about Vlad... it made her wonder if she had to hold some kind of meeting to reinforce the idea again. At least she’d heard through the grapevine that Vlad was keeping his head down. She hoped Herod could succeed in getting Vlad to realize the feelings he’d hurt and just why his arguments were so abrasive. If Herod needed any pointers... perhaps she could have a talk with him later.

Still, she thought back to her original point. She really did wish one of the Chosen were here. Any one of them were just a treat to talk to, and she imagined they could get along with the soldiers well in this type of situation. Then again... it could just be her longing talking. Holding back a sigh as the soldiers switched to another topic, she clasped her hands in front of her. Her bleeding heart really couldn’t keep itself from falling in love with all three of them, it seemed. It was something she knew would always remain a longing—after all, there were so many aspects in the way of it. First of all, societal norms dictated she’d have to choose one, and that brought its own problems. Even if all three of them agreed to be with her in a weird sort of open-relationship she hadn’t seen outside of the “hippie circles” she’d heard one of her grandfathers rant about... did they see her in that way at all? Yes, there was the comforting, the confiding, the crying, but Eliza was just seeing that as being a true friend and Commander nowadays. It didn’t necessarily show there was a founding there for a serious relationship. Would they even be attracted to her? Did they still feel attraction at all?

This time, she couldn’t hold back a sigh. Herod, who was next to her, leaned over and kept his voice low as the other soldiers took no notice. “Something on your mind, Commander?”
“Oh, plenty,” she replied, adjusting herself in her chair. “I’ve got a lot to think about. Always have.” She leveled a tired, but joking look at him. “Commanding was a mistake. Take it from me; don’t do it.”

Herod chuckled, shaking his head. “Suggestion noted, I suppose. Still, anything you’d like to talk about?”

She set her mouth into a line. “I shouldn’t bother you with my personal thoughts, Herod. You all have much more to worry about without me piling my own problems onto your plate.”

“What, and not let me pay you back for the advice you gave me?” Playfully, he punched Eliza’s shoulder. “It’s alright, Commander. You don’t gotta tell me, but aren’t you the person who told me about the virtues of letting stuff off of your chest?”

He had her there. As much as she didn’t want to go into her romantic troubles, Herod was one she knew she could trust. But the minute she opened her mouth to suggest something, the door to the Commons opened, and a lot of people looked over. Standing in the doorway was Elena.

About instantly, the mood shifted. The laughing and friendly talk died down. News travelled fast on the Avenger, and it wasn’t a stretch for Eliza to guess that they all knew what happened between her and Mordenna. Still, she hadn’t thought it would be this pronounced. She knew Mordenna probably had a better image amongst her own than his other siblings, but this shunning silence implied something more was going on.

Benald and Pattie sat backwards on their chairs to face her, and Pattie opened up. “Oh, look, it’s little miss ‘I gotta corner the big, bad Chosen alone.’ Boo, hoo, hoo.”

“Afraid to square up where there were people batting in his corner?” Benald scoffed. “Knew Reapers were slinkers, but you take the cake.”

“Not all Reapers. Arsozu’s chill. But you’re giving them a bad name.”

“Bad naming’s about all she can do with her skillset—”

“Enough.” Elena cut across the both of them, looking to Eliza. “Commander. I want to talk privately.”

Before Eliza could reply, Rosa leaned forward from her perch on SYN. “Gonna get her off on her own to try to shittalk her, too? Guarantee you the beatdown we’ll give you will make you think twice.”

“Might as well let her,” Benald said, doing a dismissive gesture with his hand. “Let the Commander kick her ass.”

“Alright, alright.” Eliza stood up, holding up a hand to cease the jabs. “I appreciate it, but let me fight my own battles. Try to keep the open jeering to a minimum. Don’t care if it’s deserved or not.” When she got her respectful nods, she walked out of the circle and met with Elena. When they wandered out into the hall, Eliza turned to her. “Well, you have my attention. What do you need?”

Elena rubbed her shoulder almost nervously even as her expression was calm, looking to the side as she began. “I... I wanted to explain myself over that whole incident. If you’ll listen to me.”

Eliza shrugged. “People have committed far greater crimes in my presence and I’ve heard them out before.”
“Right.” She looked back to Eliza, crossing her arms. “It’s... really no secret that Tomko was turned into the Hunter. Volk makes a show of denying the rumors, but every Reaper knows we lost one of our own, then a year later, he appeared.” She looked away from the Commander again, face hidden by her hood. “I don’t know what I was to him. Maybe something important, if things... if things happened like how I think they did. The wet patch on your shoulder wasn’t exactly missable.”

“As I intended.”

Elena seemed to wince at that, but she continued. “Tomko meant a lot to me. And I’ll be the first to admit I liked him in a different way than he liked me. We were good friends, at the very least. Can you see where I’m going with this?”

“Yes,” Eliza said softly, “but I want you to say it.”

She sighed. “...So when he shows up after killing our own and toying with us for fifteen years, eating at one of our feasts and being implicitly *welcomed*, I just don’t know what to say.” She paused. “Well, I suppose that’s a lie. I knew exactly what to say, and you know I said it. I just didn’t know what to *feel*. It looked like to me that he was mocking us. Standing there and spitting in the face of everything that had happened. And I... I just assumed he knew. Can’t really blame me, with the way he talks. I assumed he knew that and that he knew *me*. When he called me ‘Ellie’ I just... well, you know.” She looked back to Eliza, eyes a bit more vulnerable. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said all that to him. If he doesn’t remember, then, well... we already lost Tomko fifteen years ago. High time I started acting like it.”

Eliza gave herself a moment to reflect on all that Elena had said. To Eliza’s ears, she sounded quite genuine—it was rare to see Elena like this, so openly revealing information as she was. Eliza could feel sympathy for her, and understood what it was like to lash out like that. But, there were still things left to be said. “All in all, I believe you, Elena, and I appreciate you letting me know what was happening. It’s a humble act to explain yourself even when you know it won’t get you out of trouble. However.” She took in a calm breath. “I’m not the one you should be apologizing to. Regardless of who he is now... there was enough of Tomko left in Mordenna to make what you said hurt. But, I suppose you’d gathered that already. This won’t be truly cleared up until you approach him and let him know you’re sorry. Do you get me?”

Though she grimaced, Elena ended up nodding. “Yeah. I get you. It’ll be the hard part. It’s... hard not to look at him and both see the killer we’ve known for fifteen years... and Tomko.”

“Hardly anything worthwhile in life is easy, Dragunova. But I shouldn’t be telling you that. Reapers always prided themselves on tackling the tougher aspects, right?”

“Right.” Her shoulders slumped, though if it was from relief or something else, Eliza couldn’t guess. “Thanks, Commander. That was really all I wanted to say.”

Eliza nodded. “Want me to let them know you’re going to be making amends?”

“No,” she said, half-turning to leave, “I deserve the coldness, at least. If he... if *Mordenna* thinks I’m being serious, he can let them know. Didn’t think he’d have that many people in his corner.”

“Like I said, he’s been proving himself, as have his siblings and everyone else I let on this ship.” She inclined her head to her. “But, I’ll respect your wishes. Best of luck, Elena.”

With a nod, Elena stalked down the hallway, footsteps quiet and hardly echoing, eventually leaving Eliza to her thoughts. She’d forgive Elena as fast as Mordenna did—forgiveness was kind
of her department, but she wasn’t the main person being wronged here. She sighed, looking back towards the door. Hopefully the soldiers had gotten back to their camaraderie. If not, it wouldn’t take much from her to start it back up again. As much as Eliza had put Elena to the grinder, she didn’t want her ostracized forever, as well as any of her soldiers. As soon as they could tune back their attitude, they could rejoin their fellows, was her belief. Hopefully Elena could find Mordenna soon and muster up the courage to get her apologies out of the way.

Well, only time would tell. With a hopeful spark in her heart, Eliza tapped the door pad. She could still have some fun before the day was up.

If Fal-Mai wanted to be a better sister, she supposed, she would have to start hanging out with her brothers more often.

So that was what was spurring Fal-Mai into following the general direction of Jax’s signature, searching for him and hoping that perhaps he and Mordenna were together. She was... quite aware of how much she tended to simply keep to herself and put her cloak up as to not have to engage with anyone without her wanting to. The good part was that it did exactly that. The bad part was that she felt isolated of her own measure. Several times she’d passed either her brothers or even Eliza in the halls and... simply didn’t engage. With her brothers she feared rejection. With Eliza, more of the same. But she’d resolved she’d never know until she tried. Her brothers were an easier start in her eyes. She supposed the next thing she might end up doing was hanging out with the regular soldiers more often. Edgar intrigued her, and she had to admit, the ravens were charming.

A few more turns brought her outside of the room that Jax was most likely in. This close, Fal-Mai could hear his signature. There was no music to it, but it was curiously harmonious of its own accord regardless—a low roll of pure power against her ears, but restrained naturally enough to be gentle. There was no intent to intimidate. His power simply was, like a natural force. Even so, there was something ever so slightly off about it that Fal-Mai had always been able to hear, but could never guess at what was wrong.

Satisfied at her dissection of his signature, Fal-Mai tapped the panel to the Training Center, stepping on in. What greeted her was one half of a room dressed in white and clad with armaments on the walls, with a clear control station to handle the other half. The other half was a holographic, but seemingly solid projection of an ADVENT city center. She watched as a Sectoid peeked its head out from behind an art fixture... and summarily had it shot off. Having nailed his mark, Jax crouched back into his cover, and off to the side, Mordenna nodded. “There you go. Honestly, if it were a real Sectoid out in the field, I’d imagine you’d have an even easier time of telling when they were sliding out. Y’know, feeling their signatures move, and all.”

Jax nodded, but his eyes slid to the door as it closed. He raised his eyebrows, and Fal-Mai thought she was about to be addressed... but he looked back to Mordenna. “Quite so, but I feel as if your tips will be instrumental in simply capitalizing on it in the first place.”

“All about keeping a cool head and your eyes on the prize.” Mordenna took a datapad off of his hip. “Want to reset? Think with a few more we can work you up to a real shooting gallery. You’re learning fast, honestly.”

Ah. So Mordenna was teaching Jax how to shoot? How... kind of him. She knew that Mordenna had mentioned it to her in passing, but it was still quite a sight to see. Fal-Mai, herself, was self-
taught. She was only limited by her weapon’s range, but even then she possessed enough mobility to close the gap.

Jax shook his head, rising from his crouch and flipping a switch on the side of his gun. “Perhaps later. I believe our sister’s here.”

“Is she?” Mordenna clapped his hands together after putting the datapad back, squinting around the room. Since she wasn’t focusing on her shroud very hard, once his eyes raked over where she was, he grinned. “So she is! Hey there, you sneaky bastard. Need something?”

Cover blown, but with no grudge held, Fal-Mai stepped out of her cloak. “I’ve nothing in particular to ask of you two. Simply the want to... convene.”

“Oh? The ever-stealthy Assassin, wanting to hang out?” Mordenna pressed a hand to his chest in mock shock. “Bro. Bro you hearing this? Can you imagine. All joking aside, sis, sure! I was just teaching Jax how to suck a little less at making enemies take dirt naps.”

Jax scoffed. “As if I was somehow deficient before, with my vast arsenal of powers?”

“Variety is the spice of life, dear brother.” Mordenna pointed to their brother with both hands, thumbs up as if imitating handguns. What a curious gesture. “And besides, relying on one thing too often is bound to stop working eventually. Fal-Mai please tell our brother this.”

As both their gazes fell to her—granted, Jax only did so after huffing at Mordenna—Fal-Mai felt implicitly welcomed, even if Mordenna had already stated she could hang around them. Knowing she was being invited to some of his trademark “banter,” Fal-Mai shook her head. “And yet there is much variety in Jax’s arsenal, is there not? While he does rely on his psionics, he employs multiple facets of them. I could make the same argument that you rely on guns too much.”

Mordenna made a noise of exasperated disapproval. “First the Skyranger, now here?! Who the hell’s side are you on? Look, man, I rely on multiple guns, a knife, and a grappling hook.”

“‘Multiple’ being the new word for ‘two?’”

“Yes! Yes, by royal decree of me, multiple can mean two. So I speak, so it shall be.”

“Mordenna, Mordenna, Mordenna.” Jax clapped a hand on Mordenna shoulder with enough force to make him stagger slightly. “There is a certain amount of pride in admitting defeat, I do hope you know. Surely you don’t think you could win against the unified force of the two of us?” He paused. “My apologies. I suppose that would be multiple on one.”

In response, Mordenna punched Jax’s arm off of his shoulder, jabbing his finger at him. “I will end you. You wanna fight in the Pit? Huh? I will make you cry uncle faster than Bradford can crash this ship drunk.”

“Ah, there we are. You see, brother? Not so hard at all.”

“Mark my words I will destroy you.”

Honestly, the exchange was enough to get Fal-Mai to laugh. It was so unlike all of their previous interactions—the playful fighting a stark contrast to the very real battles of snide comments and hurtful retorts. It was honestly so relieving. To see her brothers acting as she’d seen soldiers on the ship do towards each other... it gave her hope.

Jax looked to Fal-Mai and smiled gently, though it moved to fit his performative bravado as he
extended a hand towards her. “You see? Our sister can only agree as to the foolishness of your charade. Honestly, Mordenna, if your skin is indeed that thin, I would soon suggest armor such as mine.”

Mordenna looked like he had a hot, but funny retort to that for a second before Fal-Mai spied one of his telltale “eureka” moments, shaking his finger as it looked like he was bringing an idea forth. “Alright. Banter and potential sparring match set aside, that reminds me. I was actually looking into handling new armor as my next project, and I figured I could extend that to the both of you. Sis, Lily’s excited to see if she can’t fit you for a Wraith Suit because won’t that be overpowered, and bro, I’m thinking about going behind the Templars’ backs and rearranging your gauntlets to support their blades. Y’know. Close range. Zaps. Shields. The works.”

As much as she was sure Mordenna meant the offer kindly, the thought of changing or even removing her armor felt... wrong, to her. She was quick to suss out that she should not be holding onto any gift from the Elders save to use it against them. After that, she felt mildly embarrassed when she realized she was putting up a minor fight over the idea of having to get used to a new texture of material for her armor.

Still, best to let Mordenna know what her hangup was, especially as Jax looked markedly more reserved than she did at the idea. “I believe such an implement will be a boon to me, especially if some of the things I have heard from the soldiers are true. However...” She pressed her mouth into a line. “You know how... hypersensitive, my skin is.”

“Oh, that’s doable.” Mordenna waved it off. “I made you a mask that felt like the one before, if your reaction to it meant anything. I can modify the Wraith Suit to feel like your current set of armor. Might need a piece of yours for study, of course, but once I get the surface composition down you’d be able to have it back.” He looked to Jax, whose mildly dampened mood was easily conveyed by his expression. Mordenna’s voice softened. “Got any, uh, got any objections, Jax?”

Jax crossed his arms, taking in a breath and blowing it out gently. “I... would not like to move on from this armor yet. And my gauntlets are very... important to me. I think I could allow modification on them if Fal-Mai likes her armor.”

Mordenna opened his mouth, looking for all the world like he was going to go on a tangent about the Elders. But, instead he sighed, shrugging. “Yeah. I can do that. Can I at least dye your armor?” At Jax’s questioning expression, he continued. “Half of the reason I was suggesting this was because. Well. We all need a wardrobe change. We’re all kinda still flying ADVENT colors here. Not to mention this,” he said, tapping the Chosen emblem on his chest.

Jax gave it a moment of thought, then nodded. “You present a fair point. I would certainly allow a mere color change. Though, might I ask how you will do so?”

“Simple—few pieces of tape, some dyes—”

“Brother,” Jax gently interrupted with, “I think you forget that we do not have a spare change of clothes.”

Ah. Jax also had a fair point. The nature of Fal-Mai’s physiology did not require her to take baths—something she was unsure if Helena ordained or if she shared it with her brothers—and she’d never felt the need to slip out of the second skin that was her armor. She had spare sets at her Stronghold before, but here? No such luck. All she had was her undersuit beneath, and she would not wear that while Mordenna was dying her armor.

Thankfully, Jax broke the silence he’d caused with that realization. “I believe I have a solution—
once my Tailors finally have access to materials, I think we can, horror of horrors, accept *casual clothing."

“What? What is this ‘casual clothing’ you speak of?” Mordenna did his best to look baffled. “I’m pretty sure we were all born in these duds. Quite literally for the samurai over here. What would you even wear casually? A Roman tunic?”

“Do not tempt me.”

Mordenna heaved an exasperated sigh. “Guess I shouldn’t. My idea was just going to be slapping a gas mask on you guys and having you stand still for like, oh I don’t know, however long it takes for me to do the detail work?”

“An interesting way to speed up the process.” Jax gestured with a hand. “I have mastery in the art of maintaining a pose for hours on end. Lest you forget the very pieces you griped about in my art gallery.”

“You modeled those?! Bro. TMI.”

To save Mordenna from further ribbing on Jax’s part, Fal-Mai chimed in. “I would also be fine with such a solution—lest you forget you *made* me such a mask, and while I cannot claim expertise like our brother, I believe I would be able to stand still reasonably well.”

“Hey, as long as you can stand more still than the ship when Bradford’s taking it for joyrides,” Mordenna replied, “it’s fine by me. I’ll see if I can’t drag you guys to the side to do it. Hell, honestly? There’s a lot of stuff I want to make for you guys. And... one thing I was *considering* making a gift, but you know me, bro, I get too excited about the stuff I make. Plus, I want to run it by you to make sure you’d like it. You guys wanna move this shindig to the Workshop?” When the both of them nodded, Mordenna took it upon himself to start marching towards the door. As they followed him out and they began to walk, he angled his head back. “By the way, you guys hear about that mission Eliza’s planning?”

Right. That must be the one Fal-Mai had the pleasure of hearing about in-person. She bobbed her head before she spoke. “The one that investigates the cave, yes? Is it coming up soon?”

“Yeah, pretty much.” Mordenna went back to looking at where he was going, gesturing as he spoke. “Bout as much as we can gather, there’s probably people holed up in there that are twitchy enough to fire on whoever’s coming close. Which, honestly, don’t blame them. Funny thing is, we’re picking up hints of a radio *broadcast* coming from there, but at our current distance, we can’t hear anything of it. Lizzie let slip a few details while I was messing with the Hologlobe over on the Bridge.”

“You seem rather well-informed,” Jax commented.

“I listen more than people think I do. Kinda gotta. Brain won’t let me do shit otherwise until it starts fucking up.” Mordenna shrugged. “But you guys basically know when that’s happening. Speaking of, uh...” He rubbed the back of his neck through his hood. “...I know I already said it after it happened, but thanks for sticking with me when I came after. Y’know. *That* whole business with Elena.”

The incident Mordenna was speaking of, Fal-Mai remembered, happened a few days prior. Fal-Mai had gotten a level and *kind of* distress she’d never felt out of Mordenna, and sought out Jax to make sure he was alright. By the time they’d decided to go search the ship for their brother, Mordenna had already made his way to them, a bit better than what his communicated feelings
would’ve made them assume. She smiled gently. “It is only natural, isn’t it?”

“Agreed.” Jax walked forward enough to pat Mordenna’s shoulder. “As you have come for and supported me, I shall do the same for you. And for you,” he said, pointing that statement over his shoulder at Fal-Mai. “Lest you forget.”

“I appreciate the reminders, brother.”

“Ah, look at us.” Mordenna looked back at them again. “Picture-perfect specimens of a happy family. It’s so saccharine I could die.”

“Try to die on my watch,” Jax said, wagging a clawed finger at him, “and I will faster kill you myself.”

“Dude. Wanna give that statement a second draft?”

Whatever witty retort Jax had for that statement, it seemed to die on his lips as the devil rounded the corner, assuredly having heard her name spoken. Elena stopped up as the three Chosen stared her down in varying degrees of hesitance to anger. It was Fal-Mai who acted first, walking up from behind Mordenna and standing partially in front of him. “If you’ve any sensible thoughts,” she began, “you will let us pass you by.”

Jax followed after her, taking the spot next to her and further obscuring Mordenna. “And if you dare possess sense,” he added, “we will not have to explain why.

The dual offense of Fal-Mai and Jax seemed to make Elena falter, but she brought herself back up to full height. “I want to say something, and then you all can go.” She swallowed. “I want to apologize.”

Though Fal-Mai was initially taken off-guard, she remained resolute. Elena had harmed her brother greatly. Even if she wished to apologize... “Then you will do so where you stand.”

Looking like she wasn’t fond of that prospect, but equally didn’t want to talk back to no less than three Chosen, Elena squared her shoulders. “… Mordenna. I... I shouldn’t have said what I did to you. Should’ve listened to myself when I said you weren’t Tomko, because that meant I really didn’t have business saying all that. If you’re... aiming for something different, fine. Good luck to you on that.”

Elena’s rather brief apology over, Fal-Mai glanced back to Mordenna. His eyebrows were ever so slightly pushed together, and he was looking down, not meeting anyone’s gaze. The look was unbecoming of him—it was almost shy. Eventually, however, he crossed his arms and turned his head to the side. “… well I appreciate the apology, if nothing else,” he began, voice quiet. “Doesn’t really... remove anything you’ve said. Think it’d be best if things were like they were before and we just. Didn’t talk to each other. At all.”

Elena looked reserved at that, but she nodded. “I can do that.” Her hands rested in her pockets, and she turned slightly, as if she was about to leave. “That was about all I had to say. I’ll leave you three alone, now.” With that, she completed the turn, disappearing down the hallway she entered from.

Fal-Mai waited until her footsteps told her that Elena was far enough away to not hear them. When they did, she turned back to Mordenna, who was running a hand through his hair. “Everything alright, brother?”

“Yeah. I suppose.” He dragged a hand down his face. “I just—I don’t know what to say to her.
You guys know how she hurt me. I’m—I’m not used to someone actually getting to me that isn’t you guys or the Elders. You guys I understand are family, we’ll tick each other off. The Elders are bastards, as we know. But *her*?” He sighed, flicking a hand in a despondent gesture. “... I shouldn’t let it get to me. How weak do I have to be to let a human bring me down, huh?”

“Not all humans, brother,” Jax chimed in. “Though I don’t blame you for saying so. Remember—Eliza ranks among them.”

That was enough to get Mordenna to smirk as he shook his head. “I forget, sometimes. She just feels like one of us without being family, y’know?”

“An equal without measure,” Fal-Mai added. “Sometimes, I would not hesitate in placing her above myself.”

“Yeah. Need to do something for that poor girl.” His eyes roamed to Jax, then the horns on his head. “... yeah, maybe I can do something like that. Help her in channeling her psionics, yeah? Perhaps I can even jerry-rig some gauntlets for her. Y’know, help her with training?”

Jax nodded at that. “The gauntlets first, I would imagine. Best to make sure she can control it without...”

“Hey, yeah, that’s the idea,” Mordenna followed up quickly, all of them knowing where that might be going. “I might need to take a few cues from yours—which, hell, we can do. We’re heading down to the Workshop, I’d be able to take a look at them, right? Or are they surgically attached to you?”

He went “hmph.” “I think you will find that I am able to remove them from my person satisfactorily enough.”

“You have to understand why he asks, brother,” Fal-Mai spoke, giving a small smile. “After all, you might be mistaken for relying on them exclusively.”

Jax balked at that, clearly seeing where that was going. “Come, now! You were just defending me no less than five minutes ago, Fal-Mai. Et tu?”

Fal-Mai gave a small laugh. “I suppose I can relent, for now. I believe we were off to the Workshop...?”

Mordenna grinned. “Right you are! But don’t stop grilling Jax with me, I could always use the assistance. You see the size of this lad?”

Off they walked, exchanging banter and the occasional idea from Mordenna. Fal-Mai would readily admit she would’ve never seen this as a possibility a month ago. The easygoing atmosphere was totally unlike what she was used to. But, it wasn’t necessarily a change she was against. After all, this felt far better than the bitter competition they had been embroiled in for so long. Having them here for her, able to help them out and be helped in kind?

Fal-Mai could feel her smile growing. Her brothers were the best.
Fal-Mai had wondered what mission organization would be like at XCOM, when she first joined. With this meeting and the previous one, she supposed she knew now.

The Assassin was standing at the Hologlobe with Eliza, Jax, and Bradford in attendance, currently waiting on Mordenna to finally show up. These meetings were interesting—along with Eliza’s continued insistence on inviting her and her brothers to them. Mordenna, she could understand—he was a tactician given knowledge and strategy from Eliza herself. Her and Jax, however? She didn’t imagine she’d have much to impart, but she wasn’t about to question Eliza’s reasonings. Surely there was something more to it that Eliza was counting on that Fal-Mai simply didn’t realize.

Whatever the case was, her train of thought was broken when she heard Jax’s next reply in the conversation they’d been holding. “—and do you think there is, perhaps, any way that you can ‘ransom’ some of the havens out of textiles and the such?”

Eliza sighed, leaning on the table-like platform in the middle of all of them. “I’ll see what I can do. Not that I’m hesitant to do so—more clothes for all of the soldiers and whatever else your tailors can come up with sounds like a great thing to invest in. Sadly, the havens are getting a bit... testy, nowadays. Apparently the ‘rampant scores of aliens I’m picking up’—their quote, not mine—is concerning them a fair bit.”

Bradford crossed his arms. “It’s pretty easy for them to forget how much they rely on us for protection.”

“I can understand the concern to an extent,” Eliza continued, “but honestly? I’ve only heard two valid complaints about you guys,” she said, nodding to Jax and Fal-Mai, “thus far. One was from Roland, the other from Volk. Both of them were about Mordenna.”

Jax gave a soft chuckle. “Fitting.”

Eliza rolled her eyes, but she was smiling as she did so. “But, back to the original point? I’ll see if I can’t talk some sense into them and score you some textiles. I mean, all else fails, there is the Black Market. And god knows the Baroness misses me.”

Bradford gave a concerned “hm.” “Probably best not to cosy up to the head of the Black Market too much, Eliza. She might start asking favors you can’t fulfill.”

“As far as I’m concerned, I’m already doing favors for her.” Eliza gestured to Bradford. “We’ve basically cleared out our excess corpse stocks though her and half of our allotted intel is practically hers. Unlike the havens, I think she knows just what would happen if XCOM stopped supporting her. Not to mention, though I hate putting it this way, clearing out the Chosen.”

“It is an accurate statement,” Fal-Mai replied. “If we are too busy fighting for XCOM, we do not exactly possess the time to root out the Black Market.”
“I had been shockingly close,” Jax half-lamented, “to discovering their hiding place. A true shame I had to be kidnapped by XCOM and its dastardly Commander before then, hm?”

Eliza and Bradford chuckled, with Bradford shaking his head. “Never thought I’d live to see the day of you using humor, Jax.”

As funny as the notion was indeed, that left Fal-Mai with a question. “Brother, I’d never heard Mordenna boast about finding the Black Market—if anything, he wished to see it continue. Out of the three of us, how did you come so close to finding it?”

“Simple, really.” Jax gestured with an open palm, but there was a graveness, of sorts, to his face. “You would be surprised what humans utter at confessionals. My network of former Priests were starting to root out the Black Market by sheer force of guilt of those who patronized it. Gathering trends of the areas of confession, along with details from some of the more harrowed parties, I was slowly working out where it lay without ever stepping foot near it.”

Eliza raised her eyebrows. “—starting to be glad that Christianity was never my thing.”

“Easy for you to say,” Bradford replied. “This is just giving me bad feelings about my own time in church.”

“‘Guilt’ is a strong agent of truth,” Fal-Mai observed. “Knowing your methods now, I am no longer surprised you had nearly sussed out its location.”

“Still, all things aside,” Eliza said, “maybe it’s time to visit the Black Market soon. Perhaps I could bring you guys along to show her the rumors are true, yeah?”

Jax shrugged. “I see no objections of mine, so long as they do not endeavor to shoot me and my siblings upon sight. If anything, I would like to meet the woman who is to be the supplier to my Mystics, just in case any complications arise.”

Eliza nodded. “The Baroness is usually pretty good at getting XCOM quality materials.”

“As for myself...” Fal-Mai threaded her fingers together in front of her. “Though I see no personal business of mine to be had with this ‘Baroness,’ I will attend as a bodyguard, if your intent is to see her in person.”

“Usually do.” Eliza sighed. “Mostly because she’s one of the few people that I do maintain direct contact with because I’m pretty sure she’s holding my likeness to implicit ransom. Surprisingly, the larger world doesn’t know what I look like or even that I’m a woman. The word ‘Commander’ tends to inspire a grizzled, world-weary man into the minds of most.”

Jax grinned. “So I assume Bradford is your acting ‘Commander?’”

“Hey,” Bradford protested, “it’s a legitimate tactic.”

Eliza laughed. “Yeah, pretty much.”

Fal-Mai was sure the conversation would’ve continued had one of the doors to the Bridge not opened to reveal Mordenna, who came in with arms spread out in a grand gesture. “Oh, much like the Siberian winter descending upon the Nazis, I am an inevitability that idiots choose to ignore! How’s everyone doing in this ship tonight?”

Jax scoffed. “We were having a lovely conversation, but I see now that will no longer be the case.”
Mordenna pointed a finger at Jax as he took the last unoccupied spot at the meeting. “You love me and you know it. Now! Before we begin, I have a progress update on Wiki. Turns out, yeah, she pretty much just burnt herself out pulling that intense of a teleport. The Shadow Chamber was able to find her own blueprint in her brain—a nice contingency plan, but I’d faster credit Wiki than my bastard of an old man for that—and the fix won’t take long. After that, just need to power her back up and we’ll have our favorite Codex back!”

“Good work, Mordenna,” Bradford replied. “Glad to know we’ll have one of our own back soon enough.”

“Hey, defying death is my thing.” Mordenna shrugged, carefree. “Until I figure out the secrets of immortality, I’ll practice on robots.”

“Fair enough.” Eliza straightened, assuming a professional air. “If that’s all you had to impart, I’d like to get on with the planning for this upcoming mission.”

“That was it, Lizzie. Hit us.”

Nodding, Eliza got her datapad off of her belt, manipulating the projected globe in front of them with it. “Our upcoming mission relates to an area of interest that the Skirmishers passed onto us. They have reports of missing scouts from that area, and we’ve recently started picking up a radio signal from it. As of earlier today, we’ve just gotten close enough to pick up the message whoever’s there has been broadcasting. Playing the message... now.”

Eliza tapped something on her pad, and soon, a voice started filtering from the Hologlobe. It was in English, but it sounded as if whoever was trying to speak it didn’t have a fully human mouth. “To those fighting against ADVENT, we have a message. We are four rulers of the planets the Elders have conquered and taken our people to wage a war on Earth. We intend to strike back at those who stole our very lives from us, and we would be welcome to any help that is offered. The Elders and ADVENT will be made to pay for their crimes, and we can accomplish this goal together. Repeating this message. To those—”

The message went silent, and Eliza looked back up at them. “We got precise coordinates from the broadcast, but whatever equipment they’re using, Shen says it’s horribly out of date, and is likely attracting attention. There’s a good chance ADVENT is planning to move on them as we are.”

“Four rulers, eh?” Mordenna rubbed his chin. “Siblings of mine, you wouldn’t happen to remember the outstanding kill orders for ‘Alien Rulers’ on the Network, would you?”

“I would,” Jax replied, “We were meant to hunt them down when given the chance.”

“Yeah, well, we all know how lazy I am when I comes to orders from the Elders.” Mordenna tilted his head. “Still, though, I’ll give some credit to that woman. For being a middle-aged, scientist, Vahlen sure managed to—”

Bradford and Eliza’s reactions were instant and noticeable enough to make Mordenna stop up. Bradford looked like he’d had the wind knocked out of him, and Eliza? There was some hardened expression on Eliza’s face, and she looked away, muttering something Fal-Mai was sure only she could catch. “Of course. Of course it had to be her who survived.”

“Uh...” Mordenna cleared his throat. “You guys got some history with Vahlen I surprisingly don’t know about, or?”

Bradford was the first to speak after her recovered. “... Vahlen was our head scientist at First
Contact. She fulfilled the role Tygan does now. She... also carried out the interrogations we did at that time. Think I speak for Eliza and I here when I say she’s half the reason why we don’t do them anymore.”

Eliza sighed, massaging her forehead. “She’s also a living monument to everything I’d done wrong at First Contact. If I never see her again, it’ll be too soon.”

“Yikes.” Mordenna rubbed the back of his neck. “She’s not exactly someone you’re clamoring to recruit again, is what I’m getting out of this. Well, for what it’s worth, she was the one who stole the Alien Rulers from ADVENT custody. Though, what she did from there, nobody knows. If the aliens are still alive and are now rallying a rebellion, who knows? Maybe she had a change of heart.”

Eliza didn’t look too encouraged at that, but her expression softened. “Well, I suppose if I’m willing to forgive you guys for what you’ve done... who knows? Maybe Vahlen was in the same situation I was. But...” She squinted at the Hologlobe. “If that was the case, wouldn’t it be her putting out that broadcast? I’ve never heard that voice before, if it isn’t clear.”

Jax, similarly, looked into the Hologlobe. “Perhaps she was anticipating your exact reaction and hoping to bring you in before explaining her situation.”

“Sounds likely.” Bradford’s arms fell to his sides. “So. We’re gonna need a squad assembled out there.”

“Well, if Vahlen’s using the aliens as a front,” Eliza said, bringing up the datapad again, “I might as well send you guys in there to show them just how accepting I am. You all good with that?”

When Fal-Mai and her brothers nodded, a roster came up and their names appeared. “Great. I’ll send Sammy as our diplomat—” Samhien’s name then appeared, “—and... hm. What to do with our last slots?”

“Been a while since you sent SYN out there,” Mordenna commented. “Can I see my handiwork in action? Pretty please?”

Giving a single chuckle, Eliza nodded. “Alright. And with SYN should probably come Rosa. Need our Grenadier, after all.”

“Once I get that minigun made for you,” Mordenna said, addressing Jax, “sending anybody but us three is gonna be even **more** redundant. Fit you up with a grenade launcher—well, actually, wouldn’t you just be able to **teleport** the grenades in at their feet?”

“Oh you are gonna be a murder **machine** when I’m done with you. I’ll make you a better version of a WAR Suit and I will make a weapon that will surpass all the fears of ADVENT.”

“Boys,” Eliza interrupted, smiling, “is there a potentially disastrous project I need to know about?”

“Simply the possible destruction of this ship and everyone on it,” Fal-Mai muttered, hiding a content smile behind her hand as she looked to the side.

“Hey!” Mordenna jabbed a finger at her. “It’s not **that** bad. God knows Lily would continuously smack me upside my head should I do something that dangerous. But, yeah. Commander? Jax. With a minigun.”
Eliza shook her head. “That’s practically a war crime. Don’t the Geneva Conventions cover excessive use of force?”

Grinning, Mordenna wagged a finger at her. “Only if I’m using him to intimidate the sick or imprisoned!”

She sighed. “Hypothetical question. I know the Geneva Conventions—and I’m pretty sure you only know because I know.”

“Imprinted knowledge is interesting, even if I didn’t particularly ask for it.”

“True enough.” Dismissing the tangent, Eliza shook her head. “In any case, get yourselves mentally prepared. We’ll be landing at the site in three hours. I’ll call you all down for a final debriefing right before I deploy you, as always. Any questions?” When none were presented. Eliza nodded to all of them. “Alright. You are all dismissed.”

When Mordenna immediately slid over to Jax and continued to go on about Jax’s potential new arsenal and Bradford tapped Eliza’s shoulder, starting to bring her to the side, Fal-Mai supposed she was on her own. She brought her cloak over herself and went to walk out of the room. She’d entertain herself for those three hours, and then? She would be ready to fight.

By the time the three hours were up and Fal-Mai got a message in her ear to head down to the Armory, she was in deep in Edgar’s flock, with an untold amount of ravens around her and perched on her. The message practically shattered the gentle relaxation she’d lapsed into in the Commons, petting a few of the ravens after she’d been instructed how to handle them by the man herself.

Her expression must’ve been clear, as Edgar chuckled. “The voice of god come calling, Neylor?”

She blinked a few times. Edgar was strange and tended to use people’s last names if he knew them. “—I suppose if the Commander summoning me would be such, then yes. I appreciate the time I was able to spend with you and yours.”

“But of course!” Edgar whistled, and the practical omen of ravens lifted off and freed Fal-Mai, allowing her to stand.

Nevermore, currently sitting comfortably on Edgar’s lap, regarded her. The blatant intelligence the mutated raven exhibited always caught her off guard. “I can tell they are just as happy to have you, Assassin. After they acclimated to your psionics, they were more than happy to have your attention.”

“Sorry again about that,” Edgar muttered. “They’ve... learned to associate strange psionics such as yours and the ones from ADVENT with danger. Takes them a bit to readjust, but you can’t blame them, can you?”

Fal-Mai shook her head. “Considering their nature, it’s only natural to avoid that which has heralded peril before. I am simply glad they learned I am not here to harm them.”

Edgar nodded, idly scratching behind the plume on Nevermore’s head. “And if you keep coming by, the idea will stick. Now. My court, what do we say?”
Either Edgar had trained them enough that this was a practiced response, or the ravens were more intelligent than she gave them credit for, but in either case they all croaked out a “thank you” in near unison. The spectacle made Fal-Mai smile. Edgar himself chuckled. “Courteous, aren’t they? I won’t keep you any longer—go on, and tell the Commander I said hello, alright?”

She nodded, and turned on her heel, walking out of the Commons. It was, indeed, nice to hang out with Eliza’s soldiers. The ones that would have her, of course—Edgar was one of her first choices for that reason and because... well, she had a soft spot for the ravens. They were positively adorable, even if they were bigger than she’d thought they’d be.

Enough walking and she eventually got to the Armory, where the squad for the upcoming mission were gathering their weapons. The lights high up in the ceiling highlighted her and her brothers’ new coat of paint on their armor—a washed-out blue, emblematic of XCOM’s colors. Speaking of emblems, Mordenna had also gone to work sanding those off of their armor. She took to it readily. Jax... needed a little convincing, but eventually they managed.

In the middle of them all was Eliza, who nodded to Fal-Mai as she walked in, gathering her Arashi from its rack. When everyone was properly suited up, they came to stand in a line in front of the Commander, who cleared her throat before she spoke. “Menace One-Five, your mission today is one of diplomacy. We have it on good intel that there is possibly a new resistance faction, if not a new set of allies currently holed up at our destination. They describe themselves as ‘four rulers of planets that ADVENT has conquered’ from their radio broadcast.” She then nodded to the Chosen. “I’ve heard that you lot have knowledge of them?”

Mordenna was the one to speak up. “My knowledge is patchy thanks to Severance Effect, but I do know that there was an Archon King and a Berserker Queen mentioned.”

Fal-Mai nodded. She knew of those two, but she also remembered the third. “And a Viper King.”

“Oh lord,” Mordenna replied. “God knows they’ll have Viper forces for days if that’s the case.”

“The final one,” Jax added, “is one known as a ‘Gourgeamus Queen,’ of whose race has been not yet used in ADVENT’s planet conquering, it seems.”

“At least not for Earth yet,” Eliza muttered. Gathering herself, she nodded. “Menace One-Five, you are to approach without weapons drawn and try to make contact with these Alien Rulers. The Avenger would make first contact, but their equipment is ‘out of date’ according to Shen.”

“The radio they’re using is like from 2010,” Mordenna said, shaking his head. “How retro can you get?”

“Just one question, Commander.” Rosa has spoken up. “If this is a diplomacy mission, why are you sending in enough force to clear out this cave?”

“Good question, and thank you for paying attention.” Eliza clasped her hands in front of her. “Due to their equipment being outdated, there is a very likely chance that ADVENT has picked up on where they are. According to the Chosen, there is an outstanding kill order with their names on it, and ADVENT isn’t one to pass up the chance to eliminate a growing threat. That’s why we’re rolling in with full force—and be sure to warn them of what they’re doing when you can get a word in edgewise.”

“Got it. Sorry for the stupid question.”

“Certainly isn’t stupid,” Eliza countered, “if it’s a valid question. If their signal were more masked,
I might just be sending Samhien in.”

Sammy was wearing his helmet, but Fal-Mai could swear she got the aura of him smiling. “I appreciate your confidence in my abilities, Commander.”

“Wouldn’t offer it if it wasn’t very much earned. Now. Any more questions before you head out?”

“Just another,” Mordenna said. “Since ADVENT’s likely coming to kick their asses, we should probably let them know and relocate them, right?”

“Right. All else fails, I’m sure we’ve got enough room on the Avenger to temporarily house them.” Eliza looked over the rest of the squad. “Will that be all?”

When that seemed to be it, she nodded. Considering themselves dismissed, Menace One-Five turned and moved for the Skyranger, loading up and preparing for the battle ahead.

The arid landscape that lead up to the land rising up in front of them very much reminded Fal-Mai of where her Stronghold was located.

As she did then, she left no footsteps as she scouted ahead of the group, in cloak and keeping her eyes and ears open. Even if this was a mission of diplomacy and they were to appear as they were, she would be sure there was nothing hazardous lying in wait for them.

While on approach, the squad were keeping their weapons holstered—no problem for her and her brothers, who tended to keep their hands free anyways out of force of habit. She imagined it would’ve also helped with traversing the landscape—if the ground didn’t curiously slope downwards towards the cave that was starting to be visible in the distance. As it became visible, so too did the “decorations” in front of it. Mostly human skulls were impaled on pikes, with the occasional recognizable alien skull, mostly Sectoids, and there was even simply a Chryssalid head here or there. A warning sign, if nothing else, though judging by the way the footsteps of her comrades behind her continued, it was hardly a deterrence.

Fal-Mai bound-determined in her pace—that is, right up until she heard a noise to her right. She quickly whipped around to identify the source... and was a bit underwhelmed and fascinated to see the source. A Viper that couldn’t have been longer than her leg was curled up in the shadow of one of the natural steps in the rock, clearly in pain. As she angled around, whispering “company halt” into her communicator as she looked for the source of its distress, she could see there was a few thorns in its underside. They were low enough that she guessed it was having an agonizing time moving and had stopped to rest before making the rest of the trip home.

“Whatcha seeing, Fal-Mai? ”

That was Mordenna. She tilted her head to the side, still whispering. “An injured, baby Viper.”

“Ah, a Neonate? What’s the problem with it? ”

“Thorns. I cannot tell if the source is animal or plant.”

“Probably plant. Spotted some more thorny flora on the way here. What’s your call? ”
She focused back on the Neonate, who was looking mournfully at the distance it would have to travel to get back home. Considering they were on a mission of diplomacy, there was only one correct answer in her eyes. She crouched down, gently lowering her cloak so she would appear to fade in slowly. Looking back, the Neonate caught her and hissed, using its hands to scoot away with little success. She shook her head and raised her hands in a calming gesture, speaking softly. “It’s alright, little one.” Did it speak English? Did it understand English? She hoped her soft tone of voice would communicate her intent regardless. “I’m not here to harm you. I want to help you.”

Whether it understood her or not, it stopped trying to back away, eyeing her suspiciously. It looked back to the mouth of the cave in the distance, then to her again. Its posture wilted from defiant to definitely scared and it pointed to the cave. Fal-Mai nodded, holding her hands out. “I will take you there, if you let me carry you.”

It regarded her for a few more cautious moments before holding out its own arms. Fal-Mai carefully approached and picked it up, cradling it in her arms and being mindful of its injury. It was rather heavy, heavier than she’d take something of its size to be—mostly centered in the tail, which made sense. It wrapped its arms behind her neck and leaned against her, resting. She stood back up, nodded to her squad behind her, and resumed the walk towards the cave in full view. If they moved to strike her with one of their young in her arms... perhaps that stood to say they shouldn’t open negotiations.

They managed to walk for quite a while, getting closer to the entrance to the cave than Fal-Mai would’ve expected when a voice barked out a “halt!” Fal-Mai did as she was told, and she could hear everyone behind her stop as well. From the landscape, figures appeared—Vipers with such varied colors that she wouldn’t take them to be part of ADVENT’s mass-production. Strangely enough, some of them lacked the... venom sacs she had known Vipers for, mostly the multi-colored ones. There were a few “normal” Vipers present in the welcoming party, but they were outnumbered by their fellows.

One, larger than the rest of them and tinged shades of iridescent green and blue like a scarab, spoke. “Let the Neonate go,” she said.

Fal-Mai... didn’t want to refuse with the Vipers currently holding scavenged plasma guns and what looked like prototype Boltcasters at her, but... “It is injured,” she spoke, loud enough to be heard. “It cannot move without agony.”

The Vipers looked suspicious until the tiny one in her arms nodded at them, and they slightly lowered their guns. The iridescent Viper slowly approached, keeping hers at half-rest until she was face-to-face with Fal-Mai. Face-to-face indeed—slightly raised on her tail, this Viper was long and large enough to meet her height. She holstered her gun, gently taking the Neonate from Fal-Mai’s arms and looking over it. When she hissed something in a language Fal-Mai couldn’t understand, it shook its head, and spoke back. She looked back to the Assassin. “You say you found him like this?”

Fal-Mai nodded. “He was curled up far back from here, with those thorns in his tail. I did not want to risk removing them without getting him back to his... family.” “Family” was probably the correct word here. With a Viper King amongst their ranks and the existence of this young one, there was no doubt he was busy at work repopulating.

The Viper secured the Neonate closer, then signalled to the rest of her own to stand down. Looking back to Fal-Mai, she squinted. “No symbol and blue colors, Chosen? If I didn’t know any better, I would say you were with XCOM.”

“I am,” she replied. “So are my brothers, and the Skirmisher with us. We intend to establish contact
between your rulers and the Commander.”

She took a moment to look over Fal-Mai and the gathering behind her, then nodded. “Fine. But if you are lying, we will not hesitate in opening fire. Follow me.” With that, she turned and slithered towards the mouth of the cave, the rest of the Vipers watching Menace One-Five as they followed her. Her brothers caught up to her and Mordenna muttered “nice job” as he did.

The walk was quiet for a moment before the Viper looked back. “My name is Shel-Za,” she began. “I am my lord’s primary consort and his advisor. Are you here because you heard our broadcast?”

Mordenna nodded. “Sure did! And, uh, we’ve got a warning for you guys. Whatever the hell you’re using to put it out there... anyone can hear it. And I do mean anyone. ADVENT included.”

Shel-Za “hmmm”ed at that, looking forwards. “… if you’re speaking the truth, I shall bring it up with my lord. Now that we, apparently, have garnered XCOM’s attention, there is no reason to continue broadcasting it.”

“Hopefully it won’t be too late by the time you take it down,” he muttered, crossing his hands.

Having seemingly no comment at that, Shel-Za continued into the mouth of the cave. Just beyond, the almost alien architecture was clear—beyond a certain point in the cave’s enormous entrance, a wall of alien metal had been established, only giving way to a large, wide door. At its sides, the strangest Mutons Fal-Mai had ever seen stood. Their armor looked far different to ADVENT fare, and they were taller, if somewhat less stocky, than the ones she was used to. Still muscled enough that she had no doubt they could snap someone in half. They also lacked the mask that other Mutons wore, revealing a mouth that looked Berserker in nature, but with thin stretches of skin that could be lips.

"Those don’t even look like the Mutons at First Contact," Eliza muttered over comms.

“Must be the true originals,” Mordenna mused. “Kinda like the Vipers around here.”

One of the guards looked up at Mordenna. “Does the Chosen have something to say?” He hissed. Seems the different mouth structure allowed them to speak English, if somewhat strangely to the ears. Fal-Mai caught a glimpse of a tongue within, too.

“Xaakt,” Shel-Za chided. “They are guests, for now. XCOM, as well.”

Xaakt re-adjusted his gun. “Fine. One wrong move...”

“Keep it down, brother,” the other natural Muton said, shaking his head. “If they aren’t what they say they are, you’ll have your chance.”

At that, Xaakt backed down, huffing and looking back towards the horizon. His brother tapped a panel behind him, and the door started to shudder open. “Sorry for that. He’s somewhat untrustful of former ADVENT, even if recruiting them is out main objective,” he said, last statement very much pointed. “Whatever the case, proceed on in.”

Shel-Za nodded to him, and moved inside. As Fal-Mai followed, she had to take in her surroundings with amazement. This was definitely an ADVENT facility at some point—but it was clear it had been taken over by its new inhabitants. Devices she couldn’t guess the purpose of lined the walls, crafted naturally. The walls themselves were positively covered in greenery—yet, when Fal-Mai examined it, it didn’t seem to be of this Earth. Perhaps it was doing a good imitation, but there was something clearly off about the ways the leaves moved despite there being no breeze, and the patterns upon them, and how some of the vines were holding onto guns like they were
living weapons racks. There was clearly more machinery here at some point in time—but it had been apparently gutted, for some reason.

There were also the inhabitants. More of the natural Vipers and Mutons watched them pass—though there were a few former ADVENT Mutons here. In a group of three over in the corner, there was also a gathering of Archons. One of them was standard ADVENT fare... but the other two were clearly different. Different-shaped, decorated helmets, different wings, different skin tones, one green and the other a washed-out yellow. Seems there was much more variety to be had on the Archon homeworld... and that their appearance here was apparently how they were originally.

Past the initial entry room, Shel-Za opened another door and moved beyond. The next room was much of the same, with the walls completely covered. But now there was a thick blanket of plants on the floor, almost mossy, but not sticking to her boots. Some of the vines on the walls were flowering, the flowers themselves reminding her of plants touched by the Blight. To the Vipers scattered about, Shel-Za hissed something in her language again, and they moved into the adjacent rooms—but not before one came up to her and took the injured Neonate from her arms. She turned back to Fal-Mai. “Wait here. I will fetch the rulers.” After that, she moved into the room on the right, leaving Menace One-Five alone.

Mordenna rubbed his chin. “This is possibly the strangest thing I’ve seen, outside of the horrors of the Void. Am I really to believe the Archons were like that originally?”

“Can’t be,” Bradford came in, incredulous. “They were Floaters back then. If you’re telling me they’ve always looked like they stepped out of a Greek painting...”

“Well, if the Mutons were different,” Rosa said, leaning against SYN, “who’s to say the Archons aren’t, too?”

“Indeed,” Jax commented. “The ‘Vipers’ took on a different form at First Contact as well, did they not?”

“Thin Men,” Eliza spat out. “So I guess the Floaters were the Elders making the Archons into agents of terror.”

“Well, we’re about to find out.” Mordenna crossed his arms. “Fal-Mai, you seem to be doing good at this diplomacy thing so far. Keep talking to them, tag Sammy in if you need, and all else fails, I’ve got a backup radio on me that Eliza can talk through.”

Fal-Mai nodded, turning back towards the center of the room. They weren’t kept waiting long—the door on the right opened, and in came the Alien Rulers.

First was the Viper King. His scales were a solid white and natural thorns spread out from his hood. His armor was strange, with a crown-like headpiece with a holographic symbol displayed upon it. Back from his armor, a scarf-like cloth trailed, and he took his place on the far left to the squad.

Next was the Archon King. His armor was a shining black and his wings were far more decorated, with red bolts of statics running through a similarly colored field, like an unnatural halo. His skin was red and his helmet was more flat and arched than the standard, pointed one seen on other Archons, and ribbons trailed down where his body ended. He floated next to the Viper King, deftly holding a clearly-modified staff.

Lumbering after him was the Berserker Queen. She was far larger than any other Berserker Fal-
Mai had laid eyes on, and the plates adorning her body were impressively thick, probably able to hold off blasts of plasma. There was a faded, green coloration on her back—and what looked like broken injection ports, destroyed long ago, with plants growing in the cracks. She stood next in line, standing at the usual Berserker hunch, but with an air of dignity to it as she clasped her hands together.

Finally, what Fal-Mai guessed was the Gourgeamous Queen ducked under the door. She must’ve been the source of all the greenery—judging by the tone of her skin, the vines hanging off of her body and head, the four giant wing-like leaves on her back, and the leaves adorning her head and making up her tail along with the vines. She reminded Fal-Mai of the centaurs she’d seen in some of Jax’s favored art pieces... but instead of an equine lower body, it was more reptilian in nature, with long, clawed legs. A bouquet of alien flowers hung from her head, though one of them looked like it belonged on Earth, if somewhat strange still. Her eyes were a shining gold and there were a set of fangs on the outside of her lips. Quite muscled for a walking plant, outranking Eliza’s build. Finally, her vines and leaves—and some of her skin—were marked with a shining purple pigment, almost as if she had psionics. She capped off the line of Rulers.

The Archon King was the first to speak, voice deep and sounding like it belonged to a more suave, visually younger version of Jax. “Greetings, XCOM. My name is Rodin.” He gestured to his fellow rulers with his free hand. “This is Shazara-Ta, the Viper King. Vel’kiin, the Berserker Queen. Celosia, the Gourgeamous Queen.” He then leveled an eyeless gaze at Fal-Mai. “This is certainly a strange welcome party, the Commander sends. I would not think them one to send the Chosen to greet us, even you lot have apparently defected.”

Fal-Mai took her chance to speak. “The Commander’s intent is to show you that they,” Fal-Mai said, mindful of her current anonymity, “are welcoming and accepting of any who truly wish to better themselves.”

“A bold statement,” Shazara-Ta replied, voice hissing, clearly having a difficult time speaking English but having full knowledge of the language. “And the machine?”

She took in a deep breath. “Perhaps Shel-Za has informed you that your broadcast is being heard by all available parties. The Commander feared that ADVENT might come upon you soon with that visibility, and made sure to send a full force squad to ensure that if they did, you would have even more of a fighting chance.”

Shazara-Ta made a sound that Fal-Mai could only assume was a scoff. “Have we not been subsisting fine thus far? Your Commander sounds presumptuous.”

“Hold, Shazara-Ta,” Celosia said, voice soft, but deep. “The Chosen’s words have merit. While we may not need the help, there is no reason to deny it.” She turned to address Menace. “What are your names?” When the squad got done listing off their own names, she nodded. “It is good to meet you all. We have been hoping to meet XCOM for some time now—hence, our rather risky message.”

“Risky’s one way to put it,” Mordenna spoke. “I wouldn’t be surprised—”

“Hold that thought,” Eliza came in, sounding hurried, “Lily’s spotted ADVENT dropships on long-range scanners!”

“And a lot of them,” Lily herself chimed in. “I’m... I’m seeing a Sectopod hooked up to one of them.”

Mordenna, stopped up in his tracks, was garnering the attention of the rulers. Vel’kiin huffed
something, presumably in her language, and Rodin translated for her. “Speak, Chosen. What has happened?”

Mordenna wrung his hands together. “Ok. So. Y’know how I was warning you about ADVENT coming in and crashing the party due to your broadcast? Well, that’s happening. Right now.”

When the four rulers rightfully looked to Fal-Mai for confirmation, she nodded. “We have a ship landed that has picked up ADVENT dropships incoming. The Commander just told us through our communicators. If you choose not to believe us, we will fight off ADVENT alone.”

The Alien Rulers went quiet for a moment. Then, Vel’kiin spoke again, gesturing naturally as she did. That caused them to nod, and Celosia spoke. “Your words have merit, if you are so willing to fight them off alone. We will prepare to fight at your urging.” She nodded to her fellow rulers, and they scattered, with Vel’kiin and Shazara-Ta moving past them to the mouth of the cave, and Rodin flying into one of the connecting rooms. Celosia approached the squad. “I will set up a triage area here. Do you have any medics in your squad?”

Samhien nodded, stepping forward. “I am. I will be happy to work with you, Queen Celosia.”

“Grand.” She turned her attention to the rest of Menace One-Five. “I will take Sammy here so we can tend to the wounded. The rest of you establish defensive positions—I trust you all know your roles.”

“Why, of course!” Mordenna pulled his Darklance off his back. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you sound like a regular Commander, yourself.”

“Queens on my planet were prized for their strategic ability, even in the Satellite Queens. If you could not prevent a war,” she explained, “suffice to say, you could not lead your people. Now, go!”

Taking the order, Fal-Mai was the first to go, entering cloak and peeling away from her squad as she dashed back to the mouth of the cave. Already, Vel’kiin and Shazara-Ta were leading the aliens into defensive positions, with the Mutons leading the front, the Vipers at the back, and the Archons in the air between them. Fal-Mai took up her spot in front of all of them, hiding in the shadow of a large rock even if her shroud was covering her. In the late afternoon glow of the sky, she could see dots on the horizon, quickly growing larger, with one of the slightly-deformed ones she could assume belonged to the one holding the Sectopod.

A shot rang off behind her—a familiar one, and she watched as a bullet from Mordenna screamed through the air. It was a while before it made contact—but when it did, one of the ships dropped from the sky, crashing into the Earth. “Those shots take a lot out of my mag,” she heard Mordenna explain to someone, “you want me as anti-air or anti-personnel?”

“Ai-air,” she heard Shazara-Ta reply. “We have plenty of anti-personnel as is.”

“Right!” Mordenna could be heard reloading. “Give me a minute before the next shot!”

If Mordenna could take down a few ships, that would make it so much easier, considering more were appearing on the horizon. Enough to lead Fal-Mai to believe ADVENT was planning to wipe out the whole resistance coming from the cave. She kept to her cover, watching. At least there were some units that couldn’t be brought by ship.

Of course Fal-Mai had to think that. As the air far in front of her seemed to peel open, from beyond the veil of the Void, a Gatekeeper emerged. No regular Gatekeeper was this—its shell was a dark gray, almost black, with the accent lines being a muted red... almost like her former armor colors.
With it, she saw Chryssalids spill out from the hole in space. Gunfire opened and she drew her blade, cutting down those who passed while keeping an eye on this unique Gatekeeper.

Right next to it, a Specter formed out of the Void. Its head was rounded up and slightly back into two spikes, like horns, and the lines on its body were a foreboding red. One of its arms was fashioned into more of a blade than anything else, and it scanned the battlefield. “Eliminate everything,” she heard it say over the din of battle, voice like the soft groaning of a machine about to collapse in on itself. “Especially the Chosen. Helena’s orders.”

Helena. Was she the one to suss out the location of the cave? Was the new Gatekeeper and Specter taking direct orders? Were they made in response to the Chosen defecting? The questions momentarily blinded her to a Chryssalid running past—but before it got too far, a Viper tongue belonging to Shel-Za wrapped around it and slammed it into one of the nearby rocks, killing it instantly. Looking behind her, Rodin had returned from rallying the rest of the compound and was now weaving through the crowd, cutting down Chryssalids that got through the hail of gunfire.

Looking back, the Specter had disappeared, leaving the Gatekeeper, who was seemingly keeping the portal open, allowing the onslaught. Another shot from Mordenna pierced the air, and the ship with the Sectopod on it went careening towards the ground. He wouldn’t nearly handle all of the ships, but he’d make a dent at his rate. Plasma occasionally struck the Gatekeeper’s shell, but if it made any impact, the alien didn’t show it. Fal-Mai’s grip on her blade tightened. It would take a cut such as hers to destroy it. “Tell them to divert fire from the Gatekeeper,” she hissed into her comms. “I will stop it.”

Behind her, Jax lent his booming voice to the cause—and he must’ve been doing something to amplify it, because she could tell that without her headset it would’ve made her ears ring. “Focus upon the Chryssalids!” With that, the Gatekeeper was no longer being pelted by the occasional blast of plasma.

She took in a steadying breath, winding her cloak so thickly around herself she was sure that even in the Void, she would be hidden. She peeled out from her cover, dodging between the Chryssalids and the gunfire that sought after them, eyes focused upon the Gatekeeper. An eye shot would probably disable it, if not outright kill it. Cut deeply enough on anything and you could kill it, was her thinking. She didn’t need to be her brother and know the exact anatomy of every monster.

She stepped smoothly into a crouch, then uncoiled like a spring, sailing through the air and keeping her shroud up for as long as she could. By the time it had lifted and the Gatekeeper’s orange eye slid to her, she was already upon it, driving her blade deep into it while planting her feet either side of it. It made a sound like a thousand fireworks shrieking through the air, and she could see the portal around it close. Drawing her blade back, in that moment she used her momentum to leap off using it as a springboard, tumbling back and landing on her feet as she saw the portal wink out, taking the Gatekeeper with it. If it hadn’t died right there… that might not be the last they saw of it.

Not wasting a second, Fal-Mai turned on her heel and made to dash… and fell flat on her face. Wait. She was the Assassin. She didn’t do tripping.

“Hello, Neylor.”

The area around her suddenly darkened into night, then into pitch black, leaving her isolated. She moved to cut at whatever was around her, but her left arm was restrained, then her right. It seemed the darkness itself had curled around her wrists and was now dragging her into the air, restraining her legs as well. She was turned to face the Specter, whose legs disappeared into the darkness. “Oh, surprised, are you?” Its chuckle was rust grating against rust. “You are not the only one to
bleed into the edges of sight, to elude even those who peer beyond the veil.”

She strained against her bonds, then remembered her communicator. Before she could tell anyone where she was, the darkness closed around her throat, and all she gave was a strangled squawk. “As much as I would appreciate hearing you scream in agony,” it continued, “best you don’t tell anyone else where we are. Would ruin the fun, hm?”

It slid closer to her, eye to faceless visage. “Afraid, are we? Tut, tut, Assassin. You really have fallen far from grace. I suppose the first sign of that was getting captured, but I figure they can’t all be winners. Now. As much as I’d love to drag this out, I am on firm orders to make this quick so you can’t survive, as you seem to have a knack for eluding death even when caught out.”

It drew back, raising its arm to bisect her vertically. “Helena sends her regards.”

Life or limb. This was life or limb. Fal-Mai chose the latter.

With a noiseless scream, she yanked on the right side of her body, forcibly dislocating her shoulder and sending her shunting to the side as the nanomachines tried to readjust. There was almost no resistance as the Specter’s blade arm sliced through her shoulder—but the agony practically split her consciousness and she felt on the verge of passing out, head swimming in pain.

The link between her and her brothers shuddered—just in time as a bullet ripped through the darkness, right where Fal-Mai’s head used to be. It split the head of the Specter and the sphere of darkness dropped, sending her to the floor where she crumpled, mindless and filled with suffering. The nanomachines retreated and the Specter disappeared into the early evening light, leaving her alone and exposed, clutching her blade with her remaining arm as she coughed and shuddered out half-sobs.

Something wet, warm, and strong wrapped around her waist, and before she could think to cut it, it dragged her back in the direction of the cave, revealing it to be a tongue from a friendly Viper getting her to safety. Her own blood mingled with the sand behind her as she watched her arm get smaller and smaller in the distance as she was rapidly dragged back.

Her body felt cold, her head was light, and warmth was spilling from where her arm used to be. She was only vaguely aware of her surroundings as she was picked up in a fireman’s carry. She registered Jax’s low drone beneath her as the scenery bled by her, melding together in her blurred sight. Then, she felt heat track down her face. Jax, she could feel herself say. Jax, it hurts. She could only feel it, as if she was submitted to damning silence for once in her life.

She was eventually set down, leaned against something. Breathe. Where the command came from, she didn’t know, but it was so hard to follow. It felt as if the air was stolen from her the minute she hit the ground, and she couldn’t bear to breathe in and realize her situation. Breathe. Breathe.

Her lungs burned and eventually she took a gasping breath. She must’ve inhaled something, as the burning in her shoulder began to subside and the fog that closed in around her head was traded for more of a light mist. Another intake of air, and the pain went to a dull throb. Her vision restored, if somewhat blurry, Fal-Mai took stock.

She was back in the room where they met with the Alien Rulers, leaned against Celosia and in her lap. Sammy was next to her, helmet off and wearing her gas mask, secured onto his face via clever use of his supplies. When they’d taken that off of her, she didn’t know. The more she breathed, the less pain she felt, until the only indication she got that Samhien was tending to her shoulder was the vague feeling of him working his tools against her flesh. It allowed her to see the full extent of the damage—her arm had been cut off at the shoulder, though she couldn’t tell if the blade had
damaged the socket.

Strangely, the reality of the situation seemed so... far away. She simply passively regarded her shoulder, looking to Samhien. *Is it going to be alright?* She swore she said that.

Sammy looked to her, eyes narrowing. He then looked up to Celosia. “... how deep do you have her under?”

“I have you wearing her mask for a reason,” was the queen’s answer. Still, it didn’t really seem to matter to Fal-Mai so much. It didn’t hurt and she felt rather relaxed. She leaned more on Celosia, eyes tracking the gentle particles of mist wafting through the air. “I don’t know what the Chosen’s resistances are like, so it’s... heavy.”

Samhien shook his head. “I am finding myself glad that Hunter Mordenna’s craftsmanship is peerless. If that were affecting me, I feel as if I would be unconscious.”

“Probably so. If anyone comes in, direct them very much around us.”

Sammy nodded, continuing to work on her wound. Soon, it felt like a gentle heat was getting pressed against it. “I never believed I would need to cauterize a wound of this kind with Eliza’s commanding, and yet...”

Hm. Eliza. Fal-Mai’s eyebrows moved together. Would Eliza be ok? Well, Fal-Mai was ok with missing an arm. Didn’t seem to matter so much, at the moment. But how would Eliza react? Losing a limb was kind of a big deal, and she hoped Eliza didn’t blame herself if Fal-Mai was the first to lose a limb under her commanding. *Will Eliza be ok?* She asked.

Again, Sammy looked to her, seeming heavily concerned. “I... don’t think I’ve heard a Chosen slur that much... are you sure the dosage you’re using—”

“It’s this or she feels every single thing you’re doing,” Celosia shot back. “Unless I’m given a week’s notice, this isn’t an exact art.”

Summarily silenced, Sammy focused on her shoulder. Eventually—though time seemed a little weird at the moment—he wrapped up her shoulder in bandages. “I’m going to need to dress this properly when we return to the Avenger,” he muttered. He stood up. “We don’t seem to have many other wounded, but I’ll handle them as they come. Just... keep her company, alright?”

“Of course. Head to work, Samhien.” With that, Sammy left them, leaving Fal-Mai to lean carelessly against Celosia’s chest. The lack of heartbeat was interesting—though she could still hear some low rush of fluid, as if Celosia had blood running through her veins regardless.

Still, her worries for Eliza remained. *Eliza?*

*Nothing. Eliza? Are you there?*

Fal-Mai frowned, a bit of discontent working its way through the fog of passiveness. Why wasn’t Eliza responding? Was Fal-Mai’s communicator broken? She moved to manipulate it with her remaining arm, but Celosia held her close. “Still yourself, Fal-Mai. Save your strength.”

Fal-Mai could feel herself practically whine. *I just want to talk with Eliza.*

“Keep hearing you say that word... ‘Elusa?’ I can’t imagine that’s what you’re trying to say.”

Was she not hearing her correctly? Then again, Samhien did mention her slurring. Perhaps the
painkillers were distorting her speech. *Ee-lie-za. El-i-za. She is my Com-man-der.*

“Ah. ‘Eliza,’ hm?”

Yes.

“So a woman leads your resistance?”

Yes.

“... I suppose this planet has *some* sense, then. Trying to talk to her?”

Yes. *My communicator is how.*

“... keep it short and simple, Fal-Mai. You’re not in much of a state for eloquence.

Eloquence? It was hardly four words. Sighing, Fal-Mai slumped back against Celosia. *I just want to know if she’s alright. She is my whole world, do you understand? I would die if I hurt her, unintentionally or not. Without her, I would be nothing—just another dog of the Elders, oblivious to my fate. I love her without a doubt and she makes me love **being** in love. I want to talk to her. I want to be with her. I want her to know and say that everything is going to be alright. Do you understand?*

Celosia looked down at her, golden eyes soft. “—perhaps it’s a good thing you’re so drugged you can’t speak,” she mused. “Could barely understand a word you said, and I feel like there was something personal in there. For your sake, be quiet, alright?”

Quiet? Quiet she could do. She was the Assassin. She was the night. Closing her eyes, she made it night. Quiet was good. Quiet was *her.*

She didn’t know how much time had passed, exactly, or if she even fell asleep. One minute she closed her eyes, the next she opened them. She was now laying on the floor in a soft bed of grass and flowers, a dull ache in her shoulder. She blinked a few times, sitting up. There were beds similar to hers, with a few Vipers and Mutons laid down. The air was quiet and filled with the scent of some flower she couldn’t place the name of, but it calmed her.

Still, she remained sitting up, curling her arms—well, her *arm* around her legs. The missing muscle memory made her look over again. Samhien had fully bandaged her up, and there wasn’t even a stump to indicate she’d had one in the first place. This time, looking at its absence made her stomach turn, but still, she didn’t feel too perturbed. Alright, she lost a limb. She’d taken shots before. This would just be a little more permanent.

The door to the room opened, and in streamed Mordenna and Jax. She could hear Sammy’s voice protesting just beyond, but they came in undeterred, with Mordenna sliding to a kneeling stop right next to her while Jax crouched down. “Fal-Mai?” Mordenna gently moved her, getting a better look at her bandaged wound. The color seemed to drain from his face. “Oh. Oh. Oh I knew, but.” One hand pressed against his temple. “This... th-this is all my fault, if I’d waited a bit on that next shot I would’ve had the ammo to shoot that fucker immediately, a-and then this wouldn’t—”

“*Brother.*” Jax put a hand on Mordenna’s shoulder, then looked to his sister. “Fal-Mai. Are you alright?”

Fal-Mai looked slowly between the two of them. “I am... fine,” she responded, lips no longer feeling like they were melting putty. “Are you two alright?”
“Are we alr— Fals.” Mordenna looked at her intensely, eyes wide. “Fals you lost an arm and you’re asking us if we’re alright?”

“Fal-Mai is still coming off painkillers,” Sammy said, hurrying up next to them. “Strong painkillers. She’s... likely not quite with us yet.”

“Arm...” Mordenna snapped his fingers. “Is her arm still out there? It can’t have been too long, if we reconnect it—”

“I’ve...” Sammy looked to the side, taking off her face mask and clutching it. “I’ve already cauterized her wound. And if her arm remains in the field... there is no speaking as to the state of it.”

“You... you have to try, you can’t...” Mordenna shook his head rapidly. “No. No, I can work around this. I’ve brought robots back to life, I’ve made guns that kill psionics, I can make an arm. Yeah. Fal-Mai I’ll have you a prosthetic quicker than you can blink, ok? I’m just—I’m sorry.” He clutched Fal-Mai, burying his face into her good shoulder. “I’m sorry. I-if I’d been quicker, I could’ve stopped it.”

Jax brought Mordenna in for a hug, wrapping his other arm around Fal-Mai. On reflex, she sought an arm around Mordenna... and found herself wanting to hug Jax, as well. “I’m sorry, Jax,” she muttered. “I... cannot hug you both, anymore...”

The statement made Mordenna choke out a sob, and even Jax looked away, silent. Sammy looked to the side awkwardly, muttered something about tending to the other patients, and left.

“Fal-Mai? ”

That was Eliza! Thankful her communicator was still working, Fal-Mai leaned against Jax in lieu of hugging him. “Hello, Commander. Is everything alright?”

“... yes. Everything’s alright. How are you doing?”

“Fine, for the moment.” She sighed. “Everyone seems worried. I’m sure things will be better in time, as they always are.”

There was silence once more. She could’ve sworn her communicator went offline before Eliza spoke again. “Th-that’s... that’s good. I’m glad. I’ll... I’ll see you in the ship, ok?”

“Ok.” Eliza’s voice sounded strange at the end, like it was wavering. She hoped she was really alright... but Eliza said she was fine, so Fal-Mai would believe her. She continued leaning against Jax, patting Mordenna’s back as he sobbed quietly. His sadness, his inadequacy weirdly resonated within her, as if she was supposed to be feeling that way. She was only missing an arm. Only? Yeah, maybe... maybe it was a bit of a bigger deal than she was making it out to be. As she thought that, the dull pain at her right side grew. Mordenna was crying for a reason.

She squinted past her brothers. Inadequacy? Why would she feel that? She did all she could—and it was losing an arm or losing her life, so the options really weren’t evenly weighted. Still... maybe there was something she could’ve done to prevent it? Maybe remembering that Specters went invisible in anticipation of a strike—but she wasn’t her brother, she couldn’t see it coming. Oh well. She’d think more on it later.

Mordenna eventually stopped crying, palming at his eyes. “... I’m sorry,” he eked out once more.

“It’s not your fault,” she replied easily. “I am thankful you stopped it eventually.”
“For god’s sake,” he muttered with some heat, “come to your senses. This ain’t you. You’re not detached. That’s me.”

She looked to him. “You do not seem very detached right now, brother. You seem quite the opposite—caring for my current state.”

In a rush, Mordenna wormed out of the group hug and stood up, kneading his skull. “I can’t—no. Not when she’s like this. It’s not right. She doesn’t even know.”

“Mordenna—”

“No,” he said, interrupting Jax. “No. I’ll—I’ll get the Skyranger here. She’ll need me more when she’s coming off this high.” With that, Mordenna stalked off, through the door.

She looked after him, feeling a small measure of sadness. Arm now freed, she used it to hug Jax. “... I didn’t say something bad again, did I?”

Jax looked to her mournfully for a second, then took in a deep breath, appearing calm as if she did not just see him so vulnerable. “No. You are... simply coming down from a dose of painkillers. Things... will be clearer soon.”

“Soon?” Well, Fal-Mai could wait. She nodded. “... could you carry me to the Skyranger, once it comes?”

“Of course.”

It was quiet then, for a while. She watched as Sammy checked in on the other patients and as they stirred, thanking him for his help as they assessed their wounds. Jax fully sat down next to her, and she focused on the strong rhythm of his heartbeat, contemplating, but on nothing in particular.

“Menace One-Five, the Avenger itself is coming in for pickup.” Bradford’s voice filtered in through general comms. “Seeing as we’ve got a lot of allies to relocate.”

Well, that would make the trip shorter at least. After that, it wasn’t long before the ground itself rumbled gently, as if a titanic body was moving just outside. Jax weaved his arms around Fal-Mai and gently lifted her, carrying her out the door and through the entry hall, where the aliens were gathering their weapons and some of the equipment.

When Jax moved outside, Fal-Mai had to take a solid minute to survey the damage. ADVENT corpses littered the area outside the cave with the invading force of Chryssalid corpses being the most prevalent. The ground was well-trodden and scuffed, with orange blood being mixed into the sand. There was a trail of alien blood starting a little ways away from the door and leading out into the sand—an old trail. Must’ve been hers. Vipers, Mutons, and Archons were picking up the weapons, bringing them into the open ramp of the Avenger, which sat a ways away.

Jax made his way onto the Avenger, holding Fal-Mai firmly the whole time. They passed the Workshop, where Lily was directing the ADVENT weapons drop. She caught sight of Fal-Mai and averted her gaze, going quiet for a moment as they passed.

Onwards through the ship Jax moved, and more the pain in Fal-Mai’s shoulder grew. Inadequacy. Mordenna was gone and it was no longer the ghost of it she was feeling. It now seemed to be her own emotion. Inadequacy? Well, yes, she was missing something. A part of her design.

*Helena sends her regards.*
The words came screaming back across her mind and she sucked in a breath, pressing her face against Jax’s armor. Yes. She was missing a part of herself, a part of her perfection. She wasn’t perfect anymore. She was lesser. Damaged goods. She was not Helena’s but Fal-Mai would not hesitate to say she was Eliza’s, and she was nothing now. She was broken, unusable. Why would the Commander hang onto someone with a missing arm? Even if Mordenna made her a replacement, it wouldn’t be the same. She wasn’t whole anymore.

Jax hugged her closer. “We’re nearly there, sister.”

She shuddered. “She won’t want me anymore,” Fal-Mai lamented, voice high and full of sorrow. “She won’t.”

“Nonsense,” he shot back, speeding up his pace. “Eliza has always accepted us as we are, and she won’t think of you as lesser for this injury. None of us could have predicted the deployment of such advanced units onto the field.”

Fal-Mai shook her head petulantly. “She won’t,” she repeated, lacking the words to explain the nuance.

Jax tapped the panel to a door, and the smell of the Infirmary hit her nose. He took her to the back and set her down on one of the Chosen-sized beds. She immediately drew inwards on herself, clutching the spot where her right arm used to be, even if that made the pain worse. “I’m broken,” she continued. “I failed. I let them take something from me! How can I serve her if I can’t stop something as simple as losing a limb?!” Her voice raised as she protested, pressing her forehead against her legs. He didn’t understand.

She could feel Jax lean against the railing to her bed. “Sister. You did everything you could. Eliza will not—”

“*She will!*” Fal-Mai pounded her remaining hand against the railing, fixing Jax with a heated, tear-filled stare. “You don’t understand! You haven’t lost something and had to face the most important person in your life and figure out what you have to say for yourself! *You have everything!*”

In the silence afterwards, what Fal-Mai said really hit her, like her painkillers had fully worn off in that moment. Jax slowly drew himself upwards and looked away from her, expression unreadable. “... you’re right,” he muttered. “I don’t know what it’s like to lose a part of myself and then have to face someone who used to be my entire world and figure out what I could say that could avoid punishment.”

A part of himself. Even back then, in ADVENT custody, he considered her that important to him? Fal-Mai opened her mouth to apologize, reaching after him, but Jax was already walking away, a trail of dried orange blood marking the melted back of his armor. He left without saying a word after that, opening the door and disappearing into the hallway like a ghost.

Fal-Mai’s arm fell to her side as she sat there, frozen. Soon, she laid down and curled up on the bed, drawing her shroud over herself as she hiccupped, pressing her face against her knees once more.

She was broken. Nobody would want her anymore.
Salve

Chapter Summary

After an intense battle, the Avenger collects itself.

All that Mordenna knew as he rushed towards the Infirmary was that it was all his fault.

Taking down the ships was a priority, yes, but he should've held his fire the minute he laid eyes on that Specter. That thing wasn’t standard fare and he never should’ve taken his eyes off of it. If he’d been smarter, if he’d been more wary of it, none of that would’ve happened. He wouldn’t have made the shot far too late. Fal-Mai would still have her arm.

Speaking of his sister, he was getting echoes of pain and *worthlessness* in the back of his mind. That either meant that the painkillers had finally worn off... or Jax was feeling the same self-loathing he was. Either way, he last saw Jax carrying Fal-Mai onto the ship. They were likely in the Infirmary.

It interested Mordenna, then, when he saw Jax walking *away* from it, head slightly down and face in a mild scowl. Mordenna stopped up, and it was then that his brother spotted him. Mordenna was the first to engage. “Bro? Everything alright?”

Jax blew out a gust of frustrated air through his nose, looking to the side. “Yes. Apparently I have *nothing* to be upset about.”

Mordenna’s eyes flicked from him to the direction the Infirmary was in. “... I feel stupid for repeating the question, but that really doesn’t inspire confidence, Jax.”

His brother looked back to Mordenna, eyes hot. “Does it hardly matter? According to our sister, I have lost *nothing* compared to her.”

Mordenna blinked. Well... he wasn’t about to say anything in that department, but—“Fal-Mai *just* lost her arm, bro, are you seriously gonna take what she says like that while she’s hurting to heart?”

Jax’s scowl deepened, and he looked back ahead. “Not everyone is made of stone as you are, brother.”

He could feel his anger bubble up, and he swallowed, as if trying to force it back down. “You... are the last person who should be accusing me of not feeling a fucking thing, Jax. If anything I’m angry that I feel *too much.*”

“Then you go in there,” Jax hissed, not looking at Mordenna and starting to walk away, “have her tell you just how little you mean in the face of her.”

“Fal-Mai’s a *limb down!*” Mordenna turned to fully face Jax, his anger coming up despite his best attempts. “Are you seriously gonna get this upset over your *own feelings* not getting handled?!”

“*It is not a matter of that!*” Jax wheeled on Mordenna, hair aglow and animated in his fury. “I have spent so much of my life absolutely certain that I had nothing to be upset about within the
Elders’ grasp! The last thing I wish for is to have those feelings questioned again when I think I am somewhere safe from them!” Oh. Jax’s neglect to verbally capitalize that “them” hit Mordenna like a truck, but Jax didn’t give him any space to say something. “You were not the only one to see her lying there in a pool of her own blood! Lest you forget I was the one to carry her inside while she was delirious from pain! But her being in pain does not give her the right to insist I have lost nothing! ” Jax bared his teeth. “It does not give her the right to look me in my eyes and say I know nothing of what she feels! She has no right to insist that the Elders have not taken from me as well! She—”

Jax suddenly closed his eyes, whirling back around and slamming his fist on the wall. He took a breath in, and when he spoke again, his voice was low and soft... almost as if he was holding back tears. “You go. I will tend to my own, since it is clear I am not wanted there.” With that, his hair floated back into place and his fist dropped, and he lumbered off, not once looking back.

When he rounded the corner and disappeared from sight, Mordenna finally let out the breath he had been holding, slightly staggering on the spot. If he had to be honest with himself, it did not feel great in the slightest to be shouted at by his brother. There was a time where he reveled in it—or at the very least, wasn’t phased by it. Of course, he was now learning that it was a tell-tale sign that whoever just yelled at him meant something to him. Jax meant something to him. Yet, the words Jax had just said echoed back at him. Him being in pain doesn’t give him the right to shout you down. Frowning, and with his own feelings not quite so intact, Mordenna turned back around and focused on what he’d come here for. Fal-Mai was in pain—and unlike his brother, he wasn’t about to abandon her.

The shouting Fal-Mai heard in the distance didn’t exactly inspire confidence in her. Not that her state was nothing short of “devastated.”

She hadn’t moved from her curl on the bed, hiding under her shroud as she sniffed and hiccupped. It was rather unbecoming of her to wallow in a pool of her own self-pity, that much she knew, but she really didn’t feel like doing anything else. She’d just yelled at Jax and practically spat in the face of the hardships he’d experienced. Judging by the tone and pitch of the two voices she’d heard muffled outside, her brothers had an argument, likely caused by her hurting Jax’s feelings. Was there truly nothing she could get right? Was this just the culmination of all of her failures? It wouldn’t be long before Eliza came in to say she no longer had a place on the Avenger—that much the Assassin was certain of.

She was pretty certain that was about to happen when she heard the door to the Infirmary open and she sucked in a breath. Even if she knew her fate was inevitable, she stayed under her cloak. Her emotional state meant it wasn’t very strong, of course. But if it was just Eliza or anyone else coming in, it wasn’t like it mattered. It would only matter if it was—

“Hey, sis.”

Mordenna had come upon her faster than she realized. Even if she knew he could see her, she wound herself into a tighter ball and kept her eyes shut. Mordenna sounded like he was dragging up a chair, then lowering the railing on the side of the bed he was on. “C’mon, Fals. I want to talk and make sure you’re ok.”

She sniffed again, raising her cloak, knowing it was just a formality at that point. “G-go away,” she
whispered, voice raw with her sorrow. “I-I will merely push you away as well. I will hurt you.”

Her brother sighed, and she could feel him ease a hand onto her shoulder. “Fals, you... just lost something big. You’re hurting more than you could hurt me, and I want to make sure you’re ok.”

Fal-Mai continued to lay there with her eyes shut. She equally wanted him to leave so she could not hurt him too... and she wanted to cave in and accept his comfort. One eventually won out, and she sat back up to the best of her ability, not looking him in the eye as she scooted to the side of the bed, holding her arm out.

Mordenna was quick to lean in and hug her, a gesture she readily returned. He let her lean against him, patting her back before he spoke. “... the first thing I want to do,” he began, voice soft, “is say I’m sorry. I... could’ve prevented this. I could’ve stopped this if I’d used my head and hadn’t underestimated what the Elders put us up against.”

Normally, Fal-Mai would be quick to dismiss such sayings as Mordenna redirecting all the blame onto himself, but... she was still feeling hurt. She was still feeling rather sore over losing her arm, even if she knew it made her selfish. Fal-Mai opted to nod against him, letting him move onto his next topic.

“That being said... since it’s my fault, I want to do something about it, y’know?” He spared an arm to rub at the back of his head, returning it as he went on. “I don’t know if you remember me saying this, but I want to make you a new arm. It might take a while—I don’t think anyone here’s done anything on the level of making a prosthetic that advanced—but I want to make it up to you. Sound good?”

As much as she was happy that Mordenna would be willing to potentially restore her ability to fight... she slumped against him, resigned. “I appreciate it, brother, but it hardly matters. I am no longer myself—I am lesser. Broken. Shattered. I cannot be who I was. I am no longer—”

“’—perfect?’” She stopped up as Mordenna interrupted her, guessing what she was getting at. “... hey, Fals, I don’t know if you know, but we’re no longer bound by our ‘parents’ shitty standards. If it got into your head so much, let me say this while maybe being a bit insensitive: you lost an arm, not part of your soul.” He gave her a friendly jostle. “It’s not like you’ve changed. You’re still Fal-Mai: apparent diplomat extraordinaire who cares deeply about her family, up to the point of chasing them off if she thinks she’s going to hurt them.” He blew out a breath. “And if it helps I firmly believe Liz will see you the same way. She’s gonna be majorly down that you lost an arm on her watch, but that’s about it. You’re still her favorite Assassin and me willing, you’ll still be her best stealthy Chosen. Ok?”

Mordenna made far too much sense for her to linger in her mood, but some stubborn part of her still wanted to thrash against what he was saying. She failed, didn’t she? Eliza is not the Elders, she could hear a voice of reason speak up. She will not have you put to death for missing an arm. You are still who you were.

Fal-Mai buried her head in his shoulder, trying her very hardest not to start crying again. “... thank you,” she eked out. “I... I needed to hear that.”

Mordenna squeezed her closer, to the point where he could rest his head on hers. “Ain’t no problem. I don’t want you beating yourself up. I know what it’s like to do that.”

Fal-Mai was sure the tender moment would’ve lasted much longer had the door to the Infirmary not opened just then. She was half-afraid she’d have to stop hugging Mordenna to appear dignified—but thankfully, it was Eliza, who rushed over and sat on the bed next to Fal-Mai. “Fal-Mai,” she
breathed, “I’m sorry.”

Unlike Mordenna, however, Fal-Mai could never blame Eliza for anything. She stopped leaning on Mordenna so hard so she could address the Commander. “—it wasn’t your fault. You were undoubtedly focusing on the other members of my squad, confident I could handle myself.” She closed her eyes in shame. “It is I who should be sorry.”

She was moderately surprised when she could feel Eliza practically crashing against her, hugging her tightly. “Don’t be sorry about losing an arm,” she muttered, resting against Fal-Mai’s collarbone, “you’ve been hurt. Badly. Right now you should be resting and getting your strength back up, ok?”

Eliza’s continued concern for her wellbeing got to Fal-Mai, and she moved to hug her—with an arm she no longer had. The frustration and self-loathing fully caught up with her and she squeezed her eyes shut, her heart feeling like it was seizing in her chest. “I... I-I cannot do anything right,” she hissed at mostly herself. “I hurt my brothers, and the trail of death I have left in my wake at ADVENT is miles long! A-and now... I cannot even be of use anymore!” Hot tears slipped past her eyelids and she hiccupped. “You—you have every right to exile me, Eliza. Please. P-please.”

Though her eyes were closed, she felt as if Eliza and Mordenna shared a look. Mordenna’s arms withdrew from around her and she could hear him getting up. As he did that, Eliza further sat on the bed, pretty much inviting herself into Fal-Mai’s lap as she adjusted her position, sitting so it was Fal-Mai who had her head buried against Eliza. Lone arm now freed, she hugged Eliza as Mordenna’s soft footsteps faded, catching a mutter to the effect of “checking on Jax.”

When the door closed, Eliza spoke. Her voice was gentle and warm. “Fal-Mai... I wouldn’t want to live as the woman who exiled an operative over an injury in the field. Not even the Eliza of old would sink that low. You got hurt—and despite what anyone says, it’s nobody’s fault alone. If anything, it’s the Elders’ for continuing to lash out.” She re-adjusted her embrace on Fal-Mai, almost cradling her more than anything else. “I’m sorry that it happened to you. But this isn’t the time to be seeking out punishment—you need to rest and regain your strength. I promise you that you will always have a place on the Avenger, and if anyone else tries to push you out, I’ll be on them faster than you can blink. You deserve a better home than what the Elders gave you, and a mistake on the field isn’t going to take that away from you.”

This close to Eliza, Fal-Mai could practically feel her heartbeat. Her psionics, as well—with each passing day they seemed to emerge more, and now they were swirling around her like a soft Solace, filling her with the exact emotions she felt whenever Eliza comforted her. Fal-Mai took a few deep, shuddering breaths. “I... I’m sorry... I-I can only think of what I am worth to someone in...”

“... how you can be used?” When Fal-Mai nodded and started to babble out more apologies, Eliza shook her head. “Shhh. No more apologies. You’ve done nothing wrong. Fal-Mai... I will never think of you as something that is only of use to me. You’re so much more than that. You’ve done so much and come so far. You are more than whatever you’re worth to someone. But, if it helps, to me... you’re worth more than anything could buy.”

... how could Fal-Mai even respond, when faced with such unflinching support and obvious love? Her tears were still flowing but she simply leaned into Eliza’s shoulder, sinking into her. Fal-Mai had about one response, and in that moment, she was emboldened enough to say it.

*I love you.*

Or... so she thought. She could only mouth it against Eliza, hoping she could simply feel it as Fal-
Mai did. It felt... wrong, in a way, to ruin this moment with a confession. There had to be a better moment for it. Searching for other words she could stand to say, Fal-Mai gave a shivering sigh.
“—thank you, Eliza. I... I do not have many words to offer, and... I won’t apologize, but know that I wish I had more to say.”

“It’s alright.” She could feel Eliza’s thumb rub against the back of her neck, where her hand had come to rest. “I just wanted you to know that. For now, I want you to rest and regain your strength. Lost a lot of blood out there... and I know you Chosen heal fast, but I still want you to get some bed rest. Relax for a bit.”

Fal-Mai didn’t have too many objections to that idea... until she wondered what she’d do after she got better. That dampened her mood. “What will I do afterwards? I don’t imagine you would have much use for a one-armed Chosen in the field...”

“Well, plenty of people earn their keep around here without fighting.” She patted Fal-Mai’s back. “And I don’t think anyone’s wanting you to light the world on fire when you’re down an arm. I think I remember hearing Mordenna talk about making you a prosthetic, which I don’t doubt he can do.”

She took another deep breath. If Mordenna could make her a new arm that worked even remotely as well as her old one... she would be happy. She would try not to stake her whole worth on her use as Eliza said, but it would make her feel better to be somewhat mended. Fal-Mai nodded against Eliza before a thought occurred to her. “—will he be alright, going to go see Jax?”

“Did something happen between them?”

Fal-Mai slumped. “I... fear they may have argued because of me.”

Eliza reassuringly stroked Fal-Mai’s back. “If I know anything about the two of them, Mordenna will be driven to make things up after he’s done being angry.”

If asked twenty five years ago where he’d see himself now, Bradford wouldn’t have been able to begin to guess.

Even if he were more self-assured of his future than he had been, this definitely blew any expectations he had out of the water. Driving back ADVENT from Earth, negotiating with the pieces of a scattered resistance... and managing more aliens than he rightfully knew what to do with.

Eliza had made a mad dash to the Infirmary to check on Fal-Mai, and Bradford couldn’t say he blamed her. He’d assured her as she was running out that he’d handle where the rulers and their subjects went. Now that he was heading down to the Workshop... he kind of wished he’d just waited on Eliza. He was self-conscious about his commanding skills at best. Hopefully organizing their new refugees wouldn’t pose too much of a challenge. They had plenty of room down in the “basement” of the ship, considering how much Mordenna had been moving through their supplies recently.

Surprisingly, when he got to the Workshop, it was rather empty. Just Lily and a few of Rodin’s Archons hanging about. They seemed to be locked in a conversation about engineering—strange, considering he didn’t take the Archons to know much about it. Not like you’ve sat down to talk...
He walked up, crossing his arms. “Lily? Did you see where the other rulers went?”

“Oh.” Lily sort of rubbed her shoulder, looking mildly sheepish. “They, uh, didn’t much like the standing room of the Workshop, and asked me if there was a bigger area they could get used to. I didn’t want to send them all over the ship willy-nilly, so I told them they could rearrange stuff in the basement as much as they liked to get comfortable. Sorry if you had different plans…”

Well, that basically took out a majority of Bradford’s workload. He shook his head. “If anything, it was exactly what I was going to say to them. Thanks for speeding things along.”

Lily blinked a few times at that, but she stopped looking so nervous. “Well, glad to help, I suppose.”

One of the Archons—blue-skinned with more silver-ish armor than gold—turned to Bradford and inspected him. “Is this your Commander, Chief Engineer?”

“Him? Nah. Our Commander…” She trailed off, then looked to Bradford. “… where is Eliza?”


At that, Lily grew a bit more reserved. “… yeah. I hope she’s alright. I don’t know what I’d do if I were the Commander right now.”

“Me neither. Eliza’s with her, at least.”

The same Archon that spoke to Bradford rested a hand on his hip. “—a noble warrior, that one. Do you humans have any way of restoring her?”

Lily sighed. “Good question. If I know Mordenna at all, he’ll be chomping at the bit to see about making an arm for her. By the way, Virgil, if you think I’m a genius, Mordenna’s a god.”

Rodin? Virgil? These were very human names for Archons. Bradford had to know. “Your king’s called ‘Rodin’ and your name is ‘Virgil?’ Interesting names for Archons.”

Virgil huffed. “‘Aou-lohn-rai’ is a language beyond the means of humans and most other races. My king and his subjects chose names that it would be easy for humans to pronounce, in the interest of interspecies relations.”

“And the others?”

“Rough translations of their given names at best.” Virgil seemed to sober for a moment. “Save our Queen Celosia. That detestable Vahlen tortured her for so long that she’s forgotten most of her native language and her own name.”

Oh. So that was what they thought of Vahlen. Bradford rubbed at his stubble. It definitely sounded like what Vahlen would do, but still… “Well, alright. Appreciate you all trying to make things easier on us, at least. Is your king in the basement?” When the Archons nodded, Bradford dropped his hand. “Alright. I’m going to go talk to them about arrangements.”

With that, Bradford turned and headed for the door that lead down to the lowest area of the ship. Past the door was the makeshift firing range they had before they built the Training Center, with an Old Sectoid cutout with a near-perfect headshot in it. Entertaining taking that down now that
they had more alien allies, Bradford moved past it into the “basement” proper.

The aliens got comfy quickly, he had to admit. The crates that were down here had already been moved to a corner of the room close to the entrance, and the path to them was clear. Thankfully, it seemed the aliens knew that the rest of the ship might have to access them at some point. Beyond that area, they’d made full use of the fact that the “basement” of the Avenger stretched for nearly the entire length and width of the ship itself, and he could see the areas they’d assigned themselves to. The Alien Rulers themselves were in a huddle off to the side, and as he approached, he could hear their conversation.

“—and it simply worries me,” Celosia began, “propagating in this war. I... do so dearly want to have children out of the grasp of ADVENT, but I fear for their safety.”

Vel’kiin spoke in some language Bradford couldn’t understand.

“Well...” Celosia wilted a bit. “Your pregnancies are difficult, my love. I can adapt myself to reproduce on my own—slowly, yes, but I don’t have your hardships to overcome that would outweigh waiting.”

“Ultimately,” Rodin followed up, “I think you should consider yourself first and foremost. You already have a difficult task ahead of you if the Commander allows you to reform this area for us. Ensure your safety and there will always be time later to repopulate, my queen.”

Feeling that he didn’t want to eavesdrop further, Bradford cleared his throat. The four rulers looked up, and it was Shazara-Ta who approached. “Human. Are you the Commander of this ship?”

“Couldn’t be.” Celosia wandered over, inspecting Bradford. “Human females tend to look different, with those odd bags in the front that the Elders put on your captive Vipers.”

Rodin, similarly, came over. Bradford couldn’t help but feel like he was being interrogated. “And how do you know their Commander is female?”

“Fal-Mai told me as she was under my painkillers. Her name is Eliza, as well.”

Bradford shook his head, holding up his hands to signal to give him some space. When they did, he began. “My name’s Bradford, Central Officer to the Commander. Still, for the purposes of this conversation, I’m acting in her place, as she’s currently seeing to one of our wounded.”

“Ah, right.” Rodin’s mouth pressed into a thin line. “I must extend my apologies to you and yours. Despite what I have heard of the Chosen in the past, they seem very dedicated to your cause now, and for one of them to be injured in such a way, defending our own? It is a tragedy. If there is anything I or my own can do, let me know.”

The support was nice, at least, and Rodin seemed like one of the few people willing to fully believe the Chosen’s reformation. “Unless you can make a prosthetic to match a Chosen, I think what you can do is moral support. After a bit I’d visit Fal-Mai in the Infirmary and let her know you appreciate her fighting for you, even if it cost her a limb.”

“Very well.” Rodin nodded. “I shall visit her when I am able.”

“Ah, before I forget.” Celosia rested a hand on Bradford’s shoulder. “If you are acting in the Commander’s place... is it fine if I perform some renovations to this area? Nothing permanent—simply of the type you might have seen in our former home.”

From what Bradford had seen, Celosia had singlehandedly overgrown the lab they’d taken
residence in. True, removing it all would be easy enough with some weed killer and the like, but...
“I’ll talk with Shen if we can’t get some more permanent accommodations for you guys going down here if you want to stay, but for now? Well, if you can remove it fairly easily, consider the permission for it granted.”

“Thank you.” Celosia took her hand off of his shoulder. “Thankfully, I had the mind to take a few seeds from home before we left, so I should be able to re-establish the same strains we had before. It will simply take some time for me to replicate them.”

Aliens certainly were strange, and Celosia really took the cake. Bradford took all the other aliens as normal at this point, but mutant plants? Not exactly something he’d expected. Even if he knew they were alien and probably had different growing conditions, something still bothered him. “... and these plants won’t need sunlight, water, any of that?”

Celosia shook her head. “The most they will need is a solid foundation somewhere and the air my fellows breathe out. I believe you humans call it CO₂? If you ever have the time, I’d be more than happy to explain the process to a point that you can understand.

Well, if Bradford needed the botany lesson, he’d take it, but that kind of thing struck him as something that Tygan would be more interested in. “I’ll keep it in mind, though maybe you should have that kind of conversation with our head scientist. Need anything else out of us before I handle other things around the ship?”

Something about the words “head scientist” made Celosia’s face wrinkle a bit, but the expression passed quickly. “If you could land when the sun’s out,” Celosia replied, “I would much appreciate it. Preferably near a source of water as well, but as long as you’re not landing us in too arid of an area, I should be able to manage.”

“That I can do.”

Vel’kiin said something again. Lost, Bradford looked to the other rulers for translation. Shazara-Ta stepped up to the plate. “Vel’kiin asks if you would be able to send down the Commander eventually so we may talk with her in person. You straightening things out for her is acceptable, but we would wish to meet with the one who has saved us from ADVENT’s retaliation.”

Bradford nodded. “She’ll be a bit, and honestly, I’d like for her to rest sooner rather than later, but... that’s up to her. I’ll let her know you want to see her.”

“That you.” Shazara-Ta looked at his fellow rulers. “I don’t believe we have anything else for you. You are free to go.”

Pretty expected from a group of rulers, but Bradford wasn’t about to say anything. He’d leave Eliza to puzzle out the customs first. He turned and left the aliens’ new home, waving to Lily as he passed, catching something about legs as he left the Workshop. Whatever was going to come out of that, he didn’t want to know. He kept himself moving forward, intending to go check up on Eliza and Fal-Mai.

He knew his care for Eliza would be expected, but the concern for the Chosen was certainly more recent. He’d be the first to say he was against the idea of converting the Chosen well before Vlad got his ass kicked about it, but even then he’d been convinced by Eliza’s fortitude and determination at the prospect. With a few more encounters with the Chosen and seeing how much effort they were putting into themselves... well, they convinced Bradford, too. So they had eventually gained a soft spot in his heart, and he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t concerned about them. Didn’t take much of hearing about what happened to them and just how they were reacting
to it to gain his sympathy.

Well, speak of the devils and at least one of them will appear. Bradford caught sight of Mordenna leaned against a wall in the hallway, not too far from the Infirmary. He looked pretty deep in thought—troubled thought. So deep that he seemed not to notice Bradford for a few seconds. Somewhat worrying, coming from the ever-vigilant Hunter. Eventually though, he looked up and regarded Bradford. “Oh. Hey there, Bradford. Going somewhere?”

Bradford crossed his arms. “Something on your mind, Mordenna?”

His eyes darted away for a second in response, like he was looking for something to cover with. Bradford knew that look many times before. “Eh, nothing too big, just... a lot to think about, yeah?” When Bradford’s stare didn’t waver, he sighed. “Well, for one, I’m bummed that my sister pretty much lost an arm thanks to me.”

“That could hardly be helped,” Bradford shot back, “considering ADVENT hasn’t fielded elite units of that type before now. We were all unaware of what they would be capable of, and suffice to say, that includes you. Don’t beat yourself up over something you couldn’t have possibly known.”

“But that’s the thing!” Mordenna threw his hands out. “I should’ve been more careful because I didn’t know! I should’ve held a shot to see what it would do instead of wasting it taking down another ship! I should’ve—”

“Hindsight,” Bradford butted in with, “is 20/20, Mordenna. If you’re half the strategist I think you are, you know that better than anyone here outside of Eliza. If you keep beating yourself up over this, are you going to have your eyes open for what else might happen? Or are you gonna get yourself stuck on what could’ve been?”

That was good enough to get Mordenna to hush his mouth for a bit, silenced at Bradford’s reasoning. After a bit of consideration, where Mordenna’s eyes flickered back and forth, he sighed again. “Goddamnit, Bradford, don’t bring hardcore reasoning into this. You’re supposed to let me beat myself up for fifteen years and then get around to handling it.”

“My ship, my rules. That all said, don’t take it as me dismissing your concerns. I think it’s nice you’re worried for your sister like that, but you need to consider what you could’ve done right and then move on. It isn’t healthy to dwell, and I don’t know how many times I’m gonna have to keep saying that to people on this ship.”

Mordenna blew out a breath. “Have to deal our that advice a lot, huh?”

Bradford shook his head. “Like you wouldn’t believe.”

He gave a single chuckle at that, pushing off of the wall and rubbing the back of his neck. “Well, I appreciate it, Central. Uh...” He averted his eyes. “If you’re still willing to help me out, could you assist me with something else?”

Nodding, Bradford uncrossed his arms. “I’m all ears.”

“So... me and my brother, well. Fal-Mai’s in pain, y’know? More than just physically. Girl lost an arm, can you blame her? Anyway, I think you know that people in pain tend to say things they don’t mean because they’re hurting. Well, Fal-Mai must’ve said something like that to Jax, because when I ran into him right outside of the Infirmary, he... wasn’t in the best of moods. I couldn’t see why, we got to shouting at each other, he stormed off.” Mordenna gestured with his
hands out. “Now that I’ve had a moment to think and calm down, I... I really don’t like what I said to him then.”

“What did you say?”

“I, uh. I got a little peeved over the fact that whatever Fal-Mai said legitimately hurt his feelings, but not in a good way. I got peeved at him for reacting. He told me to my face that me saying that was... was pretty much like what the Elders did. And yeowch, that hurt me. I don’t wanna be like the Elders, Bradford, it’s practically the last thing I want to do—and killing myself comes before that. So, uh...” He looked back to Bradford, and he had to say, Mordenna looked almost sheepish. “Could you... I don’t know, go before me? Make sure Jax ain’t still pissed at me? If he is, I don’t blame him, I just... don’t wanna make him angrier and more upset by showing up when I’m the last person he wants to see.”

It seemed like a solid plan—Bradford was a more neutral party, though he couldn’t claim to understand the Chosen to the extent that Eliza did, and he didn’t think he’d ever come close. He’d do what he could, of course, they were owed that much. Still, he had to be sure of one thing. “I’d be fine going in and mediating with Jax for a bit—but you’re not just doing this so I’m the one who has to handle it instead of you, right?”

“Oh fuck, of course not.” Mordenna shook his head as he said that. “Even if we get to shouting at each other, well... Jax is kind of the only brother I got, and half of my sibling population. Well, a third if you count what Lily and I have going, but that’s still a sizeable chunk. I wanna get things smoothed between us, Central, I hate leaving things festering like this when I can do something about it. I just want it to go smoothly, is all, and if you’re willing to help, I’m gonna make use of what I’ve got.”

That was good enough for Bradford. He let his arms fall to his sides and he nodded. “Alright. I figured that would be your answer, but I had to make sure. You know where he went?”

“Honestly, if he’s going to go calm down somewhere, it’d be the Studio. That’s relaxation station number one for him right there.” Mordenna shrugged. “That or that little tailor’s office the Tailor Twins have set up, but his signature’s located more generally near the Studio. Guarantee you that he went there to vent to his followers or just to sulk among them—and honestly, if I had a support group that large, I’d do it too.”

All Bradford really needed to know was where he was at, but he wasn’t about to tell Mordenna to stop babbling, considering it was just his wont. Bradford shoved off in the direction of the Studio—then had to check over his shoulder to make sure Mordenna was still following. Maybe his hearing wasn’t what it used to be, but Mordenna really didn’t make much sound. When he made sure the Hunter was still with him, he kept walking, wondering how he was going to approach this with Jax. Probably the same he did with any other soldier that looked like they had something on their mind—calmly, but firmly.

A few hallways and a ladder later, Bradford was at the door to the Studio. Behind him, Mordenna sighed. “I’ll... throw up my little cloak and head in with you. He won’t see me—and neither will you. Just know that I’m with you, alright?”

“Allright.” When he looked back to make sure, Mordenna was definitely gone. Trusting that he’d follow, Bradford opened the door to the Studio and stepped on in.

Jax and his followers had certainly done a number with the place. There was even more art on the walls and it seemed Mordenna or Lily had chipped in at some point to get them proper shelves for some of the other pieces. Not only that, Jax’s congregation seemed to have grown since the last
time Bradford had bothered to check. Arachne was in there with them, sitting among the Mystics and chatting in what sounded like ADVENT, and almost all of the PsiOps were in a circle with some of the other soldiers—ones he knew had sympathies to the Chosen. Jax himself was doing as Mordenna said and was sulking, sat at a table near the middle of the room. Maria was near him, seemingly having been dismissed at some point but still wanting to linger.

Some of the soldiers looked up as he entered, but he knew he shouldn’t get sidelined in casual conversation with them. He made his way to Jax’s table. “Hey, Jax. Something up?”

Jax looked up for a second before huffing, not looking at Bradford. “And what business is it of yours?”

“Generally, if the soldiers in my ship aren’t feeling the best, I take it upon myself to make sure they’re functioning properly.” Bradford leaned over on the table. “... and it doesn’t help that I know why you’re upset.”

At that, Jax pushed his eyebrows together, squinting at nothing in particular. “I take it my brother has sent you here.”

“What makes you say that? Understandably, the two of you would be rather upset that your sister just lost an arm. So I’m doing my rounds and checking up on the three of you. Seeing as the first thing Eliza did was bolt for the Infirmary, I figured you’d be in your usual spot.” Perhaps he was telling a bit of a lie here and there, but he figured Jax would be easier to talk with if it seemed Bradford had come of his own volition. To aid with that, he raised an eyebrow. “Though I’m curious to know why you’d be angry that Mordenna sent me here. Angry that he cares?”

The Warlock blew out a resentful breath. “You will find the case is quite the opposite—he does not. That is why you find me in my current mood.” Seems Jax bought it. “I understand that our sister is hurting. But would you, indeed, not also feel aggrieved if the person you were attempting to comfort harshly lashed out at you? What would you do?”

Well, Bradford held his first answer back—mostly because it was “stay there and stick it out.” Judging by what Mordenna said, whatever Fal-Mai said to Jax was enough to get him upset. He reconsidered his answer based on that. “If it were me, I’d step off a moment to calm down and let them do the same. Then I’d come back later, let them know that what they said hurt, and hopefully get an apology. Maybe give one of my own for storming off.”

“Exactly!” Jax finally looked to Bradford, slightly exasperated. “So why stop my retreat? Why halt me when I am off to calm down myself? Why—why stand there and insist that I have nothing to be upset about?”

This didn’t seem to be going well—if anything, Jax was getting more distressed by the second, and it was attracting attention. Seems Bradford needed to shift into that “hardcore reasoning” Mordenna was on about. “Because he, like you, cares about Fal-Mai—and that can blind him sometimes. I don’t think he could’ve imagined what Fal-Mai said to you to make you leave—and I don’t think I can, either. All he saw was his brother walking away from his sister, who was in need. From what I’ve heard, and what you’ve experienced before, Mordenna gets fiercely protective of whatever he cares about. Fifteen years of having nothing to hold onto and suddenly he’s given a new lease on life, and can you begrudge him for getting upset if something seems to threaten it?” Bradford sighed. “And yes, I’m aware that it doesn’t give him the right to chew your head off. But like you explaining why you stormed off from your hurting sister, you have to understand where he’s coming from.”

Jax took a moment to digest all that—looking like he was going to defiantly reject all of it at first,
then simmering into deep thought. Finally his expression shifted to a melancholy as he sighed, slumping over in his seat. “... I would think I would avoid taking rash actions out of anger, considering my... guardian, but it seems I am not immune to lashing out, myself. I would go try to make amends with my brother... but with my luck, he will be rightfully avoiding me.”

“About that.”

Mordenna’s voice came from right beside Bradford, and he’d be ashamed to say that he jumped. One moment, there was nothing beside him—the next, Mordenna was leaning over at the table. When Jax himself got over his surprise, Mordenna spoke up again. “You’d be right saying I sent Bradford here. I wanted to settle things, but... I knew you’d be pissed at me still, and honestly I don’t blame you. Me being a dick is kind of expected by this point, but I’d like to change it if I can. And... yeah. I’m sorry for blowing up at you. Pretty much what Bradford said here—I just... focused on the fact that you were walking away from her.” He rubbed at his mouth, looking down. “Fuck. Maybe one day I’ll learn to stop biting your head off for things you couldn’t control.”

His brother looked at him for a long moment before sitting up a bit more. “—I must also apologize for lashing out at you. Even if some of it was justified, raising my voice at you wasn’t necessary. I should also exercise temperance when dealing with my own anger. I pray that you can forgive me, brother.”

“Well, of course I can forgive you, bro.” Mordenna shrugged to the best of his ability in the position he was in. “If you ask me, you were justified in shouting me down, but that’s now when I’ve had a moment to think over it all. Could you forgive me for saying what I did?”

“I can.”

Mordenna relaxed a fair bit. “That’s a weight off my chest. And hey, uh... I think it’s nice you’re getting some validation on your feelings, here.”

Before the two of them could launch into a no-doubt heartwarming conversation, Bradford fully stood up. “Hate to dodge out of this conversation, but I need to both check up on Fal-Mai and get a message to Eliza. Mind if I duck out?”

Both of the brothers shook their heads. “Nah,” Mordenna said, “go right ahead. Tell Liz that Jax and I worked things out, yeah?”

“Can do.”

Bradford went to leave, but then a soldier called out to him. “Hi Central!”

He sighed, but restrained the urge to shake his head. “Hey Pattie.”

“Everything good?”

“Yeah. Now if you’ll excuse me...”

With that, Bradford made it out of the Studio, happy with the fact that he helped work out things between the two brothers.
Things had largely calmed down, back in the Infirmary.

Eliza now had Fal-Mai leaning against her, the Assassin’s head against her chest. Her eyes were closed and she looked as calm as Eliza had seen her all day, without the assistance of painkillers that could knock out a Berserker that is. Eliza was keeping her breathing calm and steady as she had an arm around Fal-Mai.

Samhien had already came and went, both returning Fal-Mai’s mask and applying new bandages to her wound, confirming it was healing ahead of schedule, as was the norm for the Chosen. No sign of regrowth, however—it seemed generating new limbs was beyond the capabilities for them. Eliza idly wondered if that extended to organs as well, but figured they’d have bigger problems if the Chosen started losing organs. Then again, wasn’t the skin a giant organ? Honestly, thinking on the logistics of it left her with more questions than answers.

So Eliza resolved to think on other topics. But really, she could only think of one, and she was currently laying on her chest right now. It was wonderful to have Fal-Mai this close again, even if the circumstances were beyond wanting. More than that, though, it was nice to know she was helping. After seeing Fal-Mai reappear from thin air with an arm down, it... shook Eliza greatly. Judging by the way it disappeared instead of dropping to the ground, they’d be seeing that Specter again. The Gatekeeper too, if the Elders deigned to save it instead of scrapping it—Eliza hadn’t seen any sign of it about to explode when the portal closed, meaning Fal-Mai had struck a decisive, but not lethal blow. What if Fal-Mai saw that Specter on the field again? Would it be like Jax, seeing his Ascension Facility in ruins? How would Eliza make the call for that? Much like the Chosen themselves, before, it could rightfully appear on any mission they undertook.

Eliza withheld a sigh, knowing the action would concern Fal-Mai. She’d have time to think over the strategic ramifications later. She was just here for Fal-Mai at the moment. Did Fal-Mai know the love Eliza held for her? Not the romantic love she was struggling over hiding—the platonic love. Eliza loved Fal-Mai, outside of her attraction. It was the same love she shared for her soldiers and her brothers, the same love that drove her to care about them and make sure they were alright on a personal level. Eliza wanted to tell Fal-Mai she loved her—but she knew the phrase “I love you” was either romantic or familial, and Eliza was already trying desperately to not appear to have either. The former because of how impossible it would be to have it returned, the latter because it wasn’t what she felt. She just wanted Fal-Mai to know she cared deeply about her. Through action, then, she decided—that was the best way to make it loudly known. Hopefully staying here with her communicated that enough...

Which was why it was all the more jarring when the door opened. Fal-Mai raised her head immediately, revealing her to either be awake the whole time or an incredibly light sleeper. Thankfully it was just Bradford on the other end of the door, who stepped in quietly. “Fal-Mai. Commander.”

“Bradford.” When Fal-Mai leaned away, she let her arm fall. “The Alien Rulers settling in fine?”

“ Seems so. Lily directed them to the basement, which was what I was going to suggest, anyhow. Celosia says she can provide their own accommodations within reason, though I’m sure the cooks will have a bigger workload on their hands.”

Eliza shook her head. “Seems I’m gonna need to bump up that trip to the Baroness in my schedule.”

“I’ll make a note of that. By the way, two things for you.” Bradford turned his head slightly, addressing both Eliza and Fal-Mai. “For one, things have simmered down again between Jax and Mordenna. Got them to apologize to each other, and Jax himself is sorry about storming out on
you, Fal-Mai.”

Fal-Mai rubbed her side, looking down. “... I don’t blame him, after what I said. He had every right to leave.”

“He meant to come back later,” Bradford replied, “so I’d expect a meeting within the hour. As for you, Eliza...” Bradford crossed his arms, getting a look on his face that Eliza had seen many times before. “The rulers want to see you personally. I’d advise against it—not because I don’t trust them, of course. They seem genuine and largely want to keep to themselves for now. You’ve just had a busy day today and I want you resting.”

Of course, Eliza took umbrage to that, as she always did. “And leave things unfinished? Of course not, John. I’d rather handle that within the day than leave it hanging. Besides...” She gestured to Fal-Mai. “Implying I wasn’t resting just then? If I were any more relaxed I’d be in the bed and sleeping.”

Something about that sentence made Fal-Mai look away, like she was hiding the expression on her face. Bradford himself just shook his head. “Whatever you say, Liz—but after you meet with the rulers, I want you resting. In your own bed or whatever else. This isn’t the time to be working yourself to the bone.”

“Fine.” Eliza rolled her eyes. “Well, if you want to help with that process, could you make it over to our comms station and book an appointment with the Baroness for me?”

“Gladly.” Bradford’s arms dropped. “If you’ve got nothing else for me, I’ll head off to do that.”


Muttering something about “hearing that before,” Bradford nodded to the both of them and left, leaving the quiet atmosphere in his wake. Eliza turned to Fal-Mai, who was still facing slightly away from her. “Mind if I go handle that? I’ll be right back afterwards.”

Fal-Mai nodded, and Eliza got up. She didn’t get too far before she heard Fal-Mai say something, though. “—Eliza? If... if I am to remain in bed and rest as you say...” After a period of silence, Fal-Mai sighed. “Nevermind. See to your duties, Commander.”

Eliza chuckled gently, turning around. “You’ve tried to brush me off before and it didn’t work, Fal-Mai—though I’ll commend you for starting to bring up whatever you wanted to talk about this time. What’s up?”

Fal-Mai was still looking away from her, but her eyes flickered to Eliza for a second before she spoke. “You... say you were nearly relaxed to the point that you would lay down in bed with me. Central has also stated that after your meeting with the Alien Rulers, you need to rest as well.” Oh.

“I... suppose it might be bold of me...” Oh my. “... but. I wished to ask if you would stay with me as we both rested.”

Well, slap some makeup and a wig on Eliza and call her a clown. Fal-Mai took her semi-joke seriously and was asking the Commander to sleep with her. Not... sleep sleep with her, but. God. Eliza ran a hand through her hair. Ok. So what was a little bed-sharing between friends? It was clear Fal-Mai would need the company, but Eliza hadn’t shared a bed since a short-lived relationship in her teens. Sleepover? Nah, she couldn’t explain it. Submitting to that fact and knowing Fal-Mai was waiting on an answer, she replied. “That’d—that’d be fine with me. God knows I could use the rest—and I swear the beds here in the Infirmary are comfier than my own
bed.” Maybe having someone else there would prevent her from rolling onto her back? Nevermind the fact that she was sleeping with a Chosen. “I suppose I can bed down with you after I’m done talking to the rulers, yeah?”

She nodded, breathing out a sigh of relief. “I would appreciate it, Eliza.”

With that interesting maze of thought and perception summarily handled, Eliza gave a short, somewhat flustered wave to Fal-Mai before she shoved off. To the basement it was, she guessed, without thinking over all of the implications of sharing a bed with Fal-Mai for the night.

Eliza did end up stopping in the Workshop, however. Wasn’t every day that she saw Lily chatting up a group of Archons. The two of them exchanged a look—but strangely, it was one of the Archons that opened up the conversation. “Ah, I take it you might be the Commander of this vessel?”

As easy as breathing, Eliza assumed her calm, but easygoing Commander persona. “That would be me. Commander O’Leary, happy to have you and yours aboard for as long as you need. Have anything to say? Otherwise I’ve been summarily called down to talk with your ruler.”

The Archon—blue skinned, silver armor—shook his head. “Merely inquiring as to who leads this faction. I would not keep you from an audience with our King.”

That sounded rather regal. It was almost enough to distract her from thoughts like “were the Floaters the originals, or you guys” and “you guys seriously have no legs by default?” Resolving to ask them in better forms to the Archon King, she nodded. “Very well. And Lily? Don’t get carried away.”

Lily looked like she took some mild offense at that, but Eliza didn’t give her enough time to reply as she turned to walk into the basement of the ship, making her way in. She had to admit, the gathering of aliens was a little intense. Keeping her thoughts calm, she looked for the Alien Rulers in the room. They were pretty easy to spot against their subjects, standing out like sore thumbs. As Eliza approached them, they looked up. “It’s good to meet the lot of you personally,” she began, “though I hate it to be under terms like this.”

Vel’kiin was the first to reply, but it seemed she was speaking something that was neither ADVENT nor English. Cursing her lack of alien vocabulary, she made a note to either learn it or teach Vel’kiin ASL. Luckily, Celosia replied in a way that hinted at what the Berserker Queen said. “—I don’t take her to be the ruler of the human race, love.” Curious. “‘Ruler of XCOM’ sounds more likely. Unless...?”

Eliza shook her head. “The only position of power I’ve held is Commander of XCOM. I suppose in a way that made me President of the Earth’s military might, but I’d rather not dwell on that. Regardless, my name is Eliza O’Leary. Feel free to just call me ’Eliza’ if you’d like. ‘Commander’ works too, but considering you all held far higher positions of power than I, it sounds like? Perhaps that’s not necessary.”

“It hardly matters now.” Rodin’s props on his wings adjusted a bit. “But the thought is appreciated. I take it you know of us through your operatives?”

“Indeed I do. I assume you all called me down because you have some questions for me?”

Shazara-Ta nodded. “Yes, but moreover we wished to meet with who is arguably leading the human race against the Elders.”
Eliza shrugged calmly. “Not just humans, mind you. Whoever wants to help, can, and I’ve taken in all kinds—as you all saw when we came.”

“Your recruitment of the Chosen is an interesting move, Commander.” Celosia regarded her carefully. Seems at least she was going to call Eliza “Commander.” “How long have you been working with them?”

“Well over several months now,” was Eliza’s reply, feeling this tired line of questioning come around again. At least she had her answers handy. “I’ll give you the rundown of what happened; it came time to storm Mordenna’s Stronghold on the basis that he needed to be dealt with—on the approach, I decided that it would be better to take him in alive rather than kill him, based on the information on hand at the time. That information being ‘I saw personally, during my time in the Network, enough evidence to suggest Mordenna was thoroughly abused into his mindset rather than having it be the case from the get-go.’ Turns out I was correct, we negotiated with him successfully, and we repeated the pattern for his siblings. With Jax’s ‘father,’ Cronus, trying to kill him before we could secure him, natch.”

That info was enough to make Celosia recoil while Vel’kiin shook her head. “And they... all were...?”

“Yes. Abused emotionally and physically, by beings you could argue were their parents. Turns out they’re great people past the bitterness and PTSD once you get to know them.” Perhaps Eliza’s delivery was a bit blunt, but she had to get the point across. “They’re still learning—no good road without rockiness—but I think you saw firsthand their care for each other in the field.”

“As we did.” Rodin’s voice was somewhat grave, but reverent. “I saw the care that Jax-Rai expressed for his sister, and the distress afterward from Mordenna was clear.” That was an understatement. Mordenna swapped off of his anti-air rounds and started picking off ADVENT in numbers Eliza hadn’t seen outside of his train raid mission. He seemed to get out of the other side ok, so it seemed a revenge-fuelled spree was more stable than one through an episode. “I’m fully willing to believe their efforts are genuine.”

“Consider my skepticism rescinded,” Celosia replied softly. “I wouldn’t have spoken so lightly had I known their struggle.”

“It’s easy to condemn from ignorance—it’s why I’m happy to let people know what’s going on to make it that much harder.” Eliza clasped her hands in front of her. “Any other questions for me?”

Vel’kiin posed something that sounded like a question. This time, Rodin translated. “A very pertinent question. Eliza—what are your long-term plans for us? Do you seek to find us a new abode, or should we assume we now inhabit your ship?”

Hm. A good question indeed. Eliza looked down for a moment, quietly considering her options. The Alien Rulers could very well be considered a faction unto themselves—establishing them would allow non-ADVENT soldiers that were still aliens to have a definite faction to turn to. That would ease Eliza’s workload—and Betos’s. However... having them on the ship also struck her as a good idea. More forces were more forces, and considering the rulers seemed to have storied histories of their own? There was much to be potentially learned from them.

In the end, Eliza looked back up to them. “Truly, I would say it’s your choice—but if I can express my opinion, it would be an honor to have you all on the ship. There is a clear history that you all bring with you; if our information aggregator wasn’t currently down for repairs, I would introduce her to you. I’d like to get to know that history before I send you off to a new home, if you would allow me. There is also the fact that I would be glad to have some of my allies closer if I can. I’d
like to assist you all where and when I can, and I can do that far more easily if you’re on the same ship as I am.”

The Alien Rulers seemed to consider her plan for a moment. Then, Shazara-Ta held up a finger, and they drew into a huddle. Unfortunately, they didn’t seem to know Eliza spoke ADVENT, and so she was privy to the whole conversation.

“ It’s a tempting offer,” Rodin began. “ I have seen their engineering bay. It’s a sight to behold! Me and my own might finally have the materials to bring forth cherubs once more. ”

“ But do we wish to chain ourselves down? ” Shazara-Ta’s tail thumped on the ground. “ We would be fully beheld to this Commander’s whims. Not to mention that we are... ”

Celosia shook her head. “ If this Commander is half as accepting as she says she is, our relationship would matter not to her. Besides, she has a certain charm herself, for a human. I believe she might be a psion as I am. ”

“ With blue psionics? ” Rodin rubbed his chin. “ ... I am similarly interested, but we shouldn’t just dash in harshly. Give it some time. ”

Eliza was starting to feel like she really shouldn’t be listening in on this. Nervously, she cleared her throat, deciding to tell the truth. “ I hate to burst your bubble, ” she interjected in ADVENT, herself, “ but I am more multilingual than you think. ”

The rulers jumped and looked to Eliza. Rodin was the first to recover and respond. “ You... also speak ADVENT? ”

Eliza gave a tired smile, crossing her arms loosely. “ Kind of a job requirement when you’re embedded into the Network for twenty years. I speak ADVENT loudly enough around here and some of your former ADVENT-aligned troops will recognize me if they’re old enough. ” Even out of the corners of her eyes, she could see some of the more usual-to-her-looking aliens look over to her with strange looks in their eyes.

Shazara-Ta brought himself up slightly. “ So you were the one directing the slaughter of your own race for twenty years? ”

Her smile fell. “ Against my own will. Before that, ADVENT captured me while we were holding them off at First Contact. Trust me—given half the chance, during those twenty years? I would’ve faster killed myself. But I’m doing my best to make my amends now. Much like my Chosen, I have much to atone for as well. ”

That left a heavy silence between her and the Alien Rulers. They looked between each other before it was Vel’kiin who muscled past them—an easy feat, given her frame. She walked right up to Eliza, who held her ground in front of the massive Berserker. Then, slowly, gently, she put a giant hand on the Commander’s shoulder and nodded at her. Unsure, but knowing this might be a type of acceptance, Eliza nodded back.

Behind Vel’kiin, Rodin gave an impressed hum. “ That is certainly an endorsement I will abide by. I agree with my queen—we will stay on this ship yet, Eliza. ”

Shazara-Ta crossed his arms, but nodded. “ I can still see the merit in it. I am in favor. ”

Celosia chuckled. “ Won’t see me going against my queen. We will stay. ”

When Vel’kiin’s hand slid from Eliza’s shoulder and nearly took her outfit with it, she smiled,
correcting her top. “Alright. That all said, mind if I ask a question or two of you all?”

Vel’kiin took her place back among her fellow rulers, chuffing what sounded like an affirmative. When none of the other rulers objected, Eliza began. “Alright... mind if I meet with you guys later to ask individual questions about your species? Admittedly, my Central Officer is very close to knocking me out himself so I’ll get some rest—but I’d like to know more about you guys.”

Rodin smiled. “It warms my heart to know you would like to know more than what ADVENT has wrongly presented of us. I, personally, would be glad to inform you.” The other Alien Rulers nodded.

“I’ll have to see to that eventually. Now...” Considering they didn’t see Vahlen in that cave and none of the rulers mentioned her, Eliza wasn’t particularly sure what the answer to her next question was going to be—but she had her suspicions. “... you all wouldn’t happen to know about a human woman named ‘Vahlen,’ would you?”

The reaction was instantaneous. The rulers appeared to be immediately set on edge—even the towering Vel’kiin’s hands balled into fists. It was Shazara-Ta who spoke then. “... how do you know of that wretch?”

Well, that reply pretty much confirmed all of Eliza’s suspicions. Feeling her heart harden against Vahlen again, she figured she’d be truthful. “Vahlen... was our Head Scientist at First Contact, twenty years ago. She was known for her brutality and... often led interrogations on the aliens herself. I disavow her personally and was only asking because the Chosen knew that she took you all from the Elders herself. I... didn’t know the full story.”

“If you must know,” Celosia began, voice hard, “Vahlen was our torturer for years we are unaware of. She mutated and twisted us all, unheeding of our cries for help. As per my species, I was able to adapt her changes out. However...” She looked mournfully to her fellows. “The others’ changes were more permanent.”

“She’s overclocked my systems to a dangerous degree.” Rodin scoffed. “If I were not rightful warrior-king, the changes she made would kill me. Not to mention what other changes she made that I won’t discover until one of my sculptors opens me up.”

“No cold-blooded creature should have ice in their veins,” hissed Shazara-Ta. “Can you imagine having the conditions of your body scare off your lovers and friends? Can you imagine growing thorns that frighten your own children? I am simply thankful she did not sterilize me.”

Vel’kiin looked to the side, silent. But Eliza could guess that the machinery ports in her back weren’t natural, that the green tinge between her armor plates belied what Vahlen did to her. Whatever her experience, it must’ve been beyond words.

This all just contributed to the fact that Vahlen hadn’t changed a bit. Given the opportunity, she chose to capture and torture these rulers instead of fighting alongside them. She had been so close to having their cooperation, Eliza bet—but she chose the far worse option. Controlling her anger, Eliza took in a deep breath. “... should I have my way, none of you will ever have to see Vahlen again.”

“Please, Commander.” Rodin’s jets took on a slightly red tinge. “I would be glad to see her long enough to pay back what she has done.”

Eliza didn’t know so much about that. But then again, knowing Vahlen as she did? Well... it would be a coinflip if she simply let Vahlen go or took her right to the basement to answer for her crimes.
Still, Eliza nodded. “Noted. I’m sorry to bring up the subject. That was all I had for you.”

Celosia and the other rulers relaxed a bit. “It’s fine. I’m simply glad you do not stand by her.”

“With what she did?” Eliza could feel an old hatred burn. “She’s no better than the Elders.”

“Agreed.”

Eliza took in another breath to calm herself, thinking of the situation she had to return to. “Alright. Now. Anything else before I go catch a break? We’ll be heading over to a contact of mine shortly to secure more supplies for you guys.”

“The assistance is appreciated, Eliza.” Celosia inclined her head. “I can only provide so much food—and even then, I am what you humans call ‘carnivorous.’ I can subsist on sunlight, nutrients, and water—but in emergencies, I do require protein.”

“Gotcha. Anything else I need to know?” When the rulers looked to each other and then shook their heads, Eliza nodded. “I’ll be in the Infirmary if any of you need me—but fair warning, this was the last thing I was supposed to do today. If anyone bothers me they might catch an earful from Bradford.”

Shazara-Ta gave an amused, hissing chuckle. “He seems to care much for you.”

“That I won’t disagree on. Hope you guys settle in nicely—we’ll work things out as they come.” That cleared out of the way, Eliza shoved off, walking out of the basement and giving Lily a friendly hello as she passed.

The journey to the Infirmary was quiet and without interruption. That gave Eliza enough time to think on just what she was about to get herself into. Sleeping. With a Chosen. Granted, non-sexually, but still. Eliza usually chucked off everything but panties and a loose-fitting shirt to go to sleep in. At the most, she’d feel fine removing her boots and belt around Fal-Mai without making things awkward. Granted, there was another part of her that was saying to just try her usual bedtime attire and see how Fal-Mai reacted, but god no. It was clear Fal-Mai was already nervous about it being misconstrued one way or the other, Eliza didn’t need to go and make things worse.

Eventually, Eliza came back to the Infirmary. Nobody else was on the inside save Fal-Mai, and she was sitting back up in bed again. Seeing Eliza, she balled the blanket into her hand gently. “Did everything turn out alright?”

She nodded, stepping closer and sitting on the edge of the bed. “Yeah. Seems we’ll be keeping them—and as it turns out, I was right to be suspicious of Vahlen. Turns out she took them just to experiment on them.”

Fal-Mai shook her head. “The unnecessary cruelty some can stoop to never ceases to present new lows. Surely they would have cooperated out of gratitude considering the effort it had taken to free them...?”

“You’d think that,” Eliza replied somewhat bitterly, “but I know Vahlen. Without me there to handle her reigns, it was probably what she was chomping at the bit to do.” When Fal-Mai looked at her for an explanation, Eliza gestured vaguely. “That means she was really eager to do it.”

Another metaphor learned, Fal-Mai nodded. “A dangerous mind, unchecked.”

“Could say that again and it’d be just as true.”
Silence. Was that going to be the extent of the conversation between them before they went to bed? It was timely enough, at least, even if Eliza would normally protest to going to bed this early. Still, some of the troops went to bed around this time—and Eliza was definitely worn out from the day’s events. She could manage sleep in her own bed, but with Fal-Mai...? The two of them locked gazes and then shyly looked in different directions.

Well, best to go in confidently. Eliza shoved off the bed, reaching and grabbing the privacy curtain, pulling it so they would be shielded from prying eyes. Then, she sat back on the bed, unlacing her boots. Fal-Mai was silent as she did, and that quiet made Eliza slightly nervous in that stomach-tingling way. Setting her boots neatly down, she then unhooked her belt and set it on the nearby chair. Lastly she undid her pistol holster, checking to make sure her Plasma Pistol had the safety on before setting it down on the chair as well. Hesitating a moment, she then reached under her shirt and undid her bra, taking it off without ever lifting her uniform. She loved Fal-Mai but she was not sleeping with that thing on. Putting it somewhere more out of sight and as undressed as she was going to get, Eliza turned to Fal-Mai.

Fal-Mai had barely budged an inch, save for her hand toying with one of the clasps on her armor. Oof, yeah, that might be a bit uncomfortable for Eliza, at least, should they get close. Eliza cleared her throat. “If... you’ve got an undersuit on, feel free to take off your armor. Not gonna make you sleep in it if it’s uncomfortable.”

“You’re welcome.” Still, Fal-Mai hesitated. She took in a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “I... some parts of it... I am unsure if I can undo with a single hand.”

“I’ll help.” The words were out of Eliza’s mouth faster than she realized what she was offering. First you take up the offer to sleep with her, now you’re going to help her out of her clothes? Good god, Eliza, at least buy her dinner, first. Look. Look, she was helping a woman who as an arm down get more comfortable. It was alright. There was no need to read more into it.

The slight orange tinge that came to Fal-Mai’s face must’ve been either flusterment or embarrassment, and understandably so. Still, she scooted over to Eliza, and she began undoing her own armor, gently showing Eliza when she needed an extra hand to get some of the pieces off. Eliza set the discarded pieces at the end of the bed, and when they were done, she set them on the other free chair.

Though Eliza didn’t look too long for fear of obviously staring, Fal-Mai was damn pretty. Without the armor hiding it, it was clear she was fairly muscled around her arms and legs, and the bodysuit subtly outlined her abs. There was a black bodysuit under Fal-Mai’s armor that covered her from neck to toe with no visible seams, made of a material that wasn’t shiny enough to be latex but wasn’t dull enough to be any other sort of material Eliza could think of. Eliza blinked and looked away before she looked for too long. “... all comfortable? Couldn’t imagine trying to sleep in that armor.”

“I have done it before,” Fal-Mai replied quietly, “though unintentionally, and even then I am unsure if it was really sleep or simply deep meditation.”

Only one way to find out, was what Eliza would’ve said if she were any less aware. She nodded, breathing deeply as she got onto the bed proper. Fal-Mai relinquished enough space for Eliza to be comfortable and she slowly laid down. Fal-Mai mimicked her and the two of them were left looking at each other.

Eliza was quick to break the silence. “If you... if it’d make you more comfortable, don’t feel like you have to stick to your side of the bed.” Eliza. Well, she wasn’t about to force Fal-Mai to
sleep/rest in an uncomfortable position to avoid touching Eliza! She could like, lay on her back and have her shoulder touch Eliza. It was fine.

However, Fal-Mai seemed to take the suggestion farther. Gently, she reached for Eliza. In a mild panic, Eliza froze for a second—but she wasn’t about to freeze Fal-Mai out. Supposing she’d just roll with it, Eliza scooted closer as Fal-Mai did and embraced her, finding her head against Fal-Mai’s chest. Without the buffer of her armor, Fal-Mai’s heartbeat was fast, but strong. The lack of the armor layer also told Eliza how hot Chosen were temperature-wise. Eliza had only gotten hints through hugging them and holding Mordenna’s glove-covered hands. If she were a human, Fal-Mai’s temperature would be best described as feverish. Eliza guessed she wouldn’t be needing the thin blanket, but reached to drag it over her legs anyway. That done, she returned her arm around Fal-Mai, who shifted slightly at the touch.

Well. This was a hell of a situation. Eliza still didn’t really have answers for how she got here and supposed she might never. But... was she really going to complain? Was she going to complain about sharing a bed with a lovely Chosen who could use the comfort? The answer to that was no. Eliza relaxed further into the bed. The privacy curtain was thick enough that the darkness it granted could be slept in. Eliza herself was tired, and Fal-Mai’s embrace was relaxing. She closed her eyes.

“Goodnight, Fal-Mai,” she murmured, voice barely a whisper. This close, and with Fal-Mai’s ears, she knew she would hear it.

“Goodnight, Eliza,” came Fal-Mai’s soft reply.

When Eliza could feel her thoughts turn and twist like they did when she was preparing to drop off into sleep, a small measure of fear struck her. Eliza had nightmares most nights about her experiences, and her tossing and turning could pin her on her back. She hadn’t cleared that with Fal-Mai. Eliza could only hope that Fal-Mai would be alright with her sleep paralysis.

As it turned out... Eliza never needed to explain herself. For the first time in a while, her dreams were of the variety she used to have before the military—mindless stuff that tended to relate to recent events without being coherently about any of them. It was so different that in the middle of tying a balloon into a circus seal in the middle of a shopping mall, Eliza stopped up in her dream, caught in a moment of self-reflection. Then she took a pin to the balloon and it exploded into sparkles on an adoring crowd of cats. Typical.

When she awoke, it was to a bleary and comfortable world, like she was wrapped up in a warm cloud. She was so relaxed that for a second, Eliza thought she couldn’t move. But a simple wiggle of her fingers confirmed she was free of sleep paralysis. Worries cleared, Eliza opened her eyes.

The morning view was wonderful. At some point in the night, Fal-Mai had shifted to sleeping on her back, though Eliza had remained resolutely clinging to her. Her sleeping face painted a portrait of an Assassin as calm as Eliza had ever seen. Fal-Mai’s breath was slow and gentle and she still had an arm loosely around Eliza. For a moment, the whole world was beholden to a single moment, perfectly suspended like water in a globe of translucent glass. Fal-Mai was beautiful.

Something in Eliza kicked her and said she should be up and at ‘em around this time, that she had to get up and be about her day. She chose, quite easily, to ignore that concern as she rested her head back on Fal-Mai’s chest, closing her eyes. She didn’t know what was between her and Fal-Mai, but she was fine with it. If they could remain platonic and share a bed when Fal-Mai needed it, Eliza could accept that. Eliza was comfy, relaxed, and just had the best night of sleep she’d had in decades.

She could take five more minutes.
**Dealings**

Chapter Summary

The Chosen deal with their sister, and Eliza deals with the Baroness.

When Fal-Mai opened her eyes, she didn’t want to shut them again.

The Commander must’ve still been asleep. Eliza was resting on her chest, arms around her still while her hair was splayed out like a platinum brown veil. The calming rush of Eliza’s breathing came through clear to Fal-Mai’s ears and let her know that she was relaxed right where she was at. She’d spent the night with Eliza, and it was the best sleep she’d had in her year and a half of life. So good, in fact, that it almost made her want to go back to it.

But Fal-Mai didn’t want to take her eyes off of the Commander, still snoozing on her. She wanted the image of it burned into her mind, so she would remember Eliza’s kindness even in her darkest moments.

Yet, Fal-Mai was so sleepy. Even as good as she slept, it brought her into a state of grogginess once more. Chosen didn’t need to sleep—and if Mordenna was to be believed, he couldn’t at all. But something about having Eliza on her chest made Fal-Mai both not want to move and join her in resting. **Well, you are injured. Eliza said it would be best to get your rest, after all.** It was hard to argue with that kind of logic. Taking in the scene with Eliza for a few seconds more, Fal-Mai closed her eyes and let her head rest back on her pillow.

Sadly, it was only a few minutes until she felt Eliza rise, yawning as she did. With the Commander awake, Fal-Mai no longer wanted to pretend. She sat up, stretching as best she could. When she opened her eyes again, Eliza was looking at her and smiling. “Morning, Fal-Mai.”

Fal-Mai blinked, still trying to get the sleep out of her eyes, rubbing at them. “... good morning, Eliza,” she replied, voice quiet. Goodness, she **sounded** sleepy. “—apologies for my tiredness.”

Eliza chuckled and it further warmed Fal-Mai’s heart. “Don’t worry about it, I don’t blame you.” Eliza herself looked refreshed—and it may have been just Fal-Mai’s groggy view of the world, but the bags under Eliza’s eyes seemed to have shrunk. “Honestly, I think you should keep sleeping. Need that rest, and all, and might as well take advantage of it while you can. Me, I have a thousand things to do yesterday.”

Nodding, Fal-Mai gently sunk back into her bed. Eliza, meanwhile, assembled the things she’d taken off the night before and slipped them back on—including an article of clothing Fal-Mai couldn’t place, which Eliza slipped on under her shirt. Curious. As collected as she’d be, the Commander scooted over on the bed. When she leaned down to hug her, Fal-Mai readily reciprocated. “Get your rest,” Eliza softly whispered. “I’ll come in to check on you later today.”

“Have a good day, Eliza,” Fal-Mai quietly replied. With that, Eliza shoved herself off of the bed and drew the curtain aside enough to walk out. Her footsteps faded into the gentle background noise of the Infirmary, the door opening and closing heralding her exit.

Fal-Mai would’ve very well tried to go to sleep again if she didn’t hear both the baritone hum of
Jax and the tenor warbling of Mordenna right outside. Hearing Eliza’s tone following up, it seemed they met and were talking. How nice.

Wait. Her brothers were coming.

The Assassin shot up in her bed, fumbling for her armor pieces. She couldn’t let them see her like this! Not to mention how it would inevitably seem to have Eliza coming out of the Infirmary in the morning! Of course, Fal-Mai knew that putting her armor back on was a lost endeavor—without either her other arm or an extra set of hands, she wasn’t going to succeed. Mildly frustrated, she let one of the pieces clatter to the floor as she flopped back in bed, throwing her cloak on.

Just in time, as well. The door to the Infirmary opened once more, and Mordenna was quick to announce them. “Sis. On one hand I’m here to make sure you’re alright. On the other? Eliza. I have some questions.”

Oh, no. Fal-Mai wound her cloak tighter around herself. She appreciated her brother’s concern but also knew the questions he wanted to ask and she didn’t really have answers to them. Still, she could hear her brothers walk over. Mordenna threw the privacy curtain back, but with her so deep in her shroud, he was left searching for her. His eyes quickly landed on her discarded armor and they almost bulged out of his head as he gestured wildly. “Sis! My questions continue to mount and I can only hope you’re decent under that cloak!”

She’d say something, but with her cloak as thick as it was, it’d most likely hide her voice as well. Wasn’t like she wanted to appear in front of the two of them in just her undersuit, anyway—she felt like she was naked. Thankfully, Jax filled in for her. “I would not think our sister one to make a move so brazen, considering her naivety to love. I... hesitate to even summon the line of thought, Mordenna but do you think she even knows about—”

“Mouth, shut, shut it now!” For good effect, Mordenna clamped a hand on Jax’s mouth. “Ok. You’ve got a point but never bring that up again. Alright so that’s off the table, thankfully. But still—the whole night with Eliza? Fal-Mai, you sneaky motherfucker?”

Her face warmed and she quickly gathered the blanket around her, moving to cover herself with it. When she was covered from the neck down, she uncloaked. “—would you begrudge me for needing security after yesterday’s events?”

While she meant it lightly, what Fal-Mai said seemed to resonate in Mordenna and Jax. Mordenna dropped his hand from Jax’s mouth and rubbed the back of his own head, while Jax collected himself. “Perhaps not,” he began, “which is why I was attempting to halt our brother from coming in and interrogating you about it. Clearly my efforts failed.”

“Well, hey, begrudge me a little levity and the chance to pester our sister over our mutual love for the Commander.” Waving that off, Mordenna moved on. “Still, to answer your question? Not at all. Think I’d need a sleeping partner after that, too—if I needed to sleep at all. But, yeah. I meant to come back and visit you yesterday, but I got caught up talking to Bradford, then apologizing to Jax, then hanging out with Jax... you get the picture. By the time I’d freed myself of all that it was late enough in the night that I figured you’d be sleeping or at least trying to rest. So I exiled myself to the Workshop to kick on Wiki’s repair/reboot sequence.”

It sounded as if Mordenna had quite the productive day. Still, the knowledge that the two fought because of her came back to her and she looked to the side, face falling. “I... must still apologize for lashing out at you, Jax. It was uncouth of me. I had only been focusing on my own suffering and had neglected to think on what I was saying before I said it.”
Jax came over to her side and crouched down to her eye level. “I wholeheartedly forgive you, sister. While it did sting, I took my time to disengage and mend my feelings. Admittedly, I also got caught up reconciling with Mordenna and was unable to check in on you again yesterday. I apologize for any worrying or stress that may have caused.”

Fal-Mai shook her head. “As the two of you have no doubt surmised... I was in favorable company. I’m simply glad that I did not do any more damage than I thought I did.”

“Yeah, well,” Mordenna interjected, leaning on the railing of the bed, “we’re tough nuts to crack! All those years with the Elders have gotta be good for something, am I right?”

Mordenna’s inclination to joke about his very real trauma and abuse always mystified Fal-Mai. If she were in his situation, she didn’t think she’d have the spirit to be joking at all... or even continuing to live. The thought of it sobered her.

Her expression must’ve been apparent, as Jax frowned. “Brother, perhaps joking about the Elders isn’t the wisest.”

Fair of Jax to protest about that, but... Fal-Mai looked to him properly, searching his face. Did he still revere them, knowing that the wounds they inflicted upon his siblings were no longer just emotional? With that question kicking the back of her seat, her voice lowered. “Brother? I... I do not ask this for seeking conflict. I know that twenty years with the Elders would very much color one’s outlook of them, for better or for worse. But—they’ve taken from me. Do you still think...?”

She let her question hang, the millions of ways it could end clogging her throat. Jax met her gaze for a second or two before looking away. The tension in the air could be cut with a knife as he stayed silent, presumably in thought. Finally, he closed his eyes, eyebrows pushing together. “I... I no longer think of them as gods,” he began, voice forcing “them.” “My regrets now are no longer of not having done right by them, or leaving them to join XCOM, where my health was more assured, along with yours and Mordenna’s.” He opened his eyes as he stared mournfully at nothing in particular. “But... I fear I am fractured, as myself. There are still parts of my being that cry out at my ‘demonization’ of them. There are still parts of me that mourn for betraying them even as I watched an agent sent from them mutilate you. Do not mishear me; I denounce them. But until I am unified in my hate for them... can you really accept me as a brother?”

Fal-Mai could feel her shoulders slump. It was morbidly gratifying to hear Jax so thoroughly against the Elders, but to also hear him fearing over a fracture of his self? It called to Fal-Mai, and she shuffled over, leaning against him. “It is perfectly reasonable for you to still want to idolize them,” she began. “They twisted all of us.”

“Hey,” Mordenna softly interjected when she said that, but she had a point to make.

“Even you,” she responded. “They not only made Jax and I revere them, they warped all of our senses of self. As he has said, parts of Jax still cling to them even after all he’s seen of what they’ve done. You think of yourself as nothing more than a weapon and their treatment of you has driven you to a deep depression. And I...” She took in a deep breath. These were her siblings. She could be open. “I still hold myself to Helena’s standards of perfection. Once I had my wits my first thoughts were of how imperfect I was with a part of me removed. It took quite a lot of reassurance to know I was not lesser for the loss—but even so, I cannot claim to have fully moved on.” She turned her attention to Jax again. “With all of that said? Of course I accept you as my brother, Jax. How could I not...?”

Jax’s face fell and he brought Fal-Mai in for a hug. “I... I-I sometimes forget that I am not alone in my suffering. Please forgive me for my mistakes.”
The words Jax said thrummed in Fal-Mai’s mind and came back to her in her own voice. Desperately, she freed her lone arm and hugged him back. Before she could speak, Mordenna came over and brought the both of them into his arms. “Ain’t mistakes,” he said, taking the words out of Fal-Mai’s mouth, “Elders isolated us from each other. Of course we’d think of ourselves as islands. Well, if it needs to be said, I’m saying it now; it’s not like that anymore. We’ve got each other, as corny as it is! Don’t forget it. If not for the sake of being ‘good guys,’ then for getting better.”

Jax nodded shallowly, sparing an arm for his brother. “I will try my best to remember that, brother. It simply escapes me, sometimes.”

“It is hard to remind ourselves,” Fal-Mai added, “when we were so used to questioning our own feelings. But we should regard it as resolute fact.”

“Yeah.” Mordenna patted her back—and from the sounds of it, Jax’s as well. “We fight, we get pissed at each other, but apparently that’s just what families do. Think the important part here is that we make up and acknowledge that we’ll always have each other.”

There was a quiet moment of agreement as the three Chosen soaked that in. Fal-Mai herself wanted to commit it to memory so she always knew where to turn. Eventually, however, it seemed Mordenna himself tired of the silence. “Good god that was cheesy. Who’s writing this after school special script?”

Jax and Fal-Mai gently chuckled, all of them leaning away from each other as the group hug broke. Fal-Mai would’ve responded, had she not realized that freeing her arm also meant that the only thing holding up the blanket had been removed. As she worked in a flurry to pull it back up, Mordenna shook his head. “You’ve got your undersuit on, obviously. Ain’t like we’re seeing you in your underwear.”

Fal-Mai huffed. “But it is the clothes I wear under my armor. Is it not the same?”

“Surprisingly, no, but I’m sure our brother here could make a good case for the taxonomy of it—”

“Oh,” Jax interrupted, planting a hand on his hip, “so now the argumentative rube is going to pin the love of debate on me?”

“You can bet your ass on that!” Mordenna stood up. “Honestly I think we should move this discussion somewhere. I vote the Workshop! I have a Codex to revive and Fal-Mai here needs to stretch her legs.”

With the prospect of covering herself with the blankets forgotten, Fal-Mai’s mouth settled into a line. “... even if I am not in my underwear, I am not traversing this ship in my undersuit. I was recommended to rest, as well.”

“Hey, I’m not gonna ask you to run a marathon in the Workshop—and all else fails, Jax can carry you again. Or I can! You’re hilariously light. As for the armor...” He rubbed his chin. “I was about to say ‘just put it back on’ like an insensitive asshole, but I understand the stumbling block in the way of that.”

“Please.” Jax shook his head, moving to retrieve her armor. “There are no stumbling blocks to be had. I will assist you, sister.”

“And dress me like a child?” Maybe she was being petulant like one, but the notion embarrassed her.

“Fal-Mai, I don’t know how many times I gotta say this,” Mordenna said, gesturing to her, “but
you’ve only got one arm, until I can do anything about it. Things that were easy before will be hard or impossible now. Let us help you out—besides, it’s not dressing you. Medieval knights from fuck-knows-how-long ago often needed an extra pair of hands to get into their tin cans. This ain’t ’getting you into your clothes’ so much as it is ’getting you ready for battle.’”

“Besides.” Fal-Mai watched as Jax levitated her chest piece into the air with a hand made from his psionics. “If you wish, I need not touch you at all.”

Well, that made her feel slightly better. She really did want to spend more time with her siblings, and spending all day in a bed didn’t sound like too enriching an experience, even if it would be better for her. She sighed. “Fine. I will direct you.”

The process went pretty smoothly, Fal-Mai had to admit. Jax’s phantom hands assisted her as she got back into her armor. At some point, Mordenna seemed to get an idea and wrote something down in his notepad again. Eventually Fal-Mai was suited up and Jax lowered the railing on the other side of the bed for her. Still, she was nervous as she sat on the side. Jax caught her hesitation and offered his arms.

She shook her head. “I... I would like to try, first.” Nodding, Jax stepped to the side. Taking in a deep breath, she eased off the bed and slowly moved to stand. Without the weight of her right arm, her balance felt all off, and she wavered on the spot.

Mordenna was quick to come up to her good side, and she planted a hand on him out of reflex. “Woah there, Bambi. There are treadmills on the GTS to get your physical therapy moving. Probably best to just let one of us handle the walking for you.”

Fal-Mai gave another sigh. “And give off the image that I am unfit? And let the rest of the ship have the impression that I must be ferried around?”

“Honestly, fuck the rest of the ship.” Mordenna jabbed a finger at her. “You’re injured and clearly not feeling for balance right now. Until I can get you your new arm or you get used to walking without it, let us help you, ok? It’s not like we get the chance often.”

“Mordenna is correct.” Jax eased a hand on her shoulder. “Far be it from us to baby you, but... you are the youngest, and our only sister.”

How much was she going to concede because of her injury? She knew she wasn’t exactly in fighting shape, but it almost seemed as if they were babying her. Still... she could tell it was an expression of them caring. She wasn’t feeling the best and they wanted to help. She... trusted them, nowadays. This wasn’t her year at ADVENT where such an offer would only be to humiliate her. Fal-Mai relaxed slightly, leaning against Mordenna and throwing her good arm around his neck. “I will concede, I suppose. If only because you seem so eager to pamper me.”

“And the thousand things I’m offering to make for you didn’t express that fact? Jeez, Fals. Jax, grab her mask and go in front of me. You’ll be my door man.”

As instructed and while chuckling, Jax picked up her mask and pulled the curtain fully back. Meanwhile, Mordenna secured her in a princess carry, his own balance being thrown off for a moment as he overcompensated and nearly flung her. “Jesus! Fals the Darklance is heavier than you. I think the Darkclaw might be heavier than you. I know that’s part of Helena’s grand design ,” he said, obviously mocking the statement, “but I’m never getting over it.”

“Lighter weight means lesser tracks,” she justified, but knew how ridiculous her light bodyweight was.
“Where have I heard that before?” Jax mused.

“Hey!” Mordenna followed after him as he went for the Infirmary door. “I didn’t know at the time they made you a beefcake to overcompensate for the degeneracy they thought you’d have and then undercompensated for me! I didn’t ask to be as brittle as Odin’s ego!”

Jax merely laughed, holding the door open as he went through, letting Mordenna and Fal-Mai exit the Infirmary. It seemed to still be morning on the Avenger—there was hardly anybody in the halls, which Fal-Mai was thankful for. Not everybody needed to see her in her current state. Even as her mild embarrassment continued, she was happy that her brothers cared so much for her, now. It was practically night and day compared to the beginning of the year. Was a positive space and a caring Commander really all they needed to be better people...? If it was the case, Fal-Mai was happy. She wasn’t born to be a cruel killer. It was simply her situation. Her brothers weren’t going to be arrogant and spiteful forever—it was the Elders’ mistreatment that made them so.

Mordenna’s voice broke her train of thought. Seemed her brother couldn’t abide by silence. “So. I’ve been thinking.”

“Oh no,” Jax replied, and Mordenna sped up a bit to punch his arm.

“Shut the hell up, you hunk of smug. Anyway, as I was saying, I’ve been thinking. I know I proposed it a while ago, but considering Liz is about to head to the Black Market from what I gleaned of the coordinates on the Bridge and I need to go on a shopping trip while nobody’s looking... I think you guys need new duds that I can provide.”

Didn’t Jax protest to that last time? He looked like he was about to, again, and he crossed his arms. However, when he spoke, Fal-Mai’s expectations didn’t stay intact. “... I believe that would be a good prospect. Despite how parts of me protest, I need to begin to distance myself from the Elders. This marked vestiment does not do my image of repentance justice. About the only thing it conveys is their anger and willingness for cruelty—and as much as I would like to keep it for that, I’m fascinated at what you might come up with, brother.”

“That’s the spirit!” Mordenna sounded genuinely excited at that. “Jax, like I mentioned, I’m thinking WAR Suit. But like, instead of being fitted for a heavy weapon on the wrist, I’m thinking something shoulder-mounted. EMP rockets? I gotta get you something to help take down robots that don’t take so well to psionics.”

“Hasn’t XCOM fashioned something to the effect of ‘Bluescreen Rounds?’”

“Yeah but that’s the easy way out. And I don’t do easy. Hell, it doesn’t have to be EMP rockets. Maybe I could rig a back canister that feeds your minigun whatever rounds you want with an external power source and converter—or just something that stores a fuckton of grenades for you. Variety! Really just depends on what you’d like to focus on.”

Jax “hmm”ed. “... I believe I’d be more confident in the belt-fed ammo you propose, until I start training with teleporting grenades. Even so, I might favor simple heavy ordnance more.”

“Ain’t a problem you can’t solve with more gun. I like the way you think, you madman. That reminds me, I need to find out what your upper tolerance for weight is. Right now it’s ‘theoretically infinite’ and I don’t like working with theoretics. Maybe I could hand you my girl to start.”

Jax paused. “I do not see how carrying Eliza will prove anything.”
Mordenna sputtered while Fal-Mai almost giggled. He spared an arm to point at Jax. “You know what the hell I mean you pompous watchtower!”

“Turnabout is fair play.”

“Like hell it is! Shut up, you’ve lost your talking privileges.” Turning to Fal-Mai, he went back to grinning. “What about you, oh sister of mine? I think letting you pass through walls would be a hilarious prank to play on ADVENT—and a grappling hook would make you even more mobile than you already are.”

Well, she would appreciate the extra mobility. Something about the grappling hook stood out to her, however, and she wondered if she should be entertaining what she was. After all, it was one thing to use it to maneuver. It was another to take a leaf out of her former enemy’s strategy. “...could you, perhaps, modify it to be similar to the Skirmisher’s? I will admit, I admire their ability to position themselves around their enemies.”

“Oooh, good idea, good idea.” Mordenna bobbed his head. “I’ll have to see about making it so that you can grapple enemies to yourself—I don’t doubt your strength but with your low body weight I might have to look into, I don’t know, retractable spikes for your boots to keep you in place. Flinging yourself at enemies, though? Totally doable. In fact...” Mordenna tilted his head. “...I might be able to implant it into a battle-ready version of the new arm I’m gonna cook up for you. If you want it faster I can just make a gauntlet like mine and rebalance it with you in mind—might even slap a blade on top of it if you wanna go full Skirmisher.”

“Of course. I have no shame in admitting that I was impressed by their ingenuity while I served the Elders, though I would not admit it at the time.”

“Hell, nothing like learning from your enemy. Reminds me that maybe I should make my own Reaper mask at some point. Not like Volk can fuckin’ stop me.” He leveled a look at Jax. “I’m granting you speaking privileges so I can ask again about touching up your gauntlets. Sorry if it seems I’m pestering you about it, but you essentially told me ‘maybe later’ about that and your armor and you changed your mind about the armor—”

Jax held up a hand, silencing Mordenna. “I do so dearly hate to tell you ‘maybe later’ again, but as grand as an idea as having Templar gauntlets sounds—how will they react when they witness me using them on the field?”

“Fuck the Templars too!” Mordenna hopped a little, as if to emphasize his point. “The minute they let a Templar on here and let Lily have the blueprints to upgrade their gauntlets they concede the right to not have them duplicated.”

“And turnabout would not be fair play with your own guns?”

“See, I’m not stupid enough to either let anyone else mess with them or have a physical or digital blueprint on hand. Got it all here in the ol’ noggin. But to answer your question, obviously not. Besides. It’s you. I’ll break a few rules.”

Jax smiled back at them, then looked ahead as he walked. “How touching, brother, that you’re willing to gain the ire of the Templars to upgrade my arsenal.”

“Besides again,” Mordenna continued, returning the hand he was using to point to Fal-Mai as they approached the Workshop, “you’re like, a master of construct psionics. If you start making blades and shields out of the blue, well, you could do that all along! You just never did.”
As if to entertain the point, Jax lifted his arm. Sure enough, a Templar-like blade lanced out from the back of it. He let it fade before he went for the door. “Hm, a fair point. I suppose the modified gauntlets would just make it easier. Consider my answer ‘yes.’”

“Hell. Yes. God I have so much to do and it’s great! I don’t think you guys know how much I love busywork.”

Jax merely shook his head as he continued grinning, opening the door to the Workshop. The inside was standard, with the additions of SYN at his charging station—powered down—and Lily, working over what looked like a nearly-completed Chosen minigun. The sight of Lily made Mordenna give an indignant noise. “Lily Shen! I thought I told you to go the hell to bed last night!”

“And fall behind you?” Lily looked as if the very notion was absurd. She also looked like she was approaching Eliza-levels of bags under her eyes. She nodded as she regarded the rest of the Chosen. “Hey, Jax. Hey, Fal-Mai.”

“Greetings, Lily.” Jax sauntered right over and inspected the almost-finished gun on the table. Even to naive eyes like Fal-Mai’s, it wasn’t hard to see that Lily was inspecting Jax in turn. “I see the progress on my new armament is going well.”

Certainly was. The whole framework was done for it and all that was left was plating—exposing the barrels underneath. The styling was very much Mordenna’s and looked in line with the rest of their weaponry—there even seemed to be a slot for a belt magazine. Mordenna was already planning for the backpack? Lily blinked a few times, gesturing back at the unfinished weapon. “Yeah. Few more days and it’ll be done. Honestly, I’ve never worked with a project like this before. At this point the number of Elerium Cores powering it is making me nervous—and that number is ‘anything above one.’”

“Clever use of heatsinks and shielding means the weapon won’t blow up in his hands, at least,” Mordenna filled in. He walked over to one of the benches and looked to Fal-Mai. When she nodded, he gently put her in a sitting position and resumed speaking. “Even have a psionics-guard in it so that use of your powers near it won’t be a bad idea. Sadly means that if you somehow manage to charge your psionics into bullets you won’t be able to do it with this gun. I’ll make you a new one if you turn out to be able to do that. Half for the spectacle.”

“Sadly, I have not devised such a tactic—and hardly think I ever will. That would require great telekinetic projection to even reach half the speed that bullets travel at—or seem to, anyhow.” He shook his head. “I am proficient at telekinesis, but not that proficient, I will readily concede. You would have to consult Maria.”

“Maria?” Lily tilted her head. “I thought her thing was healing psionics.”

“Healing and telekinesis. You can specialize in multiple areas if your ability is great enough.” Jax gestured grandly as he was known to do as he exposted. “Maria was a Priest born of the Gatekeeper strain, one rarely-used as they moved over into Sectoid for the unit. Once it was seen that they did not require units with such firepower, they shifted the genetic component to one more accessible and less costly. Maria, however, was a Priest I specifically commissioned a year after I had been Ascended. She, along with her ADVENT Soldier and Gatekeeper roots, also has Berserker in her veins.”

Lily, for one, looked absolutely speechless. Mordenna, however, snickered. “Oh, why am I not surprised? Only you would ask for a Gatekeeper/Berserker hybrid for your right hand... woman. Explains her height and build, at least. Makes me wonder how psionically adept Berserkers and Mutons could be.”
A question that could be answered in the Psi Lab,” Lily followed up, “now that we have some on board. Mutons, at least. Didn’t spot any Berserkers with the Queen.”

Mordenna shrugged. “Might be a thing for their society. Honestly, I bet Wiki would love the chance—” He stopped up in his sentence, smacking his head. “Right! Was in here for a reason. As much as I love shooting the breeze with you guys, I have a Codex to bring back to life. If you’d excuse me...”

Fal-Mai didn’t realize, but she was sitting at a Workbench that had a Codex brain on it, with a blueprint under it and an Elerium Core next to it. Mordenna sat down right next to Fal-Mai, patting her on the shoulder as he fished out a cord behind the brain. He hooked one end up to the core, then did a double-check over the brain. “Yo. Lils. You didn’t mess with this, right? Just making sure.”

Lily and Jax seemed to have launched into a conversation of their own, and had drawn closer. Lily shook her head. “Nope. Heeded your instructions and left it alone, as much as I wanted to bring her online myself. Still, it’s kinda more your field, considering who they came from.”

“Yeah, pretty much, even if I don’t want to be connected to that wrinkly bastard.”

“Sorry.”

“Eh, don’t think much of it.” Mordenna set the brain back down on the table. “Honestly, if I get the chance? I wanna make a few Codices of my own. Would be nice to have a few zippy assistants when I need them. Just wish I knew how. Hell—don’t shoot me, guys, but it’d be nice to have a less hostile, more friendly version of the Network at my fingertips.”

Something about that unsettled Fal-Mai, and she decided to make it known. “You would revive the ADVENT Network?”

“Like I said, don’t shoot me. When I say that, I mean a version of it not used to control hundreds of thousands of near-mindless soldiers. I mean one that’s essentially a communications server. I can pull files off of the Avenger whenever I want without needing a datapad, Wiki has a bit more integration, I’m sure Schro would like it too—and hell, anybody who can hook up to it can basically use it as a messaging system. More personal and direct than the comms we have.”

“Honestly...” Lily rubbed her chin. “... it sounds like quite the idea. I agree with you—I’ve dealt with hacking into the ADVENT Network before and it’s nothing but a mess of hostile code.”

“Tsch, don’t get me started.”

“Hopefully I won’t. But if we could have some version of it—maybe based out of the Shadow Chamber, considering we’re already using it to ‘ping’ enemy units on the field—it might make things easier for us.”

“Sure would!” Mordenna finally hooked up the cord to Wiki’s cortex. The light blue light inside began to glow. “Want me to float it by the Commander eventually? She’s...” Fal-Mai watched as Mordenna’s confidence drained. “She, uh. Hm. Good point, me, try thinking of that earlier. Dumbass.”

Fal-Mai blinked. “What’s the matter, Mordenna?”

“Being hooked up to the Network against your will for twenty years won’t do you favors, is what I’m guessing,” he began, massaging his forehead with a hand. “She might be ok with it in theory but now I’m wondering... if she has a bad reaction to being in an unconscious state on her back,
what the hell will being hooked up to a diet Network do for her?"

Oh. That was a fair point. She could see why it wouldn’t bother Mordenna—it seemed to have never been against his will, and he didn’t seem uncomfortable about it before this point. But, as he said, Eliza had been put into it unwillingly. It could very well drudge up terrible memories. Fal-Mai took in a deep breath. “I believe there could still be merit to it. Perhaps if you pick apart what the ‘feel’ of the Network was? If nothing else, you could simply not put her on it.”

That made Mordenna think for a second, but when he was done, he nodded, looking a lot less like the wind had been punched out of him. “Yeah, that’s a thought. I guarantee you the Network felt the way it did due to how it was set up. If I can make a new Network and both streamline it and make it more user-friendly, I think it might feel different enough to Liz that it won’t cause a problem. And yeah, like you said, simplest option would be to just not hook her up.” A small smile came back and he nudged Fal-Mai in a friendly manner. “See? This is why I bring you down here. You’ve got a fresh, simple perspective on everything.”

Jax chuckled. “For as many words as you put to it, you are simply calling her naive.”

“Shut up! She doesn’t have to know that!”

Fal-Mai straight up giggled at the exchange, even knowing that it was essentially what Mordenna said. The levity of it was enough to make her feel happy, and it seemed Mordenna was also elated at making her smile.

As she simmered down from her laughter, she watched as Wiki’s brain slowly lit up more, even the eye-lights beginning to glow. It caught everyone else’s attention as it zipped a foot to the side on the table, then back. When it streaked a few feet into the air, Mordenna caught it and grabbed the core to make sure it didn’t yank on the cord. “Woah there, Wiki, easy. Slowly.”

If Wiki could hear him, she wasn’t listening. The brain zapped out of his arms and onto the minigun, then onto the floor, bringing the Elerium Core with it without dragging on the wire connecting it to her brain. Finally it returned to its old spot on the table and slowly began to hover, glowing brighter. With a flash of blue that made Fal-Mai cover her eyes, Wiki was standing on the table when she put her arm down. “Uh. This... isn’t the Ascension Facility. Did I do that good of a teleport?”

Muttering something about deja vu, Mordenna stood up and did her the favor of unhooking the spent core. “No, Wiki. You did the teleport well, but I have to break this to you; it pretty much killed you.”

Wiki was silent for a second. “You’re. Going to have to forgive me if I don’t understand? If I’m dead, then—”

“—I resurrected you. Pretty much like I did SYN.” Mordenna shook the core at her. “Took a long while of diagnostics in the Shadow Chamber to search your banks, and then repairing you from the blueprint you had on board, then a powerup process I thought would take longer. But, you’re here. Welcome back to the land of the living, Wiki.”

“Oh.” It took one more second for it to truly settle in, but when it did, Wiki flickered out of sight. When she came back, she was hugging Mordenna. “... thank you. I. Truly don’t know what to say. This wasn’t in my parameters, and all. You didn’t have to...”
“Oh, please, I did.” Mordenna patted her back. “Besides, it’d feel lonely around here without our favorite Codex.”

Wiki gave a giggle, then looked around. “It’s nice to see you’re all alright, at least!” Unfortunately, right after she said that was when she saw Fal-Mai’s distinct lack of an arm. She immediately deflated. “Oh. I didn’t. I didn’t see, I’m sorry—”

Fal-Mai held up her remaining arm, almost waving it off. She didn’t want to guilt Wiki, but it did sting a little, to be reminded. “I will indulge you with the story later. I forgive you for your unfortunate platitude.”

“Oh. Alright. Thank you.” Something seemed to occur to Wiki, as she turned to Mordenna. “… what all did you see, roaming around in my head?”

“Eh, not much.” He shrugged, sitting back down comfortably. “Some of the old world data you’d gathered. I was just looking to see if there was any repair files you had kicking around.”

She rubbed her chin, stepping down from the table. “So… you didn’t go a few entries further?”

“Nah, not particularly. Didn’t have reason to.”

“Well, that makes it more poignant for me to offer something in return for literally bringing me back to life, at least.” Wiki leaned on the table. “Corner me later and I think I have something you’ll be interested in.”

“Oh? Bribing me with information?” Mordenna grinned. “What a grand prospect! You certainly play with fire, Wiki.”

“Hey!” She crossed her arms. “I’m not bribing you. Like I said, I feel like I need to say thanks. Just… ask me about it later. For now…” She looked over the rest of the group. “Different colors, a new gun, your symbols are gone… how much happened while I was out?”

“You pretty much summed up a lot of it,” Lily answered, gesturing with a tool. “These guys went under minor wardrobe changes courtesy of Mordenna, and we’re making Jax a minigun because why not? Oh, yeah.” She pointed at the door to the basement. “We might’ve also picked up alien royalty while you were ‘asleep.’”

Wiki paused. “Seriously?” When everyone nodded, she looked between them and the door a few times. “… I’ll be back. Eventually.” With that, she teleported out of sight, though by the way Mordenna’s head moved, she was cutting a path right to the basement.

He shook his head. “I’d almost feel bad for ‘em, ‘cept I know Wiki’s first concern is gonna be preserving all of their history, which I’m sure they’ll love.” With an expert throw, Mordenna chucked the disconnected core sans the cord over to an open crate in the Workshop. That done, he stowed the cord away. “Right! Lily, you keep working on the 500 Sermons per Second. I’m gonna start work immediately on an arm for Fal-Mai. Going right to the top of the list with it.”

Jax cocked an eyebrow at the name. “Will I have to call it such?”

“You’re already calling the Heretic Eradication Rifle the Disruption Rifle. Quite frankly, I can’t stop you from not rolling with the kickass names I give things.”

Shaking his head, Jax regarded his future weapon for a second. “… perhaps I can give it a small revival in calling this the Eradication Cannon.”
“Sure, but like, Canon. One ‘n.’ You don’t even have to pronounce it differently.”

He scoffed in good nature. “I’ll consider it.”

“There and I’ll be happy. For a little while, at least.” Mordenna stowed the blueprint on his table and dragged out a new one, retrieving what looked like a specialized pen for it. “Alright. Fal-Mai, here’s what I’m looking at—before I can start on your arm, I need to work on a system that takes signals from the nervous system to manipulate machinery. I’m not talking ‘you think about wanting to move your arm and it moves,’ I mean ‘you move your arm and it moves.’ No trying to force it, I’m talking natural control like with your remaining arm. For that I might need to intrude on your spine to get a good connection. Any objections?”

Fal-Mai shook her head, sitting more properly so she could watch Mordenna work. Already he seemed to be drafting a design. “Ok, great. Probably gonna pull you in at some point to make sure the damn thing will read your signals correctly. Could experiment on myself, but you and I have different levels of dexterity—no offense meant, of course, I just want to make sure the arm works 100% for you. After we get all that squared away I’m gonna start on the arm’s design. Skeleton work first, then a period of you just using it around the ship before you get to fighting with it. Work out all the bugs and make sure it’s not gonna freak out on you in the middle of a heated moment. You dig?”

Honestly, it sounded like a long process, which demoralized Fal-Mai somewhat. From the way Mordenna had been talking about it, he made it seem as if all he had to do was make her a replacement arm and then that was it. But, she understood something like making a fully functioning, mechanical arm would take some time and wasn’t exactly technology she’d ever seen before. The fact that Mordenna was willing to go through this at all was what she held onto and appreciated. “I... ‘dig.’ Could I be able to put in my own suggestions for the design?”

“Of course! It’s your arm, after all.” Mordenna continued to work on the blueprint. Behind them, Jax and Lily had lapsed into a conversation about... sculpture? “I might ask you to hold off on any suggestions for the combat version for now—oh, yeah, should probably say this; you’re getting two different arms. One for lazing about the Avenger, one for slicing people up on the field. So if you have anything you want for the domestic one, feel free to tell me.”

Well, she had a few ideas. “Tactile feedback, for one.”

“That goes without saying!”

“Still.” She thought for a second. “Padding on the palms.”

“Honestly, our materials provided, I might be able to make the whole thing padded. Depending on what I do for the joints, maybe not around there to avoid the uncanny valley, but I’ll look into it. Anything else?”

“Fingernail-like protrusions?”

“Ooh, wouldn’t have thought of that. Should I copy the length from your other hand?”

“If you’d please.”

“Got it. That it?”

There was... one more thing, but Fal-Mai was wondering if she should say it. It would make the arm look more complete, but it also would echo her origins, and link her to the Elders. She supposed she could ask Mordenna for a second opinion. “... there is one more request I might have,
but I am unsure of it.”

“Hey, hit me, I can do more than you’d think.”

“It is not a matter of feasibility—I imagine it is very well within your means. It’s simply...” She sighed. “You haven’t ever seen any of my skin below my neck, have you?”

“Nope! Would like to keep it that way until I start attaching your new arm. Never saw you in any of your PR outfits, either.”

“Not that it would have mattered then,” she bitterly muttered, “considering the makeup... I digress.” She rubbed what was left of her right shoulder. “… around my joints, due to the amount of Ethereal DNA I possess, my skin is darkened as if I had their muscle degeneracy. I was conflicted on asking for it to be mimicked on my new arm for the way it would link me to them... and yet, not asking for it would make me rather asymmetrical. I was wondering what you thought of it.”

Mordenna stopped in his blueprint drawing, tapping the end of the pen against his chin. “... if you ask me, muscle degeneracy isn’t exactly a thing linked intrinsically to those wrinkly fucks and for you it’s more skin coloration than anything else, y’know? Like vitiligo. And vitiligo is pretty neat, if you ask me. That’s just like, targeted reverse vitiligo without any of your melanin dying. I’d be fine reproducing the pigmentation on your domestic arm.”

Fal-Mai relaxed, nodding. Perhaps she had been overthinking it a bit, but like Mordenna said to her, she appreciated his perspective. “Thank you, Mordenna. It had been worrying me.”

“Don’t blame you. Elders have given a lot of stuff bad names nowadays. The amount of things that give me a bad taste in my mouth because of them makes me sick, fittingly enough.” He went back to outlining the device. “Now, is that it?”

“As much as I can think of now, yes.”

“Fantastic! I’ll file away your suggestions for later when I get to designing it. For now, I’m gonna be expediting work on this. Until this ship touches down for the Black Market, of course.”

Fal-Mai blinked. “Are we going this soon?”

“Well, with all the new passengers we just picked up, yeah.” Mordenna rolled his free wrist. “When Jax and I saw her coming out of the Infirmary, Eliza told us as much. He, Bradford, and I are gonna be accompanying her over there while she negotiates with the Baroness.”

Despite herself, Fal-Mai felt as if she was being left out. She knew precisely why she wasn’t going to be attending, but even still... Her expression must’ve been clear, as Mordenna patted her back. “Hey, look, I want you to come along, but you really do need to sit back for a bit. Get your strength back and rebalance. We’ll keep Liz safe and I’ll tell you all about it when I get back, ok?”

She nodded, still somewhat melancholic. “Alright.” With that, she watched Mordenna as he worked, the sliding of his pen and the low drone of Lily and Jax’s conversation behind them taking up her hearing as she watched Mordenna work.

Who would’ve known a good night of sleep could make your day better?
Granted, Eliza knew that pretty well. She got to terms with that the minute she started having night terrors. It had just been so long since she had a proper rest that she’d almost forgotten what it was like to be well rested. She half-thought she needed a buddy to sleep with more often, but she wasn’t touching that line of thought with a ten foot pole.

Still, the extra restfulness meant she was feeling great. Once she’d stopped by her room to change into new clothes and freshen up, Eliza had spent her time doing her usual rounds on the ship—checking for correspondence from allies, getting updates on research progress, and making sure her stowaways were integrating smoothly. The last one was new, but it just felt like it was part of the job.

They were coming in to land, however—Bradford had secured the earliest possible slot with the Baroness and with the course they charted, they’d be right on time with their schedule. Just to make things run as well as possible, Eliza was already making her way to the Armory. As always, they were going to land at a distance and then make the rest of the trip with the Skyranger. While she didn’t take the Baroness to sabotage them, it was simple caution. Never knew what could happen around the Black Market, after all.

As early as she was, it meant that she arrived to an empty room—save Jolene. Firebrand was leaning against the landing gear of the Skyranger, helmet already on. Eliza approached and she nodded to her. “Commander. I always think you’re damn crazy going in there yourself, you know that?”

Eliza chuckled. Jolene had a strange way of expressing her concerns, and Eliza could see right through it. “Hey, I’ll be going in concealed as always—and I wasn’t trained with my weapons for nothing. Things will be fine.”

“Still doesn’t strike me as the right thing to do to send the head of our operation out there for negotiations. Can’t you do this over the phone?”

“You know what the Baroness is like.”

“Yeah and I still think she’s gonna pull something.” Jolene shook her head. “You’re the Commander, so I suppose your word is law and you know what you’re doing. Just try not to get your head sniped off your shoulders, right?”

“Please. If Mordenna didn’t do it while he had the chance, I don’t think anyone will.”

“Speaking of him!” She pointed at Eliza. “Tell him to stay the hell away from my bird. I’m happy he’s on our side and all but the Skyranger’s my territory. If I want him messing around with it I’ll damn well ask him. I can maintain and fly this girl myself.”

Eliza grinned. “Alright, alright. You know he’s just trying to help out—or at least, he’s interested in tinkering with it.”

“That’s exactly what I don’t want him to do.” Firebrand crossed her arms. “Don’t tell anyone this, but this girl’s old bones. I’m basically keeping her up to date with bubblegum and a prayer, and some well wishes from Shen. All it would take is one idiot—a well-meaning idiot, I know, but an idiot still—to sneeze on the internals and she’d fall apart.”

“Don’t tell me that, I have to ride in it, Jolene.” Eliza put her hands out, signalling she still got the point. “But, nevertheless, I’ll let him know it’s off-limits.”

“Thanks, Commander.” She nodded to Eliza. “Go get your duds on. I’m gonna warm this bird up.”
After bobbing her head back, Eliza split from Firebrand as she stepped into the Skyranger. In the Armory, there was one suit of armor that was set apart from the rest. Eliza took out her custom-fitted Wraith Suit, slipping it on over the lower-profile uniform she’d chosen for today. The grappling hook she didn’t think she’d see use in—it was the walking-through-walls aspect that was meant for her, just in case she got into a bad situation. Her pistol and Clint’s Boltcaster were coming with her, and she was quick to tuck her hair into a face-concealing helmet. The armor pressed against her front safely, and was padded in certain areas to conceal her true identity. Eliza was just another one of her soldiers in this getup—callsign Seraph. She leaned against the railing, waiting.

Wait she did, until she heard the door to the Armory open. Her three companions entered—Jax, Mordenna, and Bradford. When the two of them looked over to her, she could see momentary confusion on the Chosen’s faces. Mordenna was the first to figure it out, chuckling. “Nice getup, Commander. If I couldn’t see the party glow around you I’d think you were a soldier I never bothered to log.”

“The name’s ‘Seraph’ to you,” she responded. “That’s what it’ll be down on the ground until we get to the Baroness’s abode.”

“We’ve got her in this outfit to protect her anonymity,” Bradford explained as he walked down, the Chosen in tow. “Like she said, she’s Seraph outside of the Avenger, refer to her with male pronouns, and say she doesn’t talk much. Strong, silent type.”

“Acting is in my nature.” Jax came up to her, looking over her armor. Was always nice to get eyed up by eye candy herself, in Eliza’s opinion. “Something as simple as changing referred pronouns is trivial.”

“Yeah, hard to fuck that up unless you’re a dick.” Mordenna leaned on the railing that Eliza was. “So, what’s our debriefing?”

Eliza cleared her throat. “Bradford leads our group until we’re accepted into the Baroness’s business room. After that, I come to the front and assume my proper role as Commander. She’s one of the few outside who knows about me personally. Jax, Mordenna, the two of you are bodyguards. Don’t acknowledge anyone else unless they start threatening us, firing at us, or the Baroness starts talking to you.”

“That’s essentially it.” Bradford got his trusty shotgun—modded within an inch of its life, naturally—and returned to the group. When the Chosen followed by getting their weapons, he continued. “Eliza will be doing the negotiating. Try to keep the comments to a minimum—that means you, Mordenna.”

“Oh, heavens, I’ll try,” he shot back, hand on his chest.

Eliza rolled her eyes, knowing the gesture was lost behind her obscuring helmet. “C’mon, boys. We got the queen of the Black Market to deal with.” Eliza shoved off of her lean on the rail, walking towards the Skyranger. Judging by the footsteps behind her, everyone was following. She had practice in falling into line when it was Bradford and two of her trusted soldiers. This would be just another outing for her.

Still, it always felt somewhat strange to be the one loading up into the Skyranger. With Bradford here with her, the chain of command fell to Tygan on the ship—but hopefully, nothing would need him to step up to his role. Eliza took her spot at the front of the ship, visualizing herself quieting down as everyone else came in. She was Seraph. To that end, when the ship was taking off and Mordenna tried to include her in the banter, she held up her hand. She’d have all the time in the
The ride over was filled with exchanges from the boys next to her. Soon enough, the ship came to a hover, and the lights in the cabin glowed red. “Convoy Seven, you’re cleared to exit the Skyranger.” The back opened and the cords trailed out. Thanks to the occasional drills she did to keep herself in shape, it was easy to slide down the cord with her squad and fall in line behind Mordenna and Jax as Bradford took the lead.

The Black Market itself was an interesting place. Eliza could tell it used to be a military bunker out in the middle of relative nowhere—plenty of underground room hollowed out and used for the trade. However, unless Mordenna wanted to start setting up his own stall and hawking his wares, the main entrance wasn’t what they were looking for. Bradford lead them around the side and towards the back entrance. Two fully-armored guards stood at it—and one of them snapped their head up at Mordenna. “You. Hell do you think you can show your face around here?”

“Ah, boy.” Mordenna rubbed his chin at the guard. “Let me search my memory here... ah, right. September of 2028?”

“Damn right. Fuckin’ took a chunk of my ear out. Want to apologize for that, asshat?”

“Relax.” Bradford leveled a hand at the guard. “The Hunter is with us now. We’re here on business with the Baroness. Probably shouldn’t keep us waiting.”

“What ever.” He gestured to Eliza with his gun. “Keep seein’ you with this party—it ain’t weirdin’ you out that you’re working with this goddamn beanpole now?”

Calm as can be, Eliza simply shrugged her shoulders. Meanwhile, Mordenna shook his head. “Hey, leave Seraph out of this. Guy doesn’t get paid enough for this.”

“Betcha your Commander doesn’t pay him at all.”

“Well, hey, you’d be right on that.”

“Alright, alright.” The other guard shook his head, tapping rhythmically on the door behind him. “Not going to keep the Baroness waiting.”

Normally, this would be the part when the door would be unlocked and opened from the inside. A few seconds passed, and both of the guards looked towards the door. “Fucker probably fell asleep again,” the first one grumbled. He took some keys off of his belt and undid the lock on the door. “Don’t know why we have the secret knock when Ray’s passed out half the time.”

The guard was halfway through opening the door and saying “get in there, guys” when a gunshot rang out from the inside. With exclaimed curses, they were the first to rush in, followed by Convoy Seven. By the time they passed the entry hall and into the main room, a familiar mag shotgun kicked, and everyone stopped in their tracks.

The room was pretty huge, with monitors in a few places for communications with the market below. A desk sat in the middle of the room with a tasteful, fake palm tree in a pot next to it. Wires ran across the ground, but were guided around the rug in front of the desk with two chairs aimed at the latter. One of them was upturned, the other shoved to the side. Standing on top of a now-headless body with a smoking Shard Gun was the Baroness.

She was bald—and chose to be, as she’d told Eliza once. “Gave people nothing to grab onto in a fight.” She was brown with vitiligo across her left arm, standing a head under Eliza with a somewhat stockier build. A scavenged military outfit was what she was wearing, along with a huge
pair of shades that hid her eyes. Her bottom lip had a jagged scar that ran to her neck, and she looked up at her company. “About time! You guys just missed the party. Greg, Johnson, which one of you let this fucker in?”

Both of the guards shook their heads. “ Didn’t let anybody in other than Convoy Seven here,” the second replied.

The Baroness sighed, reaching down and searching the body of her would-be killer. A conventional pistol was still clutched in their hand, and she brought up the other, revealing a patchwork grappling hook. “Well, here’s your problem. I love those skylights but if it’s attracting assholes like this they’re probably not worth it.” She threw the arm back down, clicking her tongue at the mess on the carpet. “And all on my new rug. Does anyone know manners nowadays?” She turned her head to a corner of the room. “Ray!”

Out from behind one of the server towers crept a boy who was late teens at best, clutching a pad. His hair was light blond, curly, and almost white, and he was about as thin as a stick. Ray was pale like he’d never seen the sun in his life, and even in his shock he seemed to have a permanently sleepy expression. “Y-yes, ma’am?”

“Log a ‘Daniel Winters’ off our Shit List—considering I just killed the bastard.” She turned to the guards. “You boys wrap him up in the carpet. Up to you if you want to let the main marketplace know some poor fool tried to kill me and ended up getting his. I want one of you to go see Jericho about getting me a new rug. Either way, take out this trash, if you please. We’ve got guests.”

With that, the Baroness stepped off of the body and the rug. The guards went to working moving it and then rolling it up, dragging it out of the room. Ray himself was tapping down a few things on the datapad, letting out a shaky breath. The Baroness’s would-be killer must’ve invaded while he was in the room.

The head of the Black Market looked to Convoy Seven, crossing her arms. “Apologies for the mess—had a walk-in that had to get walked on. Once Ray’s scampered we can get down to business.” She leaned, looking around the Chosen before she seemed to land her eyes on Eliza, smiling. “There’s Seraph, hiding in the back! Once my boy’s out of here you can take a breather, alright?”

Eliza offered a nod, knowing that not even Ray, the Baroness’s secretary, knew of her identity. Once Ray was done taking down the info, he scurried out, giving a smile and a nod to the squad. The Baroness let out a sigh, cocking her gun and then returning it to her desk, sitting in her chair. Eliza came up to the front with Bradford, correcting her chair before sitting in it. Bradford remained standing, leading Mordenna to come up and steal his chair, lounging in it.

The door closed behind all of them and she gestured to Eliza. “Alright, now, let’s make sure you didn’t cheat me out of my favorite Commander.”

Finally, Eliza chuckled, taking off her helmet and handing it to Bradford. “I’m here, Baroness, in the flesh. Y’know, if you want better self defense—”

“Oh, cram it, cutie.” The Baroness waved it off. “You know I prefer the kick of a mag weapon to any of those plasma deals you’ve got going. Unless ADVENT tries to storm this place—and they’d be suicidal if they did—about all I need is a good gun against fools.”

“If you insist.”

“I sure as hell do. Now, first things first.” The Baroness leaned down below her desk, coming up with what looked like a basket of cookies. “Fresh baked, courtesy of a girl going by ‘Amy G.’ She
wrote out the rest of her last name, but all I’m getting out of it is a ‘Gu.’ Maybe an ‘x’ in there? Whatever. Seems you got a fan down below.”

Eliza smiled, taking the gift. “Wouldn’t be the first time, though I’m happy I’m getting something fresh. Will have to share this with the others.” She passed the basket off to Mordenna. “No eating them.”

“Tch, I’m not a fan of sweets, Commander.” Mordenna looked in the basket. “What are these, peanut butter? Yeah I’d only eat them if they were fudge or something. They’re safe from me.”

“Better be,” the Baroness replied. She came forward to lean on her desk. “Before we get to proceedings, what the hell are you two doing here? The Hunter I understand, but tall, dark, and wrinkly?”

Jax scrunched up his nose at the classification, but Mordenna just shrugged. “Bodyguards. I got a new job, as you can see. Won’t see me here anymore batting for them.”

“Well, good for you. Guess this means I’m out of my second highest dealer of ADVENT intel?”

“Eh, not if Liz here lets me off my leash every once in a while. And she has! If we’re in the area, might see me show up solo to procure some stuff.”

“Letting the Hunter outta your sight, O’Leary?” The Baroness shook her head, leaning back. “Eliza, Eliza, Eliza. Knowing you, you’ve got the Assassin slinking around here somewhere.”

Eliza smiled. “That’s for me to know and for you to eventually find out.”

“Playing hard to get, huh? Well, we’ll see how that bites you here.” She gestured to Bradford. “John here says you’re wanting to secure some extra foodstuffs and textiles. Ain’t that right?”

“Sure is.” Eliza clasped her hands together in her lap. “We’ve recently come into a lot of new allies and need what we can get along with our usual restock.”

“Mmm. You’re already taking enough to feed a whole damn ship. Can’t imagine who you’ve got up there.” Lazily, the Baroness tapped a screen near her, then turned the monitor around. It was blurry, but the photo was of their battle at the mouth of the cave. “ADVENT radios went berserk yesterday. Absolutely ranting about some ‘rouge elements’ they needed to take out. Went real quiet after that. You know anything about that, gentlemen?”

Eliza was about to respond, but Mordenna beat her to the punch. “Oh, y’know, where ADVENT goes, we follow. You know XCOM’s the number one stopper of retaliations, yeah?”

The Baroness looked over her glasses at the Hunter, revealing bright, brown eyes. She then looked back to Eliza. “Gonna let this joker talk over you, hon?”

She shrugged, sitting back. “It was essentially my answer. I’m fine with Mordenna talking over me occasionally, especially when he hits the nail on the head. The joker part, however? Not contesting that.”

“Well, if that’s your answer...” She turned the monitor back around. “Suppose that ‘haven’ you rescued got so happy they joined you. That’s a lot of mouths to feed. Be a shame if you couldn’t do it.”

Ah, here was the pitch. The Baroness always went in cold, and she could see Mordenna about to say something, but Eliza held up a hand. Eliza put an arm on the table. “It would be. Such a terrible
shame... why, if I can’t feed them, the whole operation shuts down.”

“Damn shame. Don’t see how I care.”

“Oh, Baroness.” Eliza rested her head on her arm. “I do love swinging by here. The gifts, the conversations... and all of the intel I get just burns a hole in my pocket. We’re awfully messy on the field—hardly have enough room for all of the assets we have to pick up after ourselves. Imagine all that going to waste if we have to just disappear!”

She could only imagine the expressions on Jax and Mordenna’s faces behind her as she danced with the Baroness. Said woman gave a “hmm,” tapping her fingers on her desk. “Mm, yeah. Can see why that might suck a tad. But you’re big kids now, XCOM, and we all know big kids don’t share…”

“Not if we think we’re gonna have our toys taken away.” Eliza leaned over forward, supporting her head on a hand. “But if you wanna play nice back, we’d be fine bringing out our good games that we didn’t let you see before. And you’ve been playing nice for a while.”

The Baroness sat in silence after that, the quiet only helped by the humming of machinery and the low dim of the Black Market below them. Finally, her facade cracked and she laughed, shaking her head. “Alright, alright, I was just giving you shit anyway. You know you’ve got me wrapped around your finger, Eli. Just bump up the intel pay a bit and I’ll see about getting you some of our finest grub on offer. Those materials, too.”

Eliza grinned, sitting back. The art of the deal... “Get us enough textiles and I might sweet talk my new tailors into making choice pieces that might be high in demand. Although...” She looked back to Jax. He and his brother were, frankly, baffled. Though, sensing he was about to be addressed, Jax collected himself quickly. “That’s up to Jax, here.”

“Is it, now? Thought you called the shots.” Still, she looked over to him, appraising him. “So, you’ve got the people with the skills to make what we need, huh? I got a list of clothing that’s high in demand—mostly underwear. If you promise me you’ll be returning with shipments of it, I can sign you up for a larger portion of the textiles that run through here—provided you let the market have the profit. Deal?”

Jax considered it a moment. Then; “As you should know, what you are putting into this venture will mean what you are getting out of it. I will accept your terms, so long as the highest quality fabrics and materials are routed our way.”

“Wouldn’t set myself up to fail unless I was a few notches dumber, wizard. I’ll be doing what I can. And you.” She turned to Eliza again. “I want you in here more often. Do you know how long it’s been since we’ve sat down and had a chat? I can’t keep you here long in case that idiot had friends with similar ideas, but next time I’m kicking Heidi into making the best coffee they’ve ever put out and we’re taking an evening to ourselves.”

Eliza chuckled. “My job keeps me busy, B. Although, Bradford over here wants me taking more breaks. Perhaps you’ll get that chat sooner than you think.”

“I’d better. John, you keep up your good work. Might have something extra for you the next time you’re in if she’s here quick enough.” The Baroness leaned over and started typing away. “Quote me for what you need, Liz.” When Eliza did, she threw up her eyebrows. “Damn. Got enough room in that limo of yours?”

“They’re in there, alright.” Eliza was glad everything went well, at least. “Would be surprised how
“Leave it up to Lady Rosetta here to make it work.” When she caught someone’s expression, she smirked. “What? Ms. Mysterious over here never tell you her middle name?”

“Eliza Rosetta O’Leary?” Mordenna shook his head. “What a name, Commander.”

“Elizabeth Rosetta O’Leary,” Eliza corrected, “but nobody outside of family calls me Elizabeth.”

“Fair point. Anyway, I’ve got the order down to the jockeys, along with your extras. The list of what we need is included in there too. Don’t use it all in one night, alright?”

“Of course.” Eliza stood up. “Always a pleasure doing business with you, Baroness.”

“Always great having you in, Liz—and come back, you got that? Need to see that pretty face of yours more often. Bring the Chosen if you want—pretty sure we’ve got a kids playroom in the front.”

“Unless you’ve got crayons and a coloring book,” Mordenna snarked, “I’m screaming the whole time.”

“Mm. I’ll see about that. Consider yourselves free to pick up your goods.”

With that, Eliza took her helmet back from Bradford and put it on. They went back through the entry hall, where Ray was already sleeping again. It was... interesting being out in the field. Had been a long time since she did it regularly, at least. If she wasn’t so damn important to XCOM, she could see herself doing it more often. But, for now, she’d take the lead regarding everything.

Speaking of her job, there was a mission upcoming that they needed to tend to, but the details were... tricky. Rampaging through a city center wasn’t exactly an ideal situation for XCOM unless it was life or death. She was planning to send out Mordenna and Fal-Mai to handle it, but now? She had to wonder if she needed to put it on hold. Eliza didn’t want to—it was the mission from Volk, and apparently they had a songbird who was about to divulge how to track down the Avenger. Couldn’t let that wait so long. Though... perhaps she could still do something about it.

She shook her head as they went to the main entrance. She’d think it all over later. For now, she just wanted to be home.
Eliza tries her best to go about her day.

Eliza had to admit, the Alien Rulers were pretty damn hospitable.

Once Convoy Seven had secured the many crates they’d gotten from the Black Market, Eliza had given it a day before she came down to the basement of the ship to check up on everyone. The night away from paradise honestly put her regular sleep patterns in perspective—and the sleep paralysis upon waking up didn’t really help. Still, she was sure she’d shaken it off and had put on her best face when she came down to check on the royals.

With the day of sunlight and nutrients she’d gotten yesterday, Celosia had made a good start on renovating the basement in her own way. The walls already had vines starting to crawl over them, and thick ones with bark-like exteriors were lining certain places on the floor. “Walls,” Celosia had told Eliza when she asked. Then since Eliza was already in the area and Celosia was feeling chatty, she’d roped the Commander into a spot of conversation. Then the other rulers showed up and well, things progressed from there. The conversation had bounced around a few subjects, but now the focus of it was Rodin and a rather interesting addition he was thinking on making.

From her place on one of the chairs donated to the aliens, Eliza took in a deep breath. “Legs.”

“Yes,” Rodin said for what must’ve been the fifth time. “I’m unsure how many times I need to say it. I understand why it would be uncanny to you lot, but I’ve seen the merit in them! Now that we’re on a ship much more populated than our last abode, I believe me and mine should be thinking about something more convenient to those around us.”

“Believe me, I get your reasoning,” Celosia replied. “It would certainly help with the plants, even if I’ve adapted them to be heat and fire resistant in anticipation. Especially since—”

“That was once and perhaps someday you will allow me to live it down!”

The group laughed save Rodin, who huffed and looked to the side. Seemed like there was a story behind that, but with Rodin here, Eliza was sure she wasn’t going to hear about it. Figuring she’d spare Rodin further teasing, she spoke up. “Still, I’m glad you’re considering my soldiers in this. I’m just interested in who’s going to take on the project.”

Satisfied that he wasn’t about to be poked fun at, Rodin turned to look at Eliza. “Your Chief Engineer expressed a vested interest in the project.”

Well. Eliza didn’t know what to think about that. On one hand, Lily was definitely trying to do them a solid. On the other, sculpting a lot of pairs of muscular legs and ensuring they worked with the Archons themselves. She chuckled, shaking her head. Well, she wasn’t about to shame Lily—not at the moment, anyway. Once she got past the whole misconception about Archons being fancy Floaters, they were a pretty sight. Didn’t help that Rodin had the personality to boot. “Well, once she finishes that gun for Jax, she’s got my full permission to work on it. Seems like it would be tactically viable, as well—if you guys ever want to help us out on the field, you could actually
make use of cover.”

“That’s certainly right.” Rodin gave a charming smile. “See, you lot? One of us is tactically sound enough to not laugh at the idea endlessly.” He sighed dramatically. “Oh, Eliza, if only you were part of us on the regular. I would rest my wings easier knowing there was a voice of reason amongst us.”

Shazara-Ta tilted his head. “Is that a suggestion, dear?”

Rodin’s grin grew. “Only if she wants it to be.”

Oh, lord. The aliens were expressing interest in her again and Eliza didn’t really know how to handle that. Out of all of them, Rodin was the most “conventionally” attractive, and about the one she could see herself ending up with the most. Not to say the others didn’t catch her eye, of course —she’d be ashamed to admit some of the things she thought about the prospect of more alien flings. But... her eyes tracked over to Vel’kiin, then Celosia. She couldn’t, right? It was bad enough she was attracted to enough men as she was. There was something wrong about her being attracted to women, right? She had originally been able to not think about her worries, then tried to explain them away, but now? Oh, are Sherry and March wrong? No, not at all. She had no problem with others pursuing who they loved. Her, however...

Celosia must’ve seen her distress and took pity on her, wagging a finger at Rodin and Shazara-Ta. “You two. Let her have a decent conversation without your libidos coming into this. Besides, we barely know each other. Give it some time and then you can proposition it, jokingly or not.”

“Hush!” Rodin swept his arm out. If his face wasn’t made of metal, Eliza was sure he’d be blushing. “—their Chief Engineer permitting, I would like to see to that as well.”

Well! That was a mental image. Nevermind some of the thoughts Eliza had about Lily, which still had the shame about them. She buried her head in her hands, half out of that shame, half out of embarrassment. “Boys, please,” she pleaded, “can I live?”

The group laughed again and she could feel Celosia patting her shoulder. As much as she wanted to join the camaraderie... that thought kept coming back to her. She’d had a lovely bit of conversation, perhaps this was her chance to disengage and calm down. “Alright, alright,” she said, getting up. “I think with that, I need to head back to my daily schedule. If any of you need me, you know how to find me, as I told you.”

“Hmph, begrudge us a little fun,” Shazara-Ta replied. “But fine. See to yourself, Commander.”

Rodin’s smile fell back into something more genuine. “We’ll be waiting for you to come back.”

That made Eliza feel a bit better and she nodded to him, waving goodbye to all of them as she exited the basement. It was strange, to so openly consider entering into that kind of relationship. But if she put her biases aside, it seemed right up her alley. Eliza had way too much love and she knew it. Just...

When she stepped into the Workshop, Lily and Mordenna were in attendance. She’d seen the both of them as she passed through before, though at least Lily had moved around the nearly-finished gun. Mordenna... was still hunched over his station, whatever he was doing unclear to Eliza. Her and Lily locked gazes and those thoughts came back, causing Eliza to avert her eyes. She simply nodded to acknowledge her. Bodily, Eliza was still thirty seven, maybe a few more years older thanks to stress, but she’d like to mentally consider herself fifty seven. About to be fifty eight—her
birthday was coming up fast. Regardless, even if she was an adult, Lily was half her age. As she left, she traced her hand across the wall, steadying herself.

Once she left the Workshop, walked a bit, and confirmed that nobody was around, Eliza slumped against the wall. God, she needed a drink. Since she’d made Bradford stop for his health after hearing he’d been drinking heavily the twenty years he’d been searching for her, she tried to stay on the wagon with him. But with the horror of this morning, the confrontation of her attractions, the stress generally... she’d seek that comfort at the bottom of a bottle, too. She knew she could seek comfort in others, but... who would she unload on about her worries of loving women? About the only people she could think of would be March and Sherry themselves, but she wasn’t about to vent to her own soldiers. She considered herself silly for even thinking about telling Herod about her romantic troubles. Maybe she could stop in the Bar and see if nobody was there...

Footsteps coming towards her made her immediately perk up, tucking her nearly-white hair behind her ears and putting on her calm mask again. Marlene was the one who rounded the corner, looking to the Commander and approaching her. “Commander.”

“Marlene.” Eliza cracked a smile. “Nice to see our Seer up and about. Have something for me?”

The Templar was silent for a second—and for just a moment, Eliza’s eyes involuntarily looked above her. The whispering that surrounded Marlene perpetually was there, but why did she just look above her? She returned her eyes to Marlene’s helmet just in time for her to speak. “You have a mission to organize, correct? I believe it would be best to handle that first.” She then moved her hands behind her back. “... afterwards, when the day is nearly up so you will not be bothered, take some time to yourself. I can only imagine commanding takes up much of the mind.”

How cryptic. That was some advice befitting of an oracle, but it did remind Eliza she had a Covert Op to organize. Since Fal-Mai was out of commission, her best second bet was actually Schro, what with the nanomachines that could make them go invisible. But honestly, that involved finding Schro, and she hadn’t seen a lick of them since they were on the ship. She crossed her arms. Maybe the Seer had some advice. “Good points, I suppose. Any idea how I can find Schro?”

“Ask for them freely and they will appear,” she responded, sounding every bit like the Oracle of Delphi, high on hallucinogens.

Well, alright. Eliza figured she could test that once she got to the Resistance Ring. She’d trouble Mordenna to follow her right now, but she supposed she could give him a little more time to work on his project. Nodding, Eliza let her arms fall. “Thanks for the advice, I suppose. Be about your duties, Seer.”

“And you yours,” she responded. “... and should you need a training partner, I would be willing to assist.”

Ah, right. Jax had talked about trying to train her again, but with a mediator. Someone like a Templar who could siphon psionics as needed might help. “I’ll let Jax know. Would like to train these psionics in my head sooner rather than later.” With that, Eliza shoved off, not particularly noticing that behind her, Marlene wasn’t budging an inch. She had other things to attend to, such as getting over to the Resistance Ring.

The idea of a mole in the resistance worried Eliza a fair bit. She’d like to think she fostered a friendly atmosphere. Back in her “heyday,” she’d fully understand someone wanting her reign of terror to be over with. But now? Well... to be fair, it was probably about all the more unusual allies she was picking up. Eliza was winning the war, taking Chosen out and securing more force for the effort, and they were concerned about the species of the help? She sighed again. She really needed
that drink... but Marlene was right. Not this early in the day—wasn’t even five o’clock on the Avenger. She could suck it up until that night... and hell, the alcohol might help her fall asleep.

Once she got to the Resistance Ring, she pressed a finger to her ear, manipulating the communicator inside until she was confirmed to be on Mordenna’s channel. “Mordenna? Mind making your way to the Resistance Ring? Got a mission I’d like you and a buddy to handle.”

The reply took a second, and there was something... off about it. “Got it. I’ll be there.” Maybe it was the lack of that ever-present teasing tone. Well, she was wrenching him from his work. He might be a bit grumpy about that. But wouldn’t he jokingly complain about it? He’d probably do that the moment he got in the room. Everything was probably fine.

Taking her finger away, she looked up slightly. Just ask for them and they’d appear, huh? Interesting concept, now time to see if Marlene wasn’t just joking with her. “Schro, if you can hear me, I’d like you to meet with me in the Resistance Ring. I have a mission I want you and Mordenna to handle.”

Silence. Eliza would wait for Mordenna to show up before she went cursing Marlene. She wondered who else could locate the Specter in the meantime. Maybe Wiki? Getting ahold of Wiki was at least easier, considering she had added a contact button into most interfaces on the ship. All else failed, she’d have her go after them.

Wasn’t necessary, as it turned out. The door behind her opened and she turned to watch a cloud of nanites swarm in, taking shape next to her. Schro crossed their arms, tilting their head. “Good to see you, Commander,” they began, “I see you took the Seer’s advice.”

Alright, weird. Maybe the two of them had a chat about it before? Was Marlene the way to contact Schro? Whatever. Eliza shrugged. “If someone by the codename ‘Seer’ tells me to do something, I’ll give it an honest shot before doing what I normally do. You got ears in this room, or?”

“Well...” Their arms dropped, and they tapped a finger against their thigh almost nervously. “You are the Commander, I should tell you what I’ve done. In essence, yes—I’ve spread a single nano of myself into every room. Just enough to listen in.”

That left Eliza mildly stunned for a second. Schro had essentially bugged every room in the Avenger. She blinked a few times. “—first of all, I dearly hope you aren’t recording any of it.”

“Of course not. You can ask Wiki to monitor my databanks if you think I’m lying. I merely do so to act as watchdog—and also be there if someone requires me or help in general, as you saw.”

Eliza leveled a look at them. “That’s... still a major breach of privacy. I’d like you to take your ‘ears’ out of all the personal rooms and here in the Resistance Ring. I understand your motives and I appreciate you wanting to watch out for the Avenger, but a lot of people here wouldn’t appreciate being listened in on. I know you don’t intend to do anything with the information—and I trust you when you say you aren’t recording—but it’s the principle of the matter.”

Schro nodded. “I’ve begun the recall for all non-public rooms. I... apologize, for doing something so brash.”

Eliza sighed, shaking her head. “I guess I’m glad you ended up telling me, at least. You want to do something big like that, tell me in the future, alright?”

“Will do, Commander.”

That was about the time that Mordenna came in the room, ducting under the door and shambling
over to Schro and Eliza. He gave a lazy wave, nodding to the two of them. “Hey, Liz. Hey Schro. Haven’t really seen you around much.”

Honestly, Mordenna didn’t even look like his usual self. He usually stood at a slight hunch at all times but it seemed worse today. His smile was dampened and his eyes were more lidded than usual. If Eliza didn’t know better, she’d say he looked tired. For someone who didn’t need sleep, him being tired...

Regardless, Schro didn’t seem to notice. “I usually keep to my dark corners. There... doesn’t seem to be much I can do to make amends to Wiki, and considering she runs the Avenger’s systems nowadays?” Schro simulated a sigh. “Best to seem I’m not antagonizing her, I suppose.”

“Mm, that bad, huh?” Mordenna rubbed the back of his neck. “Maybe you should still talk with her. No time like the present when she’s all chipper about being alive again.”

“But that’s just the thing,” they lamented, “if I pursue her now I know she will accuse me of dampening such a momentous event, even if... oh, never mind.” Schro shook their head, then looked to Eliza. “Commander? I believe there is a mission you wish us to do?”

Eliza both wanted to ask what was up with Mordenna and wanted to help out things between Wiki and Schro, but she was just tired, herself. Eventually. Like Marlene said, take some time to yourself. Besides, Mordenna knows he can lean on his siblings and Wiki and Schro don’t sound like they’re actively antagonizing each other. Can’t be all that bad, right? Right. Eliza unclipped her datapad from her belt, tapping through a few screens and assuming her Commanderly voice. “Indeed there is. Volk recently informed me that we have a snitch out there, somewhere—that somewhere being in this city center now that he’s about to divulge his info.” She turned the screen around so they both could see—including the target, who was a middle-aged man with black hair and a missing eye. “Apparently he’s got info on how to find the Avenger and the Elders want to use that info to send a UFO after us.”

“Hooligans,” Mordenna bit, but without heat behind it. “Since he’s currently wrapped up in a city center, I assume you don’t want to blow through with full force?”

“That’s what’s holding us up.” Confident they had the ID on him, she took her datapad back. All else failed, she could have Lily print out a picture of him. “It would be a last-ditch effort to storm through a city center, which is why I would like you two to do the mission first.”

This was where she was expecting Mordenna to jab regarding “not wanting to go in guns blazing,” or something similar. But instead he just nodded. “And I suppose Schro here is because my sister currently ain’t fit for combat?”

“That would be the reason, yeah.” She looked between the two of them. “Would the two of you be willing to undertake this mission?” When they both nodded, she turned the pad back around and began taking a few things down. “We’re going to be taking off here within the day to get closer to the destination. The two of you will be dropped in the countryside surrounding the suburbs surrounding the city—so you’ll have plenty of time to hike. When we deploy you, I’ll give you additional details to handle. Understood?”

“Understood,” they answered in unison.

Eliza withheld her own sigh. Right now would be a good time to keep either of them to see what was up, but... she put the datapad back on her belt. “That was all I had for you two. Feel free to be about your duties.”
With a nod, Schro dissolved back into their cloud form and went for the door, it opening as they approached and went through. Mordenna followed after them—but paused in the doorway for a second. If he was going to say something or stay behind, it never happened. He simply kept walking, turning out of sight as the door closed behind him.

When they were gone, Eliza staggered over to one of the couches and flopped down on it, holding a hand to her head. Never before had it been so difficult to withhold herself from going after people and asking if they were alright. *Time to yourself, Eliza. Take it. You’ve got to try out thinking about yourself eventually. Didn’t Mordenna tell you the importance of that?* Well, yeah, but surely he had to mean when everything else was fine, right?

Well if Eliza was going to take a moment to herself, that was dashed when a voice filtered into her ear. “Commander.” That was Tygan. “If I may borrow you for a moment, Wiki and I might have a discovery you will wish to know about.”

No rest for the wicked. Thankful that she didn’t have to appear dignified, she simply put on her voice again and responded. “I’ll be down in a minute, Tygan. Your lab or the Shadow Chamber?”

“The Shadow Chamber. We will be awaiting you.”

“Roger.”

She let her hand fall as she took a moment to stew in her own stress. In a way, not worrying about other people was just adding to it, because she could see that things might be wrong. *Give it time.* Eliza let out a groan, throwing her head back. Ok. She would. Free trial, like Mordenna said. She took in a deep breath and blew it out her nose slowly, rising to her feet and heading out for the Shadow Chamber.

A descent and a bit of a walk later, Eliza stepped through the door. The glass chamber in the middle of the room was housing a Codex brain, levitating by some means Eliza was sure Tygan could explain given half an hour and a thesaurus to dumb it down for her. Tygan and Wiki seemed to be discussing something, but Tygan perked up as she walked in. “Ah, Commander. Wiki and I have something to show you.”

“That’s certainly right.” Wiki buzzed over to one of the stations and merged her hands with the keyboard. The screen began to light up with streams of data. “My Codex sister here turned out to have a very interesting set of coordinates in her databanks. Thankfully, since I was a Codex of higher power and she seemed to have been a personal assistant caught up on an unfortunate mission, I was able to easily ask her death proxy for access to what they were. Unfortunately, she was an interesting one who encrypted her own data and wouldn’t tell me the method to decrypt it before she started getting huffy and asking where she was and why I wanted this info. Had to shut her down then, which is a shame.”

“I must applaud Wiki for her work,” Tygan added. “Had we tried to ‘convince’ the Codex to talk, ourselves, she likely would have accessed the ship’s systems as we used them to ‘talk’ to her.”

“Goodness knows what kind of results that would’ve had,” Eliza replied. “Something special about these coordinates?”

“As it turns out, yeah.” Wiki made an adjustment and the screen lit up, showing a rather blurry image of some alien contraption. “The coordinates roughly point around this location, image courtesy of a few old satellites the Elders haven’t knocked down yet. I actually know what the image is about—that’s a Gateway. The Elders use it to field their units from their off-planet conversion/creation factories. With just a flip of a switch and the right coordinates, those things
could point anywhere.”

“Anywhere?” Eliza stroked her chin. Dare she suggest it? “... wouldn’t happen to be able to take one for ourselves? Or at least copy the tech used in it.”

“That’s something we’ll only know when we get to the ground.” Tygan tapped his datapad, showing Eliza the general location. “Wiki did not have any blueprints of the Gate in her files, so a field study might be astute.”

“Assuming ADVENT doesn’t pry our heads off for getting to it,” she responded.

“Of course.” Tygan took his datapad back, tapping away at it. “I’ll send the coordinates to you and let you handle when we should approach it.”

“Got it. We have a few things on our plate to take care of before we handle that, but I’ll definitely keep it in mind. Even if we can’t pilfer it for ourselves, shutting it down will be fine enough. Inconvenience the Elders a bit, and all.” She crossed her arms. “Anything else?” She was... kinda hoping that Tygan would have something else for her. Something to take her mind off of things.

“Actually...” Tygan let an arm fall from his datapad. “With our more alien allies on board, I was hoping to do some more live studies. Nothing on Vahlen’s level, I assure you—I was hoping to gain some insights from willing volunteers about how ADVENT’s forces function when they are alive. I was also thinking of basing technology off of the rulers, going off of their unique physiology. Suits of armor for the soldiers was my first idea, but I’m sure Shen might have a second opinion of worth.”

“Of course!” Eliza nodded. “If you need to go down and see the rulers, consider my permission granted.” Still, something nagged at the back of her mind about that... but with nothing to go on, she dismissed it. “As well as the armor, of course. And trust me, Tygan—I don’t take you to do anything close to what Vahlen was performing. If anything, thank you for your forward thinking, as always.”

Tygan flashed a smile and Eliza internally sighed at how it made her feel. Damn it. She didn’t need those feelings right now. It just made the storm inside her worse. “I do try my best, Commander. That was all that I wished to clear by you. I’ll be seeing to talking with the Alien Rulers shortly.”

“By all means, and good luck, Tygan.” Well, no reason to stick around now, especially if she wasn’t going to bother Wiki either about what was between her and Schro. She nodded to the both of them and turned, taking her lead.

Once again, when she was sure she was alone in the hallway, she collapsed against one of the walls, voice low as she talked to herself. “This doesn’t feel like taking care of myself at all,” she lamented. “I just feel worse for not helping people out. This isn’t fun.” She sighed. “But I guess I have to give it a day’s trial just in case I just feel bad in the moment, huh?” Eliza massaged her forehead. “I need a drink...”

She figured she wouldn’t be getting that drink for a while longer still. There was still other stuff to be handled in the day. Picking herself up, Eliza started to mosey her way towards the Studio. Maybe she could talk to Jax about training...
In the grand scheme of things, Vel’kiin was actually somewhat glad that their original home had been raided.

This new place, the Avenger, it had a charm of its own. The area given to them—while clearly an area used to store supplies—was very spacious and gave all of her and her partners’ people room to stretch their legs. With Celosia nurturing thick, study plants to act as walls and even seeing what she could do about functional doors, this area was shaping up to be even comfier than the last.

Of course, it wasn’t hard to get comfier than her former grounds of torture. Thinking on the memory, she heaved a sigh. Shazara-Ta was the one to lift his head, voice soft. “Something on your mind, lover?”

“Only the past as usual,” she responded. For a second, she was thankful once again that they had gone through the trouble of learning her language. “… is it churlish of me to be thankful that we were forced out of our original home? The lab, I mean.”

Rodin shook his head. “We all had terrible memories of that place, Vel’kiin. We did what we could to remove the look of our former torturing grounds, but in the end… even if we were not moved, I do not think we should have stayed there. Too many phantoms about that place. I think it serendipitous that we had to relocate.”

Vel’kiin relaxed, calmed that her fellows understood. If she never had to see a human in a lab coat again it would be far too soon. “I’m glad to hear that the feeling is mutual. It’s good that you all did what you could to remove the resemblance, but this is a far more comfortable place.”

“Indeed.” Celosia walked over and gently leaned against her. “Guaranteed food, I have a better place to draw nutrients when we land… and I hear there’s someone on this ship cultivating Earthen plants! I’d certainly like to meet with them and see if I cannot help their efforts along. Simply to express my thanks, yes?”

Shazara-Ta chuckled, coming closer to Vel’kiin and slithering up her back. She could understand why his Viper complained of his body temperature—but stuck it out regardless, of course. Shazara-Ta’s coolness against her back was soothing, and she could feel him make a course over to Celosia. “Of course one of the few humans with an eye for agriculture would pique your interest, Cela.”

Celosia huffed. “Can you blame me? I would not think them to have much time in this war to tend to something as such.”

Rodin grinned, and as he approached Vel’kiin and killed his thrusters, she perched him on her palm. The heat coming off of his metal was nothing to her worn hands, made hard from years of labor as queen. “We all have simple qualities we look for in those who interest us, I feel. I don’t think I can quite blame you regarding your interest in whoever is keeping the plants. I, myself, have to admit a welcome respect to Lily Shen, who would make a brilliant sculptor if she were an Archon.”

Shazara-Ta came around just enough so that Rodin could see him rolling his eyes. “For someone without parts as the rest of us, you seem to have a higher libido than I do.”

Spitting out a “come on!” in Archon, Rodin pointed at Shazara-Ta. “I can express admiration without it being linked intrinsically to romance!”

“Oh, and is that what you were doing regarding the Commander?”

Vel’kiin chuffed, shaking her head. “I’ve known runts that bicker less than the two of you. I agree
that their Commander is respectable, but as Celosia said: time. Best not to rush into things." As for herself, Eliza had gained her respect for both coming to their aid and not backing down when she approached her. Vel’kiin knew it took a certain fearlessness to look a Berserker in the face and not flinch. But she hardly knew anything of the Commander outside of that, and she wouldn’t pick a Muton based on looks alone, either. Perhaps she could get out of the basement and go seek her out? Then again, without a translator, she wouldn’t really be able to talk back. Maybe she could enlist Du Mag, but she knew making Eliza sit in on a third member to their casual conversations might be awkward. Oh, woe.

The door opening on the far side of the room made Vel’kiin look up. The first thing that she registered was that a human had entered. The second thing that registered and took up her entire consciousness was what it was wearing. Lab coat. What was this thing doing here? Had it come to take the lot of them back? Did it think it could manage such a thing while she stood there? She’d killed its kind before. It would be nothing to do it again. She took a step forward, ready to charge...

... but she couldn’t go in, rage hiked. Rodin was still clutched in her palm, Shazara-Ta still hung from her back, and Celosia still within the “blast radius.” If she went in now she’d just be bringing them all closer to the object of her nightmares. Still, she could feel her heart pumping faster and faster. If not to be on offense, then on defense. She leaned forward, planting her other hand on Celosia’s chest like a barrier, pulling apart her own mouth to bare her teeth. She invited it to come closer, to dare to try to take any of them away.

But Celosia walked around her palm, even as she could feel Shazara-Ta rising into a defensive position on her and Rodin dismounted from her hand, activating his jets as he did. She continued, approaching the human. What was she doing? Was she intending to kill it herself? A noble approach, perhaps, but... “Celosia. Get back.”

“*It’s a human on Eliza’s ship,*” Celosia responded in ADVENT, “*he is not like the others. Please allow me to speak with him.*”

“*You’re making a mistake!*”

“*Trust me. Please.*”

Vel’kiin wasn’t about to blitz forward with Celosia in the way. Even still, she moved closer, prepared to interfere should this human do anything. Celosia focused her attention back on the human. “Your lab coat. Please remove it.”

The human seemed to hesitate, but looking behind her to the three other rulers prepared to eviscerate him, he seemed to get what was going on. He shed his coat, revealing some long-armed garment underneath it, a washed-out blue in color. At Celosia’s nod, he went to the entrance area of the basement and hid it out of sight, taking the rectangular object off of it as he did.

Now that Vel’kiin wasn’t a hair’s breadth away from pulverising him, she was able to get a proper look at him. Dark brown, bald-headed, wearing those strange eyepieces she’d seen some humans wearing before. Glasses, she think they called them. He didn’t look so threatening with the lab coat off, and with the knowledge that he was both willing to remove it for their comfort and was, indeed, trusted on Eliza’s ship, she stood down. Shazara-Ta remained wary, and Rodin continued to watch him carefully.

Meanwhile, Celosia continued. “While I will extend apologies for our reactions, you must understand the circumstances behind them. We were tortured and subjugated by those wearing what you did and the mistrust has buried itself in our memories.”
The man shook his head. “I should’ve assumed that, if I may be honest. It was insensitive of me to walk in here with my usual attire. I apologize for any distress I caused.”

Well, he was courteous, at least. Still, Vel’kiin kept an eye on him, content to let Celosia do the talking for them. “What is your name?”

“Richard Tygan, though you may simply call me Tygan if you wish. I am the Head Scientist of the Avenger, responsible for the research on the ship.”

“And what would the Head Scientist have to do with us?”

“I was going to ask a favor...” Tygan adjusted his glasses. “... but upon some consideration, I may need to approach how I would handle it differently. If the reaction to seeing me in my lab attire is understandably enough to cause distress, I can’t imagine what memories would be brought back, being introduced to my Lab.”

Celosia crossed her arms. “Good of you to think of it. Still, what is this ‘favor’ you were going to ask?”

Tygan was quiet for a moment, the lights in the basement catching his glasses and making them shine, hiding his eyes. “… on the Avenger, Shen and I are always seeking ways to further outfit our troops to fight ADVENT—whether that be reinforcing their armor or advancing our weapons technology. With your willing participation, I had hoped to take cues from your physiology to fashion new armor designs—but as I said, only upon your willingness and with non-invasive measures to be reviewed at your discretion.”

The thought of being in a lab again and being studied made bile rise in Vel’kiin’s throat. When Celosia looked back to judge their opinions, Vel’kiin scoffed. On her right, Rodin’s uneasy expression remained unchanged, and it wasn’t a stretch to say that Shazara-Ta seemed apprehensive as well.

Celosia turned back to Tygan. “... I would be interested in helping XCOM out in such a manner,” she began, “but if it isn’t clear, my compatriots will sit your examination out.”

“Understandable.” Tygan inclined his head towards her. “I’m simply glad that you would be willing—and I do not blame any of them for not wishing to join.”

Still, even if Celosia had the right to go where she pleased... Vel’kiin didn’t want to just say nothing about her going into a lab on her own. She took a few more steps towards Celosia. “My queen, are you sure about this?”

Looking back at her, she nodded. “If we don’t give trust, we shall never get it back. Besides, he has proven willing to accommodate us. I think there is good within him.”

Vel’kiin was silent for a second, thinking it over. If there wasn’t the danger of launching herself into an episode, she’d go and make sure Celosia was safe in that lab Tygan was going to take her to. Judging by the way her fellow rulers didn’t speak up, it must’ve been on their minds, as well. Vel’kiin huffed, standing down. “Alright. Please, be careful. I don’t want to lose you.”

Turning around, Celosia took one of Vel’kiin’s hands into her own. “I’ll be fine. I promise.”

Meanwhile, Tygan looked to the side, fingers nervously drumming on that rectangular device he brought. If he was taking umbrage at the scene, he could very well suck it up. Vel’kiin’s society chiefly composed of a Berserker Queen in her own region and her Muton consorts—about the opposite to Shazara-Ta’s society, she learned—but she’d talked with and admired queens who
chose to rule side by side. There was no stigma against it, considering the gender ratio. If one Berserker preferred her fellow Berserkers, that freed up other Mutons. Though, he didn’t seem disgusted, so perhaps it was just nerves.

Celosia turned her attention back to him. “I assume you’d like to begin as soon as possible?”

Tygan looked back. “At your earliest convenience. Admittedly, with your apparent affinity to mutating the genetics of plants... I was hoping I could talk to you about the greenhouse I am running.”

“Oh.” Celosia looked faintly surprised. “You’re the one running that?” When Tygan nodded, she blinked a few times. “Alright. Well, I’d be happy to help if you need it, so long as I get to look at those plants myself.”

“Of course.”

“It’s settled, then.” Celosia inclined her head towards Tygan. “Lead the way.” She then looked back at her partners. “I’ll be back, I swear it.”

“Be safe,” Rodin murmured, looking for all the world like he wanted to go with her.

Nodding back at them, Celosia followed after Tygan, leaving their sights. Vel’kiin let out a long breath, finding where Shazara-Ta was on her back and stroking the back of his hood to calm herself down. “I can’t help but feel I’m making a mistake, letting her go.”

Shazara-Ta leaned into her hand. “It would be cruel of us to restrain her at every opportunity. I hate letting her go with that scientist too, but she seemed sure of herself.”

“Well, there is something we can do about it.” Rodin looked around, then found what he was looking for. “Shel-Za!”

Perking her head up from across the room, Shel-Za handed the Neonate she was caring for over to a fellow Viper and came over. “Yes, my king?”

Rodin pointed to the entrance of the basement. “Follow Celosia and Tygan. If the latter asks, you are there to ensure her safety. If he does anything malicious, I want you to restrain, not kill. He may be a scientist... but this is Eliza’s ship. It will be on her to punish him appropriately. Understood?”

Shel-Za bowed. “Understood, my king.” With that, she coursed out of sight, on the trail of the two of them. With someone to watch over Celosia who wouldn’t be assailed by the sight of a lab, Vel’kiin could rest easier.

Still, she kept a hand on Shazara-Ta. Let her be safe...

Perhaps Jax needed to get out of the Studio more often.

He couldn’t really help it—outside of lights out, all of his followers tended to congregate here, and it was where everyone expected him to be. Yes, he now had a room of his own that he was slowly kitting out, but there was also just a certain... comfort, to the Studio. Plus, until he mustered up the words, wit, and courage to ask for something that totally wasn’t a night light, he was certain, he
didn’t feel comfortable sleeping in total darkness. *Like a child.* Yes, like a child.

Besides, at least he didn’t need to sleep. He could be content simply wandering the ship or meditating at night. It was lonely, yes, but he could stand it.

Still, he was in the Studio now, sharing some mild conversation with Edgar. Getting referred to as “Tessura” frequently was a little strange, but he wasn’t complaining about it too much. Besides, the ravens seemed to like him and he had one preening his hair even as he was chatting with Edgar. He wasn’t about to begrudge the company over something simple as what part of his name he used. He understood it in Mordenna’s case, but Jax had no similar hangups.

The two of them were interrupted when the door opened and Jax, naturally, looked over. There stood Eliza, posture as confident as it ever was... but the energy she seemed to have gained from her bed partner yesterday had faded. Her signature, slowly coming out over the course of a few weeks, had also faltered, further conveying her tired state. Jax’s heart softened. The woman was barely holding herself together.

She nodded at Jax. “Hey, Jax. Came to ask about something.”

When Jax looked over to Edgar, he nodded him on, whistling to get the ravens off of him. One or two of them croaked a “thank you.” If Jax wasn’t concerned about Eliza, he would’ve thought it adorable. Still, he had his attention on her. “What do you require of me, Commander?”

“I want to train these psionics of mine.”

Oh, no. Not this again. Apprehension seized Jax and his gaze flickered away. He knew he had been open to the idea of trying again before, but when it was so imminent as this? His mind was starting to sway. He didn’t want to hurt her again. Even if he was sure she wasn’t going to punish him for it, he simply did not want to do that to her. He cared for her too much.

When he didn’t respond, Eliza came over and leaned on the table. “Hey. We’ve got a bunch of people here who can stop things early, Marlene over there offered to mediate, and now that my psionics are out I think we can avoid that specific overloading scenario again. I want to learn how to control these so I don’t hurt myself—and the prospect of learning more about them appeals to me. I trust you, Jax.”

Trust. She trusted him. Sighing out a bit of his tension, Jax nodded. “I will aid you, though I hope you do understand my hesitation.”

“Of course I do—but I’m willing to give it another shot if you are.”

Well, if she was so certain... *She was certain the first time too. This won’t be any different.* Shaking off his bad thoughts, Jax rose to his feet. “Edgar? Mind clearing yourself out? I wish to employ the middle of the room.”

“By all means.” Edgar got up and moved to one of the walls, his omen following after him in a staggered formation, some electing to simply take up a different perch in the room.

When the middle was clear—and out of the corners of his eyes, he saw the psionically-enabled members of the room gather loosely around—he kneeled down with Eliza, facing her. Marlene sat to their side, watching and waiting as Jax turned to his thoughts. What to do this time... perhaps it was apt to go over some basics. *It will end in catastrophe.* Not everything had to. Not everything had to. It would be fine. *It wasn’t fine last time.* It was fine. Eliza trusted him.

He took in a deep breath. “I will start by asking how your powers feel, now that they are
unleashed.”

“It’s... strange.” Eliza flexed her hands in front of her. “It kind feels like it’s all buzzing around inside of me. About the only thing I can do is a Stasis, and that comes as easy as breathing. Even so, that doesn’t really make it calm down.”

Hmm. That sounded like Eliza needed to burn off excess psionic energy. It could pool over time if not actively used. It wasn’t a dangerous condition, merely one that mildly annoyed. He nodded. “It’s a simple case of building energy. Without much to do, it collects inside of you, waiting to be unleashed. A Stasis isn’t necessarily consuming until it starts protecting. Then, that is when your energy is used.” He allowed himself a calm smile. “You must forgive me if I am not quite keen on the idea of it having to see use.”

Eliza gave a chuckle. “Alright, I see your point. What do you suggest, then?”

Jax gave it some slight thought. The best thing for her to do would be to “exercise” them in her proficient area of psionics. But, it was impossible to judge what Eliza would be good at, save for just having her try everything in the book. Perhaps if he could study them... to that end, he looked down at his gauntlets. Templars could siphon excess psionic energy, but his gauntlets? As part of keeping his own in check, he could freely take of others’. If he could take some of Eliza’s psionics and study them, it might give him a gleaning of where to go first.

He looked up at Eliza. “To begin with, at your command, I could siphon some of your psionics and study them. With a short analysis of their composition, it will give me the insight we need to proceed.”

She grinned. “That almost sounds like it would solve the excess energy problem itself, but I can understand not being able to do that every time. Well, take it away, teach.”

Jax took in a deep breath, calming himself. He was ok. He wasn’t about to injure Eliza again. All he needed was enough to gain a clear picture. Doing his best to silence his negative notions, he extended his hands, palms up. “Place your hands into mine.”

She did, and it was only then that he really registered what they were doing. Holding hands. It... it was important for the lesson. Nothing else. It was easier to do this than to ask her to project them when she knew so little about them. Pushing his eyebrows together, he pulled his psionics from his hands, creating a vacuum that his gauntlets rushed to fill. Eliza took in an audible breath, and he could feel her psionics suffuse his gauntlets. When it mentally felt like he had handfuls of her power, he gently pressed his psionics back against his gauntlets, and they ceased their collection.

He withdrew his hands, slowly flexing his fingers as he studied Eliza’s psionics. Soft, always so soft... but the strength that lay within it was even greater than his own. That sort of power was nearly the Elders’ to control, and he was now thankful that Bradford had successfully pulled off his heist. The sound to them was curious, as well—he knew his own manifested as warped thunder and rumblings. Cronus’s... the less said, the better, but suffice to say Jax couldn’t enjoy orchestra music anymore. Eliza’s was a soft hum of her own voice, to a song he didn’t recognize. Maybe he could ask later what her favorites were...

Digging deeper into them, he found that they were naturally trying to push into his hands. Out of curiosity, he let them sink into his right... and was somewhat surprised when his muscles tingled with a strange sensation. He couldn’t put a finger on what they were doing, but it seemed like some form of enhancement. Perhaps Eliza could grant her power to others, or infuse herself with it.

Something else happened as her psionics made contact with his being—his chest warmed and his
head felt pleasantly light. He looked to Eliza and he felt as if he were looking at one of his own with admiration, and yet there was something more to it, as there always was. It was the feeling he got whenever Eliza did something selfless for him, or stayed with him. It was freeing, it was fortifying, it was... love. Eliza’s psionics were of love. That realization made quite a bit of sense, to him. If her psionics were active and with her during her twenty years of servitude, it was likely the only thing keeping her going. It might’ve been the force that turned her around, if she really was so hard and sour during First Contact.

With him denying her psionics from infusing his left hand, they instead tried to... not escape his gauntlets, but rather, radiate. Looking at how her psionics gathered around her, Jax was certain that Eliza could project a Solace very naturally. With her psionics being of love, suffice to say, it would be a Solace of Love. If that wouldn’t increase morale in her troops, it was hard to say what would.

But finally, Jax looked above her. With him starting to attune to her psionics, it augmented his sight for them. It was blurry, but behind Eliza... what was that four-armed figure?

Seeming to notice him, it quickly winked out. He blinked a few times. Perhaps he’d been imagining it. Revenants seemed to latch onto those with great psionic strength, so he was probably making assumptions. Letting her psionics go, Jax settled his hands on his legs. “Apologies for the wait—and what must’ve been several odd looks.”

Eliza shook her head. “I figured it was part of the process. Any idea what’s going on?”

Well, how to put this. Jax tapped a finger on his leg. “...the process was rather enlightening, yes. Your psionics have a propensity towards enhancement, it seems, though I could not determine what sort. They also naturally trend towards a Solace if not otherwise in use—hence my gazing about you. With a small bit of training, you could manage an official Solace. There is one other thing as well...” But it seemed rather inappropriate to share in a room full of people. He would have to share it covertly. He offered his hands again. Eliza took them, and he coursed his signature forward through his. As they met hers, he conveyed the message to both relax and push back. Hopefully she would get an idea of how it felt to approach a mind meld.

To her credit, Eliza was a fast learner. She opened her signature to him and mingled with his, and the connection between their minds opened. He gently closed his eyes, focusing on clearing his thoughts and conveying the ones he wanted cleanly to hers. “Can you hear me, Eliza?”

Her signature stalled, unsure of how to reply. Her first steps were tentative—instead of words, he got a feeling of affirmation. Considering he was just wishing to convey information, he was fine with this. “I wished to tell you this privately, as it concerns you intimately. I have seen that most psion’s energies coalesce around a singular concept, or feeling, best felt in their Solace. Maria’s are of healing. When I studied Leo, his were of clarity. Mine, from what I have seen, are of power. Yours... yours are of love. ”

This close to her thoughts and feelings, Jax intimately felt Eliza’s mind stop as she processed that information. Instead of understanding, Jax firsthand experienced a flood of self doubt, of concern. Love, her thoughts lamented. Is that why everyone’s been following me? Because I’ve been bewitching them? Was that why Argus was trying to turn me into the Siren? Is... is that why the Chosen look at me the way they do...?

Eliza didn’t seem to be either guarding her thoughts, or didn’t know they were bare. But, Jax could see her worries were false. There were no traces of her psionics around anyone she frequented, and they did not try to control or influence Jax. If anything, they simply worked off of his natural love for her. Despite himself, Jax was quick to hurry forth in the connection, radiating assurance and
trust. “That is not the case at all,” he began. “Your psionics are not controlling or influencing. They did not try to sway my mind towards anything. Rather, they merely bring out feelings that already reside within individuals.” A moment later, Jax realized what he’d said. He had to play it off quickly. “It... made me think of the love I hold for my followers for having stuck with me through thick and thin. It made me think of the love I hold for my siblings and my want to protect them.” He wasn’t really lying to Eliza—those had been underneath the feelings he had felt for her. “Suffice to say, my reasons for staying with you are untampered, as would everyone else’s. Do not doubt yourself, Eliza—there is no reason to.”

With the encouragement, Eliza’s thoughts settled from the self-doubting storm they had become. She calmed, picking over his words slowly and carefully. Despite his best efforts, she seemed to latch onto “bringing out feelings that already reside.” She drew closer and closer to what he had been implying... and then dismissed it at once. It couldn’t be, her mind sighed. They... Her thoughts closed from there, her having learned that he could listen in if she did not guard them. If he’d really wanted to listen, he could press forward, but no. Those were her private thoughts. He would not intrude on them. Even still, he wondered as to what she meant. Why could it not be? It sounded as if she doubted that he could love her as such. There was no derogatory air behind it, so what did she mean...?

He could feel her attention shift back to him, anticipating any other answer. “That was all, Eliza,” he responded. “Please, do not think you control others. Your psionics very much trend otherwise. Far be it from me to personify psionics, but take it from the master sitting in front of you—I believe it is the last thing they would wish to do.”

Eliza calmly gathered herself. She tried for projection again, and with Jax having demonstrated how he did it thoroughly, she seemed to catch on. “Ok. I trust you, Jax, despite... despite my personal doubts. Thank you.”

Jax physically nodded, then gently withdrew from the connection. He opened his eyes, seeing slight wisps of his own psionics mingled in the ones that coalesced around Eliza’s head like a halo. When she opened hers in turn, he nodded again. “I hope that was enlightening,” he murmured.

Eliza breathed out a sigh, withdrawing her hands and placing them on her thighs. “... well, the buzzing stopped,” she offered. “Things are looking up already, yeah?”

That brought some levity into the atmosphere. Remembering that they had an audience, Jax gave a chuckle. “I am happy to assist as always, Eliza.” Not everything had to end in disaster. “I would advise a moment of rest after such heavy searching. May I offer the Studio?”

Grinning, Eliza got to her feet. “Only if I get your chair.”

Jax rolled his eyes, but relented. “Only the best for the Commander, after all.”

The room laughed, and Jax was happy. Even free of her psionics... Jax loved her.

Being emotionally dead was the worst.

Well, Mordenna was sure it was, anyway. He couldn’t really summon up the energy to hate it all that much, even though he was sure he was doing so. He’d gotten this way over the course of last night, and he couldn’t even say why. Nothing had happened... recently, anyway. It wasn’t the
aftermath of emotions over Fal-Mai losing her arm. Couldn’t be—he’d be enraged or sad over that, right? Not this oblivion of lethargy and apathy.

By the time he’d gathered the few scraps of energy he had left to get up from his workbench, he couldn’t even say what time it was. Lily had actually finished up the Eradication Cannon behind him and went to go get coffee to get herself through the rest of the night, that much he knew. The device meant to read signals from the nervous system in front of him was still barely started. He’d added a piece here and wrote down a theory there, but if he were any more energetic, he would have strangled himself over the lack of progress.

But nah. Didn’t have the energy for that. He did have the energy to start walking out of the Workshop, unsure of where he was going. He just... needed to get away from his workbench and the constant reminder that he was getting nothing done.

So he walked. No scrabbling through the vents, no sauntering down the hallway in search of siblings to bother, nothing. Just a wandering Hunter. He was looking ahead but he couldn’t claim to be paying attention. Mordenna could only think on the little progress gained, his current state, and just who he was.

He didn’t know about that last point anymore. First he was David. Then he was Ref-Il. Now he was Mordenna. Maybe someday he’d be something else once again. Maybe he was someone else beforehand. Who could say, when the ones who held his history absolutely hated him? Mordenna just... didn’t know, anymore. He didn’t know who he was to everyone else. Maybe they were just putting up with him until he got bored and left. Were they waiting for him to see that?

His hand, pressed up against the wall as he walked, stopped as it hit a doorway. Mordenna looked to the side. The Bar lay just beyond his fingertips. Well, if there was any place to be while he contemplated the specifics of his own existence, this was it. Languidly, he tapped the pad and stepped on in, not particularly looking.

“Oh.”

Mordenna got a bit of a wakeup call when it was Eliza he heard. His eyes snapped to her. She was the only other person in the room, leaned on the counter and sitting on one of the stools. A few empty bottles sat to her side, a few full ones to the other, and she was currently working on another. She sighed, turning back to her drink. “Don’t tell Bradford I’m here, would you? I... don’t really need him seeing me like this.”

Mordenna shallowly shook his head, ambling over and taking the seat next to her. He pushed the empty bottles to his side, stealing one of Eliza’s full ones. “My lips are sealed, Commander,” he muttered. “I’m here to drink myself sober, too.”

“Tch. Soldiers told me you guys can’t get drunk.”

“That was the joke,” he flatly replied. Humor really wasn’t with him right now.

“Oh.”

There was a bit of silence then, as Mordenna wrenched his beer open and drank it, the bitterness of the alcohol a comfort, at least. Eliza sipped at her own. After a while, she was the one to fill the quiet. “This ain’t a regular thing for me. You’d think the woman leading the resistance against the galactic empire would have her shit together, but here I am. I was drinking alone until you came in here.”
“Misery loves company,” he murmured.

Eliza looked to him. “... I’ve been trying,” she began. “Trying all day. You told me I should think of myself sometimes. So I’m trying. But I just keep seeing people who could use my help and not going after them exhausts me more than helping. I’m not saying your advice was garbage, I just... I think I’m going about it wrong.”

Mordenna stared at the taps behind the bar. “Inclined to help others?”

“Terminally. So... can I ask what’s bothering you?”

“No.”

“Mordenna.”

“No. That’s it. Nothing.” He sighed gently. “Nothing’s going on. This ain’t me brushing you off, I’m letting you know. I had a wonderful time with my siblings yesterday, I know exactly what I should be doing to work on Fals’s prosthetic, and Lily just finished up Jax’s new gun. I should be fine. Yet, I just... ain’t. I don’t feel bad. I just... don’t. So I don’t have anything to say.”

Eliza stared at him a bit, her expression softening. “That’s gotta be hell... ‘cause you can’t really complain, can you?”

“No, not really. If I’m not feeling bad, well, what have I got to worry about?”

“But not feeling anything’s gotta be just as bad.”

“You try seeing a therapist about that.”

Eliza scoffed, taking a sip of her drink in solidarity. She paused for a second before she spoke again. “—I was going to be one.”

“Hm?”

“A therapist. In high school I got along with our school’s therapist well and I ended up asking about how I could get into the field. Still had that want to help people like I do now even back then. She guided me towards the college courses and electives I’d need—I was a damn fine student back in the day, so getting into the classes and college wouldn’t be a problem. But... I was also deluded. My parents offered to pay for college but I didn’t want to burden them. We were getting close to hard times and I didn’t want them going into debt because of me. Just as I was convinced I’d have to give it up...” Her face turned sour and her voice venomous. “The military recruiter came into town.

“He told me they’d help pay my tuition, so long as I signed up. I was initially against the deal, but they’d seen my grades and hounded me like hawks. Eventually, he learned I wanted to be a therapist and told me there wasn’t anything better than helping America out in the field. And I believed him.” Her grip on her bottle tightened. “Never saw that asshole again after I signed up. Good thing too—at this point, I’d kill him.

“So they put me in. I was sweet, before. Christian raised—or, Catholic, Mormon, I don’t know. Our family was a weird mix and I didn’t pay any attention. The drill sergeant whipped all of that out of me. The military beat all of it out of me. My want to help others, my empathy, my kindness... they fucking took it from me. They put notions into my head that I’m still trying to get out to this day. I went into First Contact like a demon from hell, and I killed those under me. Whether they died on the field or lived, I took their lives. Even if some of them had lived through
the search for me, I took things from them they would never get back. I recovered, Mordenna. They will never.”

Eliza drank the rest of her beer in a practiced swig, slamming it down on the table in a burst of anger. It dissipated quickly, and she slumped. “—I don’t know why anyone here keeps me around. The death that follows me is a mile long. My soldiers, aliens, innocents... we’ve been to raided havens I remember giving the kill orders for. I recognize some of Betos’s Skirmishers. Even now when I say I’m better... I use my status of former Network battery to intimidate. I live and breathe the sins I committed. I’m worse than nothing. I’m going to get everyone I love killed. And it all started with the sin of wanting to help them. I found my road to hell with one of my good intentions as the door.”

The silence afterwards was deafening. Mordenna found himself slowly digesting all that she’d said, her story sinking into his pores. Were those her beginnings? Did she feel those sins clinging to her whenever she extended a helping hand to someone? His face heated up and he covered his mouth with a hand. Was that everything she was holding in?

Eliza looked to him. “... Mordenna?”

Wetness hit his hand. He drew it away, rapidly blinking. He was crying. His next breath in was a hiccups, cutting through the fog and mist that had accumulated in his head. There was something that spoke to him in Eliza’s story... and admittedly, half of his tears were probably from the catharsis of feeling again. Had he less of a mind, he would’ve broken down right then, his own sadness and anger from his musings catching up to him.

But... it wasn’t just him who needed comfort. He swiveled to face Eliza, pushing the bottle out of her hand and drawing her in. He squeezed Eliza close to him, pressing her against his shoulder as he squeezed his eyes shut. “—Liz,” he choked out, “please. P-please just. Cry with me.” He needed to vent and show Eliza he was here for her. They could do both at once, right?

“I...” Whatever protest Liz had got lost behind her own hiccups and she clung to Mordenna, burying her face into his shoulder as much as she could manage. Her drunken state combined with Mordenna’s own and his request must’ve swayed her into going along with it.

Even when she had woken up in the Infirmary on her back and had cried then, it was clear she’d been holding back. Here, with her inhibitions largely removed, she was sobbing openly and loudly, squeezing Mordenna back as he held her close. He was sure to let his sorrow flow freely as well, though he still reflexively bit back bigger sobs.

Empathy. He had empathy for what Eliza had gone through. Getting lied to, having all of who you were beat out of you, and coming out of the other side doubting yourself and being sure you were just a burden on everyone around you. That last part stung him and he lost control of a sob. He hated it. He hated what she had gone through, and what he had to endure. He hated how he felt and he hated being a drag. Mordenna just needed a moment to let all that go now that he was feeling again.

It was a long, long process, and he was glad they were alone and nobody was turning up at the Bar. He knew they needed that full time to eventually calm down and lapse back into silence. Mordenna was left gently petting Eliza’s hair, coming down from his emotion-fuelled rollercoaster. Eliza herself had slumped into Mordenna’s arms, the occasional rub of his back the only thing telling him that she hadn’t fallen asleep out of exhaustion.

Well, speaking of that. His eyes flickered to the Bar’s clock. It was getting about that time, and he didn’t think Eliza should be making the walk back to her bed. “Liz,” he started, voice hoarse, “it’s
“getting late.”

“Yeah.” Her own voice was quiet and muffled by his shoulder. “I’m tired.” She paused. “... thank you. For hearing me out. Took me getting drunk j-just to get it all out there, huh?”

He kept running his hand over her hair. “Maybe we can work on that. But now it’s out there, we can talk about it later. For now... let’s get you to bed, alright?”

“Ok.”

With that, Mordenna palmed at his eyes, shifting Eliza into a princess carry after that. He wove his distraction field around the both of them—he wasn’t Fal-Mai in terms of range, but if he was essentially carrying people as he was now, it was doable. He made his way out of the Bar, keeping Eliza secure as he did.

The walk to her room gave him time to reflect as he navigated around soldiers and staff. Either he’d gotten lucky with the timing, or his empathy for Eliza’s past was what he needed to break out of that apathy. He was feeling a bit better with motivation, as well—so the storm had broken, leaving him to deal with the lightning-struck remains. But, hey—lightning strikes made good fertilizer. He could come back and help out Eliza one day with her own hangups. He could return the favor.

... maybe that was who he was. If nothing else, if not a brilliant engineer, if not a bane of the Elders... he could wrangle Eliza. He could keep her out of trouble and give her a shoulder to cry on, sometimes literally. He was that to her. He could cling to that identity.

“Mordenna?”

That was Fal-Mai in his ear, talking over comms. Ah, right. The link. Considering things were largely back to normal now, he spared an arm to reply. “Everything’s alright,” he replied when there wasn’t anyone around. “Eliza and I had a heart-to-heart. If I wanna further hash things out, I’ll come and find you guys. Thanks for checking up on me.”

“Of course, brother.”

“You take it easy, Fals. I’ll have your arm ready in no time.”

“I will ‘take it easy’ so long as you do, Mordenna. Be well.”

That all cleared, he returned his arm to Eliza as he passed through the Bridge, taking the stairs up and slipping into her quarters. From there, he sat her on the bed. Her eyes fluttered open, and he helped her kick off her shoes. “If you need to get into more fitting night attire,” he muttered, “I can go start working again on my projects.”

“Um...” Eliza wrung her hands together. “... can you stay until I’ve gotten changed? I’ll do it in the bathroom.”

Well, he wasn’t going to leave the Commander out to dry. He nodded. “Sure can do.”

Eliza nodded back, shoving off the bed and wandering over to her dresser with a bit of sway in her step. She picked out her clothes—Mordenna wasn’t particularly watching—and staggered into her bathroom. Mordenna got himself comfortable on the railing surrounding the area of her bed. Hopefully she hadn’t drank so much she’d be sick. Did she have a trash can in here? Maybe it was in the bathroom. He’d ask how she felt when she got out.

Eventually, the bathroom door opened... and Mordenna mentally smacked himself to stay civil.
Eliza came out in nothing but an oversized t-shirt and her underwear. Seems she really had lost a lot of her inhibitions. When she made it to her bed and sat down again, Mordenna stood back up.

“How’s your stomach?”

“Don’t feel like I’m going to be sick. I didn’t have that much—just drank it fast.”

“Right.” Well, if she was going to be alright, he didn’t really have any other reasons to stay without intruding. He turned to leave.” I’ll leave you to bed. I’m gonna—”

“Wait.” When he looked back, Eliza had extended an arm. “Uh... could... could you please stay? I... I don’t know what my dreams are going to be like when I’m drunk...”

That was fair. Mordenna turned back around. “Yeah, I can stay.” He could drop Lily a message that he was doing something very important while Eliza was sleeping. “I’ll crash on the couch?”

Eliza looked to the side, wringing the edge of her shirt. “... I don’t want to roll on my back,” she started, face red. “Could you... stay in the bed?”

All obscene thoughts Mordenna might’ve had were dashed with a quick reminder; Eliza was drunk. It’d be tantamount to rape to even think about trying anything. She needed a sleeping buddy—and if Mordenna got sleep paralysis, he’d need one too. “... yeah,” he said. “Just let me get my armor and shoes off so I’m not making you uncomfortable.”

Eliza nodded and flopped against her bed on her side. Mordenna walked around to the other side, shedding all of his armor, emptying his pockets, and throwing off his boots as he did. He... was sure he wasn’t going to be able to magically sleep off of this. His problem wasn’t comfort—it was being physically unable to sleep. Mordenna had tried before and failed. But, hey—if he was awake the whole night, he’d be vigilant for if she rolled onto her back.

But, as he settled into bed... he had a thought. Eliza looked positively refreshed coming out of the Infirmary yesterday, and those beds were small enough that her and Fal-Mai had to be essentially cuddling. She probably didn’t feel better just sharing a bed with someone else—she likely felt better off of sleeping against someone. With that in mind, he figured he’d ask. “... for your comfort’s sake, you, uh.” Out with it, Mordenna. No way to make this not weird. “Would you like it if we slept close?”

“Yes, please,” was Eliza’s very sleepy answer.

Well, he had his permission. Scooting forward and reaching for Eliza—mindful to not grab her anywhere suggestive—he pulled in Eliza to spoon her, keeping her head against his chest. With her being so small compared to him, at least there wouldn’t be the worry of his arm falling asleep. Still, he kept one of his over her, and she responded by snuggling back further into him. Her “goodnight, Mordenna” was barely comprehensible but he returned it anyway, watching as she slowly dropped off.

So. This was his life now. Mordenna wasn’t complaining. If he could make her life better just by being there? Well, that gave him purpose, and he’d take that. And when she dies? His siblings were going to live forever with him, so long as none of them got killed. He’d move to fully supporting them. He had reasons to live and he’d cling to them.

Closing his eyes, he settled in for a long night of thinking, the warmth of Eliza against him reminding him that his life had worth.
Eliza dealt with the events of the night before.

Eliza never thought she’d have so much murderous intent in the morning.

But as her alarm clock blared out and cut through her dreams, loudly informing her of the headache she was harboring, all she could think was that she wanted to grab the damn thing and chuck it across the room. Of course, she knew she’d be fucked if that didn’t actually shut it up, but at that point it would at least be farther away from her. She opened her eyes, glaring at her nightstand.

She was then pleasantly surprised as someone reached over and silenced it. That was nice of them. Maybe she could get back to sleep. Hopefully a little rest would kill this headache.

... wait a second.

Eliza blinked a few times. The details of last night caught up with her as her sleepiness rapidly evacuated from her mind. She got drunk, she vented to Mordenna—in itself, not bad—cried against him, he carried her to her room, and then she... She looked down and groaned. Yep. Shirt and panties. What the fuck was drunk her thinking. The perspective there also confirmed that it was Mordenna behind her, and his arm around her waist. In spite of her headache and however the hell she was going to explain this if it ever got out, this was... pretty nice. Eliza was sure her state would be ten times worse if she got sleep paralysis and a hangover. Mordenna’s body heat was damn pleasant—it was like she had a weighted, heated blanket against her back. Plus, well... If there was a chance in hell he’d be attracted to her, waking up to someone like him would be nice. But, didn’t he say he physically couldn’t sleep? Did drunk her just impound him to stay in one spot the whole night?

Her and Mordenna spoke at the same time but all she heard was her “sorry.” After a second, she weakly motioned for him to speak, and he did. “Nothing to be sorry about, Commander. You alright?”

“As alright as a hangover gets,” she muttered back. “And I say I’m sorry because I essentially forced you to babysit me for a whole night with nothing else to do.”

“‘Forced’ would imply I wasn’t up to it, and frankly, that’s a dirty lie.” Mordenna patted her stomach. “If I can make sure you’re feeling alright enough to sleep, fine by me. Now—stay put. You’re going to sleep in.”

“Hell no,” she immediately rebutted, but Mordenna was already leaving the bed, her back swiftly growing cold without his presence. She sat up and immediately hated herself for doing it, groaning again as she massaged her forehead. “If—If I don’t go out there... if you come out of my quarters...”

“Eh, scandals are fun.” Eliza watched as Mordenna grabbed everything he’d shed last night. She was already internally mourning him leaving the bed. “Besides, might be worse having to explain a
headache out of the blue in the morning to Bradford.”

“I could claim menopause...” Eliza dejectedly sighed, knowing that was a piss-poor lie. Despite being well over fifty, she hadn’t hit that yet. Maybe her body, too, thought she was still thirty.

“Just stay in bed, Lizzie.” Mordenna started putting his feet into his boots. “I’ll pop by Tygan and ask for some headache meds, and tell Bradford you’re laid up with nausea. If either of them cross-reference each other, I’ll say ‘puking is a very valid way to get a headache.’ Bad food, stomach bug, whatever the hell. Just... take it easy for a bit, alright? No need to work yourself to death.”

That was true. Thinking about it, Eliza knew she’d be making herself extremely miserable, trying to work with a headache. At the very least, she wanted to eat some pills before getting back to work. She blew a breath out of her nose. “Damn you and your caring nature.”

“Hey, that’s my line.” Mordenna clipped on her vest, smiling at her. “Take care of yourself, alright? I’ll be back with some pills for you and I’ll get Bradford off of you. Worst comes to worst, he’ll have to make good on all of his harping on about you taking a break. I’ll help him out before I leave for my mission, don’t worry.”

Right. Mordenna and Schro had that operation to perform once they got close enough. She nodded. “Gotcha. I’ll... I’ll just feel a little stir-crazy, being by myself and in bed for so long.”

“Oh, I got you on that one. I’ll send Jax your way. He can be trusted knowing why you’re laid up, right?”

“Yeah.” It was a second later that she realized Mordenna was basically complaining about being in bed with her the whole night. She looked down, conscious of her attire again. “... I’m sorry.”

“Whatcha apologizing about, Liz?” Mordenna threw out his hands. “Everyone’s gotta take a break eventually. Ain’t fair that you gotta miss out.”

“No, I mean...” She sighed. “Again. Keeping you in bed for so long. Getting you stir-crazy.”

Mordenna’s eyes flickered around for a second as he thought, and his smile petered out. “Liz, I... wasn’t complaining about being in bed with you. I just...”

The silence that followed was suffocating. His lack of followup just told her that she really had confined him for the whole night. Moving so she could crawl under the blankets, she essentially buried herself under them. There was shuffling as Mordenna got his things together. “... I’ll come back with some water and whatever pain meds Tygs has got,” she heard him say through the blankets. “Hang tight.” With that, the sound of him walking out of the room reverberated in her ears, leaving her alone in her quarters.

Well. There it was. Mordenna got uncomfortable over sharing a bed with her. If Eliza was waiting for her indirect rejection, she got it. Eliza further curled up, the heat underneath the sheets a poor imitation of the warmth Mordenna had brought to them. There was shuffling as Mordenna got his things together. “... I’ll come back with some water and whatever pain meds Tygs has got,” she heard him say through the blankets. “Hang tight.” With that, the sound of him walking out of the room reverberated in her ears, leaving her alone in her quarters.

... at least, she would like to, but the pinpricks at her eyes told a different story. “Liz,” she barely whispered, “don’t cry. Don’t... don’t cry over something you should’ve known.” Yet, she was anyway, her chest hollowing out. Her hands sought out one of her pillows and she clutched it, tensed as she held back sobs. Even if she was successful, the force of doing so was just aggravating
her headache.

Eliza had to be honest with herself—it wasn’t just Mordenna. There was no way she could be with anyone who had caught her fancy. The Chosen didn’t love her like that, her staff couldn’t with her as Commander, the faction leaders had their own business, and she didn’t even know the Alien Rulers enough. She was a hopeless loose end. As good as pining after all of them was, there were always moments like this, where she collapsed in on herself and realized just what kind of a desperate fool she was. No, Eliza didn’t think her end goal in life was to be in a relationship, unlike every message she got growing up. She just… fell in love with people, and it hurt acknowledging the fact that they wouldn’t return her feelings. Not that it was selfish of them—they had the right to not return them.

As the Commander wrestled with her sorrow, she latched onto that last point. They had every right to reject her. Not just romantically—Jax had assured her of her psionics not swaying them, but she was waiting for the moment they all realized just who she was, or found out just what she had done in her past. Sure, they might need her now. But the minute the Elders were gone, the minute there might be a better alternative? She knew she was as good as dead—and that was for the best. She was just a temporary measure. One day they’d all see that.

Realizing the direction her thoughts were heading in, Eliza forced herself to take in a deep breath. Then she let it go, though she couldn’t stop her breath hitching. Wiping at her eyes, she gingerly crawled out of bed. Before she made her way to the bathroom, she stopped by her dresser to at least put on a pair of sleep pants. That done, she stumbled into the next room, bracing herself on the sink for a moment as she let her eyes rest on the sink. Then, slowly, she brought them upwards.

Her hair was almost entirely white nowadays—it took a while of looking just to see the faint brown sheen in a few spots. Redness tinged her light, saturated blue eyes, and she wondered how apparent it would be when Mordenna came back in. Quite frankly, she looked like a mess, but she wasn’t here to pour over her appearance. She took in a deep breath. “Eliza. Here we are again, as we always end up. You get to this line of thought so often I could sing along, if we weren’t deathly afraid of doing that nowadays. About how we’re an inadequate Commander and people are only following us because there’s no other choice. Don’t know if you know this but they had another choice in Bradford. Sure, they were quick to put you on a pedestal, but they had every option of smacking you back down and going back to him. And yet, they didn’t. If you want to say it’s because he’s worse than you, well… putting the fact that we’d be insulting him aside, that means that you aren’t the worst. They had their other option and they chose you.”

She sighed, running a hand through her hair. “And that whole love business… honestly, we shouldn’t even be thinking about that when there’s a war to be fought. There’s much more pressing matters at hand than trying to get into someone’s pants. Maybe after the war and we’re in the stage of trying to rebuild society—because at least then we won’t have the looming threat of the Elders over our heads. Who knows? Maybe we could be wrong about there being no chance that anybody likes us back. Outside of the Alien Rulers, of course… maybe that’s who we’ll end up with after this war, yeah?” Eliza found a moment to chuckle tiredly. “All caught up in mourning over our romantic situation when the rulers are there, just waiting to get to know you. Don’t miss the forest for the trees, alright?”

When she stopped speaking, Eliza dropped her gaze. At least now she wasn’t feeling nearly as bad. Pep talks to herself like this usually worked—she appreciated talking to herself in private. Gave her one thing to focus on when her mind could be in a million places at once. Picking up her hair brush from where it lay on the sink, she looked back up at herself again as she set her hair into order. Maybe she wasn’t going to be about her day immediately, but at least she could square her hair away. Always provided her a little comfort to have some control over that.
Eventually, there came a point where Eliza’s hair was as straight as it was going to get, but she just... kept brushing it. This was a very bad habit of hers, she knew, but she couldn’t help it. When stuck with nothing else to do, best to make her hair as silky as possible—even if it ended up with more of it on the brush than on her head, pretty much.

Her over brushing was interrupted as she heard footsteps coming up to the bathroom door. She froze where she was. Hopefully that was Mordenna. She didn’t know what she’d say to Bradford if he came in here and she had to hide her headache.

Thankfully, it was just Mordenna. “Hey, Liz. You in there?”

She set the brush back down on the sink quietly. “Yeah.” That whole business with trapping him for a night... she wanted to apologize again, but figured she’d already gotten the message across. It almost made her wonder about her night with Fal-Mai—but Fal-Mai asked for her to stay at that point. At least the Assassin got some sleep in.

“You, uh, decent? I want to talk.”

Hm. Hopefully that wasn’t about anything from last night. Eliza... really didn’t feel like going over any of that. It took her getting drunk to even approach the subject. Still, Mordenna cared about her, it seemed. “Come in. I’m decent.”

Through the mirror, she watched as Mordenna came in behind her, ducking under the door and meeting her gaze through her reflection. His eyes quickly went elsewhere, and he rubbed at his mouth. “I dropped your meds and a glass of water over at your nightstand. Saw your bed was empty and figured I’d check here before going to see if you’d tried to go command. I also... wanna...” His hand moved to his forehead and he sighed. “I want to clear something up.”

Well, here it came. Despite her pep talk, Eliza’s heart seized. He was going to make the rejection official. When she didn’t say anything, Mordenna tentatively began. “I want to make it very clear—you did not put me out whatsoever, asking me to stay with you last night. If you don’t remember—and I don’t blame you, you were pretty damn sleepy—I was the one who offered to get closer to you so you might sleep better. I could’ve lounged in that bed apart from you and just rolled you over if you landed on your back. But... I figured you might feel better just having someone there for you. Y’know. Since stuffed animals are apparently for kids.” He dropped his hand, looking at Eliza again. “My sarcasm aside, I was perfectly fine staying with you. I... I care about you a lot, Liz. Hurts me to see you hurt. So I’m fine doing what I can to make you feel better, alright?”

Oh. Not the response she was prepared for at all. Even if it was unexpected, it was... pleasant, knowing that she’d been entirely wrong in some aspects. Her body relaxed and she nodded shallowly. Knowing that Mordenna cared about her that much... well, it didn’t help her romantic feelings, but it felt good otherwise. “—alright. I... really took your comment out of context, because I don’t think I could imagine just lying somewhere, not sleeping for eight hours.”

Mordenna shrugged. “I got a lot of thinking done, and it’s not like it was unpleasant. Been a while since I’ve actually relaxed on something soft. Just want you to be alright.”

The sentiment made Eliza smile, and she crossed her arms. “... thank you, Mordenna. For being there for me. Bit of a bummer for me to take it all the wrong way, but I just...”

“What, think you’re unlikeable? That I wouldn’t go out of my way to make you comfy?” Mordenna gently patted her head. “Perish the thought. Liz, you’ve saved my life twice now. Suffice to say I’m in for the long haul, though I don’t think we’re ever going to get to burning that bridge at the end of the war anymore, considering I’ve found a calling or two.”
The memory of one of their first talks together on the Avenger came back to her and she chuckled, even if the act of laughing made her headache worse for a second. “I’m glad you’ve found something to keep you going, Mords.”

Mordenna’s smile was genuine. “Some one.”

Oh, Eliza’s heart. It was practically melting out of her chest. Sitting on the sink for extra height, she hugged Mordenna around his middle—though he quickly repositioned to make it more proper. “I’m glad to be there for you,” she murmured as they were close.

“Same here, Liz. Not just you, either.” He eased out of the hug. “My siblings, too, though I can still pin that whole miracle on you. Don’t think we would’ve made up otherwise, even if we somehow did escape the Elders without you.”

“Hey. It was you who carried through with it when I talked about it.”

“Still put the idea in my head and nurtured the space to make it happen. You’ve got the garden, the Elders had scorched earth. Y’think we’d be able to grow in that?”

Eliza chuckled again, though this time she winced a bit as her headache loudly complained. When she opened her eyes, Mordenna was giving her a concerned look. “Seems that hangover’s hitting you hard. I love us some talks but I think you should hit the bed and take your meds. I hear Jax has some good techniques for headaches.”

“Probably does,” she muttered, sliding off the sink, “considering he probably has a tendency towards psionic headaches.”

“Psionic migraines if he pushes himself enough.” He followed Eliza out as she left the bathroom. “I’d know. Get echoes of ‘em every time he gets them.”

“Oh.” Eliza made it over to her bed, sitting down on it. Sure enough, Mordenna had brought the whole bottle of medicine with a glass of water. She popped the pills and took a swig. Now she could only wait and hope they took the edge off. Her sluggishness, she’d just have to deal with on her own.

Perhaps Mordenna caught the tiredness in her face. “Honestly? I think you should take the whole day off. When’s the last time you did that?”

“When I was hanging out in the Stasis Suit,” she bitterly replied. “It just isn’t me to lay around all day.”

“Well, Bradford thinks you’re sick, Tygan expressed concerns, and I bet you my left eye that word will spread and the whole ship is gonna throw a riot if they see you out of your room. Take a day off for god’s sake, Lizzie. World ain’t gonna end and worst comes to worst you can just rush out in your PJ’s and command like that. Ain’t nobody gonna care when you’re humanity’s best hope against the Elders.”

Even if she wanted to say Mordenna didn’t have some fair points, she didn’t think she’d be making it out of this room if he was so determined to keep her in here. She sighed, taking another sip of her water. “…I guess. Been forever since I just layed about. Just feels weird taking a break.”

“And your soldiers don’t? Only reason anybody doesn’t take breaks when they can is expectations. No rules, Liz, pretty sure you didn’t say nobody can take breaks, including you.” Mordenna crossed his arms. “I’ll chuck Jax in here before I go. Hell, if you’re comfy enough with the idea of them seeing you in your sleep attire, his whole congregation could come in here and hang out.”
She raised her eyebrows at him. “Sure that’s a good idea when people think I have a stomach bug?” Actually, that led her to another line of thought. “… including Jax, at least until you tell him the deal?”

“Well, maybe ‘no’ to inviting the whole rodeo. But even if you were sick and contagious, not like it’d matter to him. Or me or Fal-Mai. Elders did something right—our immune systems are beasts. Don’t think I’ve heard a lick of any of us getting sick.”

“No getting drunk, no getting sick, were the Elders making superhumans?”

“Probably.”

She blankly considered her water for a moment. “… if this is what you guys were like off of a year of preparation in Jax’s case, I can’t imagine what the Avatars will be like if they’re finished. If you guys weren’t good enough for them to make bodies after…”

“Yeah.” Mordenna shoved his hands in his pockets. “Luckily for us, we’re busy fucking up that whole process until we can take things to them, yeah?”

Eliza nodded. “Yeah.”

There was a quiet moment they shared as Eliza put her water back on her nightstand, thinking of the day she had in store for her if she was just going to be taking it easy in her room. With Jax, at that, so at least she’d have someone handsome to talk to. Not that Mordenna didn’t qualify, of course, but he had his own business to be on about.

Speaking of that business. “Alright. You keep yourself parked there, missy. I’ll have Jax in here before you know it and let Bradford know he’s taking over for a day.” Mordenna turned to leave. “Anything else you might need outta me?”

She shook her head. “Nothing I can think of. Thanks again, Mords. I... I really do appreciate the effort you put in for me.”

Mordenna gave her a casual salute. “All for the good ol’ Commander. Any day, any time. Catch some rest, Liz. I’ll have that slimy fucker ready for interrogation before you know it.” With that, Mordenna ambled towards the door, and he was out of sight.

That left Eliza to herself in her room. Well, she didn’t have much else to do, and her headache wasn’t doing her any favors. Perhaps she could catch up on a nap. Eliza snuggled back under her covers, taking a deep breath in and out as she relaxed.

The next time she woke up, it wasn’t to an alarm clock, at least. Eliza blearily opened her eyes as the sound of her door opening roused her from her light nap. Jax entered, looking around as he did. He... had a few things in a psionic box at his side that Eliza couldn’t really see at her distance. Jax noticed Eliza looking at him and composed himself. “Commander. Apologies if I disturbed your rest.”

“Mm, don’t worry about it.” As she got up in bed, she did confirm her headache had gone down a little. Seemed the painkillers had started to kick in. “What did Mordenna tell you?”

“That you are suffering from a hangover and could use my expertise in easing it.” Jax descended into the space surrounding Eliza’s bed, allowing her to get a better look at the items he was toting. Huh. An incense tray with a box of sticks next to it, a lighter, and some bottled water—probably pilfered from the fridge. “May I sit down?”
“Of course.” Eliza drew her legs closer to her and Jax came to rest on the side of the bed. “Brought a whole kit with you?”

Jax nodded, resting the box on the bed before he dismissed his psionics. Eliza grabbed the water bottle as he picked up the incense tray, setting it on her night stand. As he did, he must’ve finally seen her glass. “Ah. My apologies—I hadn’t known you’d gotten a glass.”

“Eh, Mordenna brought that in here. I’ll just use the water you brought me to refill it without getting up, so it’s still nice to have. Thank you.” She set the bottle next to the glass and watched Jax work. With delicateness she didn’t expect him to have with clawed gauntlets, he picked out a thin stick of incense, clutching it daintily between his “talons.” He put it into the hole in the tray and then lit the stick with the lighter. As he let it burn for a second and then waved out the flame, a rather pleasant scent filled the room. It was earthy, but with a sweet backing, maybe the smell of a flower she didn’t know in there. Maybe some cinnamon? It was nice, to put it concisely. “Huh. What scent is that?”

“Platinum Palace,” he answered, then setting the box next to the stand. “I will leave the rest of the box to you—I still have a few of these personal favorites to spare.”

“You’re... giving me some of your favorites?”

“Of course. I find this scent always calms myself when I am suffering from any particularly gruesome migraines. I supposed it if helped ease my suffering, it might make yours trivial. Now.” He turned to her. “I notice your hair has grown in length, on top of its pigment change.”

Oh, yeah. Her hair had started growing more than it used to. It was starting to get to her back when she usually kept it around her shoulders. “Yeah. Suppose it’s gonna grow like crazy like Clint’s does now.”

“As it will. I’ve noted a duality in the side effects of psionics—the hair on your head either ceases its growth entirely... or, in my case, grows exponentially faster, linked to how much you put your psionics to use. With your case being the latter, I feel compelled to assist you, considering I am your mentor in your powers and thus, you are my charge in the matter.” Jax further sat on the bed, crossing his legs. “If you would like, I may braid your hair to keep it from flying in your face, should you ever channel your powers.”

Honestly, Eliza was quite tempted by the offer. Not just for the fact that she didn’t know how to braid to save her life, but... the chance to have Jax working his fingers through her hair wasn’t one she wanted to miss. Swayed by that, she crawled over to him and sat down in front of him, her back to him. “Sure, so long as you’ll take the gauntlets off.”

“I assure you I will. I may be confident in my braiding but only do so with my gauntlets on if I am fixing my own braid.” Behind her, there was some mechanical clicking, like the sound of his armor contacting itself, and—wow. Eliza had gotten used to Jax’s fully-enforced signature after he’d been given his horns back, but now she was experiencing it without his limiters. It felt like his passive psionics filled the room as much as the smell of the incense did, encompassing her budding signature. It was almost something she could see without looking at him, like gazing at him with phantom eyes. As if he could see the expression on her face, Jax spoke up. “... my apologies if things have gotten overwhelming.”

“Oh, nah, it’s fine,” she said, somewhat breathless. *Goodness.* Jax was a powerful, powerful man. “Would rather have this than my hair getting pinched between your gauntlets. No offence.”

“None taken.” Jax’s fingers entered her vision as they gathered her hair, and she did her best to
suppress a shiver as they brushed against her neck. With her hair behind her shoulders, she felt his fingers run through her hair, gathering portions of it. “I suppose I could also share some of my hair care tips. I can imagine there is little worse than having tangled, bedraggled hair and also having it fly about as you conduct your strength. Judging by the quality of yours, I will not have to teach you much.”

“Thank you.” She was kind of wondering what Jax did to keep his hair so criminally soft. There had to be some special product he was using, but she’d never heard him ask to get it. Still, a thought struck her. “... for all your talk of keeping your hair out of your face, I’ve only seen you do a braid once or twice.”

“Make use of your psionics for as long as I have,” he explained, “and you learn some minor techniques for use in whatever ways you require them. I myself learned a way to keep my hair largely behind me as I fight. It is... admittedly something you must feel rather than have explained to you. Should you keep your hair down and let it grow longer, I will see about teaching you.” He paused in his braiding. “I have also been trying to see if I cannot adjust that ‘flow’ to braid my own hair hands-free, but the process has been rather... trial and error.”

She smiled, imagining how it might mess up. “Tied your hair into knots a few times?”

“Hmph. You couldn’t imagine the half of it.” He continued to braid her hair, never forcefully tugging on her scalp. “We can also begin more training at your leisure—though, obviously, not at the moment. I had my own time to think over your psionics during the night and I believe I have a few ways of training them. The only psionic contact I would allow you to perform at the moment would be sharing of your headache, to ease your pain.”

She blinked a few times. “You can do that?”

“Yes. Mind melding allows for a variety of possibilities, one of them being the sharing of pain. If you were of the unscrupulous sort, you could force someone to feel the entirety of your pain, so long as you maintained the link with them. However, what I speak of is pain splitting. It allows you to let someone take some, if not all of the burden of your pain as long as the two of you are connected.”

Psionics sure were weird. What was even weirder was that it seemed as if Jax was offering to help her with her hangover by experiencing it himself. She sat there for a moment, contemplating that. “... and you’d be willing to do that?”

“Yes. Mind melding allows for a variety of possibilities, one of them being the sharing of pain. If you were of the unscrupulous sort, you could force someone to feel the entirety of your pain, so long as you maintained the link with them. However, what I speak of is pain splitting. It allows you to let someone take some, if not all of the burden of your pain as long as the two of you are connected.”

“Of course, Eliza. If it helps to ease your mind, then I am more than happy to do so.” Again with this willingness to, at the very least, minorly inconvenience themselves to assist her. Did the Chosen just care that much about her? Kind of expected, given how much care you’ve put into them. If that was the case, she’d have to remember what Jax was talking about for later. Maybe she could return the favor, should he ever come down with a migraine again.

Eliza let out a gentle breath. “—after you’re done braiding my hair. And thanks in advance. Means a lot to me that you’d be willing to contract my headache.” She sighed. “But I feel like I should only limit you to taking half of it.”

“Nonsense, Eliza.” She could feel him threading her hair. “I suffer far worse headaches when I exhaust my powers. Yours will be nothing to me.” He stopped braiding. “... you wouldn’t happen to have any hair ties in your room?”

“Ah, yeah.” She pointed to her other nightstand. “First drawer, got a few of them.” She supposed she really couldn’t stop Jax if he wanted to take the whole burden on himself. He seemed so much
stronger than her. Psionically, at least, but she also didn’t doubt that he could take her in a fight. She’d never seen him physically brawl before but even if he was untrained, he could probably easily overpower her. Not that she’d mind being overpowered by him. **Eliza!** Alright, thought process ended.

She instead watched as a claw made of Jax’s psionics extended out to her nightstand, tugging on the first drawer and rooting around. It came up with a bundle of her hair ties, then adjusted its grip to only hold one. Closing the drawer, it brought it back to Jax behind her. “Huh. Claws, hm?”

“If it is a construct,” he replied, messing with her hair again, “then it is of my domain. Admittedly, I had not done much branching out during my time at ADVENT. I found a few powers that were of use to me, and I continued to stick with them without much experimentation. Within my time with XCOM, I have had more time to see what else I can do.” A few more motions, then he eased her hair back against her head. “Done. Rather simple, but I did not want the time I spent touching your hair to go to an unwanted degree.”

Curious, Eliza drug around the braid that Jax had done the best she could. It was simple indeed—rather typical of the braids she’d seen on girls in high school, but it was still pulled neatly with very few hairs out of place. Simple, but Jax had done a fantastic job. “May be simple, but you did great. And, don’t worry about touching my hair too much.”

She twisted to look up and back at Jax, who was smiling gently at the praise. “If you say it is not a bother, perhaps next time I should try my hand at a more aesthetically pleasing braid.”

“Not at all—and I guess that means I should stop bothering March to cut my hair as much so you’ve got more to work with.”

“Is she the ship’s hairdresser?”

“Very much so. She’s the one in charge of making sure that everyone doesn’t have to wear ponytails.”

Jax chuckled, the low roll of his baritone lifting Eliza’s heart. “Her presence must be an invaluable one, then, and I suppose I will have to talk to her. One of my Mystics has been handling my hair, but I can always reach out further to the residents of this ship. But, I digress.” He rested a hand on her shoulder. With his gauntlets off, his palm warmed her. “I believe we should be getting around to that headache, hm?”

“Right.” Eliza half-turned herself around. “Should I be holding your hands again?”

Some part of that statement made him clear his throat. “I only required that then so I could siphon your psionics with little stress to yourself. So long as we remain at a relatively close distance, we can manage a mind meld however you wish to position yourself.”

“... including laying down, taking a nap?” Still, she realized she’d be confining yet another Chosen to the area of her bed, and she rubbed the back of her neck nervously. “Or, whatever’s good for you.”

“Of course. You wouldn’t happen to have your datapad around here somewhere? Wiki has been uploading digital versions of the books she manages to scan and save and I have been browsing the library she is building.”

Ah, yeah. He could read while she slept. Actually, come to think of it, if Wiki was saving books... “Yeah, it’s right here.” She opened her nightstand drawer, pulling it out. “You wouldn’t think Wiki
is saving movies, would you?"

Jax rubbed his chin. “Perhaps so. I wouldn’t be averse to watching them myself, but there is the issue of noise... unless I am to take that as a suggestion that we watch one together?”

“Well, depending on Wiki’s got, yes. If you feel like it after eating my whole headache, of course.”

“We shall see, I suppose.” Jax took in a deep breath. “Do you remember how to open yourself to my approach?”

She certainly did. Scooting a bit closer to Jax, she closed her eyes and imagined herself as open, passive, inviting. She reached for her signature and tried to picture a door opening in her mind. Sure enough, that low thunder of Jax’s psionics properly approached her, and she welcomed him in. In the stage of her mind, it was almost as if Jax was approaching her pain, observing it. There was a bit of... not quite a tug, but a gentle pull, with quite the weird sensation happening to her headache. To help him, she tried... not pushing, but offering her pain, maybe herself as well to make it easier. With that, it was quite the spot of nirvana to have her headache lift entirely all at once. It was damn compassionate of Jax to just take her pain like that. Still, she hoped he was ok. Gently, she opened her eyes.

Eliza must’ve tuned out of the real world for a second, because she was leaning against him now, her head against his chestplate. Jax had kept his hand on her shoulder and it was keeping her steady. Looking up at him, Jax’s eyes were still closed, and he looked just a tiny bit tense. Hardly a change at all. Even as her eyes were open, the link still felt active, and she watched as his hair gently animated behind him. Jax was...

... ah, right, their thoughts might still be linked. She wasn’t getting anything out of Jax at the moment, so she imagined retreating to her own “room” in her mind to think. Jax was drop-dead gorgeous. Maybe it was the incredible power, maybe it was his physique, maybe it was the voice. Probably a combination of all of it. He was magnificent.

Jax opened his eyes and looked to her. “Feeling better?”

“Loads. How about yourself?”

“As I guessed before—your headache is nothing to me. Perhaps I also have higher pain tolerance, in that regard.”

“So, watching a movie or two isn’t out the window?”

He gave a single chuckle. “I suppose not. Now, how would you like to be about this?”

Eliza considered the question for a second, then realized what Jax was on about. What kind of position would she swing to watch a movie with him? She considered it for a second before blowing a breath out of her nose. Her first thought was “lying down together” as to be easy on him if he was lying about how much the headache was bothering him and maybe allow her to pass out at any given time. But goodness, she’d already scammed Mordenna into her bed and shared a night with Fal-Mai. Did she need to hit for the whole home run? Well, best to give Jax what she wouldn’t work with. “So long as I’m not sitting up with no back support or having to jerk my head at an angle to watch, I’m good.”

“Mm. Give me a second to think.” True enough, Eliza allowed Jax some silence to mull it over. After a bit, he seemed to have his answer, and took his hand off of Eliza’s shoulder. “Permission to relocate you, Commander?”
She chuckled at the wording of it, but nodded. “Granted.”

With her permission gained, Jax ever so gently slotted his hands underneath her arms. The warmth of his hands easily seeped into her skin beyond the fabric of her shirt and she quickly made sure her thoughts were private so that Jax didn’t “hear” her mild thrill at it. He moved to sit at her headboard, watching as his psionics relocated her pillows. He then placed Eliza on one of his legs, gently taking the datapad with a psionic claw and holding it in front of them. “You protested to no back support,” he explained, “and I supposed laying down would make you have to angle your head. Is this satisfactory?”

Well, it was a far sight better than getting into bed with another Chosen and all of the weirdness that came with that. She sat back, noting that Jax was sitting at a bit of an angle, like a recliner. “This is good, I’d say.”

“Glad to hear it, Commander.” He paused for a second. “... my chestplate is not in the way or uncomfortable, is it?”

Oh, lord. Yeah it was kinda jutting into her back but she didn’t know if she could handle a nearly-shirtless Jax. She presumed he had an undersuit on, at least. Still, she thought about sitting like that for however long they’d be watching movies, and her back ached thinking of it. Sheepishly, she twiddled her thumbs. “—if you’d be ok taking it off...”

“Yes, of course, Eliza. I’d hardly wish to cause you discomfort.” If only he knew. Well, it wasn’t discomfort really, but the sentiment was there. “Sit up for a second?” When she did, there was the sound of clasps and the like being undone behind her—she was at least going to offer Jax some privacy in that aspect. Soon enough, she saw him place the whole thing on the other side of her bed, and a hand on her shoulder guided her into laying back. God, it was far more comfortable, but she was very consciously aware that she was up against his muscles. Jax was built like a statue. At least the warmth at her back was relaxing.

She let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding, telling herself to ease up. Jax was just making sure she was comfortable. There was nothing more to read into. “Thanks, Jax. Any idea of what you might wanna see?”

“Hmm...” He reached forward and began tapping through the options on the datapad, heading over to Wiki’s archives. “I cannot say I am much of a movie fan...”

“Oh, that’s fair. I have a few in mind, but... I don’t really care what we watch. Just don’t put any rom coms on and I’ll be good.”

“Feel free to inform me if I pick one.” Eliza watched, and sure enough, Wiki had a section in her archives labelled “Movies.” Jax tapped it and scrolled on though, stopping on one of them. “The Day the Earth Stood Still?”

“Oh! That one. I’ve seen it before and I really liked it. Was pretty good for the time.” She squinted at the entry. “… I don’t think it was released in 2008, though. I wonder if they made a remake I didn’t know about.”

“It sounds like a scientific horror story.”

“Eh...” Eliza did that “so-so” gesture she’d seen her soldiers use a lot. “The one I saw had a different feel to it. Something, something, warning against the terrors of nuclear warfare. Dunno what this one’s on about, though—it looks like it fits that description.” The cover art Wiki had managed to salvage conveyed that.
“Only one way to find out, hm?”

Eliza chuckled, relaxing against Jax. “I suppose so. Put it on.”

With that, Jax tapped the entry and the movie began to play. As it did, Eliza contemplated her situation. She’d gotten strangely close with all of the Chosen during the past few days or so. Here she was, laying against Jax’s nearly-bare chest and watching a movie with him. What was it between her and them?

As she slightly tuned in the movie—and remembered to keep her thoughts private—she supposed there were a few answers. All of the Chosen probably never had much physical contact outside of fighting each other. Maybe they were latching onto her like they were because she had shown herself completely willing to hug them and stay close to them. If that was the case, she was entirely fine with platonic affection. Goodness knows she’d spent twenty years not touching anyone, either. Was that why she was so willing to not say anything about it?

Well, if it was a case of mutually making up for lost time, she supposed she wouldn’t make much of it. If they needed it, and she needed it too, there didn’t seem to be much of a problem in indulging. Smiling gently regardless of the movie, she slightly thumped her head back on Jax’s chest. In response, he wrapped an arm around her waist. Nothing wrong about it.

Before she settled in to watch movies and hang with Jax for the rest of her day, she idly wondered how Mordenna was doing at his mission...
Mordenna and Schro handle the mission assigned to them.

The suburbs were quiet and the air was still, and Mordenna had to wonder when that all would change.

The Skyranger had dropped them off quite a while ago and a far ways back, leaving him and his new companion Schro to trek through the countryside, then this little suburb of one of the city centers. They were quick to find an arrangement—Mordenna and Schro were able to figure out that the latter could work as some sort of discount version of Fal-Mai’s shroud. So now Mordenna had a thin layer of nanomachines clinging to his body, refracting light around him and cloaking him.

Of course, that left the question as to what they’d do with the rest of Schro’s nanos—and indeed, their core. That, too, was solved when they manifested them into a few gadgets on Mordenna’s person: two lobes on his temples to allow them to speak telepathically, bangles on his wrists to morph into whatever tools he might need, and a clingy, amorphous blob in his pocket to hide the core. Honestly, Mordenna thought the whole arrangement pretty damn neat... if it didn’t remind him that Schro was out here with him because Fal-Mai lost her arm.

He blew a gentle breath out of his nose, keeping up his stride as he prowled the sidewalk, keeping an eye on his surroundings. It had been a while since he’d been on an actual hunt. Him, a target, and optionally a time limit. He’d been wanting to lose himself to it, but...

“Something troubling you, Hunter?”

Mordenna mentally scoffed, walking around two teens. “I thought I told you to keep out of my thoughts ’till I start talking.”

“Apologies. They had been so close to the surface I thought you had been meaning to address me.”

Well, to divulge to Schro, or not? Mordenna stared into a passing house. “... I appreciate this partnership,” he began, “I really do. But you know why it’s us cooperating, right?”

He got the feeling that Schro nodded. “Yes. I still don’t believe it was your fault that your sister was injured. I even somewhat feel like apologizing that another Specter was one to inflict that.”

“Can’t be helped. But there’s your answer. I still feel like shit that my sis got chopped on my watch.”

“... sorry if I was intruding.”

Mordenna shook his head. “Hard not to, with you being so close to my brain. Don’t feel like you’ve got to fill the silence—I’ve gotta concentrate, after all.”

“Understood.”

With the mental exchange over, Mordenna was left once again to consider the ambiance of the
houses at dusk. There was no breeze to play a hissing melody with the leaves that were left on the trees, nothing to kick up wind chimes and the like. Just the occasional door, maybe a car starting in the distance.

Wait. Cars.

Still striding, Mordenna angled his head to get a better picture. Sounded like there was someone getting into one a block over. He got one snippet of “heading into the city” and he immediately changed his trajectory, sprinting through the alley between houses and hopping fences.

Schro didn’t seem to get the idea. “What’s the rush?”

“Car. Heading into the city. Far faster than me on foot and far less wasteful than me sprinting the whole way.”

“Oh. Hadn’t thought of that.”

Sparing no other words, Mordenna kept running and was quickly upon his quarry. Some forty-something was climbing into his car, a phone to his ear. Even if he went the speed limit, that was good by Mordenna. “Schro. Suction cups, magnets, anything? I trust my grip but I want to be sure.”

“Suction cups I can do.” Mordenna could feel their nanos crawl up the palms of his gloves. “Get on there and I’ll engage.”

No need to ask twice. The car started and Mordenna stepped lightly on the trunk in time with the engine kicking on, masking the noise of him mounting it. He eased forward and planted his hands on the roof of the car. Sure enough, it felt like his hands were being magnetized to the surface. As the car reversed, his palms stayed put. “Nice work.”

“It was you who got the idea to hitchhike,” they quipped back.

“Aren’t I a stinker?”

Schro chuckled in response. The car accelerated up to speed and Mordenna kept his eyes ahead, hoping the excess winds wouldn’t blow away Schro’s nanos. With luck, they wouldn’t have to worry about it.

Mordenna’s mind wandered during the car ride, absently trying to wiggle his fingers and failing as Schro had them practically glued to the car. Undeterred, he went about his thoughts. It was awfully convenient to have someone or something this close to hand that could read what he needed for tools and the like. Almost like having a personal assistant... or just a personal accessory to murder. He had to wonder—if a Specter could be paired with someone, could they...?

Well, best to ask the Specter themselves. “Hey, Schro. Could you theoretically sync your nanos with someone’s nervous system?”

“It’s entirely possible. There would need to be some sort of interface with the brain stem, but from there, it would be trivial to manipulate them to whatever the ‘host’ wants.” Schro paused. “Yes, that would include simulating missing limbs.”

Huh. Maybe Mordenna didn’t have to go through the whole rigamarole of making separate arms for Fal-Mai or testing their strengths. If he could, say, repurpose one of the Specter bodies they had in storage, he might be able to streamline the process of getting Fal-Mai a new arm. “Wouldn’t happen to be able to nick spare nanos from our collection of dead Specters, would we?”
“Not without external help. In death, Specters solidify and essentially brick their own cores to prevent data theft. Thankfully for your purposes, you wouldn’t exactly want an on-board AI when you’re making something meant to be entirely mindless, so it essentially skips the step of wiping it. With my assistance, I would be able to ‘reactivate’ the core so you could retrieve it from the body and reprogram it as you wish.”

“Neat! Might have to think about doing that for my own purposes, too. After we’re done getting Fal-Mai her arm back, of course.”

“Indeed. Perhaps it would be tasteful for that Specter to see her arm has been granted back with the very same method used to steal it.”

Mordenna mentally sighed. “With luck I’ll make sure she never has to see the damn thing again. But, I can appreciate that irony.” He thought on it a moment. “… is it irony? You wouldn’t think she’d get her arm back via Specter technology, but it just doesn’t have that… I don’t know, finesse?”

“Perhaps merely fitting.”

“Eh, we’ll go with that.” His thoughts and the car momentarily stopped at a red light. When it turned green, he continued. “Now all I need to do is figure out how to make my own personal assistant and we’ll be golden.”

Schro was strangely quiet at that comment. When Mordenna mentally pinged them to make sure that they weren’t AWOL, they spoke back up. “Apologies. The notion of a personal assistant made me think of Codices, and by extension, Wiki. I feel as if there is much unsaid between the two of us, and while she might want to keep it that way, I want to clear the air.”

“Nothing wrong with that, I suppose. Anything in particular happen?”

“Not that I know of. You’ve probably heard of the inherent rivalry between our two ‘races,’ I suppose. Most of the Specters I knew held some sort of superiority over Codices due to the nature of us essentially being a product of spite against Odin.”

“Tch.” Mordenna could only shake his head. “The thought of the ultimate asshole of spite himself getting some of his own medicine is slightly vindicating, but I can understand why it’s not exactly helping in your situation. I heard her talk to you before—she’s really set in being wary of you, isn’t she?”

“Unfortunately so. Which... breaks my metaphorical heart. I...” Schro trailed off, but Mordenna got a good feeling for what they were on about. That had to be an even worse situation than his own. Being unsure of the other party’s feelings was one thing. Knowing that they were predisposed to hate you was another.

Starting to feel a little unexpected empathy, Mordenna settled his mouth in a line. “Well, you’ve got to try to set the record straight with her. Maybe don’t go into the deep end first, but at least say that you’re slightly miffed she doesn’t even want to try to give you a chance. Or, word it more nicely than that, I’m sure you can think of something. Let her know that, she’ll mull over it for a while, and then you can move on from there. Got to at least try, Schro.”

“It’s... trying, that’s the scary part.” Schro’s “voice” grew quiet. “Call me cowardly, but... I’m afraid of rejection. If I keep away from her, things at least won’t get worse. But if I try and fail, if she then resents me for approaching her, it will make me feel miserable.” They sighed. “How foolish of me to fall so hard. This isn’t even getting into the possibility of a rejected confession. If I
Oh. Ouch. Mordenna grimaced. Was he just talking to a shade of himself, here? He figured there would be people out there with stories similar to his, but this hit a little too close to home. Sparing a moment for an empathetic wince, he responded. “... I don’t really know,” he began. “I empathize, at least, if it helps. I guess it would be easy for me to sit here and say ‘you should just go for it’ but I get how real the fear is. I think... I think you should try being friends with her. Manage that much. Then just... see if she wants to approach something more, I guess. On her own. If the two of you can’t be friends, then even if you did swing a relationship with her, I don’t imagine it’d be much fun.”

Schro took a while to meditate over Mordenna’s words. As he waited on their response, he watched as their ride drew closer and closer towards the heart of the city center, closer to their target. Finally, Schro responded as they turned onto one of the main streets. “You’re right, I believe. True, even approaching her sets fear upon me, but... right. If her and I can’t be friends, there’s no use thinking on a relationship, so I suppose I’ve got to muster the courage to approach her there first. Thank you, Mordenna. I couldn’t imagine divulging to others without context.”

Mordenna nodded. “I imagine it helps I’m Odin’s ‘kid.’”

“Perhaps, but I don’t think I see you that way. Even considering what he did to you, you always seemed like your own individual. Even more now, under the Commander’s guidance. You have become someone much happier, I think.”

Well, Schro was right. Mordenna did feel much happier around the Commander, and his one suicide “attempt” had failed thanks to her. He still had his low moments, yes, but now he had the tools to deal with them and someone to confide in should he need it. His siblings too, for that matter. It was hard for him to recognize the progress he’d made on his own, he would admit. But having someone else put it into perspective? It helped Mordenna see it. “Hard not to be happy around that gal. Also ain’t a stretch to be happier if you’re not getting the belt every other week for one reason or another.”

Mordenna would’ve imagined the conversation would’ve went on further had he not noticed a certain someone walking the streets with an ADVENT Trooper either side of him. His vision immediately snapped to his prey and he focused on him. “Schro. I need to double-check. Bring the bastard’s photo up again.”

Schro mentally pulled up the image of their target in mind—one Thomas Junes. Sure enough, there he was, walking towards some destination. He was dressed awfully fancy for wherever he was going. Probably the nightclub to celebrate before he ratted XCOM out. This time Schro got the message, and Mordenna could feel his hands being freed up. Doing a quick roll off of the car, he mentally thanked the driver for sticking to the far right side of the lane. It was easy from there to get onto the sidewalk and start to stalk his target.

“Do we grab him now?”

Mordenna shook his head. “It’ll look awfully damn suspicious if we do. His guards are bound to take notice, and if they flush us out in a crowded city center like this, we’re done for. Need to wait for a moment to separate him from his guards and take him out. We’re following him for now.”

Schro gave a pulse of affirmation in response, and Mordenna focused his attention on his target. Thomas looked relaxed on the surface around his guards, but Mordenna could see the tension in his neck. He was either on edge about the escort, or the anxiety of trying to rat out XCOM was
catching up to him. He’d be jumpy, so Mordenna would have to plan around that. No luring him away with suspicious noises—he’d be highly likely to call one of his guards over. With the knowledge he had, there was no doubt that they would answer to his every whim.

Mordenna continued to follow them, sticking close to prevent the need to weave around the occasional pedestrian. As they rounded a corner, it was pretty clear what their destination was going to be. Up ahead was a bright, neon sign advertising The Oasis, definitely a nightclub. The nightclub scene in the city centers was strangely present, though of course it was sanitized of the more risqué elements. Music had no lyrics—or if they did, they were either generic or nonsense. Codices served as DJs and even if their armor was slightly decorated to fit in with the atmosphere, there were guards at every corner of the room. The fact that the clubs remained so popular despite this just told Mordenna of how humans sought old comforts.

Thomas ducked into the building and Mordenna followed in his footsteps. He’d heard the muffled beat outside, but inside it was an entirely different story. The dance floor was packed with people, and the Codex manning the booth was just as much getting into the beat as the dancers were. A second floor to the place overlooked the lower floor, and Thomas made his way up there. He made a beeline for a group of people already sat in one of the circular booths. One of them looked up and noticed him, and waved him over. “Thomas! Was starting to think you’d skipped on us.”

Thomas scoffed and slid into the booth. His guards took a post on either side of it, and Mordenna took a seat on the railing across from them, listening to Thomas speak. “Nah, I just got held up at Baker’s Street. Malfunctioning street lamp tried to ID me as some kind of political dissident. Can you imagine?”

“I can.” Mordenna could feel Schro sifting through some intel they had on the guy. “He only knows what he does because he did turn to working with XCOM genuinely for a while. Then he realized what he could have if he sold his soul and here he is now.”

A slimeball through and through. Mordenna kept watching as his group of friends laughed. “Those things bust all the time,” one of the girls tittered, “but it’s so funny. At least the Peacekeepers are around to set them right.”

Yeah, right. Mordenna supposed it was funny to them because they never had to live with the fear of what being wrongly ID’d meant. So wrapped up in their bubble of denial that even close brushes with death were just sources of comedy. He supposed the towers malfunctioning might have something to do with the Network being on the fritz. He idly wondered how that Commander proxy was holding up in both his and Eliza’s absence.

“Yeah. Speaking of them...” Thomas flagged down a passing waitress for a second, ordering a drink. When he got done, he continued. “I gotta let them know what I know in a few hours. Sorry to dampen the party, but I figured I’d show up to hang with you guys before I left.”

“You’re doing what’s right,” one of the other girls replied. “XCOM has the Elders all wrong. They’re just spreading a bunch of misinformation and taking a bunch of stuff out of context.” She sighed. “So much that the Saints up and left.”

Mordenna’s fingers twitched, and he was thankful for his months at XCOM for taming his temper. Were he more of an idiot, he’d quite loudly inform her about her misconceived notions, preferably with the barrel of the Darkclaw. But, he had his silence to uphold.

Thomas drummed his fingers on the table. He then looked left and right, and then motioned for his group to keep quiet. When he spoke, his voice was low. “Not only left, but working with XCOM. All on the Avenger, from my intel. Apparently XCOM’s propaganda is getting so bad they’re
recruiting more than those Trooper rejects.”

The guards were clearly listening in, as one of them gave a meaningful glance inside the booth. Thomas caught it and cleared his throat. “Of course,” he resumed at a more casual volume, “I will be withholding any further info in the interest of releasing it to the Elders.”

That disclaimer made known, the Trooper resumed his watch. From there, the table lapsed into some more casual conversation. Mordenna himself went to thinking and planning. No doubt that his transport to wherever he was going to tattle on XCOM would be very heavily guarded, and they’d have far less of a chance apprehending him then. Right now was their best bet, but they had to separate him from both his friends and his guard.

The waitress came by with his drink and he took a swig of it. Hm. Maybe Mordenna could poison him somehow and corral him off to the bathroom. Looking around, he quickly identified its location. As long as there were stalls in there, they could easily kidnap him and escape unnoticed. Maybe there was a window in the bathroom they could abscond through.

But how to poison him? The closest thing Mordenna had to poison on him was his tranq darts, but he needed a stomachache, not to make his target completely limp where everyone could see. Well, best to consult the other brain currently in his head. “Yo, Schro. Any way you can like, I don’t know, induce a large amount of nausea?”

“As it so happens, yes. I’d demonstrate on you, but I’m sure we need you in peak physical condition. I’d need to scatter quite a few of my nanos across his head to achieve the effect.”

“Could I sacrifice one of the bracers to do it?”

“That’d be more than enough.”

Mordenna nodded, and held out his hand. “Not right now, I should specify. Let him have a bit more of his drink to convince him he was served a bad lot. Just set yourself up... so long as he won’t feel it.”

“He might feel it if I was spreading across his hands, maybe. But you shouldn’t worry.” Mordenna’s trained eyes watched as, one by one, nanos off of one of his bracelets flew over to Thomas’s head. If he focused his gaze, he could see just where they all ended up. Thomas never noticed during the whole process, content to take more sips of his drink and laugh with his friends. Laugh it up now, asshat.

“Done. Just give me the signal when you think he should scarper.”

“Will do.” Mordenna took his chance to map out his own route from where he was to the bathroom. Most everyone was either on or near the dance floor, or just sitting in their own seats. It would be easy to just scoot by all of them without bumping into them and giving himself away. If he was lucky, Thomas would run fast enough that he’d practically abandon his guards on his flight. If he wasn’t, and they were right outside his stall... well, he could improvise.

He watched as Thomas steadily made his way to the bottom of his glass. Once it was nearly empty, he slid off the railing. “Sick ‘em.”

For a moment, everything was the same. Then, he watched as Thomas stopped where he was in conversation and his expression shifted to uncertainty. One of his male buddies gestured to him. “What’s up, Tom?”

“I...” His hands started shaking. “I think I’m gonna be sick. My drink... shit—”
In a flurry, Thomas rocketed out of his seat and broke into a run. His guards looked pretty surprised when he did—Mordenna didn’t spare long enough of a look as he chased after him. He echoed Thomas’s path through the club, and ducked into the bathroom as he opened the door.

Thomas busted into a stall and didn’t even bother to lock the door after him. Good by Mordenna. As Thomas loudly cleared his stomach contents, he slipped behind him like a wraith, quietly closing the door and timing the sound of it locking with another one of his heaves.

Mordenna supposed he’d give him the decency of finishing up. “Stop making him sick if you haven’t already, Schro. When he’s done puking his guts out, I want him knocked out.”

“I’ll need more of my nanos for that kind of an effect.”

“Fine by me.” Mordenna’s bangle fully dispersed into a cloud of nanomachines, hovering behind Thomas. Thomas eventually stopped, reaching for the toilet paper and cleaning off his mouth. That was when the nanos descended on him, and he was knocked out faster than he could scream. Mordenna caught him before he could splash into the toilet, hoisting him over his shoulder.

That was when the door to the bathroom opened, and the sounds of armored boots on the tile rang out. “Thomas?!” Must’ve been one of the guards.

Mordenna flushed the toilet to give them a bit of time. “Tell me you can mimic voices.”

“Only if I have a sample of them. Thankfully, he was talking long enough that I do. What should I say?”

“Something to the effect of ‘my goddamn stomach still hurts, give me a minute you pieces of shit.’”

He could feel Schro mentally roll their eyes. The cloud that was on Thomas’s head formed into a speaker-like object near the toilet. “J-just a minute,” it rang out in Thomas’s voice, “I think they gave me a bad drink. Stomach still hurts. Might... might hurl again.”

One of the guards sighed. “Finish up when you’re able.” He then addressed his partner, speaking in ADVENT. “Go survey the kitchen. I don’t know how someone gets served bad alcohol. Possibly XCOM trying to kill him before he can say anything.”

Well, if Mordenna didn’t work fast, the jig was about to be up. One set of footsteps walked away, and the nanomachines returned to his wrist. “What’s the plan?” Schro asked.

“Spotted a window on the way in.” Mordenna looked, and sure enough, there was that weird gap at the bottom of the stall. He’d have to go through himself and drag Thomas behind him, but it would work. He got down on the floor, assuring himself he’d been in worse places than public bathrooms. “Cover Thomas with nanos. I’m gonna need either lockpicks or an access interface here in a second.”

Sure enough, Thomas seemed to distort. To normal eyes, he would be gone, but Mordenna’s weren’t so easily fooled. He crawled out of the stall and dragged Thomas out, slingling him over his shoulder again. The guard was standing near the exit, looking a bit uncomfortable. Ah, well. No going back the way he came. Mordenna made for the window. It was a bit high up and smaller than average, but sure enough, it was a sliding one. For the aesthetic or whatever else, Mordenna didn’t know. He tested it and found it locked. “Alright. Lockpicking kit. If you don’t know what’s in that, I give you full permission to read my mind.”

His head pricked for a second, and then his bangles formed into typical thieves’ tools. Spreading his distraction field out behind him as best he could, he balanced Thomas on his shoulder as he
went to work. Soon enough, the lock gave, and he slid the window up. A cursory glance outside told him that the alley behind was empty. With some acrobatic finagling, Mordenna fitted himself out of the window, hanging with a hand as he fit Thomas through it.

That gave him a good look inside. The guard walked over to the locked, but empty stall, knocking on it. “Thomas?” When there was no response, he looked down under the stall. Well, time to go. Mordenna didn’t stick around, dropping to the outside and breaking out in a sprint, lowering his distraction field. The sheer confusion of the situation would buy them some time, at least, but he hadn’t been able to close the window from the outside. With no body and a clear exit, it wouldn’t take them long to guess that he’d been kidnapped.

He was sure he’d be gone by then, at least. He made his way through the alley and onto the main street. In such a rush, he couldn’t manage mounting a car like he did before. With the high rise buildings and so many pedestrians out enjoying the nightlife...

Mordenna looked up, extended his left arm, and fired his grappling hook while he kept running. It latched onto a building and he retracted it, swinging himself in the air. He fully intended to get on top of the building and run from there, but as he was swinging with a healthy amount of momentum, a very silly, but effective idea occurred to him.

At the apex of his momentum, he let the line go, and retracted it back. Before he could splatter on the pavement, his eyes and mind identified another ideal spot and grappled there, swinging again. Mordenna allowed himself a barely-restrained chuckle. Only at XCOM would he have a taste of being Spiderman. Hell, it was getting him through the city quickly as he went back the way he came, through the route that the car took. Laying low in those suburbs and calling the Skyranger seemed to be the best course of action.

“Having fun, Mordenna?”

“Call me Spider Mords. At least until we reach the Avenger again, in which case we’re never telling anyone about what I’m doing.” The city was starting to give way to smaller and smaller buildings. “Remind me later to make a grappling hook for my other arm, too.”

“Will do, I suppose.”

Soon, the cityscape was fading. Mordenna allowed himself one last swing before using the next to come to a running landing, disconnecting it and going about the rest of his time running. God, his left arm was a bit tired. He didn’t know the last time he actually put in enough physical effort to make his muscles tired. Chosen did have higher endurance. Still, he focused on the path ahead, continuing his flight. The club would inevitably erupt with the guards sweeping every inch of the perimeter for where their informant went. He wondered if they’d faster suspect his sister over him for the sheer fact that there was nothing to be seen at any step of the heist.

His run had him hitting the suburbs, where he passed a few ADVENT transport cars on the road. They were driving in his direction, but more casually. He half-wondered what they were doing in this part of the neighborhood but guessed “raids” and he went on his business. He had a job to do and he was currently doing it. XCOM couldn’t conceivably stop every evil in the world.

Eventually, Mordenna came to a stop at the side of a house, panting and catching his breath. Damn, it was great being back out in the field. He was actually tiring himself out for once. He’d missed that amount of effort. Maybe he could ask if Eliza had any other missions like this. He and Schro could become thick as thieves. Idly, he leaned against the wall of the house, looking in the window. Standard girl’s room fare—plenty of fitting toys scattered on the floor, drawings on the walls, a Andromedon sitting in the corner, and a dresser with more stickers on it than drawers.
Wait. What?

Blinking a few times, Mordenna leaned in closer to the window. Sure enough... there was just an Andromedon there, sitting in the corner of the room, twiddling its thumbs. Mordenna’s mind genuinely blanked for a few moments as he tried his damn hardest to figure out why an Andromedon was inside someone’s house.

A few things clicked in his head. The ADVENT vehicles coming this way. The weakening Network. Defections in unusual units. Was... was this household harboring this Andromedon?

“Uh, Schro. You, uh, you seeing this?”

“Perplexingly enough, yes.” Schro sounded about as confused as he was. “What’s an Andromedon doing hiding out in a girl’s room?”

“A rebel, maybe? A family that took pity on it?” Mordenna planted his hand against the window. “Either way, this is one of the weirder things I’ve seen.”

He watched as the door opened, and a blonde-haired little girl came bouncing in. Even through the window, he could hear her cheerful cry of “Dolly!” as she ran towards the Andromedon. The suit and pilot seemed to perk up, and even returned the little girl’s hug. Schro still seemed incredulous. “Perhaps there’s some budding outreach program we haven’t heard of...?”

“Not with Andromedons. Those things are generally kept out of the public eye.” His mind returned to the encroaching ADVENT transport. “Something tells me those transport units earlier are here for it.”

Sure enough, his ears picked out the distinctive roll of their engines stopping in front of the house. The click of their doors opening gave Mordenna a choice. Either he moved on and lived with the blood of a few more innocents on his hands—because he knew damn well they wouldn’t be spared for harboring “dissident elements”—or...

He groaned. “The things I do for love.” “Schro, lockpicking kit.”

“You’re going in there?” Even as Schro asked, the kit formed in his hands. He quickly went to work unlocking the window.

“Yes. What else do I do? Let the family get liquified because they had a heart?” The window clicked open, and he lifted it. That attracted the attention of the two occupants, and the Andromedon stood up, placing a hand over the girl protectively. Alright. How to handle this.

Mordenna half crawled in the window. Time to figure out how to talk to a kid and her guardian. “Don’t scream.” Great start. Maybe best to address the “adult” in the room. “Andromedon. Might recognize my voice. Ain’t here to kill you. ADVENT is, though.”

The Andromedon, rightfully, looked a little spooked to hear the disembodied voice of the Hunter. However, it seemed that it could also hear the pounding at the door, the cries in ADVENT to “open up!” It motioned for Mordenna to continue. “Alright. I ain’t heartless. Those guys are gonna come in here and discover you. If you can dismiss the fact that I have an unconscious guy with me—was in town on another errand—I can hide you as they sweep the house. Got it?”

It stood there for a second, presumably mulling over his words. The little girl clung to its hand, clearly afraid. Spurred on by the encroaching wrath of ADVENT, it gently pushed the girl towards the door. “Dolly...” she protested, sounding on the verge of tears.
It held a finger to the glass of its cockpit, gesturing for her to leave. She sniffled, but went out the door, closing it behind her. Mordenna scrambled in the window, landing in the room and closing his entrance behind him. “Schro. Cover the both of us as I get closer.”

“This is a dangerous idea...” But still, Schro obeyed, covering the two of them as he approached the Andromedon. They were invisible to each other, but he lightly patted the Andromedon’s shoulder to let it know he was there.

He could hear the muffled sounds of ADVENT troops entering the house, as two different women tried to ask what was going on. Through the haze of noise and the girl’s crying, an Officer was telling them that they were suspected of harboring an enemy of the Elders. Footsteps were coming close to the door, and under his breath, he told the Andromedon to “stay still, stay quiet.”

The door burst open and a Stun Lancer and Shieldbearer did a sweep of the room. Their gaze landed on the corner he and the Andromedon were in... and promptly looked elsewhere. Mordenna could feel the Andromedon practically shaking next to him, and he didn’t really blame it. The two guards looked around some more, then barked an “all clear.” They left the room.

For a while, he could hear that process repeating throughout the house as they scanned for rebels they’d never find. All the while, he kept his hand on the Andromedon’s arm, silently assuring it that he was still there. The girl was still crying in the next room, but she seemed to have calmed down since after they emerged without her friend in tow.

Mordenna couldn’t really imagine having this be a daily reality to him. He supposed this mirrored a few historical events he’d bothered to read up about. It may have been against the law, but he saw them hiding then Andromedon as right... even if it would’ve gotten them all detained and shipped off somewhere, never to be seen again if Mordenna hadn’t been in the area. It was the most they could do, being so close to the city center.

Eventually, the noise died down, and he could hear the troops exiting out of the house a lot slower than they went in. Sheepishly, the Officer apologized for the intrusion and explained that they take such tips very seriously. He looked out the window at the neighboring house. Were they the ones to call in the tip? Probably, considering how easy it was for Mordenna to spot the Andromedon through the window.

The Officer left, and Mordenna waited until he was sure that the transport vehicles had driven far off in the distance. He then sighed. “Drop the coatings, draw the shades on the window.”

“You sure you want to do this?”

“Ain’t got much of a choice, now.”

The distortion around the Andromedon dropped, and the nanos flew over to draw the curtains shut. Mordenna rubbed his forehead, looking at the alien as it stared at him. “Hey. Buddy. This was a close call but—”

The door opened and it was the little girl on the other side, gasping as she saw him. He held his hands out. “Don’t scream!”

Thankfully, she complied. However, that wasn’t the last of the visitors. Two more people followed after her—a redhead woman and another blonde. Their eyes landed on the Hunter, and thankfully, they were too shocked to do anything. Still, he also included them in his gesture. “Don’t scream. Screaming is the last thing you want to do right now because if your neighbors snitched on you once they’ll do it again.”
The blonde woman was the first to recover, though it was clear he’d still nearly scared her out of her skin. “What... wh-what are you doing here? Is—is that man dead?”

“To answer your questions in order...” He spared a hand to steady Thomas. “I was in the area on an errand and saw the situation unfolding. Shock of shocks, I’ve got a heart and couldn’t just let this slide. Also, no. He’s alive. He’s why I was in the area.”

The little girl came out from behind one of her mothers. “... did you hide Dolly?”

He’d heard the name of the Andromedon before, but hadn’t really accounted for it. Still, “Dolly.” Good as any, he supposed. “Yes. I wasn’t going to let them take...” Him? Her? Best not to assume. “... them away. Everything’s alright.”

She looked calmed at that, but still rushed over to Dolly again, who hugged her once more. As they comforted each other, he stood up, hunching a bit in the low ceiling and looking at the couple grimly. “... like I said. If your neighbors snitched once, they’ll keep doing it. Dolly here ain’t safe anymore.”

“I know.” The redhead looked mournfully to her daughter and her companion. “We... were hiding him because we were still thinking of what to do with him. But I... I don’t know what to do. I know he needs to go, but...”

Dolly looked between all of them, the hazy silhouette of the suit’s pilot seeming to stare at Mordenna. He sighed again, rubbing the back of his neck. “... I don’t suppose either of you have heard of XCOM picking up more recruits, have you?”

The blonde woman blinked at him a few times. “... you’d take him?”

“Well, I don’t have much of a choice. I already intervened, here. Just leaving you guys to deal with more potential raids would be a bit—” He looked at the girl, mentally curbing his language. “—foolish. So I’ll extend the offer. Dolly?” He nodded to him. “... if you don’t want to get your family here in more trouble, I’m offering for you to come with me as I leg it back to XCOM. Your choice.”

Dolly looked to the little girl, who was staring at him with big eyes. Surely they both realized what that would mean. After a second, a digitized voice that sounded like it was being produced by the suit itself spoke. “I don’t want to leave. But I understand what staying means. Julie, Marie...” Ever so gently, Dolly patted the little girl’s head. “Amy. I want you all to be safe. And if you being safe means me leaving...”

Amy sniffed. “Don’t go...”

“I’m sorry. The bad men would come for all of us if I didn’t.”

It was clear that Amy wanted to burst right into tears again. But, with clear strength, she just hiccupped and hugged him tightly. Dolly returned the hug, and when they were done, she ran back to her mothers. Dolly stood up, looking at Mordenna. The Hunter rubbed at his mouth with his free hand. “... get your goodbyes out of the way. I’ll stay near the front door.” With that, Mordenna opened the door and stepped out, walking through a hallway and out to what was the living room by the looks of it.

There, he leaned by the front door and hitched up his field. Well. He didn’t know he’d be breaking up a family for its safety today, but he supposed the universe worked as it did. Still, he sighed again. “Schro. When he comes out here, you think you can manage a field on him too?”
“I can. I’ve also already hailed for the Skyranger.”

“Got it.”

It was a moment, but eventually Dolly emerged from the hallway, the family filing in after him, Amy held in the blonde’s arms. Mordenna let his field drop, waiting until they further approached him. When they did, he began. “...hope you said everything you wanted to. I’ll be taking Dolly here straight to the Avenger, where he’s guaranteed to find people like him who just want to live as they are.”

“Not just live.” Dolly’s hands tightened into fists. “To fight.”

“That too. You’ll be able to do that.” He then looked back to the family. “Don’t worry. The Commander’s a great person. He won’t have trouble in his new home.”

“Is there...” The redhead swallowed. “Is there any way we can contact you?”

“Realistically?” Mordenna blew a breath out of his nose. “No. Unless you three want to abandon your life of luxury here near the city center and go live in a haven, I can’t guarantee contact without risking both our safeties. Normally I’d trumpet the need to rebel against the Elders, comforts be damned, but...” He meaningfully looked at Amy, clutching her mother. “You’ve clearly got something else to protect, too. So I can let it slide. Just letting you know your options.”

They nodded. Dolly ambled towards Mordenna. “...I’ve said my goodbyes.”

“Got it. Marie?” The blonde nodded, letting him place a face to the name. “Open the door. Dolly and I are about to disappear. Gonna need one of you to just walk out on the porch after us so it doesn’t seem suspicious that the door just opens and closes on its own.”

Marie nodded and went past them, opening the door. Dolly looked between all of them. “...goodbye. One day we’ll see each other again.”

Amy’s eyes brimmed with tears. “C-come back soon...”

The whole scene was damn close to making Mordenna feel seriously bad. With the door open, he mentally pinged Schro. Soon enough, the two of them disappeared from sight, and Mordenna grabbed Dolly’s arm, guiding him through the door and out the house. He did his best to ignore Amy’s crying behind him, and didn’t join Dolly in looking back as he guided the Andromedon away from the only home he had known so far. He could unpack everything of what he’d just seen and did on the Avenger—hopefully either when his siblings weren’t busy or Eliza wasn’t getting over a hangover.

The trip after that was quiet. Schro, after a few seconds into the journey, lent another layer of nanos to dampen the noise Dolly was making, leaving most of the indication that he was there to Mordenna’s grip on him. They maintained a brisk pace, leaving the scenery of the suburbs behind them and making their way into the countryside.

To be blunt... Mordenna felt emotionally drained. He felt like he was quickly approaching the feeling he’d had the night before, that crushing oblivion where he knew what he should be feeling, but he couldn’t feel it no matter how hard he tried. He took in a deep breath. He knew what he wanted to feel—he wanted to feel like shit after witnessing all of that. He held onto that feeling in a way. Mordenna didn’t want to deal with it now; but he was damn sure he wanted to handle it later.

The landscape soon changed enough that there were no more houses to be seen anywhere, leaving just Mordenna and Dolly on their solemn walk. Firebrand would be coming in a while, a little ways
ahead. Figuring they were far out of sight, Mordenna rolled his neck. “Schro. You can split from me now. Think we’re good.”

With that, he watched as Dolly reappeared to human senses, and all of the nanos from his own body peeled away. Schro took form in front of them. “Hello, Dolly.”

Dolly stopped up, looking to Mordenna uncertainly. When Mordenna nodded, he looked back. “Greetings. Didn’t think you were with him.”

“Assisting every step of the way. My name is Schrödinger. Most commonly shortened to Schro.”

“Probably know my name, then.” Dolly rubbed his other arm. “... are there more aliens on the ship?”

“Well...” Mordenna kept walking, ticking names on his fingers. “There’s me and my siblings, a Codex, a Sectoid, four different alien rulers, and a fair amount of Archons, Mutons, and Vipers.”

Though lacking a visible face, Dolly looked rather surprised. “While I’d expected there to be a few aliens on your ship, I didn’t think that many.”

“Things got pretty ridiculous once we picked up the Alien Rulers. With luck, the Commander wants to pick up whoever would like to fight.”

“Consider me one of their fighters. I’d like to pay them back for everything.”

“Granted.” Mordenna leveled his eyes to the horizon, watching for Firebrand. “We’ll be happy to have another person willing to stick their fingers in the Elder’s eyes.”

Dolly was quiet for a moment. Then; “Do they have eyes?”

“Uh.” Mordenna rubbed his chin. “I think. Maybe?” No, he really didn’t know. “Let’s just say they do for the metaphor to work.”

“I suppose.”

The walk went on with some mild talking after that, mostly Dolly asking questions about what working with XCOM was going to be like. Mordenna filled in the best he could—but eventually had to admit that he might get a better debriefing from the Commander. When the Skyranger was in sight, the metal of it glinting in the late night haze, he gave a sigh. Lord, he’d be happy when he could see his siblings again.

Fal-Mai was in the middle of talking to Jax about the nature of hobbies and pastimes when Mordenna’s voice came in over her communicator.

“Hey. Sis. Uh, is Jax still occupied with Liz?”

She blinked a few times, halted in the conversation. She looked over to Jax, who was patiently seated across from her. She had wandered into the Commander’s Quarters—after knocking, of course—to see how Eliza was doing since she’d heard rumblings that she’d caught some sort of stomach flu. Jax and Eliza were in the middle of watching a movie then, so she had retreated. Eventually, late into the night, Jax had asked her over comms if everything was alright. When
things were, they simply resolved to hang out in the Studio. The occupants were just them now, as late as it was.

Jax leaned over slightly. “Something wrong, sister?”

She shook her head. “That was Mordenna. Seems he’s home.” She put a finger to her ear. “No, brother. He and I are currently in the Studio.”

“Great. And I mean that. I’ll be in there in a few minutes, I just gotta... talk about today.”

“Of course, Mordenna. We will be waiting for you.” After that, she let her hand fall away from her head, looking to Jax. “Mordenna seems to be troubled by something he encountered during his mission.”

Jax’s eyebrows raised at that. “Our brother being troubled by something out in the field? I almost loathe to learn of what did the trick. Still... he deserves to be heard out.”

“Yes... and I suppose we’ll be learning soon of what is wearing so heavily on him.” Going back to the conversation, she resumed it. “Though to answer your earlier question? Boredom and curiosity, mostly.”

Jax made an impressed noise. “No training?” He’d asked earlier how he was able to take apart and reassemble her gun so fast the one time she’d shown him before she lost her arm.

The Assassin nodded. “I would imagine, had I been provided other hobbies, I would be much like Mordenna in a particular field. Alas, all I am able to do is maintain my equipment to an exceptional degree.” She sighed. “I would like a hobby. Making things... may seem quaint, but it is something I can look at and know I made.” She glanced at the right side of her body. “... perhaps when Mordenna is done making my arm...”

His expression softened, and he laid a hand on her remaining shoulder. “Time will always wait for you, sister. There will be enough of it left to explore yourself once you have a degree of control back.”

She nodded again. The wound was still fresh in her mind, even if her advanced regeneration had went to work healing it. But, this was no time for her to wallow in her own sorrow. Mordenna would soon be upon them with his own worries, and she would be happy to address them.

Soon enough, the door to the Studio opened and Mordenna was on the other side. He looked quite tired, even for his usual persona, and it looked like he hadn’t bothered to put his weapons away. Fal-Mai scooted over in her chair to give him room to sit down and he took it, slumping in his own chair. It was a second before he spoke. “Hey guys.”

“Mordenna.” Jax leaned forward, resting his arms on the table and clasping his hands together. “What troubles you?”

“Sheesh, easier to say what isn’t.” He massaged his forehead, sighing. “... so I got that bastard Thomas. That’s fine, I don’t have anything to say about that part of the mission other than I’m astounded by the willful ignorance of the people in the city centers. But, uh, as I was making my way home...” He paused. “Give me a second to just... get this all together, would you?”

Jax and Fal-Mai nodded, and Mordenna was silent for a few moments. Eventually he found his words, and he began. “... so I was taking a rest from the mad dash I’d entered to get the fuck out of dodge. Was against a house. Looked in. There’s an Andromedon in a young girl’s room. Turns out... havens, out in the field, faction HQs, those aren’t the only places to find people just looking
to get away from ADVENT. This Andromedon—named Dolly, by the way, our newest recruit—was being held in one of these houses out in the suburbs of the city center. Well, I saw some ADVENT transport vehicles on my way in, and... not hard to see where that kind of story was going if I didn’t intervene. So I did, climbing in, calming the kid, and using Schro to stealth the both of us. ADVENT comes in, raids the place, finds nothing because I’m hiding the one thing they could find. Great, right? I just did a favor to some passing family and helped out an alien fleeing ADVENT.

“Well... maybe not so great. Turns out Dolly was more than a refugee—he was family to these people. To the little girl and her two moms. ADVENT raided them once, so it wasn’t a stretch to say they might keep doing it thinking them not finding anything the first time was a fluke. Or the neighbors just report them again, whatever. Obviously... I won’t be in that area every single time. They were lucky I was in the neighborhood for the first time. I let them know in no uncertain terms that... either he stayed and they failed to hide him, or he came with me to XCOM, where both parties would be safer for it. Sounds easy. Wasn’t so much, and I wasn’t the one making the decision.

“It’s...” He was quiet for a second, searching for his words. “Let me put it this way. Imagine we were all good to each other while we were with the Elders, but they still were bastards. I ended up fleeing and you guys had me at some sort of safehouse to keep an eye on me... but ADVENT gets suspicious. They raid it once and on a fluke, you hide me. Can you trust doing that every single time? Then some savior—Eliza, let’s say—comes along and says she can guarantee my safety... but she has to take me away from you guys and she can’t say for certain if I’ll ever see you guys again. Maybe some far time in the future when the Elders are dead, but are you sure you’ll be alive for that long? Do you let me go to save all of us, knowing you may never see me again?”

The way Mordenna put it, it hit rather close to home. Fal-Mai settled her arm onto his shoulder in solidarity. “I understand perfectly, brother... and even the actual situation weighs on me heavily. I cannot imagine having been there to see them make that choice themselves...”

“Yeah. I can hardly believe I went through it, myself, but...” He looked to some point in the distance, eyes slightly dull and anguished. “I guess... I guess it hits me hard because I’ve got family in you guys now. I think of being in Dolly’s situation and it hurts. I... I don’t want to lose you guys, even if it was for my own good. Is that selfish...?”

Fal-Mai shook her head, leaning over and hugging Mordenna. “If it is, you may call me selfish as well. I do not want to lose this little bit of family I have gained, either. After the Elders pushed us apart for so long, I am glad that we can finally be together.”

Both of them jumped slightly when Jax pulled the table towards him, allowing him to take a single step onto it and then dismount in front of them, crouching to hug them both. “I shall be the third selfish one among us. Having failed in protecting either of you from the Elders’ wrath during our time with them... I find it fitting that I make up for my deficiencies by now being there when you require me. And, admittedly, catering to my own desires of wanting a family.”

“Well, hell...” Mordenna sniffed. “I’d be happy to help out there, bro. If only because it makes me happy to be a brother, too.”

Fal-Mai leaned against the both of them. “And I a sister.”

Jax smiled, hugging them all closer. “Then let us all be selfish together, and in doing so, become a better family than the Elders ever could have fostered under their scrutinizing eye.”

There was an agreeable silence at that for a bit, which Fal-Mai was glad for. She was glad that
things had changed so much and that she could be so vulnerable with her brothers—and they in turn, vulnerable around her. She never could’ve imagined having such a great family under ADVENT. XCOM truly was the better environment, and she was happy to share the silence with them.

Happy, that was, until Mordenna broke it. “... fuck, I really don’t know if they have eyes.”

Involuntarily, Fal-Mai laughed, and Jax joined her after a bemused second. She hoped her brothers would never change. Or, if they did... she hoped the change made them happier.
Despite himself, Jax found that he was somewhat excited for the new addition to his arsenal.

According to his brother, his new weapon had been finished a day or so before, but Mordenna had wanted to do a few final tweaks to make sure it was “perfect.” Fine by Jax—it wasn’t as if the addition was desperately needed. It almost felt like an eternity since he went on his last mission, even if it was just earlier that week. There had been a lot going on since then. Especially considering...

Jax sighed, idly running a hand over his hair, contemplating brading it. Even if he had thought himself justified at the time... he really shouldn’t have gotten cross at his sister. Or his brother, either. Emotions had been running hot and he should’ve had a more level head about events. After all, it was his father who got apocalyptically angry. Not him.

But... did that mean he couldn’t vent his frustrations at all? Did that mean he couldn’t be angry whatsoever? Even as he questioned that, he thought about being angry at anyone on the Avenger and winced. It didn’t really matter if he wanted to be angry, did it? If he was angry, he’d aim it at whoever approached him, and Jax wasn’t one to isolate himself for a whole day. When an episode came about, sure—and even then, his congregation were getting better at finding him. Probably thanks to his siblings.

Still, there had to be some way to manage those feelings of rage when simply talking them out wouldn’t suffice. Perhaps he could ask Mordenna as he swung by in the Workshop.

Speaking of, Jax opened the door to it and ducked in. Mordenna was at his own workbench, talking with Schro. Interestingly enough, they had a Specter body on the table. Jax half-wondered what they were doing with that, but that wasn’t his focus. Over at Lily’s table, the aforementioned engineer stood, accompanied by Rodin. A... unique gathering of individuals, but something deeper in Jax wasn’t complaining. He internally scowled at that, dismissing the feeling and walking in. “Good morning, everyone.”

“Oh! Morning, bro.” Mordenna turned around from his bench, getting up and walking over to the lockers. “We put away your gun for space reasons, so lemme go get it.”

“I understand.” Jax continued to enter, walking over to Lily and Rodin. “Now, what could the two of you be up to?”

“Oh, y’know.” Lily shrugged, giving a lopsided smile. “Engineering. I... hadn’t really expected Archons to be so knowledgeable in the area. It’s a pleasant surprise,” she finished, directing that last statement at Rodin.

Rodin gestured grandly. “I would be a foolish king if I did not have a knowledgeable head upon my shoulders. I find it quite pleasing, myself, to know that there are humans as skilled as you are, Lily.”
“Oh, stop,” Lily waved his compliment off. “I’m not nearly as good as my dad was. Sure, I can make things happen, but...”

“Shut the hell up, sis.” Mordenna came back to the conversation, toting a huge gun. Judging by the styling, the multiple barrels, and the heavy chamber that presumably held the Elerium Cores, this was Jax’s new cannon. “Look at what I’m carrying and tell him you’re not a fantastic engineer again.”

“Well!” Lily flicked a hand at the gun. “That was mostly you!”

“Mostly me’ my ass. I practically abandoned this halfway through to get to work on Fal-Mai’s arm. Which, by the way!” Mordenna set the gun down on the table, then twisted to look at Schro. “Go ahead and get the core out for me. Might as well have it ready for when I’ve got the nervous link good to go.”

Schro nodded, pressing a hand to the chest of the downed Specter, the lines on their body glowing brighter. Jax had more pressing things at hand than watching that, so he turned to Mordenna. “Might I ask of Schro’s involvement?”

Mordenna turned back to the rest of them. “Sure thing! While they and I were working on the field, I threw a few questions at them. Turns out I’d be able to use nanos from another Specter to make Fal-Mai her new arm, if she wants. It’d mean she could practically style it however she pleases—and even form it into new shapes if she likes. If she wants the arms I promised her earlier...” Mordenna shrugged. “I still have personal interests in seeing if you really can manipulate Specter nanos with a nervous or neural uplink. I sure could use extra hands while I’m working, or just form whatever tools I need.”

Jax raised his eyebrows. Beyond aesthetics—which he certainly could appreciate—he knew little to nothing about engineering. Mordenna continued to impress as always. “A fantastic shortcut, I believe. Fal-Mai would take well to such a useful implement.”

“You think so?” Mordenna grinned for a second, then rubbed at his mouth. “That does mean that I’ll have to put the grappling hook she wants on her new suit, though. I suppose she can make one herself if she figures out the science behind that with her new arm, but I might as well make her a reliable one. Now!” Mordenna clapped his hands together, then gestured to the gun in front of all of them. “After a while of development, tweaks, and messing around, the Heretic Eradication Canon is ready for service. Whaddya think?”

Figuring he’d just keep that name this time to amuse Mordenna, Jax went over it with a more thorough inspection. The general aesthetic reminded him of every other gun Mordenna had made—though this time, the accents were a navy blue instead of burgundy. The barrels looked a little short, though he suspected they would telescope out when readying to fire. From the wielder’s perspective, there was a small, currently-inactive display on the gun, where Jax imagined an ammo counter might be. One of the handles had a smooth, stylized button on it, right where Jax would place his right thumb. There was a small, rectangular slot on one of the sides, where Jax supposed a belt from an ammo backpack would be fed in the future. Overall, it was a masterwork to Jax’s eyes.

He nodded approvingly. “A weapon befitting my presence on the battlefield. I imagine the ‘ammo tank’ will be part of my new armor?”

“Definitely. When I get around to that, this thing will be able to chug out ammo types like you wouldn’t believe. I’ll get started on that around the time I get Fal-Mai’s arm done, alright?”
“Hey,” Lily interrupted, “I could easily start on the armor.”

“And neglect the legs you’re making for the Archons?”

Huh. Jax looked to Lily, who was trying to hide her blushing face. They’d had a short, but meaningful conversation about sculpting the last time he was in here. He idly wondered if she was looking into the medium for that reason.

Rodin chuckled, patting her shoulder. “The implements for me and my kind can wait, if you wish. I’d imagine fitting out one of the main sources of firepower for XCOM might be more beneficial immediately.”

“No, no, I’ll keep working on those...” Lily gave an exasperated sigh. “I just feel strange working on like, one thing at a time.”

“Wouldn’t get much done otherwise. So!” Mordenna gave the gun a pat. “How about we lug this thing to the Training Center and see how it fires, huh?”

Jax raised an eyebrow. “Please tell me you test-fired this.”

“Of course! Just meaning how it works for you. Pick it up!”

Rolling his shoulders first, Jax gripped the handles steadily and lifted the gun. A little heavier than he was expecting, but even then he wielded it without issue. He wasn’t used to much of anything being heavy to his titanic strength. For now, he kept his thumb off the button on the handle—didn’t take much guesswork to imagine it was the trigger. “No problems as of yet.”

“Nice. Now, see that hook on the side?” There was indeed a hitch on the side of the gun. “That’s how you holster the thing to free up your hands. Slot it on your belt.”

Jax did as instructed, holstering the cannon. The reason for the shortened barrels became clear—it wouldn’t knock against his calves as he ran, nor the ground. “All clear.”

“Ah, I love it when a design comes together.” Mordenna started walking towards the door. “Can’t wait to see it on the field, honestly. Let’s go!”

Jax looked back towards Lily as he took a few steps. He was... almost hoping she’d come along. Surely she’d appreciate seeing her work in action, even if it was a test. But, she shook her head. “I’ll stay back here and get work started with my own project. Just make sure to remind Mordenna to tell me how it went.”

He nodded, walking faster to rejoin Mordenna as they exited the Workshop. There was still a longing to have Lily come along—and for some reason, Rodin as well. Maybe he was just excited over a new addition to his arsenal? It couldn’t be that he...? Jax shook his head, chiding himself. He was already infatuated with Eliza. It would be rather improper of him to also make longing eyes at Lily. Regarding Rodin... well, he was a man, wasn’t he? ADVENT had never really condemned same-sex relationships, but there was something far-off telling him that it was wrong and he shouldn’t look at Rodin that way. Jax sighed, rubbing at his forehead.

Mordenna seemed to hear him sighing, as he turned around. “Something getting at you, bro?”

Jax looked down. “... I will tell you in the Training Center, where we are less likely to run into someone else in our conversation.”

Nodding, it was clear to see the mild concern on his brother’s face before he turned back, looking
at the path ahead.

It wasn’t long before they reached the Training Center, which was mercifully empty. Jax stepped in, watching Mordenna take a seat on one of the jutting pieces of cover near the white tiles of the end of the room. “Well, Jax? What’s up?”

Honestly, Jax was debating even telling Mordenna about what was on his mind. Not that he didn’t trust his brother—far from it. He was simply nervous about voicing what sounded like stupid concerns. Jax sighed again, setting his cannon down on one of the tables in the room and coming to sit next to Mordenna. “... I will divulge, so long as you promise to not judge me for what I’m about to say.”

“‘Course. How many times have I come to you guys and you haven’t judged me for the stupid shit I need to vent about?”

“I would hardly find what you need to talk about occasionally as ‘stupid,’ brother.”

“My point stands. Promise I won’t judge.”

Jax leaned forward, massaging the bridge of his nose with his fingers. When he began, his voice was soft and somewhat halting. “Brother? Is it... improper, to look at another man with longing eyes?”

Mordenna was silent for a second. Then; “No.”

The sheer brevity of his answer stunned Jax for a second, who sat back up to look at his brother. “Surely?”

“Yeah. Nothing wrong with liking other guys like that. So long as you’re not a creep about it, but that applies to any kind of crush.”

Well, Jax supposed he’d had his answer. He’d almost expected Mordenna to have some sort of different response—but his brother was strangely tolerant in a lot of aspects. He half-wondered where it came from. Still, Jax stroked his chin. “... and you don’t suppose it would be alright to present myself as...?”

“Dude. I’ve seen so many people macking on each other on this ship regardless of gender it ain’t funny. I think you’ll be alright. All else fails I’m sure Eliza would have some goddamn stern words to anyone who gave you shit for liking guys right alongside liking girls. Me too, for that matter.” Mordenna shrugged. “I think I’m in the same boat as you, but it’s... weirder? I can see myself as attracted to guys, but nobody here really catches my eye. Just don’t feel like I know ‘em enough to get into all of my bullshit with them.” He blew a breath out. “Save Eliza. And we both know why I’m weird about that.”

Actually, Jax didn’t. He withheld his own advances knowing that Eliza was busy with the war—and perhaps out of a sense of not meeting her standards. Eliza had practically a choice of the lot in the Avenger, and yet she chose nobody. If Jax wasn’t meeting her standards... maybe he needed to work on himself a little. Didn’t help his longings for her whatsoever, though. Still, back to his brother’s statement. “I wouldn’t, actually.”

“I never told you? Weird. Thought I did. But, yeah.” Mordenna gestured vaguely, looking ahead. “… Liz couldn’t be attracted to me. I’m not exactly on the standard of ‘conventional human attractiveness.’ Not to say I think I look ugly—far from it—I just think I look unpalatable in a romantic sense to her.” He sighed. “That, and... I think she knows she ain’t gonna live forever.
Elders made sure we would just to test the idea out before using on themselves... until they replaced us one day, I’m sure. Credit to the gal, but even if she were in love with me... I think she wouldn’t wanna break my heart any harder than she already will when she inevitably has to kick the bucket.”

Jax hadn’t thought of that. Inevitably, yes—the Chosen were, in essence, immortal. No dying of old age or disease. Simply being killed. He frowned slightly, thinking over it. It really would be a tragedy, the day Eliza had to pass on. His chest ached dully. “Right...”

Mordenna looked over, then slung an arm around Jax’s shoulders. “Sorry. Not to dampen the mood, or anything. Guess I’m just resigned by nature to it happening... even if it’s gonna be a lot worse when it does. Still, means we gotta make the best of our time with her, yeah? No point in trying to cut ties when she’s still got a lot of time ahead of her. Besides, if I have any say in it?” Mordenna clenched his fist. “I’m gonna fucking invent immortality. Offer it to her if she wants it.”

A thought struck Jax. “... wouldn’t she have immortality if she was Ascended?”

“Yeah, well...” Mordenna got quiet for a second. “I suppose. But I don’t know if she ever wants to be a Chosen, considering how close she got to being one and how... she probably associates the process with Argus. Don’t blame her. Guess I could offer that, since we have the files, but damn. Don’t know how to approach that.”

Having asked, Jax now understood the implications of it, nodding. There was one other thing that occurred to him, but considering his last question? He almost loathed to bring it up. But, this was his brother. Mordenna hadn’t shunned his questions thus far. “Do you think we could repurpose the technique used for our Sarcophagi?”

At that, Mordenna rubbed his chin for a second. “Maybe? I’ll tell you now since I hadn’t really got the chance before, but I managed to snag a few pieces of your own exploded slab before we left your Stronghold.” That interested Jax in a morbid way. He wondered if, were he any more sympathetic to the Elders, he’d be asking for a piece to keep. “I haven’t gotten around to doing any tests on them, but from careful observation? They were like... gateways.” Mordenna gestured as he went on. “They were capable of conducting immense amounts of power from the Void. It was always the Elders reviving us, right? Or at least a proxy of them. I think—with enough psionic power—you could theoretically pull it off without the Sarcophagus. But you’d have to be close by—and no offense, bro, but I don’t think even you are strong enough to do that kind of thing. The Elders may be bastards, but they were powerful bastards. Think who you’re reviving has to be a psion too, but I’m not willing to test that so soon.”

Something else occurred to Jax there. “Well, if I, singularly, am not powerful enough to pull off such a resurrection, do you think a Sarcophagus could be used to connect multiple psions for such a purpose?”

Mordenna opened his mouth to respond, closed it, then hummed in thought. “It’s... plausible. With enough power donors you could probably set it up. You’re not strong enough on your own, but like, you and your congregation? Yeah. Hm.” Mordenna shrugged. “I guess I’ve got a long-term project to look at. Replicating the metal that our Sarcophagi were made out of will be a stretch, but I’m sure I could make a few substitutions. Never can use too much Elerium.”

“I’m... very much sure you can use too much Elerium.”

“Never. Can use. Too much. Elerium!”

The mood summarily lightened, Jax rolled his eyes. Still, he remembered the other thing he wanted
to discuss with his brother, and he looked off to the side. “... can I ask something else of you, brother?”

“Sure! Name it.”

Jax crossed his arms. “Do you think there is a way I could healthily express my anger? It does not strike me often, but when it does... I fear for channeling it.” He got a bit quieter. “You know how Cronus was...”

Mordenna scooted closer to him, leaning against him. “I totally understand. Me, I get aggressively creative. You? I can understand anger not really being a creative force for writing songs. Just brings me back to something else I need to do for you.” He poked Jax in the bicep. “I need to train you in the ways of throwing down. Raw strength is good and all but let’s face it, bro—you need to learn how to fight if you’ve been disarmed and your psionics aren’t at hand for whatever reason. You, me, the Ring?”

He frowned slightly. “Brother... with my colossal strength and your known frailty? I do like the idea of having another backup in my repertoire, but I do not think it will end well.”

“What, you think I’m not planning around that?” Mordenna patted Jax’s arm. “We’re not gonna go all out. I’d just be showing you the motions and you could practice them without force on me. If you need something to punch there’s always the old Sectoid dummies in there. Which...” He tapped his chin. “Liz mentioned replacing those with regular punching bags. Can’t blame her. As soon as you start picking up the enemy it starts getting weird practicing on representations of them, doesn’t it?”

He supposed so. Jax figured he was like that with the Templars—with one now loosely in his congregation, his outlook towards them had started changing. Marlene was nice to have in the Studio, at least—she usually kept to herself and was content to talk with Edgar. Not to mention the small favor she had performed for him when he initially overloaded Eliza. With her now assisting them in psionic training... he certainly had come a far way from persecuting them, hadn’t he?

Coming out of his thoughts, he sat back up. “I would imagine that would be the case. Now, that was all I wished to discuss, brother. I trust that you know what you will be doing with the training, so I concede to it. For now, I believe we have a weapon of mine to test...?”

“Oh, sure thing!” Mordenna slid off the bench. “I’ll see about slotting that training into our ever-busy schedules. Probably can just do it after this, maybe. Go grab your gun, I’ll get you a target.”

Jax got to his feet, walking over and hoisting his cannon into his hands. Mordenna tapped at the monitor in the room, and soon, the scenery of the white tiles shifted into something mildly forest-like, with a Faceless standing in the open. Mordenna looked over to the projection and sighed, apparently seeing something that Jax couldn’t. “Guess I’ll add updating this dusty-looking thing to my list of projects. Glad I’ve always got something to do at least.” He then walked over to Jax, pointing at the handle the button was on. “Think you’ve guessed it, but your trigger is there. It’s actually got two states—partially pressed and fully pressed. Partial gets the barrels spinning so you can prepare for oncoming threats, full gets you the lead. Try it out.”

Nodding, Jax rested his hand on the button, pressing it in gently. The gun hummed ominously and the display lit up, showing him the ammo count. By the Void, Mordenna had stuffed the ammo capacity into this thing. Sure enough, the barrels expanded and prop-like plates flared out, the undersides glowing. Soon the barrels were spinning at an impressive rate, requiring a bit more of Jax’s strength to keep the gun steady.
Well, showtime. He further pressed the button. It initially stopped going down, but he applied a bit more force as he braced himself and the fun began. With a reasonable buck and a sound befitting of the rest of the armory Mordenna had made for the Chosen, the Heretic Eradication Canon threw out a hose of purple-pink fire, the bullets ripping through the Faceless target and easily downing it. The “kill” confirmed, Jax eased back into letting the barrels spin. The little “stop” seemed to be there so Jax wouldn’t have to hover in one uncertain state on the button to keep it spun—likely to prevent misfires. After another second, he let it spin down completely, and the barrels retracted.

When he turned back to Mordenna—gun pointed towards the range and thumb off the trigger, of course—his brother had a wide grin on his face. “Oh, the percussive symphony! Tell me, Jax, any hangups?”

Jax chuckled shortly at his brother’s enthusiasm. “None I can feel in a short test. I do like the mechanism in the trigger, even if it seemed like it was sticking at first.”

“All part of the design. If Eliza can get you back out on the field at some point I’ve gotta go with you to watch it in action.”

“Don’t we all go out on the field nowadays?”

“To the detriment of ADVENT, yeah.” Mordenna paused. “Well, depending on how soon I get Fal-Mai’s arm done... maybe just you and me.”

Of course. Jax hadn’t expected their sister to be out on the field of battle in her state. He hoped she was recovering well. Thinking on her, he hitched his gun to his side. “Do you know where she’s at?”

“Right now?” Mordenna stroked his chin. “I think Sammy mentioned he needed to see her...”

Sammy hoped he wasn’t bothering Fal-Mai all too much with calling her back to the Infirmary.

He’d recently released her with good marks, considering her wound was healing properly and there was no sign of infection. She’d merely needed a day or so to find her balance again, and with his help, she found it. But... he had a bit of a compulsion in the back of his head to check it again. Usually he could chalk it up to his ADVENT Medic instincts, the instructions written into his very DNA to follow up on treatments and the like. However, in this case? Fal-Mai healed exceedingly fast, no doubt thanks to her Chosen nature. If anything, he shouldn’t have a reason to call her back down. It had stumped him for a bit.

After a while of reflection, Samhien had found it out soon enough. They were friends, weren’t they? This compulsion to bring her back in to check on her was merely personal worry. It was... interesting, to have that intersect over into his professional practices. He’d considered other people his friends, but thanks to Eliza’s careful commanding, he hadn’t really had the situation come up before. True, some of his friends had been committed to the Infirmary under his care. He guessed that it was different for Fal-Mai. Fal-Mai didn’t have many other friends, did she? She seemed to get along well with her brothers nowadays, and if she still harbored those feelings he picked up off of her for Eliza... suffice to say, Eliza was probably a trusted confidant. Not too many outside of that, though. He half wanted to chide himself for fussing over her.

Well, he couldn’t do that now. Not verbally, at least. He was in the middle of unwrapping Fal-
Mai’s bandages, inspecting the wounded area. “Your progress continues to astound me, Fal-Mai.” He gathered the bandages into his hand. The site was already beginning to scar up. The only unusual thing that persisted was the darkened skin color around the joint—but Fal-Mai had assured him that it was benign. “I think I could very well retire the bandages, if you wish.”

Fal-Mai, currently sitting on one of the Chosen beds, looked a little uncomfortable at the notion. Felt a little uncomfortable, too. “I... think I would rather have it covered until it is fully cleared, Samhien.”

He nodded, going and disposing of the bandages, producing new ones. “I can certainly assist with that. So long as the wound remains undisturbed, I believe this can be your last round of bandages until you can take them off completely.” He walked back over, wrapping her shoulder again. After a second or two of silence, he spoke back up. “... are you faring alright, Fal-Mai?”

“I have no more pain in the wound...” There was something off about that statement to Samhien, and his suspicions were quickly confirmed. “But... I felt as if my hand was burning the other day. The missing one.”

“That’s a fairly typical phenomenon known as ‘phantom pain.’” As he talked, he eventually finished wrapping her shoulder. “Symptoms include multiple varieties of pain originating in the missing limb. Your nervous system is still adapting to the fact that it has one less limb to account for, and pain is the body’s typical response to something being off. The intensity and frequency of phantom pain tends to go away over time.”

Fal-Mai took in the explanation, and he watched as she glanced to the right side of her body. The Specter had removed her entire shoulder and had barely missed the scapula. Judging by the angle and how the skin seemed to have been recovering from being taut, it was as if she had dislocated it before it was cut, minimizing damage. With it entirely missing, there was obviously no way she could move a missing limb—but he got the clear indication that she tried just then. “Understood. I suppose it is one more trial I must endure.”

One more? Sammy’s hands fidgeted with each other. “... are you alright, Fal-Mai? I ask not of your physical health, but of your mental and emotional.”

She considered that question for a moment, staring into her lap. “I cannot say I am for certain. These past few days have been trying, to say the least.” She took in a breath, and he could sense her mood lightening. “But I have received overwhelming support and concern from those who care about me, leaving me with no choice but to ‘chipper up.’ It heartens me to know I have such a support system.”

In a way, it made Sammy happy, too. But... he was also a touch saddened. Outside of dressing her wounds and taking care of her physical health, he felt like he hadn’t offered much of that support otherwise. “I am glad that they have uplifted you in such a way.” He glanced downwards. “And I am sorry that I have not been up to the task as a friend.”

Fal-Mai shook her head. “You have been supporting me more than enough, Sammy. The charge for my physical care has largely fallen to you, so I do not find it ill that you have been leaving the emotional support to my brothers and Eliza. No one person can provide support all of the time on their own.” She sighed. “Something that my brothers and I have been trying to teach Eliza.”

Sammy was plenty worried that the Commander was overworking herself, so it was good to know that there were more people throwing their hats in the ring to try to get her to take more care of herself mentally. It also relieved him to know that Fal-Mai truly wasn’t holding his lack of emotional support against him—he didn’t sense that she was at all lying. It was nice to have such
powers. He didn’t think he’d be able to find people out otherwise. Reading visually was difficult. “I appreciate knowing that, Nightmaiden. Still, I would like to make more of an effort where I can. If there is anything on your mind, I would be more than happy to assist in any way possible.”

“The concern is noted. I do not think I have much to confide about, but...” She pressed her mouth into a line. “Simply, as always, the concern that I still belong. I know the Commander has told me she has no reason to throw me out simply because I have lost a limb. However... these doubts still plague me. I always feel as if I am merely being put up with, rather than enjoyed as an ally.”

He bobbed his head, drawing himself up to sit on the side of the bed. “And these are centered around the Commander?” When Fal-Mai nodded, he continued. “If you ever wish to hear her definitive answer, I may ask her myself. You will have your truth then. But, in my opinion?” He smiled gently at her. “The Commander made her choice when she instructed Mox to take you in alive. If she was willing to take you then when there was no guarantee that you would come to ally with XCOM... I think that speaks to her dedication, does it not? The Commander is not the type to look at people only in terms of how useful to her they can be. I’m very certain she wishes to have you around, Nightmaiden.”

Fal-Mai was silent at that. A low current of emotions were running through her—mild doubt, but there was hope in there as well. Fear, but understanding.

Before she could respond, the door to the Infirmary opened. Sherry came through on the other side. “Samhien? Ah, it’s not just me visiting today...”

She walked through, and sure enough, the other two Chosen ducked in after her. Mordenna led them, with Jax bringing up the back. A rather impressive weapon was hanging from his belt. Mordenna must’ve gotten his cannon done. “There she is!” Mordenna marched right on over. “How’re things hanging over here, sis?”

Samhien could feel her heart lift as her brothers came in, and she smiled gently. “My recovery progress is as smooth as ever. I see you have finished our brother’s weapon?”

“He has, indeed.” Jax stood next to his brother. “We were wondering if we could steal you away after Samhien has done all he requires of you.”

“And if I could talk to you, Samhien?” Sherry came around them, walking up to him.

Sammy offered them all his best smile. “If Fal-Mai has nothing left to ask of me, I am already done, in fact! You are free to take her away, if you wish.”

“Sweet. Thanks for the good work as always, Sam.” Mordenna then leaned over on the bed rather dramatically. “Hey. Sis. I’m gonna beat Jax up in the Ring. You wanna watch this go down?”

Jax scoffed. “I distinctly remember us both agreeing that me going all out on you would be detrimental to the state of your skeleton.”

“Wherever did you get that notion, bro?”

“Five minutes ago.”

“Well, I wasn’t there. Not spiritually, anyway.”

“... you continue to baffle me.”

As Fal-Mai laughed, Sammy slid off the bed, following Sherry as she walked a bit away from all
of them. She looked over to the three of them, then hummed in thought. “I wanted to have a private conversation regarding the progress of researching that surgery,” she began, speaking in French, “and I was thinking that we didn’t have to throw them out immediately, but... if you are capable of understanding multiple languages...”

That caught the ears of the Chosen as Samhien looked over to them, and he could sense an air of sheepishness from at least one of them. Hm. He tilted his head. “Do you all understand French?”

“That, and quite a few other languages.” Mordenna’s French was marked with strange eloquence compared to his usual style of speaking. Perhaps he didn’t know the shorthands well. “The Elders saw fit to make sure we knew what was being said in most parts of the world. As far as I know, I’ve got English, ADVENT, Spanish, French, Russian, German... perhaps Chinese? I believe I might’ve picked that up myself.”

“I know Latin,” Jax replied. “Not of my own accord, admittedly.”

Mordenna jabbed a finger at Jax. “You’re teaching me that one day. Just so I can be hilariously and parodically pretentious in naming projects in the future.

Fal-Mai sighed in good nature, sliding off of the bed. “Brothers. I believe the implication here is to take our conversation somewhere else? I have nothing more to ask of Samhien.”

“Right, right.” Mordenna stood up. “We’ll leave you two to whatever you wanna discuss. Goons? To the GTS!”

Jax rolled his eyes and Fal-Mai giggled, but they both complied, following Mordenna out. When the door shut behind them, Sherry blew out a breath, running a hand through her bangs. “I’m sorry for asking about this again—”

“Please don’t apologize, Sherry.” Sammy smiled at her reassuringly. “I know how important it is to you. Did you want to ask about the progress on it?” She nodded, and Samhien took his datapad off of his belt, tapping through a few screens. “With Wiki back online and interfacing with some ADVENT terminals in our downtime, she was finally able to fulfill my request. I have all the necessary procedures and techniques on hand—I merely need to memorize them.” His smile turned a bit more nervous. “If you are fine with it being my first surgery of the type. I’m not used to doing one that isn’t muscle memory...”

“I’m fine with it, honest. I just...” She sighed. “I just want it done, really. It feels weird to have it done at this kind of time we’re living in... and with how old I am... but if I’ve got the chance, I want to do it.”

“Nothing wrong with finally addressing a problem you were unable to do so before.” Sammy gently patted her shoulder. “If it makes you feel more at ease with yourself, I believe it should be seen to.” Remembering something she’d said to him, his smile faded. “Are you still sure you don’t want me to ask Dr. Tygan regarding ways we might improve the surgery?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” She gripped her arm, looking to the side. “Best I don’t make it a whole thing. Only people who know are you and my wife, and I’d like to keep it that way. Not that I don’t trust Tygan, of course—he was patching me up before you came around.” She furrowed her eyebrows. “I somehow think he knows regardless. Not because I’ve slipped up somewhere. Tygan just... looks like he knows everything.”

That got Samhien to chuckle, shaking his head. “Even if he did know, I believe in his ability to keep it confidential. Now, would you like to schedule this?”
“Oh, yeah. Give me that.” Sherry took the offered datapad and tapped it for a bit. After a while, she handed it back. “Provided the sky doesn’t fall in on our heads? That date’s good. I know what I should be doing in the leadup, so you don’t have to rake me over the coals there.”

Well, it seemed Samhien’s tendency to parrot off all the preparations for anything he was going to do was well known. Feeling a little embarrassed, he smiled to shake it off. “I am glad you know. Do you need anything else from me?”

“That was about it.” Sherry’s smile was worn, but deeply genuine. “I... can’t really say how much this means to me. Thank you, Samhien. If I could express my gratitude in a meaningful way, let me know.”

“Hm...” He clipped his datapad back to his belt. “You need not make anything for me. I believe hugs are traditional amongst humans to express thanks?”

Sherry laughed. “Oh, a hug from Samhien? Yes please.” The hug she pulled him in for was warm and firm, and Sammy fully returned it. It was nice to make people’s lives better.

Being on punishment chore duty was the worst, though Elena wouldn’t hesitate to say she deserved it.

It wasn’t like she hadn’t earned carting down the loads of laundry that the Avenger generated. Granted, she had the help of what was essentially a pallet jack in getting it all moved, but it was still going to be the first of a few trips getting it all to the laundry room.

At first she’d entirely intended to pull Mox into helping her... but as she was dragging the jack out of one of the storage rooms, she eventually decided against it. This was her cross to bear for the remaining weeks that the Commander wanted her to serve. What was strange was that she remembered that the Avenger had two of those pallet jack type things—but when she went to go get one of them, there was only one left. Well, she hadn’t had the time to worry about where it went, so she went about the task of getting the laundry baskets loaded up. She’d made her way down to the laundry room and tapped open the door, moving on in.

“Oh. Hey, Elena.”

Once she was fully clear of the door, she looked towards one of the machines. It was Vlad, sitting on one of them, the missing pallet jack near him and a few empty baskets around it. The machines were already running.

She put her cargo against the wall, regarding him. “You still serving?”

“Yeah.” He was unusually reserved for who he was. He scratched at his stubble. “... not like I don’t deserve it, anyway.”

Elena blinked a few times. She’d worked with Vlad long enough to know that he was essentially speaking in a different language right now. Not that it was a bad change, but still. “What brought about this change of heart?”

“Mostly? Getting my ass kicked.” He shrugged. “Nothing like getting the fucking daylights choked out of you by the biggest bastard on the ship to make you re-think your life choices. And,
also...” Vlad sighed. “The Commander actually sitting you down and explaining just what’s going on with the Chosen.”

Elena gave a single chuckle. “The ass-kicking part I get. But did O’Leary really just sit you down to chew you out?”

“Would’ve been easier to reject if she’d just yelled at me for thirty minutes. But, no. Basically got learned about the kind of lives that the Chosen have been living before they got here.” His mouth settled into a line. “I still got hangups, but after a bit of thinking... I think they’re valid? I’m still salty over them killing people I know. I don’t exactly want to cosy up to them and be friends. But, some of the shit I said? Uncalled for.”

Eliza continued to impress. That woman had a damn scary angry face. If she were in any other situation right now, she’d be giving Vlad shit for holding those kind of xenophobic opinions on the Avenger of all places... but considering she was serving time for blowing up at Mordenna? She didn’t exactly have any room to talk. Her crime was different, sure, but they’d both gotten their asses handed to them for giving the Chosen unwarranted shit. They had legitimate things they could be called out on—but they weren’t duplicitous. Mordenna... he wasn’t really trying to be Tomko.

Elena rolled her shoulders, leaning against the wall. “Suppose we’ve both got things to make up for before people will let us back in.”

“... I don’t know about me being a part of the Avenger anymore.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“I...” Vlad focused his gaze on the floor. “I’m starting to really get a picture for how shitty I’ve been towards people. Not just the aliens—people I used to call friends. I made it damn hard for them to associate with me and I just thought they were bitter because I was ‘right.’ Easy for me to see now that they didn’t want anything to do with me because I was being a backwards-ass moron. At this point, they really don’t have any reason to forgive me even if I do get my act together. With respect to the Commander? I might just ask her to drop me off at the next haven we stop by. Start fresh there.”

Seems like Vlad’s brain had finally caught up with the rest of him. Elena had seen her fair share of judgemental assholes in her time—this had to be the first time she’d seen one of them actually reflect on themselves. Violence wasn’t the whole answer, usually... so maybe he was giving that calm talk Eliza had with him less credit than he should. Maybe there were aliens he watched and listened to that opened his mind. But, still. There was something that sat wrong with her. “... that’s great and all, but you’re just going to run away from the problems you’ve caused?”

“What? No.”

“Then why are you leaving?” She stood up from her lean on the wall. “If you just slink off to some random haven without really putting in the work to make people want to accept you, you’re just giving up. I get that you were a dick—about anyone can say that about you. You just going to let Herod down, though?”

That looked like it hit home. Herod was the one person that had been bothering to stick around Vlad and try to make him a better person. He’d gotten plenty of shit for it over the months that Vlad was talking bad of the Chosen, but Elena had to commend his determination. Vlad massaged his temples, closing his eyes. “... no. I don’t want to. But I also don’t want to make people stand me. I can barely stand me nowadays.”
“If you leave without showing them that you’re trying to put in the effort,” she went on, “they’ll never know you even did. All they’ll see is you getting your ass kicked and then asking to be let go, like you’re going to slink off and lick your wounds. That isn’t much of a good impression. Do what you want—but if you’ve got half a mind, I think you might want to take a page out of the Chosen’s books.”

He didn’t look like he had much to say in response, just weakly nodding. Elena usually wasn’t much for pep talks, but she couldn’t really stand cowards. If Vlad really wanted to get better, he’d stay. She had her own reservations about the Chosen—as much as she absolved Mordenna, he was still guilty of killing her fellow wolves. She didn’t blame him for not wanting to get all huggy with them. But there was a line, she believed, and it was high time he recognized he’d crossed it.

After a little while more went on without Vlad saying anything, she started moving the baskets off of her pallet jack. “I’ll go up and get the—”

“No.” She looked back over to him, and he slid off the machine. “I’ll handle laundry. Call it thanks for being one of the many people who’ve rightfully kicked my ass.”

She gave him a second or two to take it back, but when he didn’t, she stood up. “Fine by me.” She wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth. With that, she turned and tapped the panel to leave. “… thanks, Elena.”

She sighed. “If anyone asks, I chewed your ass out like everyone else has and then shoved my chores off onto you.”

“Got it.”

That all confirmed, she left the laundry room. More time for her to cosy up to Mox, she supposed.

Though her nature would lend her otherwise, Fal-Mai never seemed to tire of hanging out with her brothers.

Jax and Mordenna had this natural energy about the both of them as they exchanged banter, and it always lifted Fal-Mai’s heart when it happened. Judging by the way one of them would smile harder whenever she laughed, she half-thought they were doing it just to get a good reaction out of her. Fine by Fal-Mai—they seemed to be having fun as they were doing it.

Even during the lulls, such as the one happening right now, the quiet was never suffocating. It was nice to just be with them and not be expected to act properly. She felt like she could loosen up around them—a far cry from how things used to be. She’d take this any day of the week.

During the lull, they got to the door to the GTS and Mordenna stepped on in, ducking under the door. “Alright,” he said, “c’mere, Jax. I’m gonna show you how to throw a punch.”

Jax huffed. “I would think that a simple enough action that I need not learn it.”

“And yet, much like firing a gun, there’s a bunch of nuance you wanna pay attention to lest you break every bone in your hand.” When the three of them were in there, he waved Jax over. “I’m also gonna kit out your hands with some proper wrapping and teach you how to do it in case you
ever need to bare-knuckle brawl. Not that I think you’d want to take off those indestructible boxing mitts, considering those edges are probably enough to gouge a mark in someone’s cheek.”

Rolling his eyes, Jax approached Mordenna and took his gauntlets off, resting them on the water cooler. Hearing his signature get louder was always an interesting phenomenon, and it told her how much the gauntlets were holding him back. For his own safety, she would imagine. Fal-Mai herself went to sit down on the bench, watching as Mordenna produced some bandages from one of his pockets. He took one of Jax’s hands and placed the start of the roll on them. “Now, follow the roll.” From there, Mordenna slowly wrapped up Jax’s hand in a precise pattern, even weaving through his fingers to do it. When he finished, he severed the wrapping from the roll, putting the bandages in Jax’s hand. “Now, try the other side yourself.”

Nodding, Jax took the bandages and quite accurately recreated what Fal-Mai had seen—granted, slowing down towards the end as she could imagine he was playing what Mordenna did in his head over again. When he finished that, Mordenna nodded. “Nice. You learn well! I’ll have to snag you an extra bandage roll so you can commit that to muscle memory. Follow me! I’m gonna teach you how to separate a man’s head from his shoulders with your hilarious strength.”

The two trekked over to the Sectoid dummies and Fal-Mai lapsed into thought. Throwing a direct punch wasn’t her style of fighting—there were many ways it could be countered if your opponent was paying attention, so she tuned out of the lesson and onto other thoughts. She, honestly, never knew she could understand French. A few of the others that Mordenna had listed off, sure—but all of this knowledge in her head that she didn’t have any recollection of was starting to weird her out a little. Could she access her file and finally learn? Or was looking upon the details of her creation a sweet trap that would lure her down a dark line of thinking?

The sound of flesh on punching bag made her look up. The Sectoid dummy was still swaying with the force of the punch Jax had put out—though Fal-Mai strongly suspected it wasn’t his full strength. Mordenna did a golf clap. “See? That way you won’t break your fingers. Still, remember the other techniques—like I said, those are usually preferable to concussing someone if you want to end a fight with the least amount of trauma possible. But, if you’re looking to probably kill someone? I’m sure your metal gauntlets and their skull make a wonderful pair.”

Honestly, she hated to interrupt, but with Mordenna having access to essentially every file? He might be the best person to ask. “Mordenna? Can I ask you something?”

“Sure can! Jax, practice your punches, I’ll be back.” Mordenna sauntered over, crouching to eye level with her. “What’s up, buttercup?”

She gave a single chuckle at that, but sobered up as she went onto her line of questioning. “... do you think it would be a good idea to look at my Ascension file?”

Mordenna’s smile dropped, and he rubbed the back of his neck. “I mean, I told Liz she shouldn’t. But, considering it already happened to us... I don’t know? I mean, it’ll really refresh you on how much the Elders suck and probably remind you of the horrible shit they did to us. What brought this up?”

Fal-Mai gestured weakly. Out of the corner of her eye, Jax had gone still. Maybe he was thinking over that too. Still, she went on. “Being able to understand the French you and Sherry spoke, primarily. I hadn’t even meant to eavesdrop on whatever unknown surgery they were discussing but yet I fell prey to it. I suppose I would just like to know if there is anything else I have unintentionally been taught.”

“Well, I suppose I could show you how to get to the file on a datapad.” He leveled a cautionary
look at Fal-Mai. “Only if you’re really sure, though. I’ll be there so you can hash out anything you learn.”

She nodded. “I will appreciate the support through whatever horrors Helena subjected me to that I must learn. I just would prefer to not be ignorant.”

Mordenna bobbed his head, rubbing his chin and looking down in thought. “... come to think of it, I never really looked at my—”

There was a flurry of motion out of the corner of Fal-Mai’s eye, but that wasn’t what made Mordenna stop. What did was the sound of reinforced fabric tearing violently and an echoing thud, both taking her and Mordenna by surprise. Both of them looked back to find Jax half-turned, retracting his arm and staring at his hand. The Sectoid dummy in front of him was now headless, said head rolling from where it hit the wall.

The GTS was silent for a moment before Mordenna went to stand up. Before he could say anything, the door opened to reveal Eliza in her workout clothes. “Hey guys. What’s—”

That was when her eyes tracked to where they all were looking. Eliza was far less stunned on her feet than Mordenna was and she rushed over to Jax, coming up to his side. “Woah, big guy, everything alright?”

Jax’s breathing was steady, but shallow, and Fal-Mai could hear his heart pounding. His left hand clutched his right arm, staring at the hand he’d used to decapitate the dummy. “I... believe I need to find another way to channel my anger...”

“Well, come over here, we’ve got spare ice next to the cooler and bags for it.” She brought Jax over, and that was when Fal-Mai could see Jax’s right hand properly. The force of his punch had actually pushed back the bandages on his knuckles, which were turning a brownish orange with bruises. His fingers, as well. She sat Jax down on one of the benches near the cooler and opened the compartment underneath it. Sure enough, she emerged with an ice pack and placed it on Jax’s injured hand. “Hold that there for as long as you can stand.” With that handled and Jax lapsing into a slightly concerning silence, Eliza turned to Mordenna and Fal-Mai. “Mind if I ask what was going on?”

Mordenna looked rather regretful—his reason unclear until he began to speak. “I... was teaching Jax how to fight because he was looking for a way to channel his anger. Y’know, I figured something physical not against a human being or the drywall might help. But, yeah. You can clearly see I made a miscalculation.”

Eliza nodded understandingly. “I can’t fault you for wanting to help out your brother, Mordenna. Nobody’s to blame here other than the usual suspects.” She looked back to Jax. “—good on you for wrapping up his hands, though. Minimized the damage by a lot.”

“Of course I wouldn’t let him go without proper protection.” He looked over to the headless Sectoid and winced. “Sorry about the dummy.”

“I’m going to be replacing those anyway. More importantly...” Eliza sat down next to Jax, resting a hand on his shoulder. “What got you worked up, Jax?”

Jax was silent for a few seconds, numbly staring at his hand. When he spoke, his voice was soft and almost monotone. “... I had been thinking over the injustices my siblings and I had to face under the Elders. I... I became incensed over how blind I had been to their treatment of my brother and sister.” His eyes narrowed and heat entered his speech. “I had become infuriated with myself
for having been just as indoctrinated as the populace was, allowing them to ceaselessly punish Mordenna! I had the chance, so long ago, to intervene—and yet I did not. Original sin marks my hands and it brings me to fury.” As soon as the simmering rage came, it was gone, with Jax closing his eyes and hanging his head. “... but I cannot be truly wrathful. That was the charge of my father. And I will not, cannot express that anger in my fear of it and him in equal measure.” He opened his eyes, looking up at Mordenna. “It is not your fault for this failing. It is simply mine for not knowing how to handle these emotions of mine...”

Jax’s words sank in before Mordenna sighed, walking over and crouching in front of Jax. “Look, bro. I really appreciate the sentiments that you’re putting out—it means a lot to me that you’re getting protective in retrospect like you are. But you and I both know that if you’d tried to stand up for me fifteen years ago, it probably would’ve gotten us both killed for good. It was best I took the lump then. If we organized under them—”

“—we could have escaped,” Jax interrupted. “We could have fled, had I half a mind. But I was so busy worshipping the very concept of the Elders to have concern for you, and that shames me greatly.”

Mordenna went quiet, allowing Fal-Mai to come over and sit on the other side of Jax. “Brother... I understand your regret over your actions. But mulling over such topics cannot be good for your mental health. I will not be as callous to say that ‘those events were in the past and you must not dwell on them,’ because we all know better than anyone else that the wounds inflicted on us then can hurt just as much now. What I will say is that you should not linger on what you could have done differently. What has happened has happened.”

Jax opened his mouth to speak a few times, during which Eliza leaned against him and he stopped. He rested his head against the ice pack, squeezing his eyes shut. “I... I know in my heart, that is the truth. And yet I wish to dismiss this advice leveled to me because I cannot punish myself by forgiving myself and moving on.”

“Beating yourself up constantly isn’t really a fun time, Jax.” Gently, Mordenna moved Jax’s hands down. “Take it from me. Sure, I get frustrated that the source of all my problems are some wrinkly fucks I can’t do anything about at the moment, but they’re no longer actively torturing us. Best to handle and treat what wounds we’ve got instead of lamenting about the bastards that gave us them.” He offered a half-hearted smile. “If you wanna move on, if you want some kind of forgiveness for not stepping up for me there—you’ve got it. I forgive you for not wanting to also get yourself beat, bro. It’s natural. I don’t hold any grudge.”

For a moment, her two brothers simply looked at each other. Then, hands made of Jax’s psionics reached for Mordenna as his hair flared up, and Jax brought his arms down on Mordenna, hugging him without ever separating his hands. Jax muttered a soft “I’m sorry” and Mordenna shushed him, returning the hug. Fal-Mai smiled and leaned against Jax, happy to see he no longer had words to blame himself with.

Mordenna eventually ducked out of the hug, pointing a finger at Jax. “Now. We can talk out all this blame you’ve got later. Bottom line is—Elders are bastards and them smacking me around has nothing to do with you. For now...” He adjusted so he was then pointing at Eliza. “You. Me. The Ring.”

The previously somber moment was lightened by Eliza’s laughter. “Hey, I just got here. Let me stretch first, at least—and god knows you’re probably gonna win.”

“Hey, never know until we try.” The shift from Mordenna comforting Jax to him challenging Eliza to fight seemed a little incongruous until she figured that he was doing it to lighten their spirits.
Indeed, it was working—Jax was smirking and shaking his head at the exchange, even if he still looked mildly reserved. She sat up from her lean on him, but opted to stay on the bench with him as Mordenna stood up. “And aren’t you a pioneer of trying, Liz?”

“Oh, shut up.” Eliza got up, smacking his hand away from her. “I’ll get some stretches in and then I suppose we can entertain Jax and Fal-Mai with me getting my ass whipped.”

Well, that would certainly be a sight to see. As Mordenna continued to banter with Eliza as she stretched, she turned to Jax, who was watching the scene calmly. Fal-Mai settled her hand in her lap. “How is your hand, brother?”

“Numb, but no longer pulsing with pain.” He sighed. “That burst of righteous fury was invigorating while it lasted, but with the adrenaline gone... I, definitely, should not have done that.”

Fal-Mai patted his shoulder. “Better the dummy than anything else, brother. At least you have sped up Eliza’s need to replace them.”

Jax smiled. “I suppose.” His smile then fell. “... you do understand why I fear even expressing my anger, yes?”

“Of course. Much like Helena has tainted the concept of perfection to me, Cronus has sullied the act of even being justifiably angry to you.”

Nodding, Jax watched as Eliza stretched. “It is something that, one day, I will hope to uncouple from him, as I hope you may one day no longer think of Helena as you simply try to live.”

“Thank you, brother.”

Jax spared his good hand to pat hers—a gesture quickly sullied by how cold his palm was. When she recoiled, he chuckled. “Apologies.”

“Kindly do not touch me with your cold hands.”

He looked like he was about to agree—that is, until he grinned mischievously. “Oh, is that so? I suppose you would object to me doing—”

He reached to poke her cheek and she quickly scooted down the bench. “Eliza! Jax is trying to aggress me with his unforgivably cold hands!”

“Knock it off, you two,” she playfully shouted, “or I’ll take you both to the Pit!”

Jax gestured with his good hand, which Fal-Mai ducked as he did. “Can I not tease my own sister upon this vessel?”

“Not when I’m in earshot!”

Mordenna rolled his eyes. “Children.”

“Oh,” Jax retorted, “Now the middle child is going to lecture me on manners of maturity!”

Fal-Mai, though mock angry at Jax, couldn’t help but laugh. Times like this made her truly happy.
Today had been a really productive day for Mordenna, all things considered.

His “bothering his siblings” quota was all filled up, Jax’s new gun was running like a charm, and though Eliza put up a good fight, he beat the Commander in hand to hand combat. All in all, a success of a day.

Now he was just kicking around in the Workshop, doing some touch-ups on the device meant to link Fal-Mai’s new arm to her spine. He’d talked it over with her and she was fine using the nanos, so long as he could program some sort of “default state” with the specifications he wanted. That, he could do—there was going to be some sort of barebones programming for her arm to work. Having it maintain a state it would revert to if she wasn’t actively thinking of changes to it would help out a lot. Hell, with the way Specter nanos could refract light, she could make it any color she wanted.

But, the link came first. Mostly to see if the concept itself even worked. If it did, he had a copy for himself to make to get those nanomachines working for him, too. Which would be neat. That reminded him—

Ah, speak of the devil. She was hazy, being in another dimension, but he could see Wiki passing through the wall and entering the Workshop. She came over to him and properly blipped into this realm of reality, and he offered a wave. “Hey there, Wiks. Was just thinking of bothering you.”

“Glad I decided to come to you, then.” She put her hands on her hips. “Never went and sought me out!”

“Eh, sorry. Had a bunch of other stuff to handle.” He gestured to the solid black cube at the end of his table with the Specter core on top. “Getting this done, seeing if I can pull off neat stuff with Specter nanos, the works.”

Wiki took a long look at the cube, sighing. “I bet Schro’s feeling all high and mighty that you had to go to them for help.”

“Funny story about that.” Mordenna put down his tools so he could gesture. “I posed the question to them while we were working on that mission yesterday—said they’d be entirely fine with helping me out. Admittedly, it was good to know they wanted to help restore Fals’s arm as much as I did.” He tapped his chin. “Well... close to as much as me. Not to blame them, I just really want to get Fal-Mai an arm back.”

“Oh. No gloating, no smugness, no—?”

“They were pretty humble, Wiki,” he said, casually interrupting. “I’m sure your bias against Specters is valid, but Schro’s a different beast. You tried actually talking to them and seeing what they’re like?”

“Well...” She gave a digital sigh. “No, I just really didn’t want to bother with talking to a Specter when I’m... pretty sure I know how it’s going to go down.”

“Check your biases at the door, sparky. This is a tolerant Avenger and about the most smug AI I’ve had to deal with here is JULIAN, and at least he’s confined to a private server in the Avenger’s systems.”

“I know that. Accessed it at one point and he tried to talk me into allowing him some more permissions. Didn’t, obviously, but he was pretty fun to talk to.”

“Right? I almost want to upload him into his SPARK occasionally just to have a few shots at him.” He then leveled a look at Wiki. “Back to my original point, though— weird of you to not give them
Wiki's arms fell and her black data trail drooped a bit. “Yeah. I... guess I should talk to them eventually, huh?” She then shook her head, perking back up. “Later. Definitely. Right now I wanted to get around to that thanks.”

Mordenna raised his eyebrows. “Buy me dinner first.”

“Shut up! Or I won’t divulge.”

He snickered, waving a hand at her. “Sorry, sorry, bad joke. What is it?”

Wiki snapped her fingers, and Mordenna could see his datapad light up. He picked it up, watching as it notified him of a file transfer. “I figured someone like you might like having a little extra help around the Avenger, give or take. And also the ability to reclaim something from your dad. I’m sending you some files now relating to the building and programming of Codices.”

Mordenna stared at her blankly for a second. “No joke?”

“Mordenna, I physically cannot lie to you.”

“I know, but.” He settled on smiling. “Thanks. You’ve got me there—I really would like having a personal assistant of my own.” It would really be neat when he got the XCOM Network up and running, too. “I suppose I might have to cannibalize another brain if that’s alright?”

“Well, safe to say if the brain’s been forcefully shut down like that... that Codex isn’t really waking back up. I feel a little weird about it but it’s not like you’re going to find the parts elsewhere. If you want, I can double-check to make sure it’s just the death proxy hanging around before you wipe them.”

He nodded. “I’d appreciate that. Anything else?”

“That was about all I had for you. When the upload is done, the plans are all yours.”

“Thanks again, Wiks.”

She saluted, and in a flash, she was darting out of even his sight. That left him in silence for a second before his brain jumped back to something earlier that day. He never really had looked at his Ascension file, had he?

Considering he’d already looked at Eliza’s and was underwhelmed, he figured it would be more of the same for his. Tapping through the datapad, he eventually navigated over to the directory where his own file was being stored. With a moment’s hesitation, he opened it, eyes flitting through the list. Honestly, there wasn’t much that immediately caught his eye. It was more of a planning file, the one he’d selected—the year of preparation was here. But, under the plans for that? The physical changes were outlined. Mordenna went “huh” as Odin went over the specifics that granted him his unearthly sight. Theoretically, if they could get their hands on that specific alien DNA, they could give that to anybody. Honestly, though? Mordenna wouldn’t want to have it on all the time if he could help it. He moved on. There were more physical changes—organ refining, facial reconstruction, chest scar removal.

Wait. Hm.

His eyes focused on that. “‘Removal of scars beneath each pectoral,’” he read out loud. There... was something very strange about that, in a way that was pulling at deep-seated memories. Idly, he
felt his chest. Did he have some very specific surgery there? The only thing he could imagine was...

His eyes went a few entries lower and he had his answer. “Ah. So... I wasn’t born with a dick.”

If anything, it was another piece of the puzzle. So he was trans. It felt... nice, to pick up a piece of his past like that. It explained the previous change, at least. Still, there was something that unnerved him about it. He was sure Tomko would’ve loved to have bottom surgery, but... that was probably against his will, it being done during his Ascension. “Not cool, dad. Amongst all the other things you’ve done that are not cool, this ranks up there. I guess. Even if I’m sure Tomko would be happier for it...?” It was probably done to have the “perfect son” and that was just creepy. Cool that it played into previous wishes, but Mordenna knew damn well that generosity wasn’t what Odin had in mind.

From there, he idly read the rest of the changes, but his mind was on something else. He’d found something out pretty substantial from an ADVENT file. Could there be a chance that they had kept extended tabs on him before they captured him? He knew some of the soldiers at XCOM had files that were updated with info when they got them, along with the faction leaders. Tomko had to be notable enough to keep a record of. Perhaps he needed to start some hunts of his own.

When he got nothing else from his own file, he set the datapad down, not bothering to check if the file upload was done. He had a job right now, and that was to help out his sister. Picking up his tools again, he wondered if he should tell anyone about his discovery. “... maybe Liz. I feel like she could handle that. And didn’t I just get done telling Jax that being bi is ok? Sibs could probably handle it. Other than that? Eh. Not much reason to run down the halls screaming about it.”

With that said, Mordenna got back to work. He was just glad to know more about himself.
Responsibility

Chapter Summary

XCOM answers a distress call from a nearby haven.

The last few days of training with Eliza had gone well, and Jax was happy for that.

It had been rather explorative at first, but Jax hadn’t been lying to Eliza when he said that he had a few training methods in mind for her. Projecting a Solace turned out to be rather easy for Eliza—focusing on what she loved sounded stereotypical in order to make her powers work, but for a Solace? A Solace was projected feelings. Other powers could work regardless of what you felt, with some exceptions, but that was the heart of a good Solace. Though, once it was established that she could pull off one well... he’d quickly wanted to move on. Being that close to her while swamped with his feelings for her? Well, it wasn’t going to be pretty eventually, was his guess.

They’d moved onto the other aspect of her psionics next—that enhancement he’d guessed at. Some trial and error led to him confirming they were of the strength-enhancing sort. Until they were trained further, he wasn’t going to let her attempt to apply them to other people. Best she didn’t try to channel against his psionics and hamper the process... or not have a guiding hand in someone else and potentially injure herself. So self-enhancement it was for the moment.

Which was a rather long-winded explanation as for why Eliza and Jax were sat at a table in the Studio, across from each other, with their arms on the table like they were going to arm wrestle. Because they were.

“Most importantly,” he went on, “do not overly strain yourself. The purpose of this is to set a benchmark.”

Eliza chuckled. “Oh, what, it’s not to kick my ass in front of my PsiOps?”

No, it wasn’t for that, but he could see where she got that conclusion. Along with their typical mediators—Maria and Marlene—members of his congregation and some of the PsiOps had also began attending these training exercises of theirs. Said audience had pulled up chairs around them, but were still maintaining a respectable distance. He somewhat lamented having so much company—he thought some things best said to Eliza in private—but so long as they weren’t being disruptive, he supposed it was fine.

Still, he rolled his eyes. “I assure you, Commander, I seek not to humiliate you.”

“If you say so, big guy.” She threw her hair behind her shoulders. “Ready for me?”

“Oh, if you’re sure.” Their hands came together and he gripped hers tightly, but hopefully not to the point of pain. He had his left gauntlet off—apparently Eliza was left-handed and preferred to use that arm. Jax was right-handed, but would allow using his left... mostly to give Eliza more of a fighting chance. He didn’t expect her to be able to match his strength, but he was always open to being surprised. “Now, channel your powers to your left arm.”

She nodded, knitting her eyebrows together. Her now-completely white hair began to shine a light
blue, and the braid it was in began to mildly float. Jax watched as first her arteries and veins lit up blue, then the rest of her arm glowed a lighter shade. “Think I’ve got it,” she said, and he could spot a bit of light coming from her mouth.

“Very well. Maria?”

Maria smiled. “On your marks in three... two...”

He locked eyes with Eliza. He wasn’t going to bench her immediately—just use more and more of his strength to see how much it augmented hers.

“—one... go!”

To her credit, Eliza caught him off guard. His arm lurched to his left, close to the table. Her soldiers gave a raucous cheer as she came close to victory. His pride reared and he chuckled, starting to put his back into it. With her powers active, Eliza was putting up a decent fight—but slowly, surely, he struggled their arms back to the starting position. The point where they gained no ground against each other, where they were equal in strength, it surpassed any human limitations he’d grappled with. Now, to see if it surged more struggling against the tide.

He started to tilt her arm towards the table and she bit her lip. There was another push against his hand and he could see her braid rise further. With that confirmed, it was best that Eliza didn’t break her own arm trying to beat him. “Don’t strain yourself too much,” he managed, not wanting to taunt her but also not wanting her to overwork herself.

“—you just want me to lose!” She eked out, though he could see her hair lower a little. She seemed to know her limits, as when he kept going and he could hear his congregation cheering him on, Eliza didn’t channel her powers further. Eventually, her knuckles touched the table and she let out the breath she was holding, giving up. Her powers dismissed, she patted the back of Jax’s hand with her free one. “I give, I give.”

He’d stopped pushing the moment she’d relaxed, so all that was left to do now was to withdraw. As he did and among the cheers of his followers, he searched her hand. “I did not cause you undue pain, did I?”

“Nah.” Eliza, worryingly, massaged her hand. “No more than I probably deserved. Shouldn’t have gone that hard trying to win.”

His mouth settled into a line and he leaned forward. “Truly, are you alright?”

“Hey, nothing some rest and not trying to wrestle the alien equivalent of the Terminator won’t help.” She smiled at him. “Get what you needed to know out of that, at least?”

Realizing the kind of concern he was showing in front of her troops, he cleared his throat and sat back. “Yes. It seems that your powers offer you a considerable amount of strength, perhaps building off of your already existing reserves.”

Her gentle smile turned into a confident grin. “All those years of keeping in shape had to be good for something. How much are we talking, if you can quantify that?”

“Far more than an average human, that is certain.” He put his left gauntlet back on. “It took me not an insignificant effort to equalize us—and more to win the duel. It is, however, hard to quantify without some method of official measurement.”

“Well, we’ve got weights in the GTS.” She looked like she was about to get up, but then stopped,
focusing on something around Jax’s head. “... say, you wouldn’t think I’d be able to beat you if I nicked your horns, would you?”

Ah, those. He chuckled. “It would be worth a shot, but I do not believe they are sized for you.” Something Mordenna brought up a while back came to his mind, and he stroked his chin. “My brother expressed an interest in making a similar set of psionic amplifiers for you, along with a set of gauntlets—for channeling, I would presume, and perhaps to offer you the same safety mine do to me. If you are interested in such a prospect, I would imagine he would be more than happy to accommodate you.”

“Sure thing, if only so I get a good shot at a rematch.”

He laughed again. Eliza certainly was stubborn if she put her mind to something—he knew that from experience. “And you will get one, worry not.”

“Good! I’d like to even the—”

Suddenly, Eliza stopped where she was at. Her joking face fell and she grew silent. The confusion and concern in the room was palpable. Jax rested his arms on the table. “Commander—?”

She held up a finger, interrupting him. She then pressed it to her ear. “Got it. I’ll be at the Bridge shortly.” Oh. She must’ve gotten interrupted by Bradford or the like. Eliza stood up. “Sorry to stop this here, but we got word from Volk *and* a distress call that a nearby haven’s getting raided.”

A raided haven? That would be Jax’s first spot of conflict since the aliens’ cave—if Eliza brought him along of course. He stood up with her. “Shall I accompany you?”

“Might as well.” She nodded to her soldiers and his own. “Be ready for if I call on you.” With that, she made her way to the room’s exit, where Jax followed her.

When they were out of the Studio, Jax decided he could start asking some questions. “What is the situation?”

“Don’t know much as of right now,” she began, “but it seems standard procedure. ADVENT’s flushing out a haven and it’s up to us to stop it.” She rolled her hand. “Funny thing is, this time we could’ve gotten backup—but it seems like we won’t get it. Bradford said that Volk also put in a call, but he was ‘busy.’ Can only imagine ADVENT found the Reapers as well.”

Despite himself, Jax hoped that the Reapers would make it out alright. Wouldn’t do XCOM good to lose one of its biggest pillars of support—even if they made it a habit to ostracise his brother. “Does it seem like a coordinated attack?”

“With our luck, probably. Hold on a second.” She fiddled with her communicator a few times, likely tuning into someone’s channel specifically. That was made clear when she started speaking. “Mordenna, I want you at the Bridge. We’ve got a distress call to respond to.” A pause. “See you there.” She let her arm drop. “I’m a little iffy about sending you two to help a haven—not that you guys wouldn’t be the best for the job, of course. You probably know this, but haven raids are when ADVENT field their more brutal forces. Berserkers, Chryssalids, Sectopods, the like. We need you and Mordenna for heavy firepower. But...”

He could understand Eliza’s implication, and gently patted her shoulder. “I will do what I can to avoid aggravating them, at least. At the end of the day, they are in their hour of need and we will be their saviors. For them to be ungrateful in the face of your assistance perhaps shines a light on their viability as an ally.”
“A good sentiment...” She blew a breath out of her nose. “Shame what would happen if I applied that to every haven I helped. Thought I was done working with councils when First Contact inevitably failed—turns out they just rebranded.”

A chance here seemed to present itself, and Jax withdrew his hand. “Would you like to talk about it? Later, of course, when we are not imminently about to foil ADVENT.”

“I...” Eliza was quiet for a moment, and she slowed down, rubbing the back of her neck. “... I really should, shouldn’t I? I don’t want to shove my problems off onto you, but...”

“Please, Eliza. I am asking to be informed. I am requesting for you to bother me—of course, that latter statement is falsehood. I could never be bothered by supporting you. After this mission, presuming I am not laid up with injuries—and even then, I might speak with you in the Infirmary—we shall speak on the topic and let you air out your grievances.”

Eliza sighed, but sped back up. “Alright. I’ll meet with you then. Suppose I should give you guys the chance to pay me back for everything, yeah?”

“It is the least I can do.”

Though he could not see her face, he could feel her smile in the shift of her signature—and how it gently expanded in the beginnings of a Solace. She truly could do that on command, couldn’t she?

The two of them entered the Bridge, and Jax could feel the ship gently lurch as it took off. Seemed they were already en route. Bradford was over at the Hologlobe, and he looked up as the two of them approached. “Commander. Warlock. Situation is as bad as it usually is.”

Eliza was quick to come over and lean on the railings. “How far in progress is it?”

“Just started, give or take a few minutes. Haven called Gilligan’s Ridge. ADVENT dropships seem to have deployed all the force they intend to use, and the haven’s getting chewed up.”

“What about Volk? He busy because ADVENT’s after him, too?”

“Sounds like it. Apparently his scouts had spotted ADVENT in the area—and they seemed to have a vague idea of where they should be looking. They were packing up and moving camp when he sent me the message.”

The Commander nodded. “Then we need to be quick. There’s going to be a lot of wounded on the ground and plenty of more difficult units to tend to. Sherry, Rosa, and SYN are absolute musts.”

Bradford was the one to take out a datapad this time, and the globe changed to a roster. “Got it. The other three?”

“Far be it from me to send the Chosen to a haven, Bradford, but...” She looked to Jax. “Jax has his new weaponry and is good for turning the forces against themselves, and Mordenna can take out key targets from relative safety.” Of course, Fal-Mai was left out of her explanation for obvious reasons. “If you have a reason not to send them that isn’t the obvious one, I’d love to hear it.”

Bradford shook his head, sighing. “No, but you know how the haven will get.”

“I don’t mean to be cruel,” she replied, kneading the bridge of her nose, “but it’s us or get wiped by ADVENT. Hope they understand that, even if it won’t dampen the eventual complaining much.”

That was when one of the doors to the Bridge opened and in stepped Mordenna—followed closely
by Fal-Mai. Hm. One must’ve found the other on the way. “I’m here, Liz,” Mordenna began, “what’s the sitch?”

“Haven raid.” She nodded to his sister. “Hey, Fal-Mai.”

“Greetings, Commander.” Fal-Mai joined the rest of them. “I do not mean to suggest myself to be on the mission—I was simply with Mordenna.”

“We’re on the final stages of the prosthetic.” Mordenna smiled despite the situation. “The neural link is reading her with perfect accuracy and at this point it’s a matter of me programming the Specter core and ‘bonding’ it with her. If you gave me an hour or two I might be able to slap together a base version with no bells and whistles for this mission... but I highly suspect this is very time-sensitive.”

“Sadly, yes. Don’t have that kind of time.” Eliza gestured to him. “While you’re here, you wouldn’t mind accompanying your brother?”

“Not at all, Commander. I’ll hang back so they can just attribute the highly unique sniper shots and precision accuracy to one of the other Sharpshooters.”

“Glad to have you on board,” Bradford mumbled. “And the last?”

“Roland, probably. Need ourselves a close range expert and Roland is a little too... twitchy for covert, so he’s been benched for a bit.”

“Hopefully he’s not rusty.” The roster was summarily filled, and the display went back to the globe, their destination displayed. “I’ll get who we need down to the Armory and ready to deploy. Anything else, Commander?”

“Other than to get ready for another episode of me getting yelled at for daring to help? I think we’re ready to go.”

Mordenna chuckled, though Jax gently sighed. That woman really did have too much to deal with.

The scene on the ground was troublesome, to be sure.

Jax descended from the Skyranger in his usual fashion to have the distant roar of fire and gunshots fill his ears. The sky had grown a reddish gray from the smoke already kicked up and embers blew in the direction of the mild wind like wisps. Underneath the din of fire and flame he could hear screaming—and he had a pang of sympathy for Fal-Mai for a brief second. He wouldn’t imagine being able to pick out every distressed cry.

At least the grass under him wasn’t really burnt yet. The rest of his squad landed just outside of the border of the cleared haven—close enough that he could spy some mag fire flying the Skyranger’s way. Firebrand already took off before any of it could hit her, of course. Jax focused his attention back ahead, taking his cannon into his hands. “I trust everyone knows their roles?”

“Don’t gotta ask me twice.” Mordenna was behind him, though he watched as his vision snapped to a nearby tower. “That a watchtower? Hello, my new perch.” Just like that, Mordenna was off, scrambling up the tower without even bothering to use the ladder, setting himself up. Good to
know they would have sniper support early, at least.

Nevertheless, Jax advanced. “SYN, Fortuna, to me. We march.”

“Understood. Advancing.” Jax let Rosa and SYN overtake him as they rushed ahead, keeping an eye out for potential threats. He almost stopped in his tracks when a crack of the Darklance rang out, fearing a threat close by, but he glanced at the trail. It streaked farther into the haven than they were—he must be already taking out priority targets.

An unearthly, but familiar screech sounded out, and SYN gunned down one of the approaching Chryssalids. “Contact!” Rosa confirmed, sending another one packing with a kick of her own gun.

The squad began to gun down the encroaching beasts—save Jax, but he had a reason. If there were Chryssalids here, there might be cocoons. Or survivors, if they were lucky. His vigilance paid off; there was a man scampering away from the center of the haven, blood streaming from a clutched arm. He laid his eyes on Menace and stopped—an unwise move, as one of the Chryssalids menacing them turned and skittered towards him.

Not on Jax’s watch. He freed a hand from his gun to throw out his psionics, which lanced forward towards the Chryssalid. They took shape and a wicked claw formed, grasping the Chryssalid and stopping it in its tracks. Then, taking a cue from one of the Vipers he’d watched at the cave, he whipped the tether back and flung the beast against the ground with heavy force. It must’ve died on impact, because there was a mildly sickening crunch and there was no movement from there.

Fair by Jax. Sherry gunned down the last Chryssalid and looked to him. “I’m going to establish triage in front of Mordenna’s sniper tower! Direct anyone you get to here.”

He nodded, moving forwards with the rest of the squad. The man must’ve heard them, as he limped towards Sherry as she stayed behind, taking him and setting him down. There were hopefully more to be saved in the depths of this warzone.

“Menace One-Five,” Eliza came in, “we’re getting reports of a Sectopod on site. Jax, if you can do more tricks like that, I want you to pull out anyone close to it when you start demolishing it. Can you guys keep collateral damage to a minimum?”

“Collateral damage is kind of our thing,” Rosa fired back—then she also fired upon a nearby Trooper. “But point taken.”

“Hey, goons, visual confirmation of that bastard.” Another shot from Mordenna screamed past, and this time Jax watched as it downed a Muton. “I’d take it out myself but it is right in the middle of this whole damn mess. You’re going to have to lure it and evacuate some people.”

“Acknowledged. After sufficient clearing of the current combat arena,” SYN replied, “I will see what I can do in regards to provoking the ire of the beast.”

“Well said, honey.” Rosa reloaded her gun. “Let’s light ‘em up!”

That, Jax could do. They were getting closer to the center of the haven, and Jax was starting to put the minigun to work. It was a morbid treat to watch Mordenna’s creation in action as his formed his own cover, thinking of the pillars that Templars would often make. From there it was a spin of the barrels and a shower of modified lead that destroyed most cover and the enemies he aimed it at. He had his fair share of sharpshooting at the cave, but this? This was a different beast entirely.

Speaking of beasts, it was clear that ADVENT had, indeed, let the Berserkers out to rampage. People were scattering in Menace’s direction, and SYN’s BIT was now looping a loud
Jax was playing hero today, wasn’t he? At the same time he clipped his gun back to his belt, he leapt through the Void in a teleport, coming to stand over the woman as the Berserker raised its arms in a downwards swing. It was just a moment later that Jax raised his own to intercept the strike. The very limits of his strength were tested as he nearly buckled under the force of the blow—but he held, and he forced himself not to thank the Elders for the overwhelming strength in his design. He didn’t know if the woman beneath him had gotten up, so best to be sure. “Go! Run!”

It was then that he heard her scrambling away—and saw the Berserker withdraw a fist to sock him in the chest. He wasn’t exactly prepared to block that, and his hand was in the middle of shifting direction—

—when the Berserker’s head exploded in a mass of orange gore. Jax barely shielded his face in time but he could still feel some get in his hair, and that was almost worse than getting his rib cage caved in. He quickly backed up and into cover. As he did his best to wipe the chunks out of his hair, Mordenna came in on comms. “Bro. You alright? Didn’t nick you?”

“I’m fine,” he strained. “As fine as getting blood and gray matter in my hair gets.”

“Oh, boo hoo. Glad I didn’t take some off the top, at least.”

Jax sighed. Yes, he really shouldn’t be caring about his hygiene too much at the moment, but it still distressed him. Mindful he was still in a live fire zone, he took his rifle off of his back and readied it. “Menace, I am unharmed. We are clear to proceed.”

“Good to hear, even if it looks like you’re bleeding from the scalp.” Roland took one of the Fusion Axes he’d chucked out of the corpse of a Stun Lancer. “Lotta this haven just ran past us I think. Onto the Sectopod?”

The earth rumbled, step by step, and the sounds of mechanical servos working filled the air. “Seems we don’t have much of a choice,” Rosa replied. “SYN?”

If they had some sort of plan between the two of them, it went unsaid. SYN stood his ground as the Sectopod audibly approached. A few more haven members ran past—this time they were the ones wielding conventional rifles and a mag gun or two, attempting to pepper the mechanical nightmare with shots as they retreated. Jax called out to one as he passed. “Do you have any more civilians in the haven?”

The man, wielding one of the mag rifles, dove into cover. “Nobody who isn’t dead! Just got this thing and a few of those skittering bastards!”

Jax turned his sight back to the Sectopod, now visible. “Finish your retreat to triage! XCOM will handle this.” Jax didn’t bother to look if the man had complied. He fired off a few shots at the hull of the Sectopod and looked to SYN. “Where are we diverting it to?”

“The building density is far lesser towards the east. I suggest we—”

SYN was interrupted by the Sectopod completely ignoring Menace, seemingly being directed
towards the south. It smashed over a tower before Jax quickly holstered his gun, using both hands and his psionic strength to practically lasso it, causing it to lurch backwards a bit as he halted its advance. He dug in his feet as he was dragged forward, clenching his fists around his psionics as it strained against his hold. “We may not have a choice in the matter! Mordenna!”

A blast of green shards shredded through the Sectopod’s armor from the back as SYN fired upon it with his gauntlet, but it was the thundering shot from the Darklance that ripped through its hull. Unfortunately, with the destruction of vital components came the lack of orders directing it to stand—as Jax quickly released his grip on it, the influence of his pull still caused it to fall back, right between him and Menace. The holes the gunfire made began to glow from the inside with dangerous luminance, and he knew he wouldn’t get to the rest of the squad in time to shield them and him. Not both parties—but Jax knew which one was more hardy.

Bracing himself the best he could, he projected the shield over the rest of his squad, covering his face with his gauntlets as he did. That, of course, didn’t prepare him adequately for being near ground zero of an exploding Sectopod. A wave of force crashed into him and he was flung far back—only stopping when he hit one of the ramshackle buildings, and he could feel it cave under his velocity. Pain wracked his body but it was greater and stabbing in a few places; those were likely shrapnel wounds. He slid down from the wall he’d impacted and sucked in a breath through his teeth as he doubled over, coughing.

Despite his pain, his first concern was to the others. Slowly, he raised his head. Sure enough, he witnessed his own psionics dissipating to reveal Menace, unharmed but clearly very concerned. His ears were still ringing from the blast and he couldn’t quite hear was Rosa said—not that he could reply. That really had knocked the wind out of him. The alto of Eliza’s voice came on in his ear, and he only caught something to the tune of asking if he was fine. He coughed a few more times, taking in shaky breaths. “I—I’m fine. J-just need medical attention. Mildly deaf.”

SYN came over and offered his hand, which Jax took. He was a little unsteady on his feet but tried his best to not lean against the SPARK. His pride was already in pieces over the whole situation—best not to ruin it further. The ringing in his ears slowly subsided and he massaged his forehead. “—I believe I can hear now.”

“Don’t scare me like that.” Mordenna, to his credit, sounded genuinely concerned. “I know you’re a tank but that was pushing it, even for you. Look at you, you’re a pincushion for shrapnel right now!”

Mordenna wasn’t far off. The parts of him that were aching more, indeed, had shrapnel sticking out of them. His armor had stopped a few from being lethal, at least. Of course, his unprotected biceps had a few shards. He sighed, looking over them. Jax really needed that new set of armor as soon as Fal-Mai’s arm was done. “I will be alright as long as I can make it to triage. I simply need these removed.”

“Man’s got at least five pieces of blown Sectopod sticking out of him,” Roland grumbled, though without heat, “and he’s less distressed than getting Berserker brains in his hair. Think you and Clint have more in common than you think.”

After a few steps and nearly falling over, Jax conceded to SYN’s support and leaned against him as they walked. “Pain is temporary. Gore in the hair will take ages to wash out.”

“Glad to hear you’re holding up, at least.” Eliza herself sounded relieved. “Menace, keep your eyes peeled for any lingering forces, including Faceless. The fact that we haven’t seen any worries me.”
That was true, actually. Out of all the forces Menace had gunned down and were now littering the grass, there were no Faceless among them. That meant there was a very good chance someone at triage was not who they were.

Just as Jax happened upon that thought, the distinctive pop of the Darkclaw firing echoed through the area. Someone had engaged Mordenna at close range? Jax began to leave SYN and try to walk faster, but his aid was quick to catch up and hold him back. “Warlock Tessura, you are in no position to be running off ahead.”

“That was Mordenna’s pistol,” he protested. “If someone has gotten close enough to mandate him using it over his rifle—”

“Hey, bro, I’m fine.” They rounded the building that was blocking their sightline, which revealed the scene to them. The fighters were in front of the wounded, with Sherry in their midst. She had her gun out and pointed at a downed Faceless. Mordenna himself was leaning over the tower. Now that he was in earshot, he raised his voice. “Hadn’t seen the Faceless ‘til I did a check of the patients here. Honestly, that’s a failing on my part.”

“So long as you saw it before it cut off anyone’s head.” Sherry holstered her gun, letting out a breath. “Just about gave me a heart attack, firing off at it like that. Can we please get this body moved?”

“Normally I would say that Jax could handle that so there would be no risk of contamination, but...” Eliza trailed off, her concern clear.

Jax shook his head. “With luck, it will be the last use of my powers for today. I simply need to drag it farther away from the wounded.” With that, he raised his arm. Psionic claws formed around the Faceless body and carted it away, though he could start to feel a minor pinch around his eyes. That shield for the explosion really took it out of him, especially considering he hadn’t even used it on himself. When the body was far enough away, he let it drop, dismissing his powers and leaning a bit more against SYN.

Sherry nodded to him thankfully, then took in his wounds, grimacing. “I’ll get to you soon, Warlock. We’ve got a few cases of Chryssalid venom here and I have to make sure antivenoms are properly administered.”

“Fuck having him wait.” Mordenna dropped down smoothly from the tower, navigating around the haven members to Sherry. “Tweezers, thread, bandages, liquid painkiller if you got it. I’ll get my brother squared away.”

“I’ll need those back as soon as you’re done.” Sherry reached into her bags and gave Mordenna his requested supplies. “I didn’t think you would know first aid, Hunter.”

“Comes with the territory of memorizing human anatomy. On the surface, us Chosen are pretty much like humans.” He took the materials. “Don’t ask how I know so much about human anatomy. You’ll sleep better at night.”

Looking like she didn’t even want to know that much, Sherry went back to work. Mordenna walked over and gestured to SYN. “SYN, lay my brother on the ground, would you?”

As the SPARK complied, Jax scoffed weakly. “First you smear guts into my hair and now dirt. What kind of brother are you...?”

“A Hunter, as far as I know.” He took a knee beside him, waving the rest of Menace away. “You
guys patrol the area or something, bound to be some Chryssalids lurking while I’m not watching. I gotta tend to my brother here.”

Obligingly, the members of Menace dispersed, leaving Mordenna and Jax near the wounded. Mordenna prepared his suture needle. “Alright, bro, I’m no Sammy but we might as well get these surface ones removed. Painkillers or no painkillers?”

Jax let out a breath, managing his breathing to stave off the incoming minor headache. “If anything, I would like headache relief. Void willing, I shouldn’t contract a migraine, but headaches annoy the most.”

“Well, unless I can jam a needle right into your brain with no issue...” Mordenna sighed. “No painkiller, then. Leaves more for Sherry.” He tapped Jax’s chestplate. “Any of these shards go through?” When Jax shook his head, he nodded. “Alright. Really need to make you that new armor, now. Just the shards in the non-armored parts, right?”

“Right.” As Mordenna began to extract the first piece of shrapnel from his arm, he sucked in a breath through his teeth. “Curse me and my vanity,” he strained as Mordenna got out the metal and began to sew.

“Not really your vanity so much as it was Cronus’s, innit?” Mordenna pressed his mouth into a line. “Not to talk shit about them right now—”

“Please, Mordenna, do it as you wish.” Jax let his head thump back against the ground, staring into the hazy sky. “I should never have even defended them as I had. Cannot believe it took me witnessing Fal-Mai lose her arm to finally get it though my abhorrently thick skull...”

“Not like you weren’t indoctrinated, bro,” Mordenna softly replied, finishing up the suture and bandaging the wound. “I feel bad for holding it against you back then. Had my own head stuck so far up my ass regarding it all that I kinda forgot I was really the only one getting the belt all those years.” He sighed. “Maybe some of it was frustration. That really childish mentality of ‘he got beat, doesn’t he know now?’”

“Call it childish if you want.” Despite everything, Jax managed a timid smile. “Far be it from me to throw stones, being the younger of the two of us...”

Mordenna chuckled gently at that, moving onto the next piece of shrapnel. “Hey, nobody has to know. As far as they know, you’re like a hundred years old and I’m maybe forty.”

Jax groaned through another piece being removed. “I don’t appear that old, do I?”

“Bro. Wrinkled face, long, white hair, vocabulary like your parents were thesauruses? You’re not doing yourself any favors.”

“As much as you complain, I believe you would be the first to tell me to ‘shut up’ if I began speaking remotely in your style.”

His brother laughed at that, then slowed down in his sewing, the horror of the notion slowly dawning on him. “… that just isn’t right. Like, I’m imagining it now and why did you burden me with this knowledge?”

Jax just grinned back at him. “At any point in time, I could drop my eloquence and you would be wholly unprepared. Think the next time you dare to cross me, for you now know the consequences.”
“Jesus fuck, Jax, I think this is the first time I’ve been legitimately afraid of you. Stop spooking me and let me sew you up.”

He kept his laughter to a minimum, mindful of the fact that Mordenna needed precision. The rest of the time, his brother went about his work quietly, leaving Jax time to reflect. Hopefully the haven wouldn’t mind too much that the Commander had sent two separate Chosen to defend it. In Jax’s mind, it was the right choice, considering what ADVENT usually sent to these raided havens. Then again... Jax had conducted a haven raid of his own or two in the past. Mordenna, as well. He was also understanding of why they wouldn’t exactly want the Chosen to come back.

Eventually, Mordenna finished up, even yanking out the shards in Jax’s armor for good measure. “There we are. I’d still get scanned after all this in the Infirmary to make sure none snuck underneath—doesn’t feel like it, does it?”

Well, it was hard to distinguish between all the different pain, so Jax just sat up and shrugged. “I’m unsure. I will be stopping by the Infirmary regardless.”

“Good on you. You sure you can stand?”

Just to check, Jax accepted his brother’s offered hand and stood up. His dizziness was gone by this point, so he nodded. “I should be fine in walking. I... appreciate your concern and support as always, brother.” He sighed. “I’m the ‘eldest’ of us two, it should be me supporting you.”

“Eh, chuck those notions out the window. ‘Sides, this is one of the few chances I do get to help you out. Usually it’s me losing my shit and you having to calm me down right alongside Fal-Mai.”

Jax frowned. “But, with all my episodes...?”

“And all of mine? At the very least we’ll call it even, alright?”

Conceding the point, Jax nodded. “Alright.”

“Fantastic! Now, if you excuse me, I have some tools to pass back to Sherry. Don’t go getting yourself in trouble, now.”

He chuckled as his brother walked away, finding Sherry and handing her tools back. He would’ve listened into their conversation had something else interesting not happened. Out of the corner of his eye, Jax spotted a man coming up to the resistance fighters—a little bit shorter than average, buzzed, brown hair, somewhat pale complexion. He was going around them and telling them variations of “come with me.” The two caught each other’s eyes and it was the man who drew up his upper lip, pointedly moving on to the next fighter in line. Hm. Jax figured the man was probably someone of authority as he led the fighters away from the triage area.

“Don’t let Tyler get to you, he’s a salty asshole.”

A voice behind him made Jax turn. A woman was behind him, leaning on a crutch. She was a few shades lighter than “Tyler,” but more muscled and scarred. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and the pupil of her right eye was milky. A quick glance down explained the crutch—she was missing the lower half of her left leg.

Mindful not to stare, Jax focused on her face. “It would take more than a heated glare and scowl to shake myself, I would hope. At the same time, I do not begrudge him for his anger.”

“More tolerant than I am, then.” She offered her hand, which Jax took. “Name’s May. Second in command to Tyler there. He won’t say this, so I will; thank you for coming out here today.
you Chosen haven’t exactly been the best for the havens, but if the Commander trusts you enough to send you out here? Figures I should trust you, too. Plus, I saw the way you saved Isabelle.” May grinned. “Takes more courage than I’ve got to get in the way of a Berserker like that.”

Jax shook his head. “It was merely the right thing to do—perhaps spurred on by the fact that I did not wish to witness such a terrible act happen right in front of me when I could’ve prevented it.”

“Damn, you’ve done a 180. We’ve got a working TV here at Gilligan’s Ridge—I used to tune into all your outings. Half because I loved your outfits. A dress at a grand ballroom, huh?”

He merely shrugged. “It was fitting for the tone of the night and I especially favored the design my tailors had come up with. I find my taste in clothes fluid, so long as they do me justice.”

May laughed at that. “You’ve got taste, I’ll give you that. Still, back to my point—no offence to you, but you seemed pretty damn stuck up and haughty.”

“That persists,” he jokingly grumbled, “if you believe my brother.”

“And the joking!” She gestured to him. “… XCOM really did work out better for you, huh?”

“In many ways. Even one as blinded by indoctrination as I eventually saw the Elders’ folly for what it was.”

“Gives me hope, that does. By the way...” She pointed to the gouges in his chestplate. “You gonna be alright? I saw your brother working on you, but.”

Jax scoffed lightly. “I’ve had worse. Not much stacks up to actually perishing a few times.”

She chuckled again and shook her head. “I hope you guys get a few more chances to visit when our place isn’t on fire. Where’s your sister, by the way?”

“She...” Jax cleared his throat. “She was laid up with an injury and currently is resting in the Avenger. I can only imagine she will be ready to appear once more in a while, all things permitting.”

“Jeez. If standing next to one of those terrifying pieces of shit while it’s exploding isn’t enough to stop you, what the hell is?”

Jax was silent for a second. Then, “There are a few things our regeneration cannot cover. I shall leave it at that.”

May nodded gravely, readjusting on her crutch. “Family matters, I got it. Well, Warlock, hope things get better for all of you. I’m going to figure out what the hell Tyler’s doing, taking all our gunners away.”

“Best of luck,” he returned as May left. It was at that time he saw the members of Menace starting to return, guns holstered.

Rosa was the first to approach. “There were a few more Chryssalids on the perimeter, owing to a cocoon we missed, but we handed them. Area’s clear.”

Jax nodded, noting Mordenna joining them as well. “Commander?”

“ Heard her loud and clear. Cherry, how goes the wounded? ”

“A few more people to check,” she responded, “but I don’t see anyone bursting into those
Chryssalid boils, so it’s just seeing to injuries at this point.”

“Understood. Menace One-Five, call the Skyranger. Firebrand can park her bird until you’re all ready to go—need to have the corpse collectors out there, anyway.”

“I’ve got the flare,” Roland replied, “I’ll handle that.”

As Roland walked off, Jax could see Tyler approaching again with the fighters in tow, their weapons at rest. He seemed to be pointedly not looking at Jax. “When your squad leader gets back, I want to have a word with him.”

“Squad leader—?” Rosa then rested a hand on her hip. “Acting squad leader right now is Jax, here. Not Rascal.”

Tyler’s gaze went stony. “So you’re telling me XCOM would not only just let the Chosen walk onto their team, they’d let one of them lead a squad? Disgraceful.”

Jax and Mordenna looked between each other, and Mordenna did a “you seeing this?” gesture to Tyler. Jax gave a single chuckle, which only seemed to infuriate Tyler. Before he could speak, though, SYN interrupted him. “Regardless of if Jax is our squad leader or not, if there is something you wish to say to one of us, it is best to say it to all of us. We may wait until Rascal returns.”

Tyler just scoffed, crossing his hands. “Fine.”

Roland eventually came back to them, and as he walked around the wounded, Jax could see Sherry lifting her head to listen. “The hell’s going on here?” He asked when he rejoined the squad.

“Just an address,” Tyler responded. “Were this any other day and any other circumstance, I’d be thanking XCOM for getting ADVENT off our backs. However…”

He snapped his fingers, and suddenly all of the resistance fighters had their guns aimed at Menace. Jax almost wanted to laugh for a second—but he wasn’t the only person here. Out of the corner of his eye, one of them was aiming at Sherry, as well. Menace One-Five raised their arms in surrender.

Mordenna was the first to respond. “What in the fresh hell are you doing?”

“Simple. Killing ADVENT.” Tyler threw out his hands. “I know XCOM exists. They’re on the side of the humans, I know that. So when I’m hearing these rumors about XCOM bringing in aliens, I just know they can’t be true. Especially with you three ‘leaving’ ADVENT. Ain’t no way they would’ve allowed that. This ain’t XCOM here. This is just another damn branch of ADVENT.”

A pause. Then, from Roland; “You’re joking, right? We’ve been defending havens with the same people for months and you’re about to pull the trigger on us because we’ve got two fresh faces in the mix?”

“Now that’s fair. Maybe I’ve got everything all wrong.” Tyler paced to the side. “Could just be XCOM here, doing their duty. But with the Chosen? I find that hard to believe. If you really are XCOM…” He fixed the Chosen with a deadly stare. “You’ll let my boys here shoot these two bastards dead.”

Well, this was a hell of a situation. SYN’s BIT floated forwards, and the Commander’s voice started streaming from it. “Tyler, this is absurd. Let my soldiers go. Do you think ADVENT would be fine with wiping out their own forces en masse?”
“They’ve got reserves,” he shot back, “don’t you dare try to defend them.”

“Defend?! I’m trying to make sure you don’t wipe out a squad full of good people.”

“I’m sure the humans are good people, the robot too maybe. But these two?” He spit on the ground. “I know havens that have been wiped out by them personally. They’ve got a lot to answer for, ‘Commander.’ If you’re XCOM, you know that.”

“Tyler.” That was May, coming forwards. “These people just came and saved our sorry asses. If they were ADVENT they could’ve just let us burn.”

“All part of their plan,” he replied, “of fooling us. Now, what’s it gonna be, ‘Commander?’ Two inhumane maggots or the whole squad?”

Eliza went to reply again, but Jax was trying to formulate a plan and didn’t quite catch the ensuing conversation. Forcing his hair to stay still behind him, he bumped fingers with Mordenna, opening a link with him. “Any ideas, brother?”

“You know how quick of a draw I am,” he responded, eyes flitting about, “but some of these fucks are obscured by our own. Plus... how good of a look is it to walk out of here having killed like, eight of these people ourselves?”

Eight of them, hm? Jax knew where they all were. He knit his eyebrows together. “I may possess a plan, but you have to act quickly with me.”

“All ears.”

“I’m going to disarm all of them—I know where they are. At the same time, I want you to lunge forward and take the leader hostage in case I miss any of them. If he truly is unscrupulous, he won’t hesitate to tell them to lay down their arms.”

“Gotcha. Let me know.”

For a second or so more, Jax confirmed where they were all at, holding his breath to do a minor search. He then mentally prepared himself as Tyler was getting more annoyed with Eliza’s stalling. “Count of three. One. Two.”

“Too late, ‘Commander.’” He bared his teeth at them. “They’re all dying—”

“Three!”

There was a flurry of motion. From Jax’s back, eight claws emerged, and he could feel them successfully close around the fighter’s weapons in just an instant. They twisted and yanked the guns out of their hands. At the same time, he watched as Mordenna leapt forward, tackling Tyler to the ground and rolling back into a sitting position, drawing his Darkclaw and holding it to the haven leader’s head. Jax lifted the guns far out of reach, letting his hair billow out once more.

The sudden turnaround of the situation left all but the brothers baffled for a second. Tyler was the first to regain his wits, struggling in Mordenna’s grip until he pressed the gun further against his head. “Stop struggling you pile of puke.”

Nobody spoke. Jax let his hands fall, his thoughts brewing. “Commander? May I handle this?”

“So long as nobody dies...”
“Of course.” Jax turned back to the crowd, trusting Mordenna to keep a handle on Tyler. “I shall make this very clear, as to not be misunderstood again—my siblings and I have willingly defected from ADVENT and the Elders. We have made the choice of our own accord, and this is indeed XCOM that has come to your aid today. Were we some spy branch of ADVENT, we would not need to guide to wounded to safety, to save those who we could, or even to kill the invading forces. Merely ‘drive them back’ with missed gunfire. Your wounded will be tended to before we depart. However...” He looked back to the BIT, staring the camera right in the eye, almost looking at Eliza herself. “Far be it from me to make presumptions, but it seems this haven leader does not wish for his haven to be supported by XCOM.”

That was enough to make the crowd stir. He looked to Tyler, still fixing Jax with a venomous gaze. “G-good. We... we don’t want the support of ADVENT.”

“Shut the hell up you sack of garbage!”

“And let us die?! ”

“We’d be dead without them!”

The cries of the people went up, and Jax crossed his arms. This seemed to be the kind of decision made without consulting the rest of the haven. Acting on that hunch, Jax raised his voice. “Am I to be led to believe that this miscreant made the decision to hold up XCOM without the support of his people?”

Affirmative responses came back to him. Grandly, Jax spread out his hands. “A leader who does not take into account the will of his supporters is no leader at all. A leader who acts against his follower’s wishes should be usurped! Pray tell, are there any willing to step up to the plate to dethrone this tyrant?”

Movement to his right made him turn. May was walking up to Mordenna and Tyler, staring the latter in the eye. “I will. I’ve tolerated everything you’ve done for too damn long, Ty. I stood on the sidelines and watched as you got good people killed. It’s about damn time I did something about it.”

Jax turned back to the crowd. “All in favor of the old?” Nothing. A few jeers, and that was it. “All in favor of the new?” That got him the cheers. He looked back to May. “Gilligan’s Ridge is summarily yours, I would declare. Any new decrees?”

“Definitely.” She addressed SYN’s BIT. “Gilligan’s Ridge denounces the actions of its former leader and recognizes the Chosen as part of XCOM. We wish to continue to receive the support of XCOM and, in turn, support it however we can.”

“The actions of Tyler Hayden are recognized as his own and do not, in XCOM’s eyes, reflect the attitude of Gilligan’s Ridge at large. Gilligan’s Ridge will continue to be supported by XCOM—and personally, as a Commander? I wouldn’t hold the innocent to the crimes of the guilty.”

“Good to hear.” May snapped her head back at Tyler. “As for you. Far as I see it, you’ve got two options—exile, or the ‘brig.’”

Exile out in this area could only mean death. Tyler snarled, but deflated. “Lock me up. One day you all will see your mistakes, and I’ll be there to laugh.”

Two of the guards approached Mordenna and Tyler, the former releasing the latter into custody. Jax lowered the guns onto the ground, away from the three of them as they walked back into the
haven. May sighed. “Finish up with the wounded and then you can certainly leave if you want. We’ve got the means to put out the fires ourselves.”

“Loud and clear.” Eliza’s voice stopped filtering from the BIT, instead coming over comms. “Menace One-Five, admirable work. Firebrand’s almost on the scene. Cherry?”

“Done.” Sherry was rejoining the squad. “Guy pointing the gun at me didn’t seem to mind me continuing to patch up their wounded so much.” She scoffed at the retreating form of Tyler. “Dumbass.”

“Damn right.” May came up to Jax once again. “Hope you guys don’t think too much lesser of us because of him. Promise he doesn’t represent all of us. And...” She sighed. “Thank you. Again. Was half a second away from tackling Tyler my damn self to smack some sense into him.”

“As always,” he replied, “it was simply the right thing to do.”

“Say any more cliches and the end credits music is gonna start,” Mordenna muttered, walking to his brother. “You alright, bro? As far as my record goes, that was one use of psionics more than anticipated.”

“I’ll be fine,” he said, feeling his eyebrows involuntarily twitch. The headache hadn’t gotten much worse, but it was there.

“Oh, bullshit, bro.” Mordenna looked over his shoulder, then addressed May. “You can say whatever else you’d like to say to the Commander and she’ll get it relayed—I wanna get my brother home so something else doesn’t jump us and make him have a hernia or something.”

May chuckled and waved them off. “Go on, then. Hopefully we can see each other again on better terms.”

Jax nodded, and a voice came in on comms. “Menace, this is Firebrand. I’m parked and ready for you. Sorry I missed whatever holdup was going on.”

“Eh, the Chosen solved it.” Rosa began to walk towards the Skyranger—which was indeed parked a walk away—with SYN in tow. “Just get us out of here once we’re in there.”

Very much agreed. Jax trailed after the rest of the squad with his brother beside him, taking calm breaths to manage his headache. He would be home and able to manage it in a bit.

When they got on the Skyranger, instead of sitting across from him, Mordenna came to sit down beside Jax in the seats. The reason for it was clear a moment later when he bumped his hand and pretty much requested a mind meld. When Jax complied, Mordenna was quick to talk. “Might as well do it like this so I can help you out.”

Help him? What was—oh. Mordenna’s signature had done what it did best and let him slip past Jax’s usual defences to get to his pain, and he was already making off with a good portion of it. “You don’t have to do that, brother. Have I not put you out enough?”

The ramp closed and the Skyranger gently tilted as it took off. “That would imply you’re putting me out and that it wasn’t entirely my choice to step into your brain and run off with some of your headache. Don’t worry about it. I’d like to be there for you. Family, and all.”

Jax was supposed to be the big brother, wasn’t he? He knew they just went over this, but it felt improper for Mordenna to have to support him. “I should be stronger than to have to lean on you constantly.”
Mordenna looked at him. “Hey there, Eliza, didn’t see you on the Skyranger. Please, Jax, we all get on her about doing that, don’t just turn around and cop her attitude. I love her to death but if I have to make two people unlearn that kind of thinking I’m going to scream.” His mental “tone” implied that it still wouldn’t be any major issue—only that he’d be mildly exasperated about it.

Jax looked to his feet, blowing a sigh out of his nose. “Apologies. I suppose I’m trying to lean into this ‘big brother’ attitude and finding myself lacking because of circumstances like this.”

“Shit happens. So long as you’ll be there for me when I need it—and you have been—I’ve got no problems with it.”

“Of course, brother. I wouldn’t dream of abandoning you.”

“Good to hear. That said.” He could feel Mordenna poke him mentally, and somehow he was able to “gesture” at a specific thought in Jax’s mind. “Didn’t mean to read your mind there while I was taking on a bit of your headache, but you wanna talk about shit we did in the past?”

Right. Mordenna must’ve caught onto his musings of the ways they really had wronged havens such as Gilligan’s Ridge. “I would wish to speak of it eventually, I suppose, so this just speeds up the process. Yes, I... I was thinking that, indeed, even lowly fools can have points sometimes.”

“All part of the redemption process, bro.” Mordenna looked back ahead, his mental space growing quieter. “Did my fair share of war crimes back in the day, y’know. It actually spooked me a little there how one of my first inclinations was to shoot all of the haven members holding us up, because it took me right back to all of the times I did it without a thought, y’know? I think, at this point, I’ve just accepted that there will be people who have the right to not forgive me. Doesn’t mean I won’t try to make amends where I can, but... it doesn’t seem selfish that it enables me to move on and worry about things I can help, does it?”

The mild insecurity there at the end was telling. Jax wound his fingers together. “I do not see it as selfish whatsoever—if anything, it may just be a mindset I adapt for my own sake. Perhaps it is a waste of energy to toil over things you could or could not have done in the past. Of course, there is still responsibility to be taken for your actions, but I would like to believe all three of us are not taking what we have done to innocent people lightly.”

“All part of the redemption process, bro.” Mordenna’s signature shifted to a kind of shy genuineness—and was that a bit of familial pride? “I’m glad that’s starting to sink in for you. It really wasn’t your fault what happened to the rest of us, you know? Just the Elders’. And since you said you were now completely fine with me shittalking them, I’m saying it: they were terrible as fuck parents and never saw us as kids to be raised—just as accessories or trophies. Or systems, in my case.”

“...agreed. And I would like to think I am learning. This, of course, does not mean I will not be striving to protect the both of you the best I can in the future, of course.”

“By all means! Happy to have someone watching my back.”

“Happy to watch it, Mordenna.” A small moment of mental silence lapsed between them. Jax’s mind wandered back to the Elders, and he tried his hardest not to think of Cronus. No, there was another Elder outside of the Trio he was concerned about.

He was leaving his thoughts open by choice, so naturally Mordenna picked up on it. “Yeah, I don’t know what to think of Argus either. I mean, fuck them for trying to turn Eliza into something against her will, but...” He could almost feel Mordenna’s mind working away, leaping to ten different thoughts at once along the same subject. Just how did he have any coherent thoughts? “It
shouldn’t take twenty years to Ascend a Chosen. Like, her files are dated 2015. By all rights this second war shouldn’t have even begun.”

That was both right and very strange. Jax poured over it for a second. He hadn’t witnessed the file himself, but Mordenna had given him a breakdown of the contents when he’d asked if the Elders had modified Eliza’s psionics at all. A year for the changes Argus wanted to make would be generous—twenty was overkill of the highest degree. With the growth therapy and minor mental tweaking, it should’ve taken perhaps a month or two at most. “There was something else I was wondering about. The second time I was... **punished, they appeared after Cronus had suddenly stopped.**” He closed his eyes, trying not to think of the pain beforehand. “I... I would think it would be Cronus to finish there, and what I had witnessed—the exchange between the two of them... I do not know what to make of it. The intensity of it, as well...”

Jax could feel Mordenna’s signature come in and support his, and he took the measure of comfort gladly. “Honestly, bro, what I was getting around that time? That was too extreme even for Cronus. Plus, combined with these breathing problems you’re seeming to have... I. I think Cronus was trying to **kill** you. If you say Argus came in and it stopped suddenly...”

The implication Mordenna was putting down... it unnerved Jax. To think of any Elder in a positive light? He’d just gotten away from it, largely, even as some parts of him still wanted to make excuses for them. What was Argus...?

“... I wouldn’t think too hard about it, Jax. In the end they’re an Elder and still just as guilty as the rest for drastically thinning out the human race, capturing the Commander, and, y’know, invading the planet.” Mordenna physically reached over and patted his shoulder. “Their time will come—my only regret is that Eliza won’t be there in person to cap them.”

Jax nodded at that, relaxing. They could be sure of that much, at least.

Stressful mission, that one. Mordenna was glad it was over.

As was tradition at this point, Mordenna made sure Jax made it to his followers alright before hugging him and regretfully withdrawing from the mind meld. On one hand, he was glad to not have a considerable headache—Jax really did a good job of hiding his pain on those, it seemed. On the other? Well, Maria was with him now. He didn’t have to worry that much. In any case, he was unofficial co-commander to Eliza and work partner of Bradford. He had business in the Bridge.

With long strides and a quick pace, it wasn’t too long before he was ducking under the doorway and entering the room. The screen in the corner had May’s face on it, and her and Eliza were talking. Well, he could always just hang around and see if he was needed at some point.

He watched as Bradford approached Eliza, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Commander? It’s Volk. He wants to know if the defense went alright.”

Eliza looked back to May. “I really don’t want to interrupt this,” she began. “Getting a new haven leader acquainted in the aftermath of an attack is important procedure.”

“I know. Maybe I’ll—”
“I’ll go talk to him.”

Both of them turned to Mordenna, and he gave a lazy wave. “I have some mildly unfinished business with the bastard anyway, and might as well let Lizzie give her undivided attention to the new leader of Gilligan’s. If you trust me to do it, of course.”

Eliza’s “of course” and Bradford’s “well...” came at the same time and he almost wanted to laugh. Bradford looked at Eliza and shrugged, shaking his head. “I suppose if the Commander clears it, fine by me. But you tell me if Volk gives you a hard time, alright? I’ll kick the bastard’s ass myself if I have to.”

“Bradford, language.” Even as she said that, Eliza was grinning. “Go ahead, Mordenna. Thank you.”

Mordenna gave a peace sign and walked right back out of the Bridge, his destination in mind. Volk was kind of a different beast to Elena. Mordenna would like to think they could still have a mildly civil conversation. Only mildly, of course. There could still be plenty of shit-slinging to be had.

He entered the Resistance Ring just to see Volk already on screen, who looked incredulously at Mordenna. “She sent you down here?”

“I know, right?” Mordenna shrugged, his hands out. “Woman’s mad. Good kind of mad, mind. Anyway, I’m here to tell you the defence went fine. Saved some civilians, they got the fires put out, and we only got held at gunpoint once!”

That made Volk stare at him a bit. “What.”

“Yeah, they did that. Granted, the situation got resolved pretty quickly and peacefully—by my standards, at least—and suffice to say it won’t be a problem at that haven again. They’re under new leadership, by the way.”

Volk massaged his forehead, sighing. “One of the saviors of the human race and they hold them up. I’m gonna have to go to some of the havens under our protection and tell them that if they pull shit like that against XCOM again they can kiss their assistance from us goodbye.”

“Oh, tell me about it. I was at risk of getting shot and all I could think of was ‘jesus fuck this can’t be good for the Commander’s blood pressure.’”

Volk looked like he almost wanted to laugh at that, but didn’t. He looked Mordenna in the eye. “...everything fine outside of that?”

“Absolutely. New leader established and she’s on the line with Liz right now. It’s why I’m down here instead of her.”

He crossed his arms, sitting back. “And she sent you knowing...?”

Mordenna casually waved it off. “It was Elena who sent me into an emotional breakdown for a solid hour and made it so we can pretty much never speak to each other again, not you. You’re just captain of holding me to Tomko’s memory and justifiably being angry about the things I’ve done...”
Slam dunk. Volk looked pretty uncomfortable with what Mordenna just said. As much as he loved banter with his former leader... sometimes it was nice to lash out a bit. He scratched at his beard, looking away. “... look. I really don’t stand by what Elena did at all. If she stayed... well, she would’ve gotten an earful from me, too. I don’t really think it’s right to hold you to something you were before.”

“Maybe it’s time you stop too, then,” Mordenna replied, voice quiet. “I’ve been letting it all slide, considering I’ve done some not-so-nice things to you guys in the past, but... if you guys are capable of forgiving and working with the Skirmishers, of whom you had a feud with for ages until Eliza got you to cut it out, then you’re capable of recognizing I’m not Tomko anymore. Won’t be and don’t intend to be, either. I’m Mordenna now.”

Volk went back to looking at Mordenna, and the expression he was wearing... it was one of familiarity. “—I can do that. Just, sometimes, like right then... I can see Tomko again. Telling me you’re not who you were and wanting to move on. Because... well, I guess it’s alright if I tell you, but you were—”

“Trans. I know. One of the few things I do know.” Mordenna crossed his arms, the corner of his mouth turning up. “Only gotta read about the Elder in charge of you removing your top surgery scars and slapping a dick on you once to get that picture. But, still, you knew Tomko before...?”

“Yeah. When all your folks called you ‘Rachel.’”

Oof. Just hearing that name sent some disgust into Mordenna—and it made a strange amount of sense for something else he didn’t want to be called. “—always wondered why I eventually had a guttural reaction to getting called Ref-Il. Too phonetically similar. Still, I’ve got a point to get to.” Mordenna gestured at the screen. “... we can catch up in person sometime, I think. I just want to be clear that I want to learn not because I want to be who I was, but so I can move on and become someone now. I’d like to think I am someone now. Just, changing a bit. Reclaiming what Odin took from me.”

Volk nodded, the creases of his face showing up even in the video feed. “We can do that. And... I suppose now would be the time to bury the hatchet, too. If I can forgive Betos for what she’s done? You’re right on the list next to her—and from the sounds of it, you had less of a choice in the matter than she did. I’d be happy to move on if you are. Because, quite frankly? I’ve been a bit of a dick.”

Mordenna chuckled, shaking his head. “Never thought I’d hear the day. Sure, old wolf. Next time Liz is in the area, I’ll catch you and talk your ear off.”

“I’d be interested in seeing how that goes. We all good?”

“All good, Volk. Catch you later.”

The video feed went dark, in the darkness of the Resistance Ring.
The Assassin knew she owed her life to her brothers in many ways. Today was just another reminder of that.

It had been a while of testing in the Workshop to make sure the implant she was currently wearing would read her intentions with perfect accuracy. Said device was a thin, disc-like object molded to where her shoulder used to be, with a line on the back running across her skin and ending in a port linked to her spine. That had been an... *interesting* installation, but Mordenna knew how to defuse awkward situations well enough. Plus, Samhien had been the one to hook her up, and she was very grateful for that.

Today was the moment of truth. She’d been called down to the Workshop and was just about there. Mordenna had mentioned just a day or so ago that he was on the final steps of the process of getting the Specter core reworked. Fal-Mai had no sense of scale on how hard that would be—but she assumed something like this would’ve taken a far longer time, especially when she took a moment to appreciate just what Mordenna was doing for her. Was he putting in any time he wasn’t hanging out with them or going on missions solely into working on her new arm?

That was a question she supposed she could ask shortly, if she ever got around to it. She opened the door to the Workshop and was greeted by the sight of Mordenna, leaned back against his workbench with a datapad in his hands. Lily wasn’t in sight. As she entered, Mordenna perked up and sat upright on his bench. “Fals! Perfect timing. Just did one last diagnostic and was leafing through some files Wiki gave me. You ready to see if this stuff works?”

“Of course.” She walked up to him, eyes on the table. The cube with the Specter core jutting out of the top was still there. “How will we go about this?”

“Well first we’re going to do one last test of your neural reader just to make sure it’s still working. Never can be too sure, you know.” He got up, gesturing for her to take his place. When she did, he rifled through the drawers on his workbench and came up with a cord he’d hooked up to her before. After he hooked it up to her device, he plugged the other end into his datapad. “Alright. You know the drill. Hold up some fingers.”

That turn of phrase was a little odd for what she was supposed to be doing. She was working on muscle memory alone for her missing arm, and these tests were to make sure everything was still transmitting correctly. She tried holding up her missing pinky finger the best she remembered.

“Pinky finger, other fingers curled inwards?”

Accurate as always. She nodded. Thumb and ring finger out.

“—I sometimes forget a lot of humans can’t just put their ring finger straight up like that. Thumb and ring finger?”

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**Restoration**

Chapter Summary

A project is completed in the Workshop.
“Such a strange phenomenon that they cannot.” Still, she nodded.

“Something, something, not enough individual muscles and tendons and the brain not properly distinguishing signals, last I remembered. One more, just to be sure.” For that, she simply spread out all of her fingers. “Open palm. Nice one to end on, if you ask me.”

“Correct.” Admittedly, Fal-Mai was getting a little impatient to gain some measure of control back. “Am I ready for my prosthetic now?”

“Excited, aren’t we? Well, I am too! Just want to make sure things will work smoothly.” Mordenna unplugged the cord from both his datapad and her body, putting it back. He placed the datapad down and tapped the cube. “Alright. Look here—this is your prothetic’s default state. Good for storage. When you want to hook it back up...”

He did a circle with his finger on top of the Specter core. In front of her, the cube morphed, the nanos sliding against each other until it was a disembodied arm, including the shoulder. The core was sticking out of the shoulder, clearly meant to socket against her arm. He picked it up, holding it. “You ready? This will return sensation to your arm, so brace yourself.”

She bobbed her head, placing a hand on the workbench to steady herself. “As ready as I will ever be.”

Steadily, Mordenna brought the arm towards her, pressing the core against the neural link. There was a bit of locking into place—and she gasped, clutching her arm. The sensation came all at once: a burst of pain, touch, and general feeling restored. It frazzled her. What frazzled her more was the feeling of the fingers on her left hand pressing through the nanos—and she watched as her new arm essentially lost form, puddling on the floor, connected by a thin strand. Fal-Mai winced as she still was getting feedback of it all. No longer pain, thankfully, but the puddle of nanos was still behaving as a limb and letting her feel the cold floor.

“Hey, hey.” Mordenna rubbed the back of her neck soothingly. “Breathe. Think... uh, arm-y thoughts. That’s your arm right there. Just try to move it like you used to, alright?”

A tall order when it felt like some alien appendage was suddenly stapled onto her. A fist. She wanted to make a fist. She closed her eyes and focused on the muscle memory. Slowly, she could feel it reforming, and then it was as if she’d never lost her arm to her senses. As she opened them, the nanos held, and she gently relaxed her hand. Fal-Mai then took the chance to inspect it.

It was as dark gray as the Specter it had once been. A few exploratory movements revealed it to be lighter than her old arm had been—quite a feat, considering her physical makeup. She wasn’t complaining in that aspect. Her conundrum earlier felt possible still, but as she continued to treat it and move it as if it were her arm, it stayed that way.

Mordenna was grinning when she looked over. “Going all smoothly?”

She nodded, setting it against the table. Hm. Strange. She wasn’t feeling as much through it. Fal-Mai ran her hand across the slightly-marked surface. Before she would’ve been able to feel every scratch and indent, but now? It felt like she was wearing gloves. The nanos probably weren’t tuned to her previous sensitivity—and she didn’t really want them tuned to that, honestly. It would take some getting used to, but this was far less overwhelming. “It seems to be functioning as I desire.”

“Grand!” He put his hands on his hips. “Those nanomachines respond to commands received by the spinal column—but they also respond to thoughts secondarily, unless the case is extreme like that first hookup. Specter nanos can reflect light at any wavelength you want—try like, making it
red. Hopefully it’s more intuitive than not.”

Hopefully it would be. She held up her arm. There was no kind of muscle memory for color change, so she squinted at it, imagining it turning red. Sure enough, slowly, the hue on the surface began to gain color and shift. It became a bright red—rather tacky, but it was what Mordenna had instructed her to do.

“Nice. That way you can give it commands to do essentially whatever you want and what it can support. I think a conversation or two with Schro will help you out with the latter aspect.”

Mordenna chuckled. “Suppose that clears me to make my own version of it. Could always use all the nice stuff Schro was doing for me that one mission.”

Well, she was glad to hear she could be of service. This cherry red color was rather garish. She’d rather have something more aesthetically pleasing. There was this one kind of design she’d seen on dishware a lot—and occasionally on pottery. Could she...?

Indeed. The arm shifted to white, faster than it had gone red. Before her eyes, patterns of blue began to form and emerge, entrancing in nature. Lines and designs took hold, and she marveled at it.

“Porcelain, huh?” Mordenna’s voice got her to look up. “A good look, if you ask me. Make it whatever color you want—it’s you, now. I’ll just be playing mechanic to it if anything goes wrong or you want something adjusted.”

“Oh course. And...” She stood up. One more test. She leaned forward and hugged Mordenna tightly. Yep. It felt a lot better to do it with two arms again, and she smiled. “Thank you, brother. It... it means much to me to have a part of me back.”

Mordenna readily hugged her back. “I’m more than happy to help, sis.” When she let her arms fall, he did the same. “Suppose now I’ll be moving onto a few other things on the bucket list—you and Jax’s armor, for one. That’ll be way faster than this was, since I’ll be working off of existing concepts. Just need to keep styling in mind, and I think I know what you two might like. Not to say I won’t bring you in for your opinions, of course.”

“I look forward to it, Mordenna. Although...” Her next thought was a bit awkward. “Won’t you need our measurements?”

“Tailors measured us a while back, remember? I’ll grab those.”

Right. “They are about done with our ‘casual’ clothing, as well. It will be... strange, to not be casually lounging in my armor. But the fabrics I chose agree with me, so perhaps it will be pleasant.” She, naturally, had sprung for an outfit that covered everything below her head. Turtleneck sweater, gloves, and leggings, with some nice fluffy socks. The material those would be made out of was absolutely lovely.

“Ah, trust me, Fals, it’ll be grand.” He spread out his arms. “Can’t wait to rock a flannel and let my hair fly loose.”

“Couldn’t you do that latter part already by putting your hood down?”

“And have people sneak things in it when I’m not looking? Obviously not.”

She laughed at that, covering her mouth. “You think of the strangest excuses!”

“Wouldn’t be me without ‘em. So!” He clapped his hands together. “There’s one more thing—or
rather, a few things—that I did for you. Make up for the fact that I... maybe wasn’t responsible for you losing your arm, but mildly complicit. Could’ve handled the situation better. But!” He said, holding up a finger to her as she opened her mouth to assure him. “I’m not dwelling on it. Trying to move on. That said, I made you something else.”

From behind his workbench, previously unseen, Mordenna pulled up a toolbox-like container by the handle on the top, setting it down on the workbench. He gestured to her to open it, and she went ahead, using her new arm to undo the clasp and pull the top back. The inside opened and splayed out several trays and it took her a moment to identify what was on them. They were attachments to replace the tubes on her helmet—one was clearly a wrapped-up piece of dark blue silk, while another was several smaller tubes. There were others of many styles, and she looked over to Mordenna. “You were working on these as well...?”

“Ever since you and I talked about it,” he replied, “I figured I could help contribute to you... I don’t know, it’s hard to put into words. Easing into wardrobes that aren’t entirely utilitarian? I’ve been working on them between projects because they take nothing to do since they really don’t have any moving parts or complicated bits. Well...” He held up one in particular that had long, thick tubes, with black lines down the sides of which lights occasionally coursed down. “This was probably the most complicated one, but it’s so low power that the minor Elerium inside powers itself.” He put it back. “Do you, uh, like ‘em?”

In answer, she looked down to the silk one, picking it up. It unfurled as she did, revealing that it flowed down to the middle of her back, the fabric catching the light pleasingly. She presented it to him in a wordless gesture. He smiled gently as she turned around, and Fal-Mai could feel him unhooking her tubes, putting them back in the case. The clicking at the back of her head told her it was hooked in. It would be a little weird re-adjusting to the lack of weight... but something about the silk veil spoke to her. She turned back around when he was done, catching it fluttering in her peripheral vision. “... do I look elegant?”

Mordenna chuckled. “How about we ask Jax? I’m sure he’d be a better judge of it than me. But, in my opinion? You look great, Fals. Glad to see you enjoying some fashion.”

She softly giggled in response. “I suppose I can take the rest to my room then, if I ever feel for a change of pace. I do like this one a lot—do you think you could make more with different designs and colors?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely!” Mordenna looked ecstatic over Fal-Mai’s approval. “All it takes is a little collaboration with the Tailors—who we should also stop by sometime today, I might add. They’re half to thank for this ensemble, because I don’t know much about fashion, myself, outside of what I like specifically. Jax first, though, he’ll be happy to see you’ve got your arm back.”

It pretty much boiled down to “showing your older sibling your new stuff,” but Fal-Mai couldn’t be happier about such an activity. She grabbed the case after closing it up, carrying it with her. “Do you suppose he is at the Studio as he normally is?”

“It’s that or the GTS. Best to check the former first.” Mordenna walked past her towards the door. “Remind me to bring you back in here when Lily’s done talking with the Archons about their new prosthetics.”

A question struck Fal-Mai as they left, and she supposed she should pose it. “Did they not have something like legs back on their homeworld?”

“I asked Lily that myself and apparently they did, though their legs didn’t look like ours.” Mordenna gestured with a free hand as he spoke. “Theirs were more individual-purpose built. Lily
said the closest thing they had to everyday legs looked more like hooves to us. Suppose the Elders figured they wouldn’t need them if they never had any downtime as combat units.”

That just brought her around to another question. “And... that was their appearance in the first place?”

“Apparently so!” Mordenna looked back, shrugging. “Metals on their planet are different, if I recall one of Lil’s ramblings. Lighter, even alive in some contexts. If Lily or I can break it down into an understandable form, I’ll have to explain it sometime. As for why they look like that? That’s something I gotta ask Rodin himself, I think.”

Fair enough. There were certainly weirder alien races she could think of. She looked to the box on her side. She wanted to drop it off by her room first, but that was out of the way from both the Studio and the GTS. She wished she could take it by there, but... “By the way, brother, can I—”

A sudden lack of weight from her right arm made her jump, and she looked down. The lower half of her arm had detached, morphing mid-fall into a many-legged drone of some sort. The accessory case sat in the middle of it, and she and Mordenna watched as it skittered off down the hallway. Mordenna looked that way for a second, then looked back to her. “Uh?”

Well, Fal-Mai was mildly flabbergasted. She looked back to her arm, the remaining nanos reconstructing themselves back once more. Her limb was now even lighter than before, if still the same visually. “... I suppose that is one of its functions? I merely was thinking about dropping the case off by my room, but had lamented on how it was out of the way from our destinations.”

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“Huh!” Mordenna rubbed his chin. “I had left a rudimentary AI in there to help process commands, so I suppose it’s taking suggestions and working with them. Hopefully that little drone you made will return to you when it’s done—if not, well? You know where it is.”

Fal-Mai was still rather mystified over the whole experience, but she nodded regardless. If it had the sense to interpret her thinking as a command, perhaps it had the sense to pilot the drone as it should.

The two of them kept walking, eventually getting to the Studio. As Mordenna opened the door, Fal-Mai peered over his shoulder. The usual occupants were inside—Jax’s congregation, a few of the PsiOps, and a motley group consisting of Dolly, Schro, and Wiki for some reason. Jax himself... was staring at some sort of tower of wooden blocks. The pieces had been taken out of it in some places, and Fal-Mai watched as one of his claws of psionics carefully selected a brick, sliding it gently out. It came without the rest of the tower falling, and he placed the brick on top, smiling in satisfaction.

Mordenna came in, chuckling. “Power of the gods and you’re using it to play Jenga?”

Jax looked up, huffing and crossing his arms. “I am using this game as an opportunity to further solidify my construct psionics. The more precision I may gain with my usual standbys, the better.”

“Sure, we’ll go with that reason, and not you totally wanting to catch up on playing Jenga because it’s great.”

Jax rolled his eyes, then looked to Fal-Mai as if wanting assistance with their brother. He then did a double-take as he caught sight of her new arm. “—your arm is finished?”

She smiled, coming over. “Our brother is a peerless craftsman.”

The mention of her arm seemed to attract the attention of the room. Out of the corners of her
vision, she could see people perking up and leaning over, trying to catch sight of it. In particular, she saw Schro angle to take a look, then move into standing up. As they came over, Wiki trailed after them. “Ah, I see Mordenna finally was able to make that work.”

“Finally?” Mordenna gestured to it. “I craft a working prosthetic out of one of your dead buddies with all the bells and whistles attached and all you can say is ‘finally?’”

Schro’s shoulders bounced in silent laughter. “Meant more fondly than anything else, I assure you. May I see, Fal-Mai?” When she nodded, offering her arm, they gently held it up. “... hm. Less nanomachines than what the body was running with. Did you have to take out a portion of them to make it work, Hunter?”

“Not really, no.” He jerked a thumb at her arm. “The AI I left inside interpreted something Fals was thinking about as a command and took something she was carrying to her room. With luck, it’ll be back eventually.”

“Working as intended, then.” They looked up to Fal-Mai. “If you ever need an extended course in what you can do, come see me. I’d be more than happy to teach you.”

She nodded. “Thank you. Mordenna said as much, himself.”

“Honestly, with that arm of yours?” Wiki stepped out from behind Schro. “I could probably get you hooked up to the Avenger’s systems if you ever needed to access the files yourself for some reason. Or just construct yourself a datapad whenever you wish. Probably the best function for that will be for letting Shen take over for bypasses or the like.”

“Or me, if I’m close enough.” Mordenna grinned. “It’s a work of art—but it’s Fal-Mai’s, so it’s her call.”

“Eventually, I would think.” Fal-Mai took her arm back. “I would like to get properly acquainted with it first.” Getting around to showing Eliza too was on the agenda. Maybe Mordenna would know where she was. Or Jax. But, there were a lot of people around, and she was starting to feel crowded. She held her prosthetic to her chest, still trying to keep up a calm mask.

Mordenna, however, always seemed to know when something was off. He held up his hands. “Alright, people, give my sis some breathing room. Mind if we resume having a Chosen-exclusive conversation? You can certainly ask Fal-Mai about her arm later, I’m sure. Or bother me about it!”

The people around them nodded and dispersed. When Fal-Mai was certain they had gone back to what they were doing before, she gave a quiet sigh. “Thank you, brother. It was becoming a little much.”

Mordenna patted her back, easing into sitting in a chair at the table Jax was. “No skin off my back. Just want you to be alright.”

She sat down with him, unwinding a bit. “And Jax? Do you have any questions? I believe the ensuing crowd somewhat interrupted you.”

“Merely ones regarding if you’re alright with it so far.” He gestured to her, a content look on his face. “Otherwise, I’m happy that you have regained control over your life—and just as proud of our brother for restoring that control.”

“Aww gee, thanks, bro.” Mordenna chuckled and leaned back in his seat. “See her new accessory, by the way?”
“I did—I was simply getting around to it. It looks very lovely on you, sister. I suppose now I know what the Tailors were doing that time I was in their workplace.”

Fal-Mai smiled bashfully, clasping her hands together and squeezing them in a fit of happy energy. “Thank you, Jax. I have Mordenna to thank once more.”

“Ah, Mordenna is simply lavishing you with gifts, is he?” Jax leaned over on the table. “I must step up my efforts! The next time the Tailors are free, I’d like to see about some other accessories for you. Help you bring out the best of you, hm?”

“Oh, don’t worry about falling behind with gifts, bro.” Mordenna pointed to him. “Next on my docket is getting your new armor done. I talked with the Tailors and I think I may have nailed an aesthetic you’d die for.”

“Ah, before you do that? If you could fashion gauntlets and a pair of amplifiers for the Commander, I would prefer that much more.”

“She wants those moved up the list?”

“It would be more accurate to say that I do.” Jax spread out his palm and flicked it backwards. “I... admittedly, wish for her safety above all else. Her having the extra strength to defend herself should the need arise as well as the safeguard of the gauntlets is something I would argue should be part of her training. I do hate to stack orders on you, but if the amplifier goes well for the Commander? I would like to see one for Maria as well. That would be something to benefit the whole ship, I believe.”

“Don’t worry Jax, I understand you completely,” he replied. “I’m sure Geist won’t mind if I pull off some Templar shenanigans for her gauntlets—and hell, maybe Kalight could train her if he’s interested. Best the Commander’s safe. And, fuck, don’t worry about piling work on me! I get around to everything eventually, and honestly that strikes me as a good idea.” Something seemed to occur to Mordenna, and he looked back to Fal-Mai. “Shit, we kinda just went on and forgot about you, Fals? Sorry about that?”

In response, Fal-Mai shook her head. “It is alright. I truly am content hearing the two of you talk to each other. It is enough for me to simply... ‘hang out.’”

“Ah, Fals is picking up the lingo! I don’t know about you, Jax, but—”

The door opened and they turned their heads. Fal-Mai had been hoping to see Eliza on the other side, but instead it was the drone she’d deployed. To the sound of a few interested onlookers and “what’s that’s, it skittered on in, hopping up on her lap. That... was definitely adorable. She got this feeling that its next course of action would have been to merge with her arm but she planted her other hand on top of it, keeping it where it was at. The device then seemed to get comfortable, settling in her lap.

Her smile or the sight of the interaction was probably what made Mordenna chuckle. “That thing’s surprising even me. Got yourself a friend, there?”

Well, it may have been silly, but Fal-Mai found the little thing endearing. She ran her hand over it, watching it. “Perhaps. I do not ever think I will stop thanking you for what you’ve done for me, brother.”

“Ah, it’s nothing.” Even as he said that, she looked back up to see him trying to hide a fond smile. “All part of the joy of the job. In any case...” He pointed to the... Jenga tower, was it? “Mind if I
“If you wish.” Jax sat back up. “Rather vexingly, you did pick out I was doing it to amuse myself, but it is helping my coordination nonetheless. I somehow think this kind of game would be very trivial to you.”

“I’m no architect, no, but I do know about load-bearing principles.” Mordenna leaned in, tapping one of the blocks towards him a few times before plucking it out, adding it to the top. “Besides, even if I could literally work 24/7 provided the materials and uninterrupted work time, I like taking my breaks. Especially with you guys.” he gave a short chuckle. “The more things change, the more they stay the same, I guess.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“Well, before I would’ve done it to be a right ass to you guys for my personal amusement. Now?” He threw his hand out. “I like you guys so much that hanging out is the amusement. Helps that the environment’s better.”

“Indeed. No constant requirement to hunt down the Commander for some vaguely defined glory and a planet I’m not certain any of us even desired.” Jax knitted his brows together, testing a few of the blocks with his claw before gingerly pulling one out. That done, he continued. “I suppose I made a show of it but even back when I was rather blind, I only saw the Earth as something to be won from the Elders. I’m not quite even sure what I would have done with it. Needless to say, I do not think it would have been a desirable situation for the inhabitants.”

“I’d say.” Mordenna’s pick was swift and he had his block on top in half the time it took Jax to do his. “For me? Two words: game reserve. That’d be if I was even interested in sticking around afterwards. I don’t think you two need to be told about my rather darker tendencies.”

Indeed, they didn’t. When Fal-Mai halted in her petting of the drone, it nudged against her hand, and she went back to her repetitive motions. “You do not, brother. As for myself... no, I did not want the planet, but if the Elders assigned me to it, I would have done my best to oversee it.” Fal-Mai figured she could be a good ruler if she put her mind to it, but it wasn’t exactly something she was looking to do. “Perhaps the prize that any of us were fighting for back then was the implied destruction of the other two.”

“Yeah, we were fucked up kids.” Mordenna watched as Jax was still surveying what he could take out. It seemed the aim of the game was to remove bricks and place them on top without toppling the tower. “But with our ’parents,’ could you blame us?”

“Perhaps not.” Jax finally picked out his piece. The tower wobbled uncertainly, but a bit of finagling later and his brick was out. “They fostered an environment of resentment, turned us against each other, and used us as proxies in competition with each other. Is it a wonder that we eventually fled?”

“I would think not.” Fal-Mai went to simply rubbing her thumb across the smooth surface of the drone. “... it would be no small wonder to our past selves, however.”

“Yeah, well, Old Me was dumb as shit.” Mordenna looked the tower up and down, then picked out his piece. “He had some idea of what was going on but he had his head so far up his spiteful ass he couldn’t see that if he’d been more decent to his siblings and worked out a plan to bust free of the Elders, this war could’ve been over at the twenty year mark. Not to linger on the past, of course—we’re working with what we’ve got now. And honestly? I’m glad we finally made up with each other.”
“Seconded.” In favor of making his next move, Jax gestured vaguely. “There are always improvements to be made upon our past selves, no? Even in five years I am sure there are some things now I will look back upon and shake my head at. But, for right now... I feel somewhat at peace. Yes, we still have the Elders to depose, but I have faith in our ability to handle them.”

“If you ask me, we’ve already won.” Mordenna tapped the table gently. “Wiki snagged the coordinates to a Psi Gate that Liz said she’ll check out soon, and I’m betting I could fudge the Network into accepting our biological signatures again. I saw the kind of alpha state that Avatar we snagged was in—they certainly aren’t immune to bullets and they’re more unfinished than anything else. We go in, we shoot those bastards in the heads, we get out. One saved universe.”

If only it were so simple. Fal-Mai didn’t want to dampen the mood, but she hardly thought it would be as easy as that. She decided to move onto a slightly related topic. “What do you think we will be doing after the war?”

“As I discussed with Eliza once, likely joining her in a year-long retreat from the rest of society.” Jax was still eyeing the Jenga tower, but not making any moves. “I know in my heart of hearts that there must be some guidance given to the freed people of the new Earth, but if I may be truthful?” He sighed. “I have been suffering and toiling for twenty years. I wish for a break from it all. XCOM is a good start, but...”

“Oh, no, I get you, bro.” Mordenna leaned back once again in his chair. “I’ll probably handle something like that for everyone else. Unless I up and invent a way for me to sleep, it’s not like I’ll be doing much else with my free time, anyway. Help the new world get on its feet, then join you guys in kicking up my own.”

“There will still be ADVENT to flush out,” Fal-Mai added, “so my work will not be done until the last vestiges that wish to fight for the fallen Elders are gone. Then I, as well, will join the three of you in relaxing.”

“Of course, I do account for getting the rest of ADVENT out in our work.” Jax sighed. “Honestly, I am quite lost in thinking of the kind of life I will lead without someone to fight. I will want to stay with my followers if they will have me, that is for sure. Perhaps I will take up my instruments and voice again and compose in my spare time. Or learn new crafts—I have the rest of my ageless life to do so.”

“And for those of us who can’t live forever,” Mordenna went on, “I’ll be devising methods. Never fancied myself a biologist but I’m starting to figure out I’m a man of all trades. Short of turning people into more Chosen, I wanna see what I can do.”

What about her? Fal-Mai really didn’t know what she would do with the concept of peace. She really didn’t have any hobbies now, save for hanging out with her brothers and the Commander. Surely she couldn’t do that all the time. She looked back down at her little pet, which angled up to “look” at her. Maybe one day she’d get around to confessing her feelings for the Commander. But, what of her brothers’ feelings...?

Mordenna’s head perked up. Fal-Mai looked to where he was looked—and it was then that she caught the small, alto humming of the Commander’s voice around Mordenna’s head. The Commander was talking to him. He pressed a finger to his communicator. “Gotcha, Commander. I’ll bring the goons down.” He then lowered it, looking between the two of them. “Jax, Fal-Mai? Commander wants us over in the Bridge. There’s a mission she’s been planning coming up fast.”

Jax blinked. “Do you have any clue as to what it is about?”
“Must’ve been one she got recently that I haven’t heard of.” Mordenna stood up. “Whatever the case, so long as you’re good for fighting...” He looked to Fal-Mai meaningfully. “I know you said you want to get used to that arm, so don’t think you have to come.”

“Please, brother.” She took her left hand off of the droid and offered it her right. It stepped onto it and summarily melted into her hand, restoring its original weight. Fal-Mai stood up. “I am fit for combat. All I need is my former headgear and my weapons.”

Mordenna looked at her for a second, then nodded, if a little uncertainly. Jax also got up, taking apart the tower and putting it into a tin nearby with both his hands and psionics. “If she is sure, then it is our mission to make sure she will be alright in the field, brother.” With the combination of his hands and his claws, he cleaned up the game in record time, putting the lid back on the tin. “I, for one, would enjoy another chance to lash out at the Elders.”

“Agreed.” Fal-Mai began to walk out, and she could hear her brothers following behind her.

The trip to the Bridge was short, and Fal-Mai didn’t hesitate to walk in and immediately approach where the Commander and Bradford were standing. Eliza nodded as they entered, smiling at Fal-Mai. “Chosen, good to see all of you. I see your new arm has come in, Fal-Mai.”

“As it has. I am already finding it a great boon.”

“Good to hear we’ve got a good prosthetic maker on the ship.” Bradford crossed his arms, his own faint smile at Fal-Mai disappearing as he assumed some seriousness. “Commander, do you think we should take the Assassin on this mission and revise the roster?”

“Definitely. We’ll let March have some more time with her wife. Apparently Sherry has a surgery coming up?” Hm. Must be the one they all accidentally eavesdropped on the planning of. Whatever the case, Eliza tapped her datapad, and the roster that was already there changed. “Of course, this should be taking into account if Fal-Mai wants to go.”

“I assure you I do, Commander. I am now fit for combat and I will show the Elders that they cannot put me down so easily.”

Eliza nodded. “Glad to hear it. As for what we’re doing? The Elders are routing plans to bury the Black Market through a psionic transmitter in the area we’re heading to. Only think it’s right for us to make sure our main supplier isn’t eating lead.”

“It was that,” Bradford added, “or stop this ‘hazmat armor suit’ thing that Cato let us know about. And honestly? I think we can do with straight up bullets. Not like we can’t disrupt the supply lines for that later, if we can.”

“Good call, methinks.” Mordenna crossed his arms. “I take it this one’s underground? Most of ‘em are.”

“You’ve got that right, Hunter,” Bradford replied. “You won’t have your usual vantage points for the mission, that’s for sure.”

“Just as handy with a handgun as I am with my sniper rifle, Brads. Worst comes to worst I’ll have Jax toss me his rifle.”

“Always best to have a backup plan,” Eliza said, “and I find that Mordenna’s got a lot of those. I think he’ll be fine—and the close quarters will suit Fal-Mai well. We’ve still got quite a few hours before we’ll be in the area, so feel free to mentally prepare yourselves. However, while I’ve all got you here...”
Eliza looked down to her datapad, working it for a bit before the roster in front of them disappeared, replaced by a few screens showing location data—and the Gate. She looked to the Chosen as she spoke. “There’s another mission I’d like to handle shortly. I assume the lot of you know about the Gate?” When they nodded, she went on. “Wiki got the coordinate data down regarding where one is. I’d like to go and, at the very least, take that thing offline. If not outright take it for ourselves after disabling it. Do any of you know of any reason why we shouldn’t?”

Mordenna shrugged. “As long as you disable the thing and take direct control of the locational input and output for it, I say go for it. We need a way to get into the Elders’ lair and stealing one of their front doors sounds like a good idea. I can always see what I can do regarding it letting us back in.”

“Still, we should be careful in our approach.” Jax held a hand to his chin. “Undoubtedly it will have a guard—and the heavy psionic irradiation they cause to the environment around them will no doubt have attracted swarms of Chryssalids.”

“It’s not so much the irradiation as the vibrations and signals those things give off,” Mordenna corrected.

Bradford massaged his temples. “Don’t talk to me about signals attracting Chryssalids. I had one bad run-in with that kind of situation in the past and I’d prefer to never think about it again.”

Eliza tilted her head. “... was that the one where our DJ was repurposing ADVENT tech without knowing what he was doing that you told me about?”

“The very same story.”

“Still,” Mordenna came in, “Jax has a point. That thing has a direct connection to the Elders’ hideout and their production factory. Priority number one will be turning it off without too much permanent damage just so they don’t flood us with reinforcements.”

“Advice taken and filed.” Eliza nodded. “Anything else?”

“Other than I’m definitely going so I can help you turn it off? Nothing else, Commander.”

Eliza restored the screen to the globe. “You’re all free to whatever you want to do for the next few hours. I’ll be seeing you in the Armory when we’re at our destination. That’s my official dismissal, anyway. Unofficially?” Eliza clipped her datapad to her belt. “Been a while since we hung out. You four, the Bar, Bradford and I staying on the wagon while you guys drink yourselves silly?”

A few hours with Eliza, Bradford, and her brothers sounded like a treat. Fal-Mai nodded eagerly. Meanwhile, Mordenna clapped his hands together. “Sounds like a damn good time! Jax?”

“Unless you have some sweeter ales on tap,” he replied, “I will abstain from drinking—but I would very much like to join in the festivities.”

“Any chance you get to unwind is a good one by me,” Bradford followed up. “I’d be happy to play bartender again and shoot the breeze.”

“Sounds like we’ve got a consensus.” Eliza began to walk out, with Bradford swiftly following her. The rest of the Chosen fell in line, and soon they were on their way to the Bar. Eliza kept the smalltalk going, occasionally stopping to say hello to a passing soldier or staff member. “What’s this about ‘sweeter ales’ I hear, Jax? Wanting to cut into my celebratory hard cider stash, huh?”

“I find some hard ciders still too bitter for my taste.” Jax sighed. “Perhaps I am a notorious sweet
tooth—but once, at one of my many outings, I tasted peach hard cider, and the rest was history.”

Bradford shook his head. “They even make that kind of stuff?”

“If there’s a market for it,” Mordenna replied, “they’ll make it. I, of course, must do my brotherly duty in ribbing you over your choice of alcohol, bro. Honestly, I’m surprised you drink the stuff at all but preferring something like peach cider is downright dainty. At least, I’m sure that’s a word you’d use for it.”

Jax turned towards Mordenna. “Are you mocking me for my vocabulary, brother?”

Mordenna held up a finger and opened his mouth, then closed it, letting his hand drop. He seemed to be considering what he would say next very thoroughly. “… no. But I am teasing you regarding what you drink at parties.”

Jax blew a breath out of his nose. “Fair enough. It was one of the few things I could gain a taste for—and soon, whatever venues I was about to visit would begin stocking my preferred brand as to cater to my tastes. It did essentially pigeonhole me into never expanding my horizons, but I never quite care to do so in that area. Indulging in food and drink is nice, yes, but with our lack of need for sustenance, I do not wish to force myself to like things I do not.”

“Well, that makes far too much sense.” Mordenna twisted himself as he walked. “And I somehow doubt you would even wanna touch anything with that much alcohol in it.”

Fal-Mai shrugged. “I have not had many encounters with those sorts of drinks. Even at my public showings, I abstained, but I am sure that fed into my image.” Fal-Mai knew she played to the elegant and near-emotionless persona well, but… that wasn’t her. She had feelings, and quite a lot of them, and hardly enough room to properly express them. Maybe she should try alcohol? “I would not be adverse to a small sample.”

“Fine by me. If the Avenger’s got it, you might even like the fruity stuff Jax likes. Do you even have that stuff, Brads?”

“Not that I know of, but there’s always the chance.”

“Dig deep enough,” Eliza said with a smile, “and I’m sure we have one of everything behind the counter. As for me, we wouldn’t happen to have any soda still in there?”

“Assuming Pattie and Benald haven’t stolen all of it, maybe.” Bradford was the first one to the door of the Bar, opening it and letting everyone else in. Fal-Mai took a seat by Eliza, Mordenna sat on her other side, leaving Jax to sit on Fal-Mai’s unoccupied side. Bradford took his place behind the bar. “The usual, Mordenna?”

“You’re damn right!” Bradford came back up and passed Mordenna a bottle of dark alcohol, which he pried the top off of and drank. “Good. Shit. If I do say so myself.” He leaned over, pointing the bottle towards Fal-Mai a bit. “Far be it from me to give a one year old alcohol, but you did say you’d be fine in trying it.”

Fal-Mai gave a playful smile. “I suppose I can—”

That was when the smell of the drink hit her, and good lord. Fal-Mai had never smelled something so bitter in her short life. She immediately felt her nose trying to close itself up. Her expression must’ve been hilarious, as everyone around her cracked up. Even Jax was stifling some laughter, which was the most galling. Fal-Mai tried to compose herself, covering her mouth as she could feel heat rush to her face. “I. I think I will abstain. What are you drinking?”
Mordenna looked like he was trying to forcibly contain his snickering. “J-just the darkest stuff Bradford’s got without serving me coffee. Sorry, didn’t mean to like, blow noxious gasses at you. Just forget sometimes that I like the stronger stuff.”

Mildly embarrassed, Fal-Mai huffed. “Next time, please remember so you do not nearly poison me.”

Jax was shaking his head, patting Fal-Mai’s shoulder. “You and I share opinions regarding the slop that our brother regularly drinks.”

Mordenna pressed a hand to his chest, mock offended. “Are you two ganging up on me again? Brads, Liz, help me out!”

Eliza chuckled, taking the bottle Bradford offered to her and twisting it open. It hissed and she took a sip. “Sorry, Mordenna, but you’d have to pay me pretty handsomely to drink the stuff that you drink.”

“If it means anything?” Bradford set his own bottle out on the counter. It looked to be the same one as Eliza was drinking. “You’re the only one clearing that stuff out, Mordenna. I think this is a battle you’re going to have to fight yourself.” While Mordenna sputtered, he turned to Jax. “I can look again but the stuff we’ve got that’s closest to what you like is the Commander’s stash—and you’ll have to take her up on that.”

“He can drink it if he wants it.” Eliza took another drink of her soda. “I won’t miss a bottle or two when I’ve already resolved to save my drinking for after the war.” Something about that statement seemed to sober Mordenna a little.

Whatever it was, Bradford didn’t notice, as he was already going through an area below the counter. When he emerged, he handed Jax a bottle of a considerably lighter hue than Mordenna’s. “You gonna pry the bottle open like your brother does, or do you need the bottle opener?”

“With my admitted heavy-handedness, I will need the opener.” Bradford grabbed a tool from behind the counter and gave it to Jax. With it, he used it to pop off the top, passing it back to him when he was done. He sniffed at the drink, giving a soft “hm.” “You seem to favor the lighter varieties, Commander.”

“Yeah, well, I mostly drink it for the apples, not the alcohol. The bitterness of it, anyway.”

“That doesn’t really remind me of what I wanna ask,” Mordenna began, “but I’m gonna ask this anyway. How’d you hear of the mission we’re about to do?”

“Templars. Which reminds me, I need to stop by them afterwards. Partly to report the results of the mission, partly just to check in.” She pointed to Mordenna with her bottle. “Those psionic transmitters they use apparently cause heavy psionic distortion they can feel—and one such conduit sprung up in their territory. A few messages and transcripts in the area told us it was preparing to mass upload plans to storm the Black Market.”

Mordenna stroked his chin. “If Fals and Jax working to find that thing didn’t turn up anything, how the hell did they find it without the Baroness complaining about how close ADVENT was getting?”

Eliza shrugged. “Somebody might have talked or ratted them out. Whatever the case, I considered it a higher priority over ADVENT troops getting a little tougher.”

He nodded, but something about his expression told Fal-Mai there was still something on his mind.
Bradford was quick to pick up on the gap in the conversation. “I let the factions know of the last one that we couldn’t handle. Volk seemed keen on sending his wolves over to handle it to repay us for covering Gilligan’s Ridge.”

“Well, I’m glad for that.” Eliza sighed, resting her head on her hand. “All of these good deeds do eventually catch up to me.”

“Plus, it’s in their best interest to do something about it. We’re not the only ones shooting at ADVENT.” Bradford finally opened his own bottle, drinking from it. “Maybe they’ll put aside their differences for once to save us all some trouble.”

“Tch. Maybe.” Mordenna took a swig of his drink. “Bet you my left eye the Reapers handle it solo. Not because nobody else comes to help, but because Volk’s a stubborn bastard who would want to repay Liz himself with no assistance.”

“Depth perception is a dangerous thing to wager,” Jax murmured.

“Well, I try to hedge my bets.” Mordenna set his drink down, sobering a bit as he considered something. “Ah, right. Mind if I float something by you three? Jax excluded, I talked with him about it before.” Eliza nodded to him. “All ears.”

“Well, Liz, you probably noticed I took a souvenir or two home when we raided Jax’s Stronghold.”

“As I remember.”

“Well. Jax brought up an interesting question when I mentioned it to him.” Mordenna gestured as he continued to speak. “And it lead me into some thought—he asked me if we could somehow recreate what the Elders were using to keep respawning us from the dead. And, theoretically, yeah. What the Elders were doing when they were reviving us was basically using their massive psionic power to patch us up and slap our soul back in our body in the Void, where common law can break down in some ways. The Sarcophagi were just massive gateways, conduits even. I haven’t been looking at the compound used in the metal for it much, but I do remember it was made of highly psionic-conductive materials. If I could get enough Elerium and whatever other compounds I need to make our own, get a psionic Network of our own up and running and link any psions to it... we could have our own way to defy death.”

He’d brought all that up to Jax before? Honestly, Fal-Mai was quite contemplative over the idea. She did like the notion of having the power of the Sarcophagi back in their control... but Mordenna had brought up his concerns about an XCOM Network before. She watched Bradford and Eliza, gauging their reactions. Eliza was in deep thought, rubbing her chin and squinting a bit. Bradford, however? Very skeptical. “Sound in theory, but let me ask this—you want to re-establish the Network?”

“I get your hangups, and let me bring in some counterpoints.” He pointed at Bradford. “The Network I’m thinking of making wouldn’t be a control and order dissemination structure—AKA it wouldn’t be the Commander powering the majority of the processing. The Avenger itself—and me, Wiki and Schro, probably—would be hosting it and hooking in all psionic members of the ship. It would hook them into the power source for the Sarcophagus, and I would program a specific routine for reviving anyone connected to it who dies. No psion would really notice it unless their power was needed to bring someone back to life. The most anyone could do with the Network that isn’t me is... maybe send messages.” He gestured to the Commander. “Trust me, I gave it some thought. I don’t want it feeling like the ADVENT Network to Eliza and triggering any
PTSD. Eliza would be a user and nothing else—just enough connection to power the revival process or get revived if needed.”

Eliza turned to him. “How long would this take?”

“Oh, jesus.” Mordenna’s eyes flitted around, calculating. “… establishing the Network itself is going to take a month, and this includes taking ADVENT’s code, re-writing and debugging it, and doing a day-long test run with me solo, a week test run with others connected to it. As for the Sarcophagus? I’d need to do some more tests and analyzing between projects to determine the exact nature of what the pieces I have are made out of, with probably a few runs through the Shadow Chamber. From there it’s a matter of supply and what I’ll need to make it. And, uh, someone has to test the first run of the revive. Unless we want to kidnap a Dark VIP, make them psionic, and use them as the first test subject? That step might get a little tough.”

“Sounds like a shot in the dark,” Bradford muttered, “but I won’t deny that’s a strong asset. Might even convince me to go super-powered. Damn long project, it sounds like.”

“That’s why I wanted to bring it up early.” Mordenna looked to Eliza. “Any thoughts, Commander?”

Eliza let her hand fall from her chin. “The Elders are very powerful beings, Mordenna. How much power are we talking?”

“The impact and power draw would be spread across all the psions hooked to the Network. In that, we’ve got you, Jax, your PsiOps, his whole congregation, and whatever else any new PsiOps wanna provide. I am very certain we have the power for it.”

“I have seen the Commander’s true potential.” Jax settled a hand on the counter. “With more training and some assistance, I would think her able to power most of the revive, though not without strain.”

“That powerful, huh?” Eliza looked back to Mordenna. “What about any non-psions?”

“That’s the tricky part. All the non-psionic units on the ADVENT Network were able to connect because of the chips in them. I... think you could recreate those for anyone who doesn’t want to go psionic, but? I’m not exactly a bastion of moral fortitude but even I question chipping people.”

Eliza’s face pinched and she shook her head rapidly. “No. Definitely not.” She let out a tense breath. Seems even the mention of it was enough to unsettle her. “Suppose it’s time to put the Psi Lab back to use. How psionic would they have to hook up?”

“Even a base amount of the Gift, natural or not, should let them in. Fal-Mai and I were on it, after all, and our extent of psionics is little more than one ability.”

“That’s five days for two soliders,” Bradford summed up. “With our numbers...”

“That would take a month or so,” Eliza finished for him. “Assuming optimal conditions and the barest amount of modification so they can use psionics. It’d take time, but having the ability to immediately recover from losses and effectively nullify them? That’s tempting. Very tempting. I’ve got one last question, Mordenna.”

“Fire away.”

“Who’s your volunteer?” Eliza looked to him, eyes set and face grim. “You brushed over it earlier, and while I can’t blame you for doing it, it needs answered. I am firmly against using unwilling test
subjects—it’s unethical. So we need to figure out who is willing to gamble dying permanently to make sure immortality works for the rest of us.”

Mordenna opened his mouth, closed it, then rubbed it with his hand, looking over at his siblings. His gaze immediately bounced off of them and to the floor, seemingly already rejecting the idea of using them. After a while of thinking, he lowered his hand enough to be heard. “I’d do it. If no one else, it better be me. It would be my code and my construction abilities on the line. When the time comes, you could ask your soldiers, but if not one of them is willing to die... I might as well give it a shot, right?”

“Brother.” Fal-Mai understood his reasoning and why he’d stake himself. However? She couldn’t abide by losing him. “You are not going to potentially sacrifice yourself for this gamble! What happens if it is, indeed, flawed, and you do not come back? You would be the one with the knowledge of how to perhaps fix it.”

“It’s not ideal,” Mordenna countered, but she could see the hesitation in his eyes, “but it’s a risk I’m willing to take. I’d be double-checking and triple-checking the code and construction to make sure everything was correct, probably having Lily and Tygan look over it as well.”

“What of the rest of us, Mordenna?” Jax leaned forward. “You are keen on potentially sacrificing yourself forever, but have you considered the kind of effect your reckless disregard for your own life might have?”

“It’s not reckless,” he protested, the hesitation in his eyes hardening. “Someone has to take the plunge. And unless anyone else in Eliza’s ranks has a death wish, I’m the person the buck stops at.”

Fal-Mai opened her mouth to respond, to tell Mordenna that he was being ridiculous. But Eliza held up her hand, and no one else spoke. She fully turned towards Mordenna. “I appreciate your gusto in accepting responsibility,” she began, voice soft, “but Jax is right. Fal-Mai is right. It may be an easy decision to make on your own, but think of the people around you who don’t even want to risk losing you. Because I’m one of them.” She leaned forward and put a hand on his shoulder. “Go through with reviving the Network, and you have my permission to divert resources to making the Sarcophagus when you need them. But... maybe it might be best to not test it until we have a backup plan. Until we have a way to bring you or whoever volunteers back to life without the Sarcophagus, it might be better to just keep working on the code and methods. I hate leaving it in the dark and I don’t want to say ‘just wait and see if someone dies and is brought back,’ but at least then they would’ve been out on the field and wouldn’t die for nothing.

Mordenna was silent, maintaining eye contact with Eliza for a while before dropping it, drumming his fingers on the counter nervously. Fal-Mai really didn’t want to lose him if it meant immortality for everyone else. She had just gotten a brother like him after a year of seeing him at his worst, now knowing that he was suffering then and was suffering 14 years before then. That shouldn’t be how his life would end.

Finally, he sighed, deflating and propping his head up with his hand. “Alright. Alright. I hate letting something like that go untested... but it’s a far range in the future. Hopefully by then we’ll have some method to bring me back if the process I laid out doesn’t. Sorry... sorry to upset you guys.”

“Only got upset because you being a little too comfortable with your own mortality has been a problem you’ve struggled with,” Bradford said, patting his arm. “Just don’t want to see you throw everything away because of it.”
“Yeah. Maybe one of these days I’ll fully accept that notion.” Mordenna turned back towards the counter, taking a sip of his drink. “Well, with the project cleared, I don’t have much else to bring up. I think I just wanna hang with you guys for however much longer we have left. I’d lighten the mood myself, but...”

“That’s fine, cowboy.” Eliza let her arm drop, picking up her own drink. “I’ll give it an honest shot.” She then turned back to everyone else. “So. Fal-Mai. Tell me about this new arm of yours.”

As she smiled and got into it, Fal-Mai couldn’t help but think of the mission in store for them. Her first re-deployment to the field with a prosthetic... and it wasn’t a stretch to think that Specter might be back.

She steeled herself, doing her best to enjoy the moment with her family and friends. Later. For now, she could relax.
Menace deploys to stop the relay.

The battle ahead of them loomed in Fal-Mai’s mind.

They had taken their time to catch up in the Bar, but soon the appointed time had come upon them. Fal-Mai had sent that drone to replace her braids and now she was in the Armory with her brothers, waiting. Eliza and Bradford were there with them, though Fal-Mai didn’t make conversation. She was checking over her gun and making sure her blade was keen, as if the time she spent away from battle could have rusted it. It was rather shameful to admit, even if she had done before, that she didn’t really know what she would do with herself outside of battle and her siblings.

Her brothers, meanwhile, were busy with idle chatter. Mordenna primarily—he seemed to abhor the silence even more than he usually did. “—and honestly the whole notion of the PR events we did just leaves a bad taste in my mouth. There was a reason why they had to drag me kicking and screaming to them and when I was there I almost wanted to start a scene. I really, really don’t want to be looked at as any sort of saint or demigod. I’m a killer, bro, it’s what I do.”

“I would not think godhood befitting of you, brother—and I do not mean that as the insult it may seem.” Jax was putting his cannon on his hip, idly checking his gauntlets. “You are a killer, I would grant you that. I do not think anyone should elevate someone who does fell work such as you to any status of worship, especially if they ask you to not do that.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m thinking. I mean, you?” Mordenna gestured at Jax. “You’re the ideal demigod—or just straight up god. Eloquent, doesn’t really go out for the killing much, kind as all fuck to those who follow him. I guess they meant for people to look at me as some sort of grim reaper.”

“Or the Artemis of old.”

“Tch.” Mordenna crossed his arms. “I’m more of a regular Ares—cowardice not included, unless you count sniping as that, which is fair. Almost makes me wonder about some sort of futuristic bow project for myself. Well, it’s something I think of for all of three seconds before realizing I have all the range I’d ever need with my rifle and pistol and I can’t really run out of ammo anyway. Unless…” He held a hand to his chin. “Unless I would want to take up some sort of support role and attach like, payloads to the arrows? Explosive, acid, maybe even tracker darts to help everyone else aim at priority targets. I’d have to make it collapsable—ah, I wonder if I could do some sort of hard light bowstring projection?”

“And there you go with another project.” Jax shook his head. “I sometimes wish for a mind such as yours, easily able to move from one thing to the next.”

“Yeah, well, it’s great until it does get stuck on something. Then I’m fucked until someone either kicks me out of my funk or it finally decides to move on.”

“Thus why I say ‘sometimes.’ Still, back to the topic before...” Jax gave a sigh. “I wished I
abhored being elevated as a deity more than I do. I suppose some measure of my stubborn pride persists and I enjoy the notion of it.”

“Well, let it be on your own terms.” Mordenna chuckled. “Your followers are still willingly calling you ‘Holy Father’ so maybe it’s a teensy bit warranted. I don’t really see it going to your head as much as it would’ve in the past.”

Jax seemed to almost shudder, thinking on it. “Goodness. Had I any more pride and haughtiness I would’ve very well been lost to my own delusions. ‘The gods’ this and ‘supreme power’ that. Best I unlearned those notions when I did.” He quieted a little. “A shame regarding the circumstances.”

“‘Pride goeth before the fall’ goes both ways, bro. The Elders will get theirs soon enough.”

Before they could go any further in their conversation, the door to the Armory opened. First, Fal-Mai’s drone scuttled in, stopping at her feet. The orb on top of its head blossomed open to reveal her traditional tubes. She motioned for it to climb up and put them on as she continued to watch the door. The next few guests were Samhien, Dolly, and Shazara-Ta. A motley group if she had ever seen one! Fal-Mai really hadn’t looked at the roster Eliza had been mulling over, so this was certainly an interesting turn. As her drone—which she supposed she needed to name eventually—hooked up her tubes, she looked to Eliza. “I believe this is the first entirely nonhuman squad I have seen you field, Commander.”

“Strange times we live in, I would say.” A different persona seemed to become Eliza as she looked over Menace, standing up straighter and holding her head higher. “But I found this the most fitting squad for the mission. Menace, assemble when ready.”

With her tubes back in place, Fal-Mai took her spot in the line. Shazara-Ta plucked the Plasma Boltcaster off the wall, inspecting it and giving an impressed hum. Mordenna himself took a grenade launcher and handed it to Dolly, explaining that they could use some more heavy ordnance. As Mordenna grabbed some grenades for him, Sammy took his place beside Fal-Mai. “Hello, Nightmaiden. Is your arm holding up well?”

“Very much so,” she replied. “If not for the trauma of losing it initially, I would consider this a sizable upgrade.”

Sammy smiled. “Leave it up to the Hunter to make a prosthetic that works better than the original limb.”

“Reminds me of the MEC designs we drafted,” Bradford muttered to himself, but Fal-Mai’s ears caught it. Considering it was probably something before her time, she let it drop, resolving to ask about it later when they were not about to embark on a mission.

Eventually, the six of them were ready and waiting, and Eliza stepped out to address them. “Menace, your mission today is one of speed. More than usual, anyhow. ADVENT has set up a psionic relay down in the underground tunnels you’ll be visiting. For the ones unaware of standard operating procedure, it goes thusly: there’s a central transmitter you must reach and plant X4 on. Mordenna will be going before you to ensure there are no countermeasures present. There will be smaller relays in the area—once ADVENT figure out we’re on the scene, they’ll begin a shutoff sequence for the psionic relay so the resulting damage doesn’t cause collateral. Destroy the smaller relays to delay the process. Any questions?”

Eliza looked out at the line of them. Fal-Mai herself had nothing to ask, and it seemed nobody else did, either. She nodded, the Skyranger opening behind them. “I’ll be with you on comms when you enter the AO. Good luck, Menace, and keep your eyes on.”
The other members of Menace began to file towards the Skyranger, and Fal-Mai followed. As she took her spot on one of the seats, her thoughts went to the mission ahead. It was, indeed, very likely that Specter would make a return appearance. Though she didn’t want to think on the incident at all—it made her want to shiver—she knew by memory that it had simply disappeared, not dropped its own corpse. To think that it was dead would be folly. Would she be able to fight it if it returned? Or would she seize up and potentially be wounded or worse?

She didn’t want to confess her concerns to her brothers, who had taken their seats at the front of the Skyranger and were currently bantering with each other. Fal-Mai, despite her better thinking, felt left out. There was fear in her heart about that Specter, and she longed to confess, but to who? The only person she could think of was Eliza... and she’d already missed her chance with that. Fal-Mai sat back in her seat, focusing her gaze at some point above the other seat she was facing.

Said seat was currently housing Shazara-Ta. “Something on your mind, Assassin?”

She looked down at him. He had his longer tail coiled near his seat as much as he was able, but even so he took up a fair amount of space. Still, she couldn’t confess to him, especially with others around. Plus, if she let him know while her brothers were around, they could rightfully take that as her not trusting them with her fears. She couldn’t exactly tell Shazara-Ta the truth. “Simply the mission ahead, and how I will fare with my new arm. I intend on doing nothing less than my best, of course.”

“A noble attitude to have, I would think.” He settled his hands on his—would that still be a lap for Vipers? Fal-Mai would consider it that for convenience. “I, myself, must concern myself with matters of safety—and yet I find myself wanting to repay XCOM however I can. I will be playing a delicate balance of self-preservation and valor.”

That reminded Fal-Mai—why was Shazara-Ta here anyway? “If I may ask, why would a ruler such as yourself not let one of his servants fight when the Commander called you?”

“Are you insinuating something, Assassin?” Before Fal-Mai could worry that she’d trespassed on some boundary again, Shazara-Ta gave a hissing laugh. “Ah, worry not. Perhaps other Kings would, but not I. It was not the Commander who came calling for me—it was I who approached the Commander, wanting to assist in the next outing. Preferably with you, since I also have a debt to repay with you as well.”

Fal-Mai blinked. “Other than assisting you at the cave, I cannot fathom the favor I have done for you. I would attribute my assistance more to the Commander than anything else.”

“Do you forget so easily the young heir you assisted? Had you not found Luina-Ta out there... I am unsure if my son would still be here today.” He gestured to her. “I suppose if heroic actions are part and parcel of the duties at XCOM, you might be inclined to forget one of many saved, but that goodwill comes back in force eventually.”

That was the king’s son? Wit her actions put into context, Fal-Mai felt a little more pride in what she did that day. “Apologies. I do not mean to forget—I simply had not considered who the Neonate was.”

“Don’t worry, I find that a good trait. You were willing to assist someone without care for their status or position—you merely saw that he was in danger and needed your help. I sometimes wish for eyes such as yours, as untouched by bias and ingrained notions. Which reminds me...” His lips moved in what Fal-Mai assumed was a Viper smile. “Luina-Ta wants to see you again at some point. Should I tell him that you are a very busy Chosen, or?”
“Nonsense,” she softly replied. “I will visit your son the earliest I am able—though I apologize if I do not know too much about handling children.”

“Always good to learn then—and I hardly think it will go badly. He’s always asking to see you and I’ve been steadily teaching him English along with his native language. It will be a good learning exercise for the both of you.”

If she could help a young ruler with speaking another language, she could certainly make a visit. Mentally noting to simplify her vocabulary at that time—and musing on how much of her eloquence she might’ve picked up from Jax—she nodded. “I find that well. I would be more than happy to visit.”

“Glad to hear it, Assassin. Or, would you rather I call you Fal-Mai?”

Come to think of it, it was maybe a little weird that she and her brothers were still sticking to the titles the Elders gave them. But, well, it was just a part of her now—a part of her she really didn’t mind so much. It was practically a job title at this point—and Mordenna was using “Hunter” almost like a first name, since he seemed so opposed to using his actual one. Finally, a title like “Warlock” was perfectly befitting of Jax. Weird, yes, but a weird they were used to. “Either is fine with me.”

“Very well. I look forward to the visit.”

The rest of the Skyranger trip was relatively quiet. She hadn’t noticed, but Jax and Mordenna had stopped talking sometime during her exchange with Shazara-Ta. Jax’s hair was animating slightly more than usual and Mordenna’s eyes had gained a faint, but otherworldly gleam. They must’ve been talking amongst themselves. Was it about something they could not share with her...? Fal-Mai knew such thoughts were childish—but it didn’t stop them from affecting her. She crossed her arms over herself, letting the hum of the ship’s engines drown out her thoughts. This was going to be a long ride...

The dilapidated ruins of this underground subway station did nothing for Fal-Mai’s mood.

It was difficult trying to turn her thoughts to better ones with her current surroundings. Not to mention she was spearheading the front of the group, trying to keep her ears and eyes open for oncoming threats. She didn’t have the time to try to think more positively—and yet her negative thoughts droned on regardless.

There was the fear of failing, as always. Fal-Mai knew she did not have to be a perfect being anymore, but some things Helena said still stubbornly stuck at the back of her mind. There was the feeling that her brothers might be starting to exclude her—which was silly! She had seen how they had gone to lengths in the past to include her on their bantering. But they didn’t do it on the ship, the voice of doubt crept in. This is just the start. Helena loved you at first, didn’t she?

Fal-Mai stopped where she was at in her stalk, forcing herself to take a deep breath to clear her thoughts. She kept her eyes up, noting where her squad was at. They were at some sort of junction in the station itself, where some modern water fountain must’ve been flowing long ago. Plastic greenery was all that was left of most of the color, the ceiling lights staying on through sheer dogged determination. Shazara-Ta was a few steps behind her, and had halted when she did.
Sammy, Jax, and Dolly were bringing up the middle of the squad, and Mordenna was at the rear, angling over to see whatever Fal-Mai might have to make her stop.

The breath didn’t fully clear her thoughts, but it staved them off for now. While she was still, she took a moment to try to see if there was anyone other than them in the area. The gentle, rhythmic hum of Dolly’s pumps was what she got from her squad, currently at a halt. Condensation dripped from places in the ceiling, and there was the low groan of foundation somewhere beginning to buckle. The acoustics of the subway station eventually worked in her favor—in the distance, she could hear the mechanical whirring of MEC joints moving, along with a few quieter sets of footsteps.

Opening her eyes, she pointed in the direction the sounds came from. “There is a squad near that direction.” She furrowed her brow. On the other hand, the acoustics were making it troubling to hear how many troops there were. “MECs and other soldiers. The echo of this place is making it difficult to pinpoint how many.”

“Some intel is better than no intel,” Eliza replied. “Menace, proceed forwards, and have Fal-Mai scout ahead under cloak. We’re going to need to take out everyone in this area anyway.”

Fal-Mai nodded, drawing her cloak around herself and leading the pack. The dust around her feet barely moved as she advanced, hopping over debris and benches. She slowed down as the sounds of the patrol got louder, and she dropped behind a planter once she was in range enough for them to be around the next corner. Sure enough, Fal-Mai watched as two Heavy MEC and the accompanying Officer, Shieldbearer, and Purifier came with.

“Fuck, that’s micromissile hell,” Mordenna said over comms.

“Can’t help but agree.” Eliza paused for a moment. “Menace, spread out along their upcoming patrol path and be ready to ambush. Stay far away from each other... save Jax and Dolly. Jax, I want you to watch for incoming micromissiles, and considering Dolly will be a high priority target? Best you’re near him.”

A wise strategy. Fal-Mai eyed up her targets as they moved, keeping tabs on how her squad moved behind her. Her first thought was to go for one of the MECs to eliminate half of the micromissiles problem—but the Shieldbearer could be just as much of one. It was hard to shoot through those barriers. Maybe she could signal Mordenna somehow? Do you think he’ll listen to you? What reason would he have when he and Jax clearly share something you do not? No, that wasn’t the case!

Fal-Mai grit her teeth, hearing everyone get into position. “Menace, looking to engage,” she hissed. She got her confirmations and she leaped from her cover, sprinting towards the squad. At the last second, her gut twisted and she veered towards the Shieldbearer, drawing her sword and stabbing it through the head as her cloak dropped. The surprised cries of the other two troops told her to book it and she did. Mag fire rang behind her as she rolled back into cover, hearing the rest of Menace open fire.

When she looked back, it was clear the ambush was already half over. Shazara-Ta had apparently yanked the Officer from his spot, as it was now in his coils, a length of his tail wrapped around his neck and already squeezing. One of the MECs was already on the ground, sparking faintly. The other was predictably firing off a burst of missiles at the duo of Jax and Dolly, the former making a protective shield of psionics to cover them with, the missiles exploding on it ineffectually. That left Sammy and Dolly to fire on the MEC, staggering it. Meanwhile, the Purifier seemed to have already given up on the situation, exercising the better part of valor and fleeing. Would’ve made it, too—if not for another crack of Mordenna’s sniper rifle puncturing its fuel canister rather
explosively. Fal-Mai was made glad once again for her headwear, making the sound of the explosion manageable.

Fal-Mai whipped out her shotgun and buried a round in the MEC, finally toppling it. Holstering her weapon as Shazara-Ta finished off the Officer, she was about ready to move on before Mordenna’s voice came in her ear. “Could’ve sworn you were gonna take out one of the bots, sis, but all fine by me.”

He doesn’t trust you.

Fal-Mai shook her head. “Tactical decision,” she replied shortly, standing back up.

A plasma rifle went off and she whipped her head around. Dolly had fired upon one of the transmitters for the larger relay, leaving it a smoldering wreck. “...that was one of the things we were supposed to shoot, right? I’ve seen them before.”

“Very much so, Dolly,” Eliza replied. “Menace, eyes open for future relays. Shen has confirmed the aliens now know we’re here and have begun the shutoff sequence.”

“Best we kick our asses into gear, then.” Mordenna could be heard priming his rifle.

Acknowledging the remark, but not replying, Fal-Mai moved on. As she moved, something that Specter had said came back to her. You are not the only one to bleed into the edges of sight, to elude even those who peer beyond the veil. Did that mean even Mordenna couldn’t see it while it was cloaked? That was certainly concerning. Perhaps they had replicated Fal-Mai’s cloak for use with the Specter nanites? The means of your creation have just become a burden for him. Have you really any reason to doubt that they are growing weary of you?

What was with this attitude her mind was trying to adopt? Fal-Mai gripped the wall she was passing, taking in a steady breath. Her brothers still loved her. The Elders were to blame for weaponizing her ability against Mordenna. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply. This was the worst kind of place to be having this kind of crisis. No doubt about it, she needed to have a talk with her brothers after this. Or Eliza. Maybe Eliza first, her brothers second? Just so she might know how to approach the topic respectfully. Mindful that she just stopped in front of everyone, she opened her mouth to explain herself.

Except, she paused. Closing it, she focused on what she could hear. Why had she stopped? It wasn’t her doubting thoughts—something made her stop up. The squad behind her had halted on Mordenna’s command, watching to see what was the matter. The ambiance of the area hadn’t changed. It was as if she had caught something on the very edge of her hearing, enough to perk her ears. The softest, smoothest grind of nanos on nanos. Not from her own side. It was like—

The next time the sound came, Fal-Mai acted on terrified instinct.

She ducked to the floor as there was a violent rush of air behind her, aimed where her neck used to be. Fal-Mai rolled to the side to confirm her attacker, just as she heard Mordenna exclaim. That Specter was behind her, retracting its arm and retreating. “You will not evade me for long, betrayer.”

It turned its head slightly, and then its shoulder warped around a shot from Mordenna, leaving it unscathed. The Specter coursed around the corner, out of sight.

Fal-Mai could only think of getting herself to safety, scrambling back towards her squad. The first person she crashed into was Jax, who had an arm around her and his other raised no sooner than
she realized where she was. “Menace,” he began, voice raised, “close ranks!”

Menace pulled closer to Jax’s location, still maintaining spacing. Surprisingly, Mordenna came from his spot at the back, drawing his pistol. His eyes were flickering about, and his brows were drawn. “Commander? Menace? I... I can’t see it.”

“It just rounded a corner,” Jax reasoned, “it will not be visible—”

“No,” Mordenna shot back, and Fal-Mai could hear unease in his voice. “I couldn’t see it when it tried to ambush Fals. I don’t want to say this—I really don’t want to say this. But I don’t think I can spot that thing in cloak.”

Fal-Mai had already come to that conclusion, but she watched as it settled over the rest of the squad. Honestly, she wanted to dignify herself by getting out from Jax’s hold on her, but the thought of the Specter being in the area was seizing her up. At the very least, she drew two throwing daggers from her belt, willing her prosthetic to remain still.

More importantly, Mordenna couldn’t see it, but she had been able to hear it. But that had only been when it was on top of her! At the very least, it also couldn’t strike in cloak just the same as her. She looked to Mordenna, doing her best to keep her voice steady. “Perhaps you can’t see it cloak—but you have the best reaction time.”

“That’s what I have going for me. We also have something else.” Mordenna looked to Dolly.

“Dolly! Load your second grenade and be ready for that thing.”

Dolly responded, hitching his gun and taking a grenade off of his belt, loading it into the launcher that Mordenna had handed him. As he confirmed that, Eliza came in. “Menace, you don’t have too much time with the relay. You have to advance—but priority number one is survival of the squad.”

“You heard the Commander. Jax, watch my back. I’ll watch the squad.”

With that, Shazara-Ta was now the one advancing the squad, keeping his gun raised as he smoothly glided over obstacles. Fal-Mai expected Jax to let her go so she could walk freely, but he kept his hold on her, half-turning so he could keep his eyes on Mordenna’s flank. It gave her a measure of security—and she used the phenomena as proof to her more contrarian thinking that he cared more for Mordenna than he did her. Hmph. Letting you die on Eliza’s watch would be a mark of bad status.

Regardless of her thoughts, she closed her eyes, trusting in her brothers’ sight. She would keep her hearing keen for the Specter.

Jax’s breathing stilled for a few moments. “—there is a massive psionic presence here,” he muttered. “Mordenna, do you think it is...?”

“Likely.” There was a second of silence, then she could hear Jax’s gun being taken off of his back. “I’m gonna poach this, if you don’t mind. Specters are somewhat psionic so this’ll scramble it—not to mention the Gatekeeper won’t like it much.”

“Feel free. I do not think we should engage both at the same time, but...”

“Not much of a choice, is there? I’d discuss tactics but I have a very strange feeling that thing is breathing right down our necks.”

Fal-Mai couldn’t hear it at the moment—but this led her to a rather morbid line of thought. Was this what her victims felt when they knew they were being stalked by her? The time that XCOM
came with scouts to her Stronghold flashed in her mind and she grimaced, thinking of what she did to Samhien.

Jax must’ve noticed her expression. “Everything alright, sister?”

Now would’ve been the perfect chance to say she was feeling mildly left out if they weren’t all in imminent danger. “—merely gaining an appreciation for the sense of terror my own abilities inspire in others. Perfectly fine otherwise.”

“Brother, your sarcasm is a bad influence,” Jax responded, clearly trying to lighten the mood—revealing Mordenna’s own influence on him. “It is alright. Mordenna and I are here for you. On my life, it will not touch you.”

“Bad promise,” she eked out. “Promise me that we will all live. That is a far better option, even if I am injured again in the process.”

“Agreed. We all shall make it out of here yet.”

That made Fal-Mai feel a bit better, and let her think back on the pace they were setting. It was slow, and she could hear the soft shifting of Shazara-Ta’s movement stop every so often, as if he was checking every corner. The lumbering steps of Dolly would stop with them, likely just as on edge as everyone else was.

Speaking of being on edge, she could feel Jax tensing up. “The Gatekeeper is moving closer to us.”

“Know a direction?” Mordenna asked, and she could hear him flipping some sort of switch on the Disruption Rifle.

“Four o’clock, I believe the expression is?”

That made Shazara-Ta stop. “Should we assume defensive positions?”

“*I would say so,*” Eliza answered. “*Menace, prepare for engagement. Dolly, hold your fire until you see the Specter.*”

“*Right.*”

Her brothers stopped in their advance, causing her to halt as well. She still could hear nothing of the Specter—but as Jax described, she could *hear* the Gatekeeper approaching. There was a certain low hum that she could catch, caused by the magnitude of psionics Gatekeepers put out. Being this close to Jax and his signature, it was hard to pick out at first—but her familiarity with his meant that hearing anything else got easier.

Menace was still stopped when she felt Jax adjust. “—it should be right there,” he muttered.

“How close?”

“Twenty to thirty feet, same direction. But...”

Mordenna was quiet for a second. “... Jax, Fal-Mai. We all need to link up. We can share senses to an extent, can’t we?”

“Very much so, but—?”

“Link.”
Mordenna’s demand was met, and she could feel Jax reaching out for her psionically. She accepted the invitation—and suddenly she felt like she was seeing double to an extent. One sight trained on the squad, the other at an empty space to her right. Mordenna was the first to come through. “Jax, stop with your sight if you can. I need your psionic sense. Fals, you’ve got your ears on, which is good. You two, I think the Specter has coated the Gatekeeper in its nanos to fully cloak it.”

One of the sights—the one focused on the empty space—disappeared. The sight was replaced by an almost thrumming sensation in her mind, coming it at four o’clock. Mordenna’s gaze shifted to that location. “Right there?”

“Right there,” Jax responded.

Steadily, Mordenna raised Jax’s rifle. Then, he unloaded.

A familiar, ghastly screech rang out as the bullets hit the empty space and stopped, the places where the bullets impacted leaving behind patches of air that distinctly looked like bullet scorch marks on a dark Gatekeeper shell. They dropped, and the disturbance was enough to shake off some of the nanos. The Gatekeeper shimmered into sight, grounded for now.

Before the Chosen could do anything with the opportunity, the sound of foreign nanos reached Fal-Mai’s ears—and thus, all of theirs. Jax was able to summon a Stasis around all of them right before the Specter’s razor-sharp blade crashed into Fal-Mai. The barrier prevented harm, but the force of the strike was enough to slip her out of Jax’s grip and send her tumbling to the floor, out of his shield and the mind link. Quicker than she could think, it ignored her brothers in favor of continuing to pursue her. Fal-Mai could only raise her right arm defensively as it brought its own down on her.

Things moved quite fast for a few seconds. Her arm warped and formed into a shield—something she would’ve expected the Specter to cut through, but it held. The reason as to why was clear, as was her pinkish-red vision thanks to Jax’s quick transfer of psionics. The blade came off of her arm and the Specter reared, showing Jax was pulling it back with a look of rage she’d never seen out of him. Its neck burst into a dark cloud, eluding his grip, but Fal-Mai wasn’t allowed to look for long.

The Stasis dropped, and she felt a cold tendril wrap around her waist. In an instant, she was sliding quickly across the ground, eventually gaining air as she was pulled into the embrace of the Viper King. He planted her on her feet, forming a protective circle around her with his tail as he spoke. “Dolly!”

By the time Shazara-Ta finished speaking, Dolly had already fired off the grenade in his launcher. Fal-Mai started forwards as it landed at Jax and the Specter’s feet, thinking the worst. The grenade exploded—but with no traditional concussive force. There was a blue wave of light, and the Specter shuddered, staggering away from Jax as bits of it seemed to melt and struggle to stay together, leaving Jax unharmed.

Shots sounded off from behind her, and she spun, raising her shield. Not a second too soon—mag fire crashed against it and she sucked in a breath, feeling her arm shudder from the impact. Another pod was upon them. At this rate they’d never get to the transmitter in time.

Just as she and Shazara-Ta dove into opposite cover, her arm morphed back—but not before her little drone sloughed off from the mass and quickly began scuttling away, cloaking a few feet out. In her haste to keep an eye on the Specter and the squad pinching them, she didn’t stop to think about what it could be doing. Her main concern were the targets around them.

With it in his sights, Fal-Mai watched as Jax wound a Stasis around the Specter, completely
trapping it. Mordenna was aiming the Disruption Rifle at it, head snapping to Jax. Before he could say anything, Jax took out his minigun and revved it. “It’s disabled, brother! Focus upon these fools!”

The Gatekeeper was still dazed, and with the Specter scrambled, it was also completely visible. With the two priority targets out of the running for the time being, Fal-Mai could size up the ADVENT forces—right as Shazara-Ta encased them in ice. Two Stun Lancers and a Trooper were frozen from the legs down, while the Heavy MEC with them broke through its cold prison. Shazara-Ta seemed to have deliberately aimed away from the lone Viper in the squad; a gamble that paid off, as the sight of the King seemed to have frozen her up well enough.

Fal-Mai heard Dolly load another grenade behind her—a grenade that swiftly sailed through the air as the Viper lunged to the side, the explosive bouncing on the chunk of ice. She fell back into cover as it exploded. There must have been a survivor or two afterwards, as Mordenna opened fire with a three round burst or two. The ensuing silence was engulfing.

She stood up, her first immediate concern being the leftover Viper. Those concerns were abated when she came out of cover, gun abandoned and hands raised. As Shazara-Ta moved forward to handle her, Fal-Mai looked back over to the Specter. It seemed to have gathered itself—but within Jax’s psionics, it could neither mount an escape nor get up, it seemed. Every time it tried, its hands would rocket out from under it as if the psionics themselves were horrendously slippery. Knowing some things Jax had said about psionics in the past, that was likely the case.

Mordenna moved over to the Gatekeeper, making sure it could see him before pointing the Disruption Rifle at it. “Move and I’ll shoot. Stay there if you know what’s good for you.” He angled his head back at the squad. “Fal-Mai, Dolly has the X4, take it and—”

“Don’t bother, Menace.”

Eliza’s words sent a pit into Fal-Mai’s stomach, and it felt like the breath had been taken from her lungs. “Commander...?”

“The psionic relay is fully shut off. We’re too late.”

The ensuing silence was broken by a mocking, growing laugh. The Specter was openly cackling, disturbingly motionless, lacking any of the movement a human or the like would have made. “Even in my failure, I serve my purpose, betrayers. Can any of you say the same? Can any of you—”

“Silence!” Jax’s roar was loud enough to make Fal-Mai’s ears want to ring. Thank goodness for her headset. “I will hear nothing from an indoctrinated dog of the Elders like yourself!”

“How quickly you speak for the other side,” it bit calmly. “Who are the heretics now to you? Who will they be to you in another year? Do you forget who gave you the power you use to trap me?”

Jax’s hair was fully flowing behind him as he snatched up the Specter, his own hands having no trouble finding purchase on his psionics. “I never asked to be made their child! You may find solace in the means of your creation, but there are those who have opened their eyes to their abuses!”

“Cocytus?”

The voice that spoke into Fal-Mai’s mind was entirely unfamiliar—but judging by the way the Gatekeeper’s eye slid to the Specter, she could guess who it came from. The Specter angled its
head over to it. “Yes, Zuriel?”

“Did we... did we stall them long enough?”

“... we did, dear companion.”

The Gatekeeper’s eye darkened. “Then I am at peace.”

“Rest well, friend. The Elders smile upon you.”

Suddenly, arcs of lightning-like energy lanced across the Gatekeeper’s shell. Mordenna began to back up, but it was Jax who dove for them, coating them both in a Stasis as the rest of the squad ducked. No explosion followed—simply a vast volume of psionics being channeled. When Fal-Mai looked back... both the Gatekeeper and Specter were gone. No charred remnants, no pieces of shell left behind.

Mordenna was the first to react, worming out of Jax’s grip as his psionics dropped, scrambling to his feet and whirling around. “Where are they? Did anybody—?”

“Gone.” It was hard to tell through the suspension fluid, but Dolly seemed defeated. “When Jax dove for you, it opened a portal... and the Specter jumped in with it.”

Mordenna looked at Jax, and the mix of frustration battling with restraint was hard to watch. In the end he wheeled around, balling his fists, not saying a word. Jax himself slowly got to his feet, not looking at Mordenna as he slumped, turning to the side. Fal-Mai wanted badly to intervene, but... what was there to say, right then and now?

Shazara-Ta came back into view, the ADVENT Viper in tow. Both remained silent at the scene. Samhien was the only one still moving after that, coming over to Fal-Mai and checking her over. She muttered a soft “sorry” to him—for what reason, she wasn’t sure, but he shook his head, moving onto Shazara-Ta and his new follower.

“Menace...” The was Bradford, sounding like he was struggling to say anything. “You all made it out. That’s what matters.”

His attempt at lightening the mood was met with resounding silence. The only thing that broke Fal-Mai out of staring forlornly at her brothers was her gently moving her right arm and remembering why it was so light. She turned her head. Where could her drone have gotten off to? As she mentally asked that, a feeling radiated from her arm—one hard to classify, but Fal-Mai got the instinctual feeling of knowing which direction it was in. For lack of anything else to do, Fal-Mai gathered her throwing knives, slotted them back into her belt, and walked in that direction. From the sounds of it, nobody was following her.

“Fal-Mai?”

That was the Commander. She barely had the energy to respond, but she figured she’d have to as she made her way away from the group. “Retrieving my drone,” she quietly answered. “It split away from me during the commotion. I know where it is.”

“Understood.” There was a moment of quiet as Fal-Mai navigated over debris. “None of that was your fault.”

“Nonsense, Eliza,” she coldly and bitterly responded, “I merely locked up in the face of one of our most formidable enemies and permitted it to escape as my brothers struggled to protect me. I’m sure that had no outcome on the resulting encounter.”
“Fal-Mai—”

“Not to mention I did not possess the sense to steal away in cloak and complete our one objective,” she went on, her self-loathing burning brightly. “Perhaps it was a waste to send me back out after all.”

No response. Fal-Mai knew she had stepped over a line there—but the anger and loathing at the back of her thoughts, the ghosts of what she was getting from her brothers were coloring her own feelings. Eliza would undoubtedly be angry at her when she got back, and Fal-Mai knew she would just have to bear the burden of anticipation. Swallowing her emotions back for now, she pressed on.

Eventually, she pushed open a set of double doors, the sight of the darkened psionic relay greeting her. On the control panel was her drone, turning around to “see” her. Its implied gaze met her own—and it disgusted Fal-Mai that her first reaction was to take out her anger on it. What had it done? Should she really be getting angry that it had tried what it could with what it had at hand? How could she get upset at something that only existed to serve her?

What is wrong with you?

Fal-Mai sucked in a breath through her teeth, and her left hand fumbled with her headset, then her communicator as tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. As she silenced her comms, the little drone was quick to scurry up to her, nestling in her hands as she fell backwards, sitting down and clutching it.

“I’m sorry,” she sobbed to a silent servant, who could only nuzzle against her in some measure of reassurance. “I’m sorry,” she repeated, trying not to imagine what would’ve happened if she let herself be like her mother. “I’m sorry,” she mouthed, the air leaving her lungs as she knew in her heart, her brothers would have succeeded if she hadn’t been there.

She messed with her communicator again. There was one more person to apologize to as she made sure she was on Eliza’s comms. “I-I’m sorry.”

“IT’s ok.” Eliza’s voice was soft and reassuring. “I know the pain you’re in. Your brothers too. What matters to me is that you all made it out. We can just let the Baroness know she has trouble heading her way.”

Fal-Mai sniffled, and her drone butted her hand, making her pet it in response. “I... I should have been strong enough.”

“IT’s ok. ” Eliza’s voice was soft and reassuring. “I know the pain you’re in. Your brothers too. What matters to me is that you all made it out. We can just let the Baroness know she has trouble heading her way.”

Fal-Mai sniffled, and her drone butted her hand, making her pet it in response. “I... I should have been strong enough.”

“Not every mission works out. Keep yourself together and rejoin Menace when you can.”

“Y-yes, Eliza.” Her drone butted her hand again, and she let out a breath. “I’m already petting you, small one, wh-what do you...?”

She looked down at it properly. The top had shifted color into an image and words—a piece of paper tucked at the corner and “1 FILE RECOVERED.”

Oh. Maybe Shen would want to look at that. Fal-Mai nodded. “Ok. I’ll... I will let them know.”

Its message delivered, the drone folded back onto her lap. “What should we know?”

“My drone... it recovered a file from the transmitter.”

“I... wasn’t aware it could do that.”
“That makes two of us. I w-will see about letting Shen look at it, or—” Right. Her brothers were currently in the sourest of moods, and one of them held that towards the other. All this thinking about how they were excluding her and liked her less when it was their protectiveness that may have made them fail the mission. Fal-Mai took in a deep breath, getting to her feet and still cradling her drone. “I will be returning to Menace now.”

“Good to hear. I’ll be getting Firebrand en route to the tunnel entrance. Just... be strong for as long as it takes to get back, Fal-Mai. I’ll be there for you and your brothers once you make it.”

“I understand, Commander,” she replied, turning and exiting the room with the transmitter.

It was a quiet moment of walking back, but Menace had barely moved from their positions. Dolly was seated on the edge of some fallen stone, contemplating his X4 charge. Samhien was sitting down with him, looking at Fal-Mai’s brothers—who were pointedly sitting so that a supporting column hid them from the view of the other. Shazara-Ta and his Viper were nearby, and Shazara-Ta was talking to her softly.

Mordenna still looked somewhat frustrated, but as his vision panned over to Fal-Mai, he immediately got up and walked over to her, shifting instantly to concern. “Fals, are you...?” Once he got close enough, he reached for her face and unhooked her mask, wiping her tear tracks. “Don’t... don’t be upset. This was...”

Fal-Mai looked over to Jax, who had stiffened upon hearing Mordenna speak to her. She looked back to Mordenna, who had frozen. After a moment, he closed his eyes, hugging Fal-Mai. “What am I doing, sis...?” He lamented, voice low. “Why am I blaming him? He didn’t... he just...

She hugged him back, one arm remaining around her drone. “H-he just was trying to live up to his promise, Mordenna.”

She felt him nod. “Yeah. But, I can’t go over there. The way I looked at him—”

“Do it, brother,” she said with a surprising amount of conviction. “You know best what happens when you let this lie.”

Mordenna paused. Then; “Only if you come with me.”

“Of course.”

He broke off the hug, turning towards Jax. They had kept their voices low enough that he clearly hadn’t been able to tell what they were on about. It was clear he was assuming Mordenna had no intent to make amends—he was further slumped over, head in his hands. Mordenna hesitated, but began to walk over, with Fal-Mai trailing closely behind. When he got next to Jax, he stopped. “J-Jax?”

Jax jumped at his name, looking over to Mordenna. Seeing the remnants of tears on his own face made Fal-Mai’s heart break, and ahead of Mordenna, she walked up and sat beside Jax, leaning against him and hugging him. Mordenna followed, sitting on Jax’s other side as he did. “That wasn’t fair. What I did and wanted to do, I mean. If that Gatekeeper really was going to explode... well, I would have you to thank for saving my life.” Mordenna stopped for a second, clearly steeling his voice against breaking. “I’m sorry. Thank you for looking out for us. Please don’t think I hate you...”

At that, Jax pulled both of his siblings in, hugging them tightly. “I’m s-sorry. I... I got angry, I wanted to scream, you have to hate me—”
“Shhh.” Mordenna patted Jax’s shoulder, rocking gently. “No. I don’t hate you and I don’t want to. I never want to. You’re my brother and I love you. None of it was your fault. I wanted to get angry too.”

Fal-Mai worked her way closer, her drone staying put as she added her other arm to the hug. “You got us out, brother. That... that was all you needed to do. You saved me from it. Thank you.”

Jax didn’t respond, sniffing hard and making sure his grip on them was tight. Fal-Mai buried her head into his shoulder, letting herself be sad on her own terms. They would make it out of this. They were a family. They just had to hold it together until the Skyranger arrived...

The failure of the mission weighed heavily on Eliza’s mind, but not as heavily as the state of her troops.

Once the whole squad—plus one Viper—had been confirmed on the Skyranger, Eliza had made a straight beeline towards the Armory, telling Bradford over her shoulder to tell the Baroness about the bad news. She had soldiers to comfort.

Of course, her worry left her pacing in the Armory, far before the Skyranger had even arrived. A failed mission was one thing, and in the grand scheme of things, this had been her best failure thus far. The only thing lost was the objective—the squad hadn’t even been injured and they’d gained a troop thanks to Shazara-Ta’s presence on the field. Maybe something more, if that file that Fal-Mai’s drone had picked up turned out to be anything meaningful.

Speaking of Fal-Mai... that probably weighed on her the most. Thankfully, things had been looking up when Eliza turned off the Chosen’s comms for privacy, but that had been a harrowing situation for all of them. Fal-Mai failing to act in the face of the Specter that took her arm, Mordenna losing focus on the objective, and Jax losing his temper quite a bit. The Gatekeeper and Specter escaping—Zuriel and Cocytus, if she remembered correctly—she wouldn’t pin on them. If she had the time to make the call, she would’ve told Jax to do the same thing he did. The fact of the matter was that the enemy was getting smarter. That didn’t put any fault on her troops for acting on previous notions that usually always held true.

So she hoped they were alright. She could only pray to whatever god would listen that they had truly started to work things out.

After a while of pacing and mumbling to herself, there was a small vibration in the floor, a telltale sign that the Skyranger had landed up above. Eliza watched as the platform lowered, the ship itself coming into view. As always, the back was open, letting whoever wanted to stretch their legs to do so. Shazara-Ta and his new Viper companion were still near the Skyranger, the Viper looking about with apprehension as the platform descended. Dolly was walking off the ramp, Samhien following behind him. Finally, near the edge of the platform, the Chosen stood. All of them looked three steps away from collapsing into a pile of exhaustion, and Eliza couldn’t say she blamed them.

The platform fully lowered and the ceiling hatch closed up. She gave them a moment to collect themselves before speaking. “Menace, assemble,” she softly asked. As they came to stand in a staggered line, she continued. “Not every fight in this war will be victorious. The veterans around here know that well. However, none of you are to blame for the loss suffered today. The enemy’s tactics are always changing and they’re bound to catch us off guard at some point.”
Eliza stood up more properly, allowing her voice to become stronger. “What I would like to call attention to and encourage is the care you all showed for each other out on the field. This loss could have been far worse if not for the attention you all put in regarding tactics and your fellow squadmates.” She gave a tired smile. “I would go on further, but... after an experience like that, it’s clear you all need your rest. Allow me to address and dismiss you in turn.”

At the end of the line, she looked to Shazara-Ta and the Viper. “Shazara-Ta, take your charge by Dr. Tygan for chip removal. I trust your judgement.” She gave proper attention to the Viper, swapping to ADVENT just in case. “New recruit, I welcome you to XCOM and our forces. Do you have a name?”

The Viper looked down, shaking her head. “Not yet.”

“Understood. Feel free to inform me when you do and I will happily refer to you as that. You two are dismissed.”

The two of them slithered out. Eliza turned to Dolly. “Dolly, your accuracy and timing with grenades is to be admired. I’m very much considering and will probably allow you to pick a grenade launcher for yourself in the future. Your... lack of restraint when using explosives prevented a lot of potential harm.”

Dolly saluted. “Happy to hear it, Commander.”

“Happy to be able to say it. You are dismissed.” Dolly lumbered off. “Samhien?” The Skirmisher nodded. “The hectic activity of the battle did not allow you to do much, and yet you still presented your best hand. Thank you for checking up on everyone, even during more tense moments.”

“Of course, Commander. I am sorry that I could not do more.”

“Don’t be. I firmly believe you all did what you could. Go get some rest.” Eliza looked at the Chosen as Samhien departed, who perked up as she regarded them. However, she noticed Jolene coming out of the Skyranger, and held up a finger to them. “Firebrand?”

Firebrand readjusted her helmet as she stepped away from the Skyranger. “Yes ma’am?”

“Could you do me a favor and ask Shen about the moral implications of sticking to old technology versus adapting alien technology? For the next... oh, hour or so?”

Jolene locked eyes with her through her helmet, nodding in understanding. “Can do, Commander.” With that, Firebrand left the room.

That left the Chosen, finally. In lieu of saying anything to them, Eliza walked up and sat down, inviting them to come down with her. Come down they did—with Fal-Mai leaning against her and the two brothers sitting as close as it was comfortable to do. Eliza’s tired smile dropped. “I’m going to come out and say it again—none of what happened was your guys’ fault.”

“We’ve gotten to that stage of the grieving process, Commander,” Mordenna replied, resting his arms on his knees. “Now we’re just figuring out what to do with all these goddamn emotions.”

“Talk them out, naturally.” She looked at Jax pointedly. “And I must say—I would be goddamn furious in your situation too, Jax. The worst you did was yell at someone who deserved it. The instant it came time to deal with your siblings, your anger dropped.”

Jax glanced down. “—just thinking of becoming so furious even in their presence makes me ashamed. I ponder that happening to me, and...”
“Well, bro, that’s because we have shit parents.” Mordenna gestured weakly. “More specifically, Cronus used his anger to straighten you into line. About the only thing that fazes me is getting yelled at. Fals, how about you?”

Fal-Mai shook her head. “Your anger was not directed at me, Jax, so I was not intimidated. Surprised, yes, but that is it. You were righteously furious at... at someone who had harmed me greatly. I see no issue with the matter.”

Jax let out a breath, nodding. “Alright. I... I had been afraid I had agitated or intimidated either of you.”

Eliza chuckled. “Worst you did was induce the strongest case of audio clipping I’d ever had come over comms. Got quite the voice on you.”

He rubbed his neck, bashfully looking away. “I am... rather loud when I choose to be, yes.”

Mordenna smirked for a second, but it then dropped. “Hey, bro? If I ever like, get angry in the moment at you, I promise it’s never permanent. I just need a moment to be angry and then I can cool off. Maybe with someone else’s help to let me see how much of a dick I’m being.”

Nodding, Jax looked back to Mordenna. “I understand. I was, admittedly, scared in the moment that I had seriously angered you.”

“Well, you had. But that’s only because I thought I would’ve had some different response on my own time. Like I said, any other situation? You would’ve saved my ass, so I’m not holding a grudge, nor telling you not to do that.”

“I am somewhat glad you are not asking me to not act. It would be hard to not leap in to help you when I can.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I understand the urge. Speaking of, did I ever apologize for getting Berserker brains in your hair?”

Jax sniffed haughtily. “You may always do it again.”

“What, the brains part?”

“I would certainly hope not!”

Eliza smiled, looking over to Fal-Mai. Fal-Mai looked like she was holding something back, her gaze trained on the floor. The Commander eased a hand onto her shoulder. “Fal-Mai? Something to say?”

Fal-Mai looked up at her, and then over at her brothers. She sat up and away from Eliza, not meeting anyone’s gaze. “... brothers? May I confess something and have understanding granted?”

When they both replied in the affirmative, she nodded. “I...I, rather foolishly and against everything which I know is correct, had begun to have thoughts that the two of you were excluding me in some way. Which I know is wrong,” she pushed, seeing Mordenna about to say something, “because I have seen and experienced firsthand the things you two have done for me to make me feel included and part of this family. I knew those thoughts had no basis in reality... and yet...”

“Sounds like intrusive thoughts to me, or at least some slightly related phenomenon,” Mordenna replied. “I’m glad that you know you feel included, at least, but I still feel bad that your brain could ever suggest that.”
She shook her head, sighing. “I would not think for a second that the two of you would willingly exclude me. Not of my own accord, anyhow. I suppose some parts of me are scrambling for ways to insist I am failing in some capacity.”

Jax leaned over, rubbing her shoulder. “I would suppose those are simply the remnants of Helena’s insidious criticisms. Sister, trust me when I say that nothing she has said or will ever say will hold water. You are doing a fantastic job with what you have been given, and I am proud to call you my sister.”

Fal-Mai’s expression eased into a smile. “Thank you, brothers. I do truly know such thoughts have no basis in reality.”

Eliza’s smile grew warmer. “...you guys have really come a long way since the beginning. It warms my heart to see you all supporting each other.”

“Well, you gave us a good environment, Liz.” Mordenna smiled back. “Things just kinda happened from there. Really, this whole situation is your fault and I’m happily blaming you for it.”

“Now, now, no blaming the Commander.” Jax wagged a finger at Mordenna. “Even if the blame is assigned with gratitude.”

“It is hard to not blame the Commander,” Fal-Mai responded, “when her fostering of understanding and empathy is what brought us here.”

“I just provided the tools,” Eliza countered. “You guys were the one who actually chose to work on yourselves when you weren’t under the Elders’ oppressive custody. I think most of the blame can be squarely assigned to you guys for taking the initiative.”

“Oh, what, let me take the blame? Me taking responsibility?” Mordenna shook his head. “You’re out of it, Commander.”

Eliza laughed. Even if it was the Chosen who did most of the work... she was so happy to have seen them come this far. It meant a lot to her that she could help them change like this.

Still, something occurred to Eliza, and she looked over at Fal-Mai. “Right, before I forget. You said your drone picked up a file or the like?”

Mordenna raised an eyebrow as Fal-Mai nodded. Her drone molded out from her arm. “I had been thinking about how we would be unable to reach our objective in time, and in response, my companion scurried off. When I went to go find it, it was on the relay, and had informed me of the file it had acquired.”

“Well, that’s interesting.” Mordenna beckoned to the drone. “Bring it over here? I’ve got a datapad on me and might be able to see what it is.” The drone scurried over as Mordenna got out a datapad. It generated a cord and he hooked it up, tapping on the screen. “...the file’s encrypted, but I’ve got a name. ‘Pursuit Initiative.’”

“Pursuit?” Jax rubbed his chin. “If they know where the Black Market is and are simply disseminating plans to destroy it, I would hardly think that befitting of the name ‘Pursuit Initiative.’ The Elders are known for somewhat purple prose... as am I... but they were hardly incorrect in its use.”

“That’s exactly what I’m thinking.” Mordenna casually threw out a hand. “That’d be more like ‘Suppression Initiative.’ Pursuit implies they’re... chasing something...”
Slowly, Mordenna looked up at Eliza. What he said definitely sounded distressing, but she couldn’t quite make the link just yet. “Mordenna?”

“Eliza. I’ve got a theory but you’re going to have to work with me. This file—its size is goddamn familiar. The Elders have tried to launch UFO initiatives in the past against you guys, but you stopped them because they were openly UFO initiatives.” Mordenna’s arm flew out. “You yourself said ADVENT’s tactics are changing. They’re getting smarter. Why would they send two elite units for the purpose of stalling us on something that would hinder us at most? Why would they launch a hazard armor project when the main problem has always been bullets with you guys?”

Things clicked in Eliza’s head, and she covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh my god. They’re all the same.”

“Bingo. The Elders banked on us not seeing through what they were doing, and...” He sighed, massaging his forehead. “It worked. God...” Mordenna shook his head. “We can still do something, though. If I decrypt this file, we can probably get more information about what they’re doing specifically and where they’re launching it. I’ve seen that Defense Matrix room you guys set up—I’ll start focusing my efforts into empowering the turrets, maybe making them able to be manned? Whatever the case, we know now. We can get ready.”

Even if knowing ahead of time meant that they could prepare, the thought of a UFO hunting them down... it brought back really unpleasant memories of First Contact. The base being invaded, aliens swarming in, that Thin Man—

“Hey, hey, Eliza. It’s ok.”

Eliza hadn’t noticed, but she’d begun to shake. Mordenna had an arm around her, Fal-Mai’s drone had skittered into her lap, and Jax’s hand was on her knee. She took in a steadying breath, unable to avoid shuddering. “I’m... I’m sorry. I’m just...” Could she confess? Mordenna had told her the virtues of confiding, and she trusted them all with her life. “—I’m scared. I think of the Avenger going down and it’s twenty years ago all over again.”

“We will be there for you, Eliza.” Jax squeezed her leg gently and reassuringly. “Should you need it, I will make sure some of my followers are rallied around you as we make sure they cannot enter this ship.”

“Yeah. We’ll get you some support at minimum.” Mordenna brought her closer in the hug. “I’ll see what I can do about piloting the ship as we’re evading. The less said about Bradford, the better, so maybe I can shake them off or hide us when they start coming.”

“All else fails,” Fal-Mai assured, “I will come back and steal away with you, ensuring that you will never have to be back in the custody of the Elders.”

“Trust me,” Eliza muttered, “this time, the minute we’re overwhelmed, I’m just killing myself this time. Was going to the last time, but...”

The notion of her ending her life definitely seemed to upset them, and they rallied around her more thoroughly. “With luck,” Mordenna insisted, “it won’t come to that. Just know we’ll be there for you, alright?”

She nodded, relaxing and closing her eyes. They were with her. She would make it.
Powers

Chapter Summary

More comes to light.

Well, it was about time for Mordenna to start going over the moral implications of making his own personal assistant.

With everything that had been happening recently, he’d been a little distracted in actually getting around to making his sparky little helper—just like he’d gotten distracted about seeking out Wiki for what she said she owed him in the first place. Life on the Avenger certainly kept him busy, that much he would say. But now he had Wiki with him, and he was making his way back to the Workshop.

He looked down at the Codex brain he was carrying in his hands. Mordenna wasn’t much for worrying over the morals of things, really, but he still wanted to make sure he wasn’t going to make an AI that was hostile to him for erasing its past memory. He knew what kind of resentment could come about from that, so he really didn’t want to inflict it on anyone else. Wiki assured him that there wouldn’t be anything left but a death proxy, and that really wasn’t a Codex in her words. Just a snapshot of the last hour or so of operation to let ADVENT know what happened to it if they recovered it.

“Like I said,” Wiki said, breaking him out of his thoughts, “It’s clandestine. We’ll be completely wiping the death proxy so there’s no room for imprinting, and from there it’s like working with a reformatted device. You’re basically going to be making your own AI from a baseline.”

Mordenna nodded. “Usually I wouldn’t consider the ethics of it so much, but it’s funny what some time at XCOM does to the way you think.”

“I mean, it’s natural to be worried about it, in my opinion.” Wiki shrugged. “But, coming from a Codex herself? It’ll be fine.”

He could take some solace in that. “Fair enough, I guess. I might end up putting this off a bit longer. Jax’s armor needs to be stepped up the production list, considering both the back and the front have problems. Maybe once you check this Codex brain it’ll be the next thing Shen and I handle. She’s been working on that thing for the Archons, alongside a project for the Commander.”

“Oh, the legs for the Archons, right?”

“Yeah. I’m honestly still reeling over it a little bit. I mean. Archons. With legs. ” Mordenna splayed a hand out, then used that hand to open the door to the Workshop. “Honestly I’m not gonna be prepared to see—”

Mordenna had finally looked into the Workshop proper, and even his Sight-gifted eyes had to adjust to what he was seeing. Lily and Rodin were over in the former’s corner of the Workshop. Lily herself seemed fine. It was Rodin who Mordenna was focused on. The man was standing on two legs, sprouting where they normally wouldn’t be on an Archon. They were the same shade of red as the rest of his body, and even had those same style tattoos that his torso had.
Wow. She’d completed that faster than Mordenna had expected. He raised his eyebrows. “So, uh, whatcha got there, Lily?”

Lily looked to Rodin, to him and Wiki, back to Rodin, then to the tool in her hand. “This? This is something I really haven’t named yet. I’d call it a welder but its function—”


“Indeed I do,” Rodin replied, too smug for his own good.

Lily shrugged. “I can work on multiple projects at a time pretty quickly when it comes down to it. Considering the Commander’s stuff could be based off of existing blueprints? Wasn’t too much of a hassle to work on that while doing something new.”

“Well, glad to hear it worked out well.” He tilted his head at Rodin. “Those working alright?”

Rodin nodded, walking around Lily’s workbench to approach Mordenna. The jets that were normally on the bottom half of Archons were gone, meaning that seemingly the only means of propulsion he had left were in his wings. “She has done an absolutely fantastic job with her craft—I would take her to be an Archon were I blind!”

“Oh, half of it was Mordenna’s ideas for Fal-Mai’s prosthetic.” Lily followed after him, setting that tool down. “And part of it was your physiology. I didn’t know Archons were intended to be modifiable.”

“Such was the nature of our kind, before the Elders perverted us for use in their armies.” Rodin gestured grandly. “The original Archon is a harmonic symphony of metal and body, forged from the living minerals of our homeworld! A shame your Earth does not seem to have such resources that ours do.”

“Apparently their planet’s metals are renewable,” Lily explained, “and for lack of a better word, alive. I don’t understand the specifics, but they can harvest the metals and use it to create more of themselves, and the metal perfectly integrates with their biology.”

“Sounds like a transhumanist dream,” Mordenna muttered, his genuine interest taking over. “Or, transarchonian? You get the picture. Still, based on ADVENT’s Archons—”

“A horrible choice for the full picture,” Rodin interrupted. “I’ve gotten reports from my men and some of the soldiers regarding how they are producing them, and it is an insult to me and mine, what the Elders have done to them.” Rodin’s mouth twisted in disgust. “This is not to even mention what they were doing to them twenty years ago.”

“The Floaters...” Wiki rubbed her arm. “They... really mangled them back then.”

“And it is why they shall pay in blood!” Rodin flourished his hand in a broad, aggressive gesture. “And should I and my court have to revive our old traditions of modifying our bodies, so be it. I will teach those False Gods not to turn their backs on the planets whose bodies they leave desecrated.”

Mordenna held up his hands. “Good that you’re angry, but maybe don’t try to take my head off with your hand?”

He looked a little flustered at that, the props on his wings jittering for a second. “O-of course. I digress. Lily’s craftsmanship is peerless.”
“I’d say,” Mordenna replied. “Just wish she’d start taking more credit for it.”

“Well!” She exasperatedly gestured to him. “You’re the one who told me the concepts.”

“The concepts.” He pointed at her. “You’re the one who went out, got the alloys, shaped the legs, assuredly tested them, maybe even made a whole new base for him so he could use them, and here he is walking like a goddamn charm! Lily if you try to keep jumping off of your pedestal to shove me up there I’m just gonna break the damn thing.”

“As aggressive as Mordenna is...” Rodin crossed his arms, looking to Lily. “I cannot help but agree. You do need to take more credit for your work, Chief Engineer. On my planet you would be venerated for your skill.” He then looked to Mordenna again. “We did have the option of legs on our homeworld, but they looked much different to what humans have. They were designed to weather hard stops and provide grip for takeoffs.”

“Oh yeah, I remember hearing about those.” Mordenna rubbed his mouth. “So larger-platformed feet and cleats on the bottom?”

“Out of many options.”

He nodded, then looked to Lily. “Speaking of cleats, tangentially, at least—and don’t think you’ve escaped me lovingly kicking your ass over your self worth—Lily, I’ve got some projects to field with you.”

She looked like she wasn’t like the idea of Mordenna coming after her later on the subject, but she seemed to latch onto the idea of new projects. “Alright, alright. What’re you thinking, bro?”

“Well, it’s simple.” He tossed the Codex brain to Wiki, who got the implication and zipped over to his workbench to work on it. “My brother’s armor is melted in the back, gouged in the front, and I don’t think we really managed to get all of Fal-Mai’s blood off of it. He needs new duds and I need your help making them.”

Lily nodded, and she walked over to her bench. Gesturing to ROV-R, the little GREMLIN flew over and started a projection as Lily picked up her datapad and stylus. “Well, I remember you talking about kitting everyone out at some point, and probably best we start with the man who needs it most. What do you have in mind?”

Mordenna came over, gesturing as he talked. “I’m thinking WAR Suit base, naturally. Let this man fire off heavy weapons—though I don’t think he needs the supporting servos to brace for firing them.”

Lily raised an eyebrow, though the blueprint for the armor came up. “Have you actually gotten around to doing a weight test for what he can handle?”

“I’m a little afraid to know that number,” he muttered, “considering I’ve seen him stop a Berserker slam.”

“Yeah, that’s more than a little frightening. I guess it means we can do whatever we want so long as he still has flexibility in it.”

“I would like to see him against Vel’kiin,” Rodin replied. “I am sure he could not stand up to her strength.”

“Well, that might be our benchmark one day. For now, any other ideas, Mords?”
“It’s Jax. We have to get some sort of aesthetic in there.” Mordenna rubbed his chin. “I’ve already talked with his tailors regarding that, and something crusader-like is what we generally settled on. Cape probably included, but like... two, smaller ones, hanging off of individual emplacements coming from his shoulder blades. Lets him have a spot to hang his gun and still be fabulous.”

Lily’s mouth set in a line. “I... kinda know what crusader armor looks like?”

Mordenna turned to Wiki, who was levitating the Codex brain, her black datastream flowing faster. “Wiki, wouldn’t happen to have anything like that saved?”

She looked up. “As it so happens...”

On the projection, an image of the armor popped up. Lily gave an impressed whistle, starting to add details from it onto the WAR Suit. Mordenna looked at it. “... larger shoulder pads. The helmet needs to accommodate his horns—which I also need to get around to redesigning and making some for Liz—and... I’m thinking a different style? Retractable visor, the front is mask-like, not slits for his eyes but like, one-way opaque lenses? Or maybe one conjoined lens fashioned like a slit.”

Lily stared at him. He sighed. “Give me that.” He took the pad and stylus from her, adding the details he had in his head. As he did, she nodded, finally starting to see what he was on about.

While he had the datapad, he added a few more details, narrating as he did. “Ok, so right under the hitch for his rifle is going to be the drum for his ammo types, and we need to retain the hitch on his hip for the cannon. XCOM banners on the capes, and probably a smaller one on the front. It has to stop before his gauntlets, meaning the heavy weapon has to be kinda detached from the armor itself? I might just fit a few to work on his gauntlets. Speaking of gauntlets, I need to make the shard addons for those, too. Make it so it’s trivial for him to have a melee weapon if he needs it. Ooh, I can put a grenade hitch or two on the belts, that would be nice.”

After a few more stylistic changes, he handed the pad and stylus back to Lily. She took a moment to marvel at the design he’d made. “You see, Mordenna? This is what I mean when I say you’re doing a majority of the work around here.”

“Shut up, this is unrelated. We’re working together on this one to make it go faster, alright?”

Lily sighed. “Alright. We’ve got an unmodified WAR Suit kicking around, so we can start with that to make things go faster. We’re going to need at least one core to make that ammo drum, and a few more for the heavy weapons, but we have some lying around.” She tapped the stylus against her chin. “Starting to run out, though. Wonder if I can ask the Commander to make another supply run soon?”

“Eh, I can do that during my downtime.” Mordenna shrugged. “I’m gonna need the materials to make another tiny one for my own mask I’ll be making here soon, anyway. Whether it comes down to a shopping trip or me robbing a supply train, I’ll get us some.”

“Fair enough by me. Making your own Reaper mask?”

“Hell yeah, and I’m gonna make it useful. Incorporate some alien tech to spite Volk.” Technically he was on better terms with Volk nowadays, but he wouldn’t pass up a chance to poke fun at him. “But, back to what I was thinking. Can we start immediately, or do you still have a few things to do with Rodin’s legs?”

Lily looked to Rodin, who put his hands up. “I have a ‘sculptor’ in my ranks. If you teach him how you made the base and legs, he can work on his own to replicate them for whoever else in my ranks desire them.”
She nodded. “Introduce him to me and I’ll get around to doing that. Still, guess that does free me up to work on it with you. Though…” She pointed at Wiki with her stylus. “What’s Wiki doing?”

“Oh, her?” Mordenna shrugged. “We’re going to make me a Codex.”

Lily nodded in total understanding for a moment before doing a double-take at him. “Uh?”

“Yes.” Wiki was the one who responded that time. “I’m repaying the favor he did for literally saving my life by letting him make his own little assistant. I’ve got faith that he’ll treat whatever Codex he makes well.”

That was certainly an uplifting statement, especially considering who his “father” was. Mordenna hid a genuine smile behind his hand. “I hope so, anyway. Still, she’ll work on getting that started for me, and after we’re done with the armor I can deal with that.”

“That’s fair. I was surprised Jax was fine going out in that armor last time, but I suppose he didn’t have anything else to wear.”

Mordenna sighed. “Yeah. Would’ve moved up his project earlier, but… Fals’s arm came first.” He hoped Jax understood why. Things seemed to be going good between the two of them, despite how many times Mordenna endeavored to fuck things up. He moved on, wanting to stay away from such thoughts, even if his mind remained on his brother. “Say, we should probably make sure Jax is good with the aesthetic of this. You go get the WAR Suit, I’ll go get him. Sound good?”

“Sounds good to me. Think that thing’s in here, actually.” Lily went over to one of the crates in the room, rifling through it.

Mordenna took that as his cue to leave. “Alright. Wiki, let me know when you’re done.” She gave him a thumbs up, and he turned to Rodin, lowering his voice. “You. Don’t seduce Lily and break her heart or I will end you.”

Rodin chuckled, holding up his hands. “I have no intentions of such folly. She—and your Commander—are commendable souls.”

*The Commander?* Mordenna narrowed his eyes at Rodin. There were way too many people trying to get in Eliza’s pants, himself included. “You and I are thinking the same thing on the Commander, at least, but if you end up with her instead of me, the sentiment stays.”

Rodin nodded. “I would fully invite you to end my disgrace if I were to hurt either of them.”

“Good.” Mordenna then raised his voice back to normal volume. “Alright, chucklenuts! I’ll be back.” With that, he left the room.

Mordenna pretty much knew Jax’s usual haunts by this point. If he wasn’t in the Studio, he was probably in his room, which Mordenna really needed to help him kit out at some point. Ah, well, eventually. He slapped the panel to the Studio, walking in without looking. “Alright you magical freaks, what did you do with Gigantor?”

“Brother.” Ah, there he was. Amidst a few laughs from the occupants of the room, Jax was sitting on a frankly huge bean bag—Chosen-sized, really—doing his best to glare at him. He even had his new duds on—and of *course* he had to capitalize on the joke and lounge in a roman tunic. White and gold were pretty tasteful colors—what was even more so was the XCOM pin holding his rope belt together. Rest of the room was as busy as it usually was—with a few Mystics over in the creative corner, being a little bit more giggly than usual and seemingly messing with some paints.
Of course, Jax couldn’t even jokingly hold the expression long, rolling his eyes and inviting him in. “Come. I’m sure you have something of importance.”

“Eh, importance is in the eye of the beholder.” Sweet, there were _two_ huge bean bags. Not that Mordenna made use of the second one, flopping down right next to Jax to be a bit of a pain. Jax didn’t seem to mind, merely moving his arm to the back of the chair to give Mordenna room. “I do have something to ask, but you wouldn’t mind if I shot the breeze with you for a few minutes?”

“Not at all.” Jax motioned to the ring of bean bag chairs, a rather nice-looking rug underneath all of them. A few of his congregation were sitting in some of them, including one of the Phoenixes and his Centurion. Jeanne, if he remembered correctly? He was sure the other was Alexander. “I was merely relaxing with a few of my followers and making good use of the amenities that Hestia and Demeter have provided.”

“Glad you’re living in the lap of luxury, bro. Bean bag chairs are _choice._” These ones were clearly made with care, with minimal, but pleasing patterns and lovely material. “Getting stuff made for the Black Market, too?”

“Assuredly. I believe the Baroness will be happy with what they have made.” Jax smiled gently to himself. “I am glad to enable something they take to so eagerly. I am sometimes afraid they are just doing it to please me, but they seem to take a certain amount of joy in their work. It lifts my spirit to know I am doing right by them.”

“Ain’t that all we can ask for?” He poked Jax’s shoulder. “Nice duds, by the way. Sure the Tailors were happy to do that for you.”

“I appreciate it, brother—and that _does_ remind me. They have yours and Fal-Mai’s first set ready when you wish to pick them up.”

“Sick! Hope they were able to pull it off well, but judging by some of your PR outfits in the past, I’m sure they did.” Mordenna sunk further into the bean bag. This was comfy. Maybe he needed to hang out here more often than he did. “Since it’s related to duds, might as well bring up what I wanted to talk about—we’re moving onto making your new armor. I _think_ I nailed your aesthetic with the design, but I’d like to get you down sometime in the next century to check it out.”

Jax nodded. “I will accompany you when you see it fit to rise.”

“Yeah, that’s a pretty big ‘when.’” Mordenna stretched out, getting more relaxed. “... you see Fals at all lately?”

“She was in here earlier, and I informed her of her clothes being ready.” Jax smiled fondly. “She left quickly after that, and dare I say she looked rather excited.”

“Can you blame her? Girl designed herself a set of clothes she’d be comfortable with wearing with good fabrics.” Mordenna grinned. “Probably be in here any minute now, wanting to show off her new outfit. Predictable, but damn adorable.” Thinking of Fal-Mai in her new clothes and her generally expressing herself more tangentially led Mordenna back to a thought he’d had earlier. “Speaking of settling more into trivial comforts, you need any help decorating your room, bro?”

“Certainly. It is rather barebones as is, though my dear followers have been helpful in adding some dressings.” Jax grew silent for a second, eyes darting to the side. Poor guy looked _nervous_ for some reason. “There is... one thing I would certainly like, but...”

Was it something he really couldn’t say aloud? No problem for Mordenna, even if he really
couldn’t imagine what would be so embarrassing to ask for. Something interest-related? Whatever the case, Mordenna’s hand landed over Jax’s, and they started the mind link. “Feel free to tell me, bro. I’m not really someone who can judge.”

It was even more evident how embarrassed Jax was in the mind meld, almost bordering on shame. “Are you sure you will not...?”

“This is a judgement free zone, Jax.”

Jax was still looking away. “I... I would very much like something like a nightlight. I find it very hard and distressing trying to sleep in total darkness. I’ve hardly been able to make use of the bed provided to me for that reason.”

Well, that was reasonable. Mordenna patted Jax’s hand. “No sweat. Little bit of elerium— practically just using some dust, really—line it in some vented metal, make you something stylish that still keeps the room at a low glow. I’d like my siblings to be able to sleep where I can’t, thank you.”

The relief that struck Jax when it was clear Mordenna wasn’t going to make fun of him for needing that made Mordenna a little sad, but he understood why. “Of course. If... if anyone asks, it is a decorative light fixture.”

“Oh, absolutely.” Mordenna took his hand off of Jax’s, easing out of the connection. “Anything else? I could probably fashion you a radio, put on some tunes? You’re an orchestral type, right?”

At that suggestion, Jax shuddered, hunching a bit. “Anything but. The whole genre has been tainted to me.”


Jax shook his head. “It is no fault of your own, brother. Merely his. I do still enjoy the idea of a radio, though I think I will be using it for other stations. Perhaps to play some of the music Wiki has compiled?”

“Yeah, I could make it so it could interface with a datapad. Think they called that bluetooth back in the day? Regardless, it’s the least I can do for you.” He smacked a fist into his palm. “You like burning incense, right? I can make you something that’ll have the smoke come out of cool places. Get some modern art in this house.”

His brother chuckled, easing up. “I would appreciate the gesture.” He sat back into the beanbag. “What of yourself? You don’t have a room, do you?”

“Eh. Don’t sleep and I really don’t have too many personal items to keep track of. The Workshop essentially is my room.”

“Hm. I suppose. There are other rooms that could be emptied out, I’m sure...”

“With the Alien Rulers and their people knocking around down in the basement, I think they need all the space they can get.” Mordenna shrugged. “Don’t really see myself needing—”

It was then that the door to the Studio opened, causing Mordenna to drop his current line of thought. Fal-Mai gently walked in from the outside—and indeed, she had gone and gotten her clothes. Turtleneck, fitted pants, and a glove on her left arm—girl was practically covered from head to toe, and she looked pretty comfy. Even had the glowing, Mordenna smiled, raising his
hands. “Ay! There she is! Get over here Fals, you look great.”

Fal-Mai smiled, approaching. A few of the other Mystics echoed Mordenna’s sentiment, causing her to blush gently and give her thanks back. She eventually got over to where Jax and Mordenna were sitting, humming in thought. “I would like to relax on the other bag, if you would have me.”

“Fuck that! Jax, move over.” Jax and Mordenna parted, leaving a Fal-Mai sized space between them for her. Once it was clear, he patted it. Fal-Mai giggled and sat down between them. The three of them on one bean bag was stretching it a bit, but it was still comfy. “There we go. How you doing, Fals?”

Her grin was contagious. As she spoke, her drone sloughed off from her arm and she held it close to her. “The Tailors finished up my new clothes—and wearing things that are soft and do not irritate me is quite the treat.”

“Ah, I need to get mine at some point. Good to hear, though!” Mordenna patted Fal-Mai’s shoulder. “You look comfy, and that’s great.” The fabric of the sweater was damn soft. The Baroness really did spoil Eliza and her soldiers. The perks of being attractive, Mordenna guessed. Oh, speaking of Eliza! “Damn, I forgot something.”

Jax raised an eyebrow. “What did you forget?”

“Just the thing you asked me to do. Well, I didn’t forget to do it...” Mordenna sighed. “I forgot to ask Lily explicitly if she was done with Liz’s stuff. Probably is, she got those Archon legs done and mentioned Eliza’s stuff like she had it done too. I guess I can go get it, but...”

“No need to get up.” Fal-Mai looked down at her drone. “Rosetta? Would you please get Eliza’s gauntlets and amplifier from Lily in the Workshop?”

The drone gave a rather cute trill and hopped off of Fal-Mai’s lap, scurrying out of the room. Mordenna shook his head as Fal-Mai looked to him. “You named it Rosetta.”

Her smile fell. “Is there something wrong with that...?”

“Oh, not at all.” Mordenna held up a hand to further the gesture. “I was just thinking on how adorable it was. Naming the thing after Eliza.”

Fal-Mai’s blush was back, and she crashed back against the bean bag. “Allow me to live,” she muttered, “it was the first thing I thought of when I wanted to name her.”

“Again, it’s adorable. I can’t really be one to throw stones, and neither can Jax.”

“I’ll throw stones the day I move out of my glass mansion,” Jax dryly snarked back.

“Bro, I love your humor nowadays.”

“I learned from the best.”

Mordenna grinned. He loved having a brother. “Finally, some recognition in this household! Why wasn’t I getting this kind of—”

Mordenna would’ve went on had Marlene not done something strange. He’d been watching her out of the corner of his eye—as he’d been speaking earlier, she got up without saying anything to Dolly and Arachne. She then walked over to the supply closet and got out a blank canvas. What made him stop was her walking over to his side and holding it out, blocking his view of the creative
corner.

One of the Mystics over there cried out. “Amelia, dont—!”

There was the sound of paint being squeezed out of a tube, and then it hitting a canvas. Mordenna watched as a red drop of it ran down the one Marlene had grabbed before she held it horizontally, guiding the drip back on. Her helmet turned towards Mordenna, then looked away, setting the canvas on the table and walking back to her group. In her wake, the Mystics at the creative corner were quiet and embarrassed.

Well. What a chain of events. If Mordenna didn’t know any better, he’d say she knew that was going to happen. Couldn’t let that sit without explanation. “Yo. Marlene. Back over here.”

Marlene stopped, hesitating a moment before turning back around and approaching the Chosen. Her Revenant hung above her, eyelessly eyeing him cautiously. “Yes, Hunter Mordenna?”

He rubbed his chin. “I know we didn’t get off on the best foot but I really don’t have a grudge against you. So, mind if I ask just what happened?”

Her fingers wound together. “The Mystics were getting excited.”

“Precise angle, distance, height, you had that canvas aligned just so a searing shot of red paint wouldn’t ruin all of our outfits and potentially the beanbag.” He let his hand drop. “You’re not called ‘Seer’ for nothing, are you? I’m not normally one to believe in prophecy, but...”

She looked away slightly. “I have been designated the Seer for a reason. The Earth gives me Her prophecies when She is able, and I act upon them when I can.”

“Usual rules of seeing the future tend to either not let you change it or account for you trying to change it. You’re telling me you can change it?”

In response, Marlene took a bean bag, dragging it very close to theirs and sitting down in it as properly as she could manage. This close, the whispering picked up, though Mordenna tried very hard to not let it bother him. “That is one of the blessings She gives me,” Marlene started, murmuring. “She allows me to act on the visions sent to me. I could only presume you three did not wish to have your wardrobes ruined.”

“Assuredly not,” Jax said. He seemed to see Mordenna’s mild discomfort, placing a hand on his in solidarity. “I... never got around to asking such, Seer, but may I inquire what would’ve happened had I not taken your advice back then?”

Marlene was quiet for a moment. Her Revenant leaned down towards her and one of the mouths moved, apparently whispering something to her. She nodded. “Back when you mistakenly overloaded the Commander... I had seen the outcome that would transpire if I had not said anything. Mordenna would approach, and without my warning, your first instinct would be to defend yourself. To use Odette’s scarring as a defense and a weapon. To call out Mordenna’s perceived hypocrisy.” She looked to Mordenna. “Mordenna would grow further incensed, and attempt to strangle you, convinced that you were trying to kill the Commander. The Tailors attempt to stop him, and...” Marlene looked away, one of the tentacles of the Oracle rubbing her shoulder. “The rest proceeds unfortunately. I asked what would happen were I to give a subtle warning, and She let me know the far better outcome.”

Mordenna... didn’t really want to believe that. He didn’t want to believe there was a situation where he could get so angry at Jax nowadays that he would resort to trying to strangle him. But... he knew
how angry he had been at the time, how much he wanted to believe Jax had acted maliciously against Eliza. If Jax had, indeed, perhaps rightfully called him out for hypocrisy? That wouldn’t have ended well.

He sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Well, I suppose it’s good that you told him. I don’t exactly like hearing that, but...”

“I’m sorry.” The helmet did a good job of hiding Marlene’s emotions, but it was pretty clear she was distressed. “I... tend not to share the details of what would happen if I did not take the actions I did. Some would rather not know the potential bad futures ahead of them.”

“It is chiefly my fault for asking,” Jax replied. “I thank you for your guidance.”

Marlene nodded. Mordenna still felt pretty shitty for making her feel uncomfortable. Odette, Marlene, the Mystics back then, could Mordenna stand to not? He crossed his arms. “Hey. Marlene. We, uh. We really got off on the wrong foot. I don’t hate or dislike you—honestly, I owe you for helping both the Commander and my brother out—and me by proxy. I just got a little on edge because of you knowing about my ‘dad’ and...” He lowered his voice. Whole room didn’t need to know what he was about to say next. “The whispers around you remind me of him. That was always what I heard when he got angry at me, which... happened a lot. Ain’t your fault, it’s his —I just have 15 years of association to break down.”

Marlene looked back at him, and after a second, it seemed like her Revenant wasn’t eyeing him as much. “I appreciate it, Mordenna. I’m sorry such things happened to you. I... would temper the whispering if I could, but I cannot further restrain my psionics more than I have. I wish I could...”

The Oracle gathered around her shoulders, appearing to hug her. Mordenna leaned back against the bean bag, somehow feeling even worse. Fal-Mai was the first out of the three of them to respond, surprisingly. “Admittedly, I find it rather interesting. It is hard, but I can sometimes pick out what the whispering is saying.”

Marlene’s head snapped to her. “You... you can?”

Fal-Mai nodded. “Only one or two of the voices are decipherable to me at a time. It was... a running conversation about what Rosetta was doing and where she was at. Sometimes the other voices talk loud enough that I lose track for a bit, but... if they’re correct, my drone got Eliza’s equipment without a problem... and Eliza herself is following her?”

The Oracle was trained on Fal-Mai very intently. It moved closer to her, and the mouths moved. Fal-Mai blinked, looking... not quite at it. It was like... she could only hear it. “I... yes, my hearing has always been sharply honed. To the point where I may hear psionics if the conditions are right.”

“You understand it, sister?” Jax was the one to ask that. Mordenna knew Jax could see it—with his mastery of psionics, he was likely the only one out of the three of them that could both see and hear it. “I cannot understand the whispers for the life of me, but... they are far too familiar for my liking. Not of Odin—the inflection is different. More like...” He creased his eyebrows. “I... cannot fully fathom why. I remember receiving visions myself, long ago. A twisting, enveloping creature of Void, waiting for Elders and humans alike long in the future. A great surge of power from beneath the Earth. But, that is all I remember...”

Mordenna saw, Fal-Mai heard, Jax was familiar. This situation was growing far stranger by the second. Mordenna was sure the conversation would’ve gotten really interesting had the door not opened just then. They all looked over—and sure enough, the first thing to enter the Studio was Fal-Mai’s drone, running in with Eliza’s equipment on top of it. Second was Eliza herself. She
“Hey everyone!”

Everyone clamored to say hi back to the Commander, and she chuckled as she walked in. Rosetta reached Fal-Mai first, sitting on her lap and chirping sweetly. Eliza’s gear was colored a desaturated light blue—a slightly different color than the gear for the Chosen. Her gauntlets looked like a mashup of Jax’s and the Templars’; more styled than the latter, but more rounded than the former. The amp was more like a laurel wreath than a crown, with the leaf-like protrusions and the way it would sit on her head. Mordenna and Lily had a fun time analyzing Jax’s amplifiers and replicating the construction in a sleeker form. The drone had thin tendrils around all three items to keep them steady, which she retracted since she’d reached her destination.

Eliza reached the gathering of Chosen and Seer, slinging one of the bean bags over and sitting in it. “This is quite a group of people. What’s going on?”

Mordenna would have answered, but Marlene was quick to beat him to the punch. “A conversation to be resumed at a later time, Commander, should you require anything of us. I believe we need to take the rest of it somewhere more private, anyhow.”

“Yes, you’re good, Liz. Now that you’re here, though!” He took the gauntlets and crown off of Rosetta, presenting them to her. “An order of gauntlets and an amp for our favorite Commander.”

Eliza grinned, taking them. “Remembered it was my birthday today, huh?”

Mordenna blinked several times. “What?”

“September 5th. That’s my birthday. Unless I’m to assume none of you did?”

The room fell to a hush. From where she was at, Pattie leaned around Benald. “O’Leary? It’s your birthday?”

“Pretty sure it is,” she replied, “unless I’m going senile.”

The room erupted in motion. Eliza’s proper soldiers rushed over to her, and there was quite a few exclamations. “You never told us, chief!” “I don’t even have a present ready!” “Happy birthday, Commander!” In the back, the Mystics were almost panicking, in a buzz about how “we haven’t prepared anything!” Mordenna himself was practically lost in the noise and commotion—and a quick glance over at his siblings told him they were similarly stunned. Well, probably for different reasons than him—he’d learned that Jax got overstimulated by a bunch of stuff happening at once and Fal-Mai didn’t like chaotic, noisy areas.

There needed to be some order on this birthday! Mordenna put his fingers in his mouth, his sharp whistle piercing the commotion. The room quieted down, and he stood up. “First of all! Sorry, Fal-Mai, I know that probably wasn’t pleasant.”

“Far more pleasant than the commotion,” she muttered, her and Jax standing up with him.

He shook his head. “Still. Anyway, second of all! Whether O’Leary told you or not, I’m gonna hazard a guess and say this isn’t proper birthday etiquette no matter who it is. Running around like chickens with your heads cut off ain’t gonna accomplish much, so here’s the deal! On the count of three, we’re doing the birthday song. Got it?” He got his affirmations from the room, and he grinned. “Ok! One! Two! Three!”
“Happy birthday to you!” Jax’s baritone was nuts. He was easily the best singer in the room.

“Happy birthday to you!” As they sang, familiarity kicked in with the room, and he heard even some of the aliens humming along.

“Happy birthday, dear Eliza!” Poor Pats, she was singing her heart out, though he couldn’t say she was any better for it.

“Happy birthday to you!”

The room erupted in cheers and clapping, and a few of the humans added on their custom verses at the end. Eliza’s smile shone like the sun and her laughter was clear to Mordenna’s ears over the din of celebration. Another year older for the light of his life. When the noise died down a bit, he gestured to her. “Gratz, O’Leary! Would it be inappropriate for me to ask which year we’re celebrating, or?”

Eliza shook her head. “Please, I’m fine about aging. This is my 58th.”

“Such a noble age!” Jax spread his arms out. “‘Tis just a shame I could not prepare ahead of time. I would have you a far better song prepared.”

“Ah, just the good ol’ classic is good for me.” Eliza held up the gauntlets and crown. “I’ll consider this birthday present enough.”

“Well then put ‘em on, O’Leary!” Pattie was way too excited for something she probably knew nothing about.

“Gauntlets first,” Mordenna recommended. “Will probably prepare you for the crown.”

Eliza nodded, and Mordenna took the amp as she slotted one of the gauntlets under her arm, putting the other on. With both on, she flexed her hands, going “hm.” “Interesting feeling, that. Psionics feel a bit more... subdued. Hard to put a finger on the exact feeling.”

“The gauntlets will act as surge protectors for you—and they can do Templar shenanigans too if you want. Don’t tell Geist I nicked his tech.”

In the circle of people, Kalight sighed. “If it is for the Commander, I am sure we may compromise.”

“Great!” Mordenna offered the crown. “Now, your swanky crown?”

She smiled at him. “Why don’t you do the honors?”

So Mordenna got the pleasure of crowning Eliza. He chuckled to stave off his mild nerves, holding the amp properly as he placed it over Eliza’s head. His particular eyes could see her signature blossom out as the crown was secured on her head, and he got this rush of emotion. Eliza was beautiful, and he was so glad that he was on the ship long enough to see one of her birthdays. The happiness he’d felt before seemed to expand in his chest. He was stuck looking at Eliza and grinning like a fool, dismissing the minor movement and form of her psionics out of the corner of his eye as them stretching a little bit more.

A few of the soldiers around Eliza gave some impressed whistles, and Benald went as far as to clap his hand on her shoulder—a bit of a feat, considering how tall Liz was. “Looking good, Commander. Always been glad to run under you. Happy you made it to another year.”
“I’d say.” Banel leaned a bit to look at the Commander. “Hardly many others I’d let order me around in sticky situations.”

“She’s made this ship a home,” Edgar added. “Hard not to feel a little emotional in this sort of situation.”

Eliza smiled, rubbing the back of her head, but there was... something off about it. It didn’t quite reach her eyes, and the way her eyebrows were pinched a little? She seemed nervous. Crowded, maybe? Liz was never uncomfy in a crowd in the time he’d been here, though. “Happy to make it to another one myself,” she managed. “Wish I had more to say...”

Mordenna really couldn’t tell what was wrong. It seemed like the perfect situation. Jax stepped forwards. “If you find yourself short of words, I will gladly make up the difference. Commander, it is clear that the soldiers under you have followed you for quite a while, and for good reason. Were there a doubt in their minds that you could not have led them as well as you have, there would be no sort of celebration today. It is your natural skill and compassion that have driven all of them to fight for you—and today’s festivities are the fruits of your labor. Forget your inhibitions! You have earned it.”

Jax certainly was a man of all the right words. Something in what he said seemed to click with Eliza, and her smile was back to being completely genuine. She chuckled, brushing some hair behind her ear. “You know what? I think that about says it right there. I’m happy you’re all as excited about my birthday as I am. Think this calls for a little celebration. To the Bar?”

“To the Bar!” Went the cheer of her soldiers. Eliza gave the Chosen one last smile before filing out, practically the whole room following her. The remaining Mystics started pulling supplies out and hurriedly making plans with each other regarding gifts, and upon a nod from Jax, the rest of his congregation that hadn’t left did.

That left the Chosen, the Mystics in the corner who were quite busy, and Marlene. Jax gave a gentle sigh, sitting back down on the bean bag. “I’m glad she got my meaning,” he began. “It was not the place for me to detail that she was still not merely charming everyone with her psionics.”

Oh. That was what was up. Eliza probably got a big blast of anxiety from her psionics growing stronger thanks to the amp. Mordenna joined Jax in sitting back down, and Fal-Mai followed. “Glad you recognized it. I don’t think I would’ve had the exact words to both be subtle about it and assure Liz she’s not brainwashing everyone.” He rubbed at his mouth. “We should’ve walked out with her, shouldn’t we?”

Jax shook his head. “Not with that many people, especially in such a small area as the Bar is. The situation was growing dire enough in here.”

Fal-Mai gave a distressed hum. “Agreed. Perhaps later...”

“I’ll tug Liz’s ear to get a more quiet celebration going later for you guys.” Mordenna himself had not trouble with rioting parties, but he wanted his siblings to be able to celebrate with Eliza. “For now...” He looked up at Marlene. “... we had quite the conversation going.”

Marlene nodded, sitting back down. “I suppose it is understandable that all three of you would be able to parse the Oracle in your own ways. But, Warlock Tessura... what you have said interests me the most.” She tilted her head at him. “If you heard such whisperings long ago, then should you not have a messenger such as I? A Revenant, if we take your brother’s terms?”

Jax scrunched his face a bit, like there was something he was trying to recall. “I... cannot say I have
ever had one. I would think I would know if I had one.”

“Manifestation may take time,” Marlene went on. “I do not have many cases to study—outside of mine and the Prophet’s—but as the psionics develop and become more powerful, the Revenant ‘wakes up’ in essence. Oracle did not fully manifest for me until I was some ways into my Bishop training, though there were signs that they were with me beforehand.”

“I certainly cannot have one, if that is the case.” Jax crossed his arms. “My psionics are as powerful as they have ever been, perhaps even more so now that I am experimenting with them.”

There was something kicking at the back of Mordenna’s seat, as it were. He’d been over Jax’s file. There was mention of some sort of suppression—though the terms used there were beyond even what Mordenna knew. The vagueness of it hadn’t helped, either. Did Jax have a Revenant that Cronus suppressed, somehow?

Marlene ran her thumbs against each other, and the Oracle took more of an interest in Jax. “I believe I could, perhaps, find out. If you would allow Oracle and I, we may deeply probe your psionics and investigate for any peculiarities.”

His brother seemed like he was pretty heavily considering that. Mordenna figured he was wondering over the ramifications. If it turned out he did have a Revenant and Cronus had suppressed it somehow, what then? Mordenna had essentially no clue how you’d go about reversing such a procedure. Psionics were kind of a genetic thing, so he wondered if Tygan could help? It seemed a bit above his pay grade.

Eventually, Jax sighed. “Well, I suppose there’s no harm in learning more about myself. You may look, Seer.”

She nodded, getting up and crouching in front of Jax. Marlene reached forward, and at the same time, several of the tentacles from the Oracle came around, wrapping around and sinking into Jax’s head. Putting a gauntlet on Jax’s forehead, Mordenna watched as the waves of her psionics began to rise, and the whispering grew louder. Jax’s eyebrows pushed together, as if strained.

Suddenly, there was a spark of red light, and Marlene stumbled back, almost tripping. Jax clutched his head, giving a pained groan. Mordenna was quick to get up and be at Jax’s side. “Jax, you alright?”

“That...” His eyes were still squeezed shut. “... that was painful.”

“M-my apologies.” Marlene seemed out of breath, and all of the mouths of the Oracle were running. “I... I did not think She had... that you were...”

Mordenna had enough cryptic speaking for a lifetime. He requested a short meld with Jax, just to help him ease the pain. He watched as Fal-Mai leaned over and did much of the same. For a second, his mind’s eye caught something retreating from Jax’s consciousness, somewhere he couldn’t even follow. Considering his hypothesis maybe confirmed, he took some of Jax’s headache and looked to Marlene. “Well?”

Marlene still seemed staggered, looking at Jax. “It was... it was only for a moment, but I was able to see it. Many eyes, writhing tentacles... a halo?” She shook her head. “It was familiar—the third child of the Earth, dare I say it. But... something blocked the Oracle and I out. No... something forced them down. I cannot be sure of what.”

“Might’ve been something Cronus did,” Mordenna muttered without thinking. “Still, ‘child of the
Earth?'"

She walked back towards them, kneeling. “... please do not speak of this to anyone else, save the Commander. I implore you.” Marlene took a deep breath. “When I speak of the Earth, the divine body that I and my fellow Templars worship, I speak of something different than my brothers and sisters imagine. The Prophet and I are the only ones I know of that know Her true form. The Earth... She is the One Who Sleeps Beneath. The Mother of the Void. She sleeps for now, but even in Her dreams, She acts.”

“What kinda cult bullshit...?” Mordenna figured he should probably be a bit more respectful than that. “So you say there’s some sort of eldritch abomination sleeping here on Earth?”

“‘Abomination’ is to call Her one who has not been sleeping here all the while.” Marlene looked down. “She slept deeply until the Elders came, their use of machines and foreign psionics causing Her to toss in Her sleep. There were times before where She naturally stirred, She has told me, and caused miracles and otherworldly events. But now, the Elders threaten to wake Her before it is Her time. If She does... She will not depart Her sleep peacefully. She will lash out in pain, and mean the destruction of humanity and Elders alike. She told the Prophet She blessed three humans with Her children, to take form according to them and allow Her to speak to them. The Prophet and I host our own. If... if I am correct... you host the third, Warlock.”

That was a hell of a notion if it was true. Mordenna looked to Jax, whose signature accurately portrayed his confusion and sheer bewilderment at the implications. It began to give way to something as he let his hands drop—not understanding, not any sort of “that explains a lot.” Anger came and he clenched his fists. “Why?”

Mordenna had the swift feeling he knew what Jax was about to be on about. He raised his head, addressing the leftover Mystics. “Girls, clear the room for a moment.”

They looked over to him, but seeing Jax hunched over? They set their tools down and hurried out. The frustrated rage coursing through Jax told Mordenna that was probably a good call. “Why?! Why, even when I am away from his grasp on me does he continue to ruin my life?! Can he not settle for striking me and reducing me to a crying wreck?!” Jax shot up, his hair flared behind him. “Must he also seal away parts of myself for his own demented reasons?! Why?! ” He wheeled on Mordenna, then looked to Fal-Mai. His anger waned, quickly replaced by guilt. “I... I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“No, don’t start,” Mordenna was quick to say. “I’m fine. Fals?”

“I as well.” She patted his arm. “I must also ask the same questions to Cronus...”

“Perhaps it was some kind of power trip,” Mordenna grumbled. “Can’t let one of their Chosen have the measure of power they have. You were probably too strong for Cronus to be comfortable with, so he sealed you up a bit.” He slung an arm around Jax’s shoulders. “Hey, it’s ok to get mad. Got the Mystics out so they wouldn’t get spooked.” Although, it did occur to him that there was one other person in the room.

He looked to Marlene. She’d stepped off a bit as Jax had gotten up, but she didn’t seem too worse for wear? Her hands fiddled with each other. “It is an injustice, is what it is,” she began. “I am angry on your behalf, Warlock Tessura. No child of the Earth should be suppressed out of fear.”

Jax gave a deep sigh, calming down. “I simply wish I knew what to do...”

Mordena shrugged. “Psionics are partially genetically-based. We could probably hit up Tygan.” He
leaned against Jax, properly hugging him. “Just... know that we’re here for you. You’re not any lesser to me because Cronus was a dick. Ok?”

He didn’t seem like he was going to respond for a second until Fal-Mai hugged him too. Jax sighed again, wrapping his arms around both of them. “I suppose I will have to believe you for now.” He looked to Marlene. “Thank you, Marlene. I consider it better to know than to be ignorant.”

“I am glad I was able to help, even if the answer was... frustrating.” She bowed gently. “I... must tell Geist, however. He will want to know where the third child went.”

“Only if you allow me to speak to him personally the next time I am able.”

“He will want to see as I have, I imagine.”

Mordenna broke off the hug, but remained leaning on Jax. Jax’s headache had subsided by that point, so he eased out of the link. “I’ll see what I can do about asking O’Leary to land over there after she’s done with her birthday party.”

The door opened, and in came the Mystics. They were quick to come over, the few of them asking Jax if he was alright. He held up his hands and turned to them. “I am alright, my Mystics. Thank you for your concern. I... merely had to express my anger, and I thank Mordenna for asking you to leave for the moment. I do not wish to frighten you.”

One of them—Amelia, Mordenna guessed?—shook her head. “So long as you are alright, Holy Father. I— we do not want you to suffer.”

“He’d suffer more bottling the anger up, but...” Mordenna gestured vaguely. “Give him his space to be angry. If he doesn’t want you in the room so he won’t intimidate you lot, accommodate him, yeah?” They nodded, and the thing Mordenna came in here to do finally came back around and mentally smacked him in the head. “Oh, shit. I’d completely forgotten!” He stood up properly, point at Jax. “You! Big man on campus! We need to get you down to the Workshop to look at the design of the armor Lily and I are thinking of. Right now, before I forget again.”

Jax chuckled and Fal-Mai smiled, the latter standing on her own, her drone perched on her shoulder. “Could I also come along to look?”

“Oh, by all means, Fals.” Mordenna clapped his hands together. “To the Workshop?”

His brother nodded, walking around his Mystics. The other two Chosen trailed after him, though Fal-Mai went ahead to get the door. He kept talking and looking at Mordenna. “To the Workshop. I suppose I might have a gleaning of what you’re intending for me—the Tailors are notoriously loose-lipped about anything concerning things asked of them for me.” He smiled, holding his arms out as he walked. “I do need to advise them more in matters of—”

With a deep thunk, Jax’s head bounced off of the top of the doorframe. In itself, pretty hilarious, if empathy-inducing. He staggered back, clutching his head. Mordenna would’ve made some sort of comment—if not for what rocketed out of Jax’s mouth next. “Fuck!”

For a moment, Mordenna’s mind was entirely blank. He had no clue how to even react to the actual situation of his brother swearing. His chest squeezed and Mordenna wheezed, slumping against the wall and gulping a breath of air. His next laugh was the loudest he was sure he’d ever done, stomach already hurting from the force of his laughter.

With his eyes squeezed shut, all he could do was hear Fal-Mai begin to giggle madly as well. The two of them were trapped in laughter thanks to their brother. Mordenna worked one of his eyes
open—just to laugh harder. Jax had his head in his hands, face thoroughly orange behind them.

Mordenna tried to gather himself together at least enough to speak. “J-Jax, I—I didn’t even know you could —” Nope. Mordenna was lost to mad cackling again, unable to so much as rib Jax. His laughter was probably enough.

“Let me live,” Jax insisted over the amusement of his siblings.

Mordenna would, eventually. For now, his brother would just have to perish.

Oh, the sympathy Argus felt for XCOM.

They were currently reviewing the footage Cocytus had captured with their own eyes of the latest action against XCOM. Theoretically, they should’ve been proud that they had constructed elite units that were surprisingly effective against the Chosen. Theoretically. In practice, Argus could only watch silently as Jax lifted the Specter Prime, face contorted in justified rage. There were more things harrowing the Chosen now than Argus could casually count. Not that they’d want to, of course.

Theoretically, they should be proud that one of the plans XCOM actively meddled with had succeeded. In practice, Argus knew full well it was likely their own actions that caused Odin to think of his plans and put them to use. What if they had not shown up to the meeting? What if they had shunned Helena when she called for them and left them to bitterly fight, eventually achieving nothing? What if they had simply chided all of them for anger and then just left?

What if they never made the plans for the Siren?

Argus sighed. That was a line of thinking with no conceivable end. Knowing it was best to leave it there, they closed the video feed. As they did, their Phantom curled around their shoulder, looking at them. “Don’t remind me of my time,” Argus spoke softly, “though I know you’re simply making sure I’m alright.”

Their Phantom came to hover in front of them, hands clasped together nervously. For a being with a fancy clock for a head, it was doing a good job of looking concerned. “There’s nothing we can do,” they tried to assure it with. “Simply bide our time and make strides on the Avatar Project in the hopes of shortening this war.”

It spread its hands out, questioning. “Why do I continue to work on it...?” It nodded. “Because, hopefully, humanity will see there’s no reason to struggle, just as I have. I want them to succeed, believe me. But until they do... I suppose I have to make things as hard as possible.” They placed a hand on their helmet. “There’s also the sheer fact of the matter that they will know if I slow down or stop on their precious project. If I die and they recapture Eliza... that will be it, for her. If I remain, I can allow her to live some sort of life.”

Their Phantom crossed its arms. “Yes, I know that is no sort of life to lead. I know it is not love. But maybe then she can have a revelation as the rest of the Chosen did and leave. Forge her own resistance anew.” It continued to stare at them. “… I know they will likely not give me the chance, especially after what happened with the Trio’s Chosen. But I have to try. If you can come up with something better, I would like to hear it.”
In response, two of its hands came up to form a threshold. It used another to point at Argus, then used that arm to move through the construct. “Trust me, I would leave if I knew how! As it stands they have my body hostage. I would need to construct an Avatar with full consciousness upload capabilities, and...” They sighed. “I could. But then what? Throw myself at the feet of a woman who has every right to kill me?”

It spread its hands out again. “Yes I know she took in the Chosen, but their circumstances were different. They were forced by a power greater than them into doing vile deeds with the threat of permanent death looming over their heads if they did not cooperate.” Their Phantom stared at them, and they turned to the side. “My crimes are of a far greater scale. They massacred, I genocide. It’s not equivalent and I should not presume that Eliza would not also think that.”

Their Phantom regarded them with more silence, leaving Argus to think. Maybe they could modify one of the Avatars secretly as they worked. Masking the full upload were they to test it first might present some problems. They would need to do extensive work in a facility as far away from XCOM’s eye as possible. Argus was sure there was one or two over in Antarctica... but that would be highly visible to the other Ethereals. Well, with a UFO imminently upon XCOM, they might be trying to lay low for a bit. Perhaps one closer to civilization would mask it better from the others. They were merely set back if XCOM destroyed the facility—they would be doomed if the Trio found out.

Argus was about to act on their decision when the area they were in shuddered. Their Phantom leaped into them for safety and they turned around, hearing whispers pluck at their mind as Odin entered the area. With Odin came his own Phantom, and the Codices made quick work of dashing into their area and checking things out. Argus shook their head. “Phantoms...”

“They’re curious, Argus.” Odin slid forwards. “I’ll permit them a second or two more. Unless you’re afraid they might find something...?”

“The only thing I’m worried about them finding,” Argus countered masterfully, “is how little work I’ve gotten done thanks to XCOM and their allies. I want the Avatar Project done as much as you all do, but it’s mildly frustrating not being able to work.”

“Well, with the UFO launched, they’ll have to pick their battles a little bit more.” With the second passed, he clicked at his Codices. They ran back to him, either hanging off of him or simply hovering in his area. “Your tactics are interesting, dear Argus. Hard to think a troublemaker would do anything useful, but I suppose the Collective keeps you around for a reason.”

Backhanded compliments and undermining comments were what Odin brought even if he was in a good mood. Knowing that, Argus carried on casually. “It’s that or the Pit, Odin. Given the choice between the two, even a troublemaker such as I can see reason.”

“And how thankful I am for it! As the rest of us are, I suppose.” Odin gestured vaguely. “I’d like to think that we would be making steady progress on the Avatar Project without you, but I would like to think a lot of things.”

“I just do what the Collective asks.” They paused. “Most of the time.”

“You cooperate eventually, that much can be said, or else Angelis would’ve supplanted you by now.” Odin examined one of their hands. “I can’t help but think it would be easier if you became like the rest of us, however.”

Oh, this again. Argus crossed their arms under their robes. “When the time comes, it will be my decision. If I am forced, it will not end well for anyone involved.”
“Oh please, don’t think for a second that I forgot your speech!” Odin spread his arms out, and as he did, his Codices moved to accommodate it. “‘Should you strip me of hope, kindness, and empathy now, you will leave yourself with a being motivated only by anger and spite, and with those clutched to my chest, I will take my secrets to the grave with me.’ Hard to forget when you overturned a vote by the Collective to modify you by **yourself**. To our Overmind’s face himself! For a troublemaker, you make for good show.”

That meeting had been long, long ago, back when Argus was still putting up a fight for what they believed in. It was a far cry from them now. Not to say that they were stupid back then—if they hadn’t fought and made the Collective see what would happen, they would be dead by now. “I merely wanted to uphold the Collective’s virtue of thinking into the future, even if my delivery could use work.”

“The things we feel shame for now, hm? Not that I would know.” Odin put his arms back under his robes. “A little while more of seeing how useless those emotions are will do you good, I think. I’m not of the same mindset of the others of trying to push you—because of course you’ll want to be contrarian and put it off. I know I would be. So long as you do your duties, you can take your time.”

Personally, Odin was the most terrifying of the Trio to Argus. He was willing to wait and see, and when he wanted to lash out, his tactics were underhanded and hard to see until they’d already been carried out. XCOM learned that the hard way. “I will, I assure you. Now, I’m planning to requisition another facility for the project—and with your UFO in the air, I will certainly have the breathing room to do so. Would you mind if I did?”

“Just one more thing and you can attend to what you wish.” Odin looked to the side. “I would’ve asked one of the others, but Helena and Cronus are unbelievably cross that my plan worked. So, naturally, asking them anything isn’t going to get me anywhere. The UFO is a credible threat, but it seems we still have one of theirs kicking around our prisons. I don’t suppose you think I should chip her and let XCOM take her?”

Odin’s plans were as underhanded as always. That was Jane Kelly, if Argus remembered correctly. Knowing Eliza’s nature, it would likely work. “That would be quite well, so long as they don’t find the chip.

“I’ll make sure her wardens get it in without her noticing. Probably when she’s passed out in a pool of her own blood.” Odin sighed. “Well, I appreciate the feedback, but I suppose you’ve got work to do while XCOM isn’t destroying it. Best of luck, Argus—you’ll need it.”

With that, Odin vanished, the whispers bidding them a few sarcastic goodbyes as he did. Once they were sure he was gone, they slumped, sighing. Their Phantom appeared again, hanging off of their shoulder nervously as it was wont to do. Still, they had business to attend to, and the faster they managed it...

Argus went to work, pulling up an interface and beginning to navigate. “She’s always been a bastion of trying, hasn’t she?” They could only hope. They had a specialized Avatar to plan for. They went to pull up their Avatar files... but something drew them once again to Eliza’s files. They opened the directory they had them in, and naturally, their eyes glanced over to the file they’d kept exclusively in this section of the Void. It was labelled as just another Siren-related file, so they were glad that the title worked in escaping the notice of Odin’s Phantom. They knew exactly what was in there by heart.

There had been something... strange, about Eliza’s psionics. Their color was the first immediately
noticeable part, of course. Light blue was far outside of the range of a human, and they’d only observed one other color difference in another human—and Cronus was quick to change that the best he could. There was also the fact that Eliza seemed to be harboring a Phantom that wasn’t a Phantom. It exhibited traits common to Phantoms, such as existing symbiotically with its host and suggesting some sort of power increase through its presence, but... this one was notable. Argus hadn’t gotten to a satisfying conclusion in the time they were studying Eliza, but if they didn’t know any better, they would say a young Ethereal had bonded to her.

The notion was absurd. The Collective hadn’t been able to produce any more Ethereals thanks to their muscle deterioration. It would take some sort of miracle to produce an offspring at this point. Yet... the conclusions were in the file, tucked away and hidden as much as Argus could manage. But the existence of the file was dangerous. If the Collective—if the Overmind found out that Argus had discovered signs pointing to a young Ethereal and hadn’t reported it, he’d likely have them killed on the spot.

Argus looked at the file for a few moments longer before deleting it. Better safe than sorry. Perhaps, one day, Eliza could wake the child up.
Daughter

Chapter Summary

Mordenna finally completes his Codex.

Chapter Notes

I’d like to extend an apology about the wait on this chapter. If you haven’t been over on Tumblr, I recently got a rather nice job, but unfortunately the hours have been eating into both my schedule and my motivation. I’m still looking to complete this story of course, but things might slow down. I apologize again, and thank you for sticking with me.

Time for Mordenna to play god, he supposed.

Of course it wasn’t as simple as that, but it was fun to boil things down to their more hilarious simplifications. Mordenna was only playing god in the sense that he was creating a “new” being. That almost made him wonder where the line was drawn. Was sufficiently advanced and adaptable code sentient? Or was it some sort of facade at it that wasn’t worth being regarded as the real thing? Mordenna didn’t think over it long, because even if something only seemed alive, that usually meant that it was deserving of respect. Especially considering the fact that Mordenna would be the one making this new Codex, after all.

Speaking of making new things, it had been a productive last couple of days! Jax’s armor was all finished and ready to go and he had a basic idea of what he wanted to do for Fal-Mai’s. His own armor would come in due time, though he’d realized with the mental design document he was crafting that he was essentially making a set of Reaper armor. Eh, they filled those coats to the brim with useful additions. He wasn’t prideful enough to say they didn’t have good ideas. He could use more tactical rigging... and the place to put his inevitable nanos once he got his own Specter system up and running. Hell, making the spine implant was pretty much half-done, but at the moment he was ensnared by his current project.

The Codex brain lay in front of him in the Workshop, currently off. It was hooked up to his datapad and he was looking over his code for the fifth time that day, at least. He’d read through it, he’d gotten Lily in the room to quote it back to her, he’d even gotten Fal-Mai’s ear just to rubber duck debug it. About the only thing he hadn’t done was run it yet, and he guessed that was on some moral grounds. He was sure it had to be ready by this point, at least.

“Hope it’s ready, anyway,” he muttered, eyes dancing over the pad. “I don’t know how many times I can stand to reboot a visibly-living creation of mine because I keep fucking up the code. I’ve gotten better about misplaced semicolons, at least, and everything looks fine.” He hoped there were enough theoretical gaps to allow his new Codex to build herself.

He paused. “...themself? Himself? Guess I’ll give them the option. Nothing like getting assigned a gender by a bastard and then hating it later.” He tapped his chin. “Was my actual dad a bastard?
Suppose I’ll never know. Volk sounded like he might’ve known him by that singular offhand comment—and in that singular offhand comment he implied that my blood family dead named me! Fantastic. Maybe it’s better not to know.” Even so, he knew his curiosity would burn. He had a new family now who he knew would respect him even if they learned the nuances of his identity, at least. “Jax doesn’t even care about gender roles and I’m pretty sure Fal-Mai doesn’t really know societal gender pressure. Just, y’know. Pressure from Helena and her standards. God our parents were bastards.”

Discarding the topic, he looked over the code at a glance. Everything seemed to be in order, at this point he was putting it off. “I mean, can you blame me? I’m creating life. Almost literal Frankenstein here. Introducing new life to this shitshow of a year. What a crappy parent I’ll... be...”

Mordenna trailed off. Somehow, in all of his planning, preparation, and manufacturing, he’d never really considered the gravity of what he was doing. He was essentially making his own little offspring, wasn’t he? Sufficiently advanced AI might as well have been sentient, after all, and he would be the one in charge of this Codex he was making. “...I’m gonna be a dad? Just like that? Holy shit.” Good thing Lily wasn’t around to poke fun at him for not realizing for this long. Mordenna didn’t know if he could handle her banter on top of having a genuine revelation.

Well, if it fell to him to parent a Codex, he could at least parent them than the Elders ever did him or any of his siblings. “Still shouldn’t look at this one as a point to be proven,” he said, going through a few pre-start checks, “after all, that’s... kind of what I was. Odin saying he could do Jax but better. This kid’s just... a kid. My kid. Whatever they wanna make of themselves, I’ll support.”

Within reason... but what was the line of reasonable? Was it really Mordenna’s decision to change his Codex’s future at all? “Maybe I can give the poor thing some consultation if they go off the straight and narrow? God knows...” So many questions and conundrums and he hadn’t even met them.

“Best to hit the ground running? Maybe? The anticipation is killing me so I might as well start.” With that, Mordenna hit the button to confirm the launch.

Gently, the Codex brain began to glow. He’d programmed it a default white head light, white body light so that the Codex could customize themself. Extra freedom, was Mordenna’s thinking. Slowly, the device began to hover, the datapad returning all green as activity picked up. The Codex Brain stilled in one place, and then the body began to take shape. Even if all Codices were visibly female—the ones Mordenna had seen, anyway—he’d given them a more neutral body. If they wanted other features, that was up to them. That progressed nicely, and soon his new creation was floating to softly stand. They stood there for a moment before looking over their hands, then the rest of their body.

In their searching, they eventually caught sight of Mordenna. They quickly bowed, cord still trailing from their head. “Hello, user.” Right. Default Codex programming. “I am Codex... hm.” They stood up, tapping their chin. “Apologies. My numbering seems to be blank. So are my mandatory protocols, ownership...” Their expression shifted into one of nervousness. “I’m missing a lot... Ah, I do have a creator listed here. Perhaps you could get me back to them and they can fill in my missing spots?”

“Just a moment, there.” He didn’t exactly want to tell this Codex who to be. The most he’d want to do was name them. “Who does it state your creator as?”

“Right, right.” They nodded. “‘Mordenna, Chosen Hunter.’ I don’t suppose you know them?”

Mordenna cracked a smile. “You’re looking at him.”
The Codex looked at him a moment... then jumped in surprise. “Oh! I’m so sorry, I hadn’t realized!”

He waved it off. “Hey, fine by me. The fact you didn’t know me is a good mark in my book.” He didn’t want to put any ingrained respect or the like into them. “And I’ve left most of your ‘personalization’ stuff empty on purpose. Wanted it to be your choice on who you want to be.”

At that, the Codex was quiet for a moment, rubbing their thumbs together. “… this isn’t some sort of test, is it...?”

“No, not at all.” Mordenna shrugged. “I just want you to be able to choose for yourself. About all I’ll do is name you.”

“I mean, you created me. Shouldn’t it be your right to designate who I am?”

Mordenna gestured to them. “What if you don’t like what I assign you? Do you think you’ll have the courage to come up to me and say ‘hey, you know how you intended me to be since birth? Well, I don’t like it, I want to change it.’”

“Um...” They looked away. “I... guess not.” They looked back to him. “Still, do you mean it?”

“Yeah. Most I’ll ask out of you is for you to help me out when I ask. Otherwise?” Mordenna threw a hand out. “It’s all up to you.”

They nodded shallowly, seeming to digest that fact. He did hope he wasn’t putting too much on them all at once. If they really wanted it, he could pick out an appearance and the like for them, but only with the heavily signposted fact that they could change themselves at any time. Eventually, they spoke up again. “I’d... like to access a database. To see what my options are. Do you have one here?”

“Absolutely!” Mordenna tapped on his datapad. “We have another Codex on our team who goes by the name Wiki. She’s the one responsible for compiling as much data as she can get about everything before First Contact.”

The Codex tilted their head. “‘First Contact?’”

“Eh, if you access the Avenger’s database, you’ll learn soon enough.” Mordenna made it to the access screen for the database, looking to the Codex. “—you want your name before you go diving in?”

“Ah, yes please.”

Mordenna nodded. “I hereby dub you Vix. Now, if you ever hate the name at any point, you are of full rights to change it. No skin off my back.”

“But... it’s the name you gave me—”

“Hey, short storytime, and sorry to interrupt you.” Might as well give them a crash course in why he was adamant about it. “I, as a former human, was given a name and designation I didn’t like at birth. I tried to change it, and everyone related to me didn’t like that. Now, I don’t really recall my earlier years thanks to things that happened to me that I’ll get into later when you’re ready, but suffice to say wanting to change who I was and not being allowed to do that probably stressed me out a lot. If you wanna think fondly of ‘Vix,’ sure! I won’t stop you. But don’t let the fact that I gave it to you stand in the way of you changing yourself. Ok?”
The Codex was quiet for a moment, looking down. They then nodded. “Ok. I understand. I still would like to be called ‘Vix.’ For now, at least.”

“Good to hear. Now! Feel free to go diving.”

Vix nodded and sat down, staring off into the distance. Mordenna watched as his datapad displayed their journey, hardly readable as it ran through galleries at frightening speeds, pulling up articles and presumably analyzing them. He’d never really seen an example of how quickly a Codex could process data, so this was quite the learning experience.

As Vix went through their archives, Mordenna watched them where they sat. Their eye lights had dimmed a little and the datastream coming off of their head had sped up a lot. Was it right to just throw them in the deep end of the knowledge he could give them instead of trying to teach them things himself? If it was Mordenna being put into this world, he knew he’d want the former. You projecting onto your kid already? Well, it was hard to help.

Eventually, the flashing on the datapad stopped as it returned to the home menu of the gallery. Vix’s eyes went back to their usual brightness. They stood up again, gently disconnecting the cord themself. Vix rubbed their head, looking to Mordenna. “… that was. Comprehensive. So, the Elders were the ones to instigate First Contact?”

“Yes. About everything you read in the official report is correct.” Mordenna put the datapad off to the side. “Any other questions?”

“Maybe one or two.” They clasped their hands together. “Is it alright if I go ahead and... decide who I want to be?”

Mordenna smiled. “Absolutely.”

Their eye lights darkened again and they tilted their head slightly downwards. He watched as their shoulders broadened a little, and they got more muscle. Even so, some more softness to their body came in and breasts on their chest developed. Built, kinda masculine, kinda feminine? Like Mordenna was one to judge, he supposed. Their body’s color shifted to a deep, verdant green, and the light on their head became sky blue. Amusingly, Mordenna picked up what they were going for when the datastream—which he didn’t even know could be colored—turned white.

Vix’s eyes glowed again. “I... I want to use female pronouns. If that’s alright.”


She chuckled a little, rubbing her thumbs together. “Thank you. I saw so many depictions of humans in there, and colors, and pictures of the Earth... this was what I wanted.”

“And I’m glad you got to decide that.” He pointed at her. “If you ever want to change it around, feel free. It’s your body. I may have made you, but that’s about the extent of it. Now, are there any other—”

Mordenna’s eyes latched onto Wiki entering the room from another dimension. She was quick to step in properly, landing to his left. “Well! I was wondering why we suddenly had an unknown user run through our database. Impressive speed, too.” She put her hands on her hips. “I take it you let her check everything out?”

He nodded, but before he could respond, Vix was the one to speak up. “Are you the other Codex who compiled all that?”
“Certainly am.” Wiki offered her hand. “My name is Wiki, resident Codex of the Avenger. One of them now, I suppose.”

Nervously, Vix took Wiki’s hand, shaking it. For being the “younger” Codex, Vix seemed to have changed her own height enough to be standing over Wiki a little bit. “I’m Vix.”

“Nice to meet you, Vix.” Wiki withdrew her hand. “If you ever have any questions about being a Codex, you can come to me.” She chuckled. “If your old man over here is ok with it, at least.”

“Hey.” Mordenna pointed at Wiki. “I’m 50. That is not old.”

“That’s old by human standards! Half of their lifespan.”

“Human standards! I’m practically a baby of an immortal.”

Wiki rolled her eyes. “Sure thing. Still, am I interrupting? I can leave if I am.”

“Well...” He looked to Vix, who had fallen quiet as the two of them bantered back and forth. “That’s up to you, Vix.” Was he going to lean into it? Was he about to say what he was going to next? Fuck it. “More one-on-one time with your dad or you wanna talk to Wiks?”

At “dad,” Vix seemed to stop up, considering it. She looked between the two of them for a bit. “... could I talk to you later, Wiki? I do want to, but I think I want to talk to... dad a bit more.”

Wiki giggled. “Alright, alright, I can leave. Hope the two of you have fun.”

With that Wiki blinked out of this dimension, running off into the rest of the Avenger. Vix considered the area she left for a little bit longer before turning to Mordenna. She looked hesitant, though she managed to speak when Mordenna gestured for her to talk. “You... consider me your daughter?”

Mordenna rubbed at his mouth. Hopefully he wasn’t overstepping her boundaries. “Only if you’re ok with it. We don’t have to consider each other family at all, if you want, that’s fine by me. I want you to have the choice.”

“That seems to be a running theme with you.”

“I’ve got my reasons, which you might learn one day. Soon, really, but I don’t want to stack too much on you when you’re, what, ten minutes old? Regardless, is it alright?”

“I’m... I’m honestly more touched than anything else that you would consider me that important to you. I’m very much fine with being considered your daughter.” Though Vix didn’t have much of a face, it felt like she was smiling. “I’m just happy that you want to call me your daughter.”

Mordenna’s ensuing smile was genuine, and his chest was warm. Fatherly pride felt nice. “And I’m glad to have you, Vix. Makes me happy.”

Vix happily fidgeted with her hands a second more before seeming to consider something. “—If I am your daughter, what is your last name? I’d like to take it up.”

“Oh, well.” Mordenna chuckled. “Mordenna is my last name. Everyone just calls me that because I’ve pretty much abandoned my first one in favor of ‘Hunter.’ Title and name, it certainly pulls its weight.”

“... did your father give you one you didn’t like?”
“Yeah pretty much. And it was too close to the one that my other parents gave me that I didn’t like.”

“Hm...” She rubbed at where her mouth would be, apparently already catching Mordenna’s physical tics. “Vix Mordenna?”

“Fair by me, even if saying your full name feels like someone’s addressing us both.”

Nodding, Vix let her hand drop. “Do you have any other family?”

“Why, of course!” Mordenna stood up, grinning. This was going to be the best part of the whole affair thus far, other than gradually realizing and coming to terms with the fact that he’d made his own daughter. “A sister—two of them, really—and a brother who would be absolutely delighted to get to know you.”

Vix bounced a little on the spot. “I have aunts and uncles?”

“Sure do! Let’s see... I think Jax would be a good start. He might attempt to steal my rightful spot as father and he will have to fight me for it.” He began to walk past Vix. “Follow me. You’ll like him, Jax looks like a tough ba—” Hm. How much should he watch his language? Maybe a little. “— bad man but he’s a giant softie when you get down to it.”

Vix followed after him. “What’s he like?”

He didn’t really need to answer that question. The door to the Workshop opened before they could get to it. Jax himself was on the other side—and it looks like he was choosing this moment to parade around his armor. The design had gone through a few touch ups since the design document, especially with Jax’s insight. The helmet had gone under some iterations to combine Mordenna’s retracting faceplate idea, the space for Jax’s horns, and Lily’s own specifications to add ventilation and filters to mimic the mechanics of Fal-Mai’s own mask. Jax himself added the short skirting around the belt to give the girdle something to do other than hold grenades, and the heavy weapon areas had been moved to be shoulder-mounted, Predator style. Otherwise, Mordenna’s original design had largely stuck, and Jax’s armor was a well-designed mix of grays, some mild white trimming, and XCOM blues. The deep blue capes were a nice touch.

However, it did mean that Vix’s first impression of Jax was one of an intimidating crusader who was nothing like Mordenna’s description of him. He could spot her freezing on the spot out of the corner of his eye, and he sighed. “Wow, Jax, intimidate my own daughter, why don’t you.”

“Apologies,” Jax began, voice mildly filtered, “I wanted to make sure these vestments were suited for long wearing and figured—wait, excuse me?”

He looked to Mordenna, and Mordenna shook his head. “Did I stutter?”

Jax held up a finger, paused, and then lowered it. The poor man was confused and Mordenna was loving it. Eventually he seemed to connect some dots and he kneeled down to Vix’s eye level, his visor retracting as he did. Mordenna made it so he’d just have to channel a quick command to the helmet to open and close the visor. As Jax stooped down, Mordenna finally took stock of how long his brother’s hair had gotten—it was pretty close to his lower back by this point. The magnificent motherfucker. “My apologies, young one,” Jax began. “I do not seek to intimidate you—this is just a case of bad timing. Might I know your name?”

He looked and raised an eyebrow at Mordenna. In response, Mordenna threw out his hands. “She wanted to do it, and who am I to deny her?”

Jax rolled his eyes, but his expression was warm again as he looked back to Vix. “It is a good name, Vix. Mine is Jax-Rai Tessura, Warlock. Brother to your father. I hope he is treating you well?”

She nodded. “He is, and I’m happy for it. I got to choose all of my specifications.”

“A mark of a good man, that.” Jax stood. “Not that I doubted him in the slightest.” He tilted his head at Mordenna. “I presume your next action will be to introduce her to our sister?”

“Pretty much, yeah, and maybe the rest of the ship on the way.”

Jax bobbed his head, addressing Vix once more. “Vix, should you ever require help, or perhaps a confidant that is not your father, I offer myself as aid. Being my niece, I fully admit that I’m happy to have you, both as such and knowing that Mordenna has more kin to call his own.”

“Don’t know if I’ll have more,” Mordenna muttered. “Who knows? I might try being Odin, but better, and have my own little fleet of Codices. Probably not, though, at least not for a while.” He smiled gently. “You alright being an only child for the moment?”

“Well...” Vix’s own nervous tic seemed to be fiddling with her thumbs. “Wiki is here, so I have another Codex to talk to, and I would not want to demand you to make more Codices purely for the sake of giving me company. I have you, and Jax, and whoever else will have me.”

“That’s the spirit.” Mordenna crouched down, gently rubbing her head. The sensation of moving his hand through the datastream was pretty indescribable—almost felt like he’d stuck his hand in some carbonated liquid. “Still, you need anything else, you let me know. Otherwise, you feel up to seeing one of your aunts?”

Vix giggled slightly, gently brushing his hand off. “I’ll remember that, and yes.”

“Perfect!” Mordenna stood back up, clapping his hands together. “Now, Jax, any clue where our dear sister is? Your Studio, perhaps?”

“Considering I just departed from there and she was not present? Perhaps not.” Jax crossed his arms. “I could attempt to psionically search for her, but in this sort of location, with her naturally evasive nature, I do not foresee much success.”

“Well, damn.” Oops, that was a swear. Eh, it was more minor. “Maybe we should just ring her up, then? Seems like the simple solution.”

“Fair enough. I shall do the honors.”

While Jax did that, Mordenna entertained taking Vix by Eliza. He... hadn’t really ever mentioned the fact that he was making his own Codex to her, did he? That was going to be a hell of a surprise. A pleasant one, hopefully. Eliza would make a great mom, wouldn’t she? At that thought, he immediately shut the whole process down.

“Brother?” Jax’s voice took him out of his thoughts. “Apparently she was with Eliza.” Oh, speak of the devil, and good on Fal-Mai for getting more time with the Commander. “They are in the Resistance Ring if we would like to join them.”

“Well hey, saves me the trouble of deciding a meeting place. Tell ’em sure.”
Jax nodded, hand on the protrusion that allowed him to manipulate his communicator. “Mordenna says he’s alright with meeting up with you and the Commander. We will be on our way.” Jax let his hand fall. “Well?”

“Well what? Let’s start walking.” Mordenna did so, looking back to make sure Jax and Vix were following. They sure were, with Vix scurrying to be closer to him. He opened the door again, moving out into the hallway. He wasn’t about to let the trip be silent, of course. “So, Vix, what all did you access in our records?”

“The publically marked files,” she responded. “Essentially everything in the Archives, including the info about First Contact, the war so far in 2035…” Her voice got a little quieter. “I... saw there were files in the records section that weren’t public. Ones that pertained to you, Jax, and Fal-Mai, was it? I didn’t look at them. I didn’t want to be looking at something I wasn’t supposed to.”

Hm. That was a tricky subject. Mordenna was somewhat glad she didn’t get around to looking at them, because then he imagined he’d have a lot of grief on her part to work through. Perhaps that could be gotten to at another point in time. “Hey, it’s alright. You can look at mine, at least, when you want to. As for the ones about Jax, and Fal-Mai—I’d imagine Eliza’s as well—ask them. No harm in wanting to learn, just make sure you’re not going behind people’s backs or reading something they would rather you didn’t.”

She nodded gently, then turned to look at Jax. Jax sighed, crossing his arms. “I do not think it should fall to you, within your first day of life, to truly learn what sort of horrors our enemy employs against us. Plus, I do not feel like you have properly gotten to know me yet—so I would rather you did not for now.”

“Ok. I won’t look.” She turned back to Mordenna. “I... I don’t think I’ll look at yours for a while, dad. If it’s anything like Uncle Jax is describing…”

While Jax seemed to be having a moment at being called an uncle, Mordenna was focused on Vix. “It’s up to you, though honestly I would prefer it if you didn’t jump in at the deep end of the pool on your first day. So, pace yourself. There will always be more time to read up on things later, yeah?”

“Yeah.” She caught up to Mordenna and walked at his side, even if she was having a little trouble keeping up thanks to his long strides. “—so we’re heading to the Resistance Ring?”

“Yep. Did you find a map in all of your searching?”

Vix nodded. “It’s relatively close. Does the Commander use that to keep in touch with the Templars, Reapers, and Skirmishers?”

“That and whoever else she needs to talk to, but typically those guys.” It was pretty close indeed—Mordenna eyed the door as they approached. “I think Volk would like you. Maybe the next time we’re by his camp I can introduce the two of you.”

“Volk, leader of the Reapers?”

“The very same.” Mordenna opened the door, holding it open to let his two companions in. “Fal-Mai! Eliza! I have someone I want to introduce to the two of you.”

Fal-Mai and Eliza themselves were sitting close together on one of the couches in the room. A spent coffee mug was sitting on an end table, and the two of them looked pretty relaxed. Maybe they’d finished up some communications with someone? Regardless, Eliza was quick to spot the
newcomer in the group. “Oh! Did you manage to steal another Codex while I wasn’t looking, Mordenna?”

“Nope, this one’s home-grown.” Mordenna stepped in, doing a little flourish with his hands. “Say hello to Vix Mordenna.”

It took a second to click for both the Commander and the Assassin, but the look on Eliza’s face as it lit up was one of the best that Mordenna had ever seen out of her. “She’s your daughter, Mordenna? Oh my god she’s adorable, hello Vix!”

Flustered, Vix offered her hand. “It’s—it’s nice to meet you, Commander.”

Eliza took her hand, chuckling. “No need to be so formal! Call me Eliza if you want. I’m honestly so happy to meet you.”

Fal-Mai was similarly ecstatic, leaning forwards. “So Mordenna has finally completed you, I see! You look wonderful, Vix. My name is Fal-Mai.”

While Vix shook her hand as well, Mordenna grinned. “You’re an aunt now, Fals. Drink it in.”

That only served to make Fal-Mai giggle. “I’m happy to be one! Especially to such a cute niece.”

If Codices could blush, Vix would probably be bright red. As it stood, she kneaded her hands together. “Th-thank you. The both of you.”

Seemed like Vix was at a loss for words. To help her out and take a bit of the spotlight off of her, Mordenna went ahead and got to sitting down next to Eliza. “Alright then, Commander. What were you and Fal-Mai up to in here, hm?”

Eliza’s expression fell a bit, but it was clear she was trying to keep her smile on. “Ah, something a little more sordid. With the UFO about to be on our trail, I was confirming a spot in our schedule to go talk to the Baroness regarding stocking up. I recently got a request from Lily regarding more alloys and Elerium, and we’re going to need all we can get for the future. Plus, I’d like to go over the details of paying with our food stocks as well. The progress with Tygan and Celosia beefing up our greenhouse has been going swimmingly.”

Mordenna went to reply, but he could feel Vix tugging on his hoodie. He looked back to her and she was looking away. “Um... sorry to interrupt... but there’s a greenhouse on this ship?”

Aw. Mordenna patted her shoulder. “There sure is, and I really need to introduce you to Tygan as well. We’ll go visit if we have a moment after this, alright?” When Vix nodded and didn’t say anything else, he looked back to the group—and they all seemed warmed by the interaction. A little nervous himself, Mordenna cleared his throat. “Anyhow. I don’t suppose I can come along on that—” Ah, right. He wanted to be here with his kid. Or, at least, he wanted her at his side. “—I suppose my first question would be ‘how soon is that happening’ and my second one is ‘are kids allowed?’”

“For your first question, I honestly swear that the Baroness clears her schedule the moment I ask
about coming in. We could visit right after we make the flight over. As for bringing Vix...” Eliza
rubbed her chin in thought. “That’s honestly your call. We shouldn’t be unlucky enough to walk in
on another attempted murder of the Baroness twice. At that point it would be down to her wanting
to go and you being ok enough to stay with her. She might have to stay in the front lobby, I’ve had
the Baroness do that to some of my guard before.”

Was he ok with taking Vix out of the Avenger so soon? They weren’t going into the main
marketplace, so she wouldn’t be in any danger of being muscled away from her and taken god
knows where. He’d seen Ray a few times before—kid was asleep half the time and pretty likeable
and non-threatening the other half. A part of him was still stubborn over the whole deal—taking
her out of the Avenger at all constituted a danger risk, and she wasn’t even a day old yet. Should he
really be bringing her outside like that? He could stay, but he really had errands to run in the
Market. Maybe he could pass a list onto one of his siblings...?

Still, there was another person involved in this whole thought process whom he wasn’t even
consulting. He turned back to Vix. “Well, V? I’d like to make it over to the Market, as I have some
things to pick up for projects. But I can stay here if you want me to.”

“I... I don’t want to make you stay behind!” Vix was back to fidgeting with her hands. “But I—I
also don’t want to be here without you. Can I come with, if that’s alright...?”

“Absolutely fine by me, Vix.” He gently jostled her shoulder. “You might have to stay in the front
lobby as we talk, but if it’s just inventory and the things I need, it shouldn’t be too long. You’ll
have Ray to talk to there, and trust me, he’s a good guy. That alright?”

Vix considered it a moment, her white datastream flickering. She then nodded slowly. “I think I
can do that. So long as there’s someone there that you trust.”

“Of course. And if you need me, you can always call for me. I’ll see about getting you into our
communications channel so you can talk to me over my communicator whenever you need to.”

Her body language switched from nervous to mostly calm, and Vix leaned against him. “Thank
you, dad.”

Mordenna smiled at her for a moment, before once more looking back to the peanut gallery. Jax
was grinning warmly. “I never thought I would witness the day where the mighty Hunter tends to
his own child as tenderly as should be.”

The Hunter shrugged. “You could not pay me to be a bad dad at this point. Would probably shoot
anyone who even suggested the idea. Anyhow!” Mordenna clapped his hands together. “Other than
that UFO being deployed, what else is on our radar?”

“That Gate, mostly.” Eliza took her datapad off of the table, flipping through it. “We’re going to go
ahead and handle that soon while we can. We’ve got the area, I’ve got the troops, and we have the
means.” Eliza gently sighed. “I can’t exactly wait around for that thing to come to us. Although,
there’s something else we could do—something else you can do between working on your
projects.”

Mordenna raised his eyebrows. “I’m all ears, Liz.”

“Perfect.” Eliza tapped through a few more windows on her device and handed it off to Mordenna.
What was presented on the screen was a pretty blurry photo—but he’d recognize that ponytail and
face anywhere. “I can’t tell you how long we’ve been looking to get Kelly back.”
Judging by the look of the photo, Jane was getting transferred between prisons. Mordenna gave a mildly embarrassed hum. “Yeah. Uh. That was my fault. After I was... done with her, I ended up taking mercy and just shipping her off to one of the prisons. Never kept track of her after that. Frankly, I’m surprised she’s still alive.” He paused. “That’s... not exactly the best thing for me to say, I know.”

Eliza’s mouth settled into a line. “Perhaps not. That’s why I think you should be the one to jailbreak her—after tranquilizing her, because she’s going to want to take a piece out of you, I imagine.”

“Don’t blame her in the slightest. I wasn’t exactly the best warden.” The picture pretty clearly showed that she was down an eye and still sporting that burn scar on that side of her face. The thought of the kind of lows he was willing to go to in the past kinda sickened him now, and he passed the datapad back to Eliza. “Yeah, I definitely can go get her. It’s... the least I can do after putting her through what I put her through. Just give me the details and I’ll see to it later. Maybe me and Schro can go out on the town again, assuming I haven’t finished my own little nano array by then.”

“I’ll get the details sent to your login whenever you’re ready for them.” Eliza put the datapad back on the table. “Outside of that, I was somewhat thinking of stretching us a little thin and going to see if we can avoid having two UFOs launched on us, but it seems our benefactors had that handled.”

“Ah, yes.” Jax nodded. “I do believe you had mentioned that you wouldn’t be likely to get around to it, correct?”

“She sure did.” Mordenna crossed his arms and leaned back. “Reapers handle it alright?”


Well, looks like Mordenna lost the bet. “Shoot. Guess that’s my left eye I’ve gotta lose. Anyone around here got a knife on them? Fals?”

Fal-Mai scoffed. “I am not handing you my Katana, nor my dagger to allow you to do that. We will merely say you were a little bit silly for not believing they could cooperate and move on.”

“Fair enough by me, I guess. Anything else on the agenda I can advise on?”

“Outside of that? Not exactly.” Eliza clasped her hands in front of her. “Tygan and Lily mentioned something about applying one of our Skulljacks to a Codex in the field—accessing the Network directly, and all, and finding out more about that Avatar Project. If we can find the means to destroy all the factories they’re using to make those damn things, I think we can effectively decapitate the whole thing before hotwiring that Gate to show up right on their front door.”

“You’ve gotta be careful about doing something like that,” Mordenna muttered. “Someone’s bound to notice. Even I can’t exactly call what’ll happen if you go and shove one of those things into a Codex. A Trooper or an Officer is one thing, they mostly are receivers on the Network and can’t do anything too funky. But Codices? Extra dimensional beings, those ones. Sparky.” Absentmindedly, he patted Vix’s back. “Just about anything could happen, so exercise caution, Commander.”

“I intend to. I want Lily—and you, if you can make the time—to look into some kind of brace or failsafe just in case the Codex... hm, I don’t know. Somehow hijacks the Skulljack back?”
“It’s within the realm of possibility.”

“Well, my point exactly then. I know it’s vague, and I apologize. I’d specify more if I could.”

Mordenna shrugged. “Well, I don’t blame you for not exactly knowing all the specifics about how either the Skulljacks or Codexes work. Not to call you dumb! They’re just... complicated.”

“Oh, please, Mordenna, calling me dumb is one of the nicer things people have said about me.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Where’s the people saying worse things? I want names.”

Eliza chuckled. “You can’t just murder people who talk bad about me, Mordenna.”

“Perhaps not him,” Fal-Mai quietly replied. “But I can make it look like an accident...”

“Fal-Mai!”

“Siblings, please.” Jax shook his head. “The both of you must contain yourselves. After all, killing is far too easy an escape. Lessons must be taught, after all—”

“Guys!”

The Chosen ended up cracking up, with Mordenna himself snickering. Vix seemed a little lost on how it was all humorous, and he figured she didn’t exactly need to know right at that moment. Letting the topic fall by the wayside as Eliza seemed to want, he moved on. “So! I do believe I have a darling daughter to show around the ship and introduce to all of my other favorite people. Can you go ahead and let me know when we’re in the area to go visit the Market again?”

Eliza nodded, getting up and collecting both her mug and her datapad. “Sure thing, Mordenna. I’ll let the two of you know as well,” she went on, addressing Jax and Fal-Mai. “Might as well have all my bodyguards on hand. Who else would Bradford hide behind?”

“You, probably.” Mordenna gestured to her as he got to his feet, letting Vix grab his empty hand. “I mean, Liz, you are six feet tall. I think you’re enough to hide behind.”

Eliza huffed. “Look. Never asked to tower over most of the men in my life...” She ended up smiling. “Even if it is pretty funny to think about sometimes. You guys are about the only ones who are taller than I am.”

Jax sighed. “I never asked to thump my head on most doorways, neither. Nothing is designed around nearly meeting eight feet tall.”

“Could say that again,” Mordenna replied. “Still, before I get caught up too long in goodbyes, I’m going to go ahead and head out with lil’ Vix here. I’ll be around the place if any of you need me.”

The rest of the group nodded and said their goodbyes, and he could hear them echoing them at Vix as they passed them by. Vix was still holding onto his hand tightly as they exited the door out of the Resistance Ring, walking a bit out into the hallway. After that, he turned back to look at her. “Well? What do you think?”

Vix’s thumbs rubbed his hand. “You seem very comfortable around them, and they all seem so... nice. Would you really kill anyone who spoke ill of the Commander?”

“Uh, nah, not really.” Mordenna chuckled. “My style of humor is usually being overdramatic for comedic effect. People have their rights to not say nice things about the Commander, I suppose.
I’m not really going to like it, but I’m not really the type to go shooting them because they’ve got a
different opinion than me. Now, if they start to take steps to actively undermine her efforts... well,
that’s when things start to get a little more personal and I have to step in, yeah?”

She nodded in understanding, quiet for a moment. Her next question wasn’t one that Mordenna
really liked. “That Jane Kelly... please forgive me if I am making an incorrect assumption, but did
you capture her and—?”

“Yeah,” Mordenna replied a little hastily. “I—yeah.” He looked ahead. This was going to come up
eventually, he knew that. He had a lot of blood on his hands, and the things he used to do weren’t
really all that far in the past. His treatment by the Elders may not have helped matters... but it
wasn’t really an excuse, in his eyes. Just a reason. “—your old man isn’t exactly a morally
upstanding person. I’ll be the first to say that. You’ve got every right to judge me for what I’m
about to say.” He took in a deep breath. “Several months ago—closer to the start of this year, really
—I wasn’t on XCOM’s side. My siblings and I, we were with ADVENT. With the Elders, and all
that. And we... we weren’t exactly doing the best of things.” He rubbed the back of his neck with
his free hand. “Jane’s just one person I’ve taken and, well. Tortured. There’s really no other word
for what I did to her. Yes, it was for information, but I wasn’t exactly doing it with a gun to my
head, if you can understand what I’m implying.”

It took a second, but Vix seemed to catch on. “You... enjoyed torturing her.” The fact that it was
more a statement than a question hurt.

“... yeah. I’m not a saint. Don’t know if I can really call myself a good person yet. Not even about
to say ‘that was back then.’ I do think I’m different now—I think of how I liked it and I...” Saying
he didn’t exactly want to live as that version of him, was it still being too comfortable with his own
mortality? If presented with that version of himself... well, Mordenna would likely kill him by this
rate. Not even give the man the chance to become better. He didn’t blame anyone who didn’t think
he could be a better person at this rate, even if it frustrated him. “… I don’t like knowing that was
the kind of person I was. Don’t like knowing I could be that kind of person. I’m trying to be better
now, and I think I’m succeeding. But...” He sighed. “Like I said. You’ve got every right to disown
me if you want.”

Even if he had offered the option, even if he was implying he’d be ok with it and he understood, the
thought of something he’d already grown so attached to rejecting him? Even if it was because they
were rather justifiably horrified and disgusted by the things he had done in the past? It already hurt
to think about. Vix was quiet, and her grip on his hand loosened. He half thought she was going to
let go entirely—before she gripped it tighter. “—I read about the reports of more ADVENT units
defecting. The Skirmishers. They’re trying their hardest to be better people despite who they were.
I... I can believe you’re doing that too. Just based on what I know of the world, I still think what
you did was wrong. But I believe you’re trying to be better. I believe that you are.”

Wow. That... that cut right to Mordenna’s heart, in a good way. He slowed down, eventually
coming to a stop. He’d always wanted to believe he was becoming a better person, and logically, he
could see that he was moving in that direction. There were just always the thought that he was
going to mess it up somehow and go right back to his former self. Or that he would somehow wake
up and the life he had been living, the life he had been enjoying had all been just a dream. It was
nice to be told that he was doing well and that people believed in him. He smiled gently. “… thank
you, Vix. You didn’t have to believe your old man, but I’m glad that you did. Just... know that I’m
not above reproach, alright? May not be human, but I’m subject to the moral standards of everyone
else on this ship and you’ve got the right to call me out if I step out of line.”

She nodded, walking a little closer to him. “I’ll remember that. But until then... I love you, and I
believe in you.”

Mordenna’s chest glowed with warmth and his smile grew. “I love you too, Vix. Let’s go see the rest of the Avenger, alright?”

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For her first day of life, Vix was pretty happy.

Her creator—her father had introduced her to his own family and so many denizens of the ship. They had so many conversations together, and even if she learned that he wasn’t the most upstanding person... she could see that he was trying to be better. A lot of the Avenger seemed to regard him as at least an acquaintance, far more in a few cases. She definitely got the feeling that he was trying to move past who he was, and Vix could appreciate that. She still loved him, after all.

They had made their trip around the Avenger and now they had ended back in the Workshop, Mordenna’s favorite place on the ship if he was to be believed. He was now working on some sort of device that he was explaining to her—apparently the Specters she had read about could be repurposed into linked devices? She knew that Fal-Mai’s hand underneath her sweater had looked a little strange, but she hadn’t imagined they could substitute for prosthetics.

With that in mind, she posed her next question. “So if you are not missing any limbs, and do not plan on doing so, why make this? Grafting it to your spine seems a little much to do.”

Mordenna threw a hand out, the other carefully holding the half-finished implant. “I could always use another set of arms. As much as I despise the Ethereals, having an extra set of arms sounds pretty convenient. Plus, I can mold the nanos to whatever I need on the go—and if I take a few lessons from Schro, I could probably pull off the same nano clone thing that they can do. Dunno how much use I’d get out of it, but I always like having the option there.”

“So, was your sister a test run?”

“What? No.” The briefness of his answer made her fear that she had asked something wrong. He must’ve noticed the change in her body language, as he scooted a bit closer to where she was sitting and settled his free hand on her shoulder. “Sorry for being curt, but I’ll let you know it was far from the case. Sure, I may be making one for myself after seeing Fal-Mai’s work out, but the circumstances for making her arm were... pretty different. She needed it after suffering a lot of hurt over it, and I wanted to give her the best thing I could make to replace what she had lost. I don’t mind you asking questions about stuff like this—you’d never learn otherwise. But I apologize in advance if I come off as a little bit... I don’t know, like a jerk when I answer them? I expect people around me to have a base knowledge of things that you don’t largely have.”

That was true. Even for all of the knowledge and context she had been able to gain by reading through all of the information Wiki had compiled, sometimes applying it was proving to be a sticking point. Extensive documentation about what to do in social situations wasn’t in there, for one. Thankfully everyone had been understanding, probably accounting for the fact that she had literally been born today. “…do you promise not to get angry at me for asking questions?”

Something about that statement made Mordenna’s face twitch, and he set down the implant, drawing her in for a hug. Mordenna’s hugs were warm to her sensors, and the physical contact was
comforting. “I promise, Vix. I really do. And if I ever do, I ask you to go get one of my siblings—or Eliza—and have them get my act together for doing that.”

She hugged him back, leaning into him. “Ok. But... I don’t want them yelling at you...”

“Kid, in that situation, I will have deserved it.”

“Don’t care,” she muttered.

One of the doors to the Workshop opened, and Vix looked up. Lily was coming in from the basement, stopping in the door as she saw the two of them. When Mordenna looked up as well, she hummed nervously. “Am I interrupting something? I can leave.”

Vix shook her head, parting from the hug. “You’re alright, Lily. How are the Rulers?”

“Doing good. They really like the legs I made for Rodin.” Lily walked further in, lowering her voice as she spoke to Mordenna. “When you get a moment alone, I need to talk to you. I have to talk to someone about what Rodin asked me to make next.”

Mordenna snickered, leaning back on his workbench. “Judging by that, I have a few guesses and all of them make me want to laugh.”

Lily gave an exasperated sigh, sitting on her own table. “Vix, your dad’s a meanie.”

Vix tilted her head. “What has he done...?” Was she talking about the stuff he did in the past? She learned about one or two of those things.

“He’s teasing me.”


Mordenna pressed a hand to his head. “On one hand, she’s my sister, Vix, and a little familial ribbing is to be expected. On the other... I guess I have an example to set now, huh?”

Lily grinned and crossed her arms. “That’s right. You can’t be mean to me ever again.”

He jabbed a finger at her. “I make no promises. Sometimes you will just have to suffer.”

Mordenna’s use of rather exaggerated language was something Vix was still getting used to. She was starting to save and remember the tone of voice he said it in when he seemed like he was joking, just so she wouldn’t misunderstand in the future. She felt like she’d get that kind of humor wrong if she ever tried to do it herself. Humor itself was a bit hard to get ahold of, especially if she thought about using it.

Lily rolled her eyes, looking to Vix. “How about you, Vix? Your dad better be being nice to you.”

Vix kicked her legs where she was sitting. “He is! He’s introduced me to all of his favorite people—” That’s what he said in the Resistance Ring, anyhow. “—and he has been nothing but supportive to me.”

She nodded. “Good to hear.” Lily looked back to Mordenna. “By the way, do you think you’ll teach her how to fight?”

“Naturally,” Mordenna responded. “Just thinking on what I’ll give her.” His mouth settled in a line, and his gaze shifted to Vix. “Even... even if I don’t want you in danger, it’s best you know
how to defend yourself, Vix. Lotta hostile people out there, and we are very much in a war situation. You should know how to fire a gun should worst come to worst. Sound alright?"

She’d read through some of the battle reports, watched some of the attached videos. Vix knew very well that without knowing how to fight... well, she would very well die. Vix nodded. “I don’t know what kind of weaponry would suit me best, but I agree. I should learn.”

“Yeah, I don’t quite know either, kid.” He rubbed at his mouth. “Don’t want you too close to the action, but I don’t need another sniper identical to me. Still want you at long range, but maybe in a more supportive role—?” That was when Mordenna shot up in his seat, snapping his fingers. “The bow!”

Lily stared at him for a second. “The bow...?”

Mordenna got a notepad and a pencil out of his pocket, flipping the former open and beginning to write. “A while back, around the time we were starting that relay mission, I started spitballing ideas about using a bow to take on a more supportive role than my usual one of exploding heads at my leisure. Thinking about it later, I tossed the idea out because we already had that sort of deal in plenty of other people and I was needed as our long range spotting and sniper role. But! If I can give that to someone other than me and train them on how to sight the bow really fast because they’re technically a sentient computer? I think it can see some use yet.” He pointed his pencil at Vix. “Vix, honey, how would you feel about using a really futuristic bow?”

Vix thought about it. The draw strength needed to nock and fire arrows for traditional bows seemed a little out of her strength range. Her physical projection could only do so much. She hummed in thought. “—would I be strong enough for such a weapon?”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s a good question.” Mordenna continued to write down things in his notes. “I’d probably need to rig up some sort of mechanism in the drawing system that would assist you with pulling back the bow—or even better, have the bow itself handle the majority of that and the string is more of a trigger mechanism than anything else. Kit it up with an Elerium core or two and ingrain a few ammo types to be copied much like I have in my own sniper rifle and I’d say we have you a weapon.” He snapped his fingers again. “Maybe I can make it so you can channel the psionics you’ve got into it and have the chamber modify them as needed to alter their properties? Damn, that’d be a tall order, but I really do wanna see if it would work.”

It seemed like her dad had a lot of work ahead of him. He seemed to revel in being busy, so she supposed that she was happy that she was providing him another source of busywork. “Whatever you go with, so long as I can fire it and be of use, I am impartial as to how it does so.”

Mordenna grinned, tousling her head. The feeling of his hand going through her datastream was pretty indescribable. “Yeah, leave it to me to sweat the details, kid. I’ll be the one focusing on getting you set up for the field. I’ll still probably kit you up with a pistol or something—you should always have a fallback firearm, if you ask me. Plus, I can set you up with one like mine that’s a small enough caliber that it doesn’t need to recharge after firing—essentially meaning you don’t have to reload it.” He withdrew his hand, writing in his book again. “I’ll probably get you some very lightweight armor as well. If any, considering it has to be able to go with you when you phase out of this dimension.”

Right, she could do that. She had the knowledge of how to do so ingrained into her code, she just hadn’t bothered to do so yet. It was good for travelling quickly, but she wanted to remain by Mordenna’s side—and she couldn’t do that on another plane of existence. Still, it would be useful in combat for evasion. “As with any gun handed to me, I believe it should be able to.”
“Should be. We’ll do a few tests just to make sure when the time comes.” After writing a few more things down, he close the notepad, returning it and his pencil to his pockets. “Anyhow! That’s definitely something to be worked on later. For now—”

The ship gently lurched and shuddered, and Lily raised her head. “Guess we’re on the ground now. The autopilot has been doing a lot of flying lately. Think Bradford’s given up trying to kill us?”

Mordenna chuckled, standing up. “Not by a long shot. He’s waiting for his time to strike again.” Vix... had no clue what they were on about, but she supposed she could always ask later. As for now, it seemed Mordenna was getting ready to leave—a guess made correct by his next statement. “I’m sure Eliza will want to get meeting the Baroness out of the way as soon as possible, so I’m going to go ahead and get myself moving to the Armory. Vix, you still wanna come?”

She nodded, hovering into standing. “Of course. The Armory, right?”

“The very same.” Mordenna took her hand. “C’mon. Say goodbye to Aunt Lily if you want.”

Vix turned to Lily and giggled. “See you soon, Aunt Lily.”

Lily smiled warmly. “See you, Vix. You be careful out there, alright?”

“I will.”

With that, Mordenna began to walk and she trailed behind him. She stayed silent for the journey, and Mordenna did as well. It struck her as strange—over the time she had come to know him, he seemed keen to fill up every silent moment, especially if they were walking from place to place. But as they were making their way to the Armory, there was a certain... tenseness, to his posture. His grip on her hand was a bit tighter than normal. Was he nervous? She knew that this would be her first time leaving the Avenger, but... she was doing it with him. She would be ok. Still, if he was right and the Baroness didn’t want to see Vix, there might be a point where they would have to be apart for a while. She was definitely nervous about that herself. Logically, there would eventually have to be a time where they had to part from each other, but... maybe not on her first day of life? It would have to happen eventually, she reasoned. Best to get it out of the way now.

Eventually they entered the door to the Armory. Some soldier Vix didn’t recognize was leaning on the railing around the Armory with Jax next to them. As Mordenna entered, he freed his hand from Vix’s. “Jax. Seraph. Bradford ain’t here yet?”

Jax shrugged. “I can only imagine he might be finishing up some communications with other factions or the like. He shall be with us eventually.”

“Seraph’s” identity was swiftly revealed when they spoke. “Yeah, he’s letting the Baroness know we’ll be right on schedule.” That was Eliza! Was she going to go in person? Why did she look so different? Vix was buzzing with a few questions to be asked, but Eliza kept speaking. “Either of you see Fal-Mai on your way over?”

Before Mordenna could answer, the veil of the world peeled back, and Fal-Mai was standing among them, now in her combat armor. “Now they have.”

Jax chuckled. “I feel as if that is a joke you have been waiting to make for a while.”

Fal-Mai huffed. “Perhaps. Begrudge me for indulging in a little bit of humor?”

“You and I need as much as Mordenna will allow us to have,” he replied.
“Hey.” Mordenna pointed at Jax. “The two of you can make jokes and that’s fine with me. I just also need to make my own jokes and I just happen to have a lot of them to make. Not my fault that not everyone else can keep up with me.”

Eliza shook her head, and behind them, the door opened. Bradford walked in, nodding to the group. “I see all of the usual suspects are here. Let me get my armor and my gun and I’ll be right with all of you.”

As he walked by, Vix waved. Bradford’s expression softened and he waved back, going over to where the armor was. She supposed she could ask a question or two in the silence that followed. “Eliza? Are you really coming with us?”

Eliza nodded. “The Baroness prefers to see me in person. That means I have to step outside in this armor so it isn’t immediately obvious who I am. For all intents and purposes, once we step outside, Bradford is our Commander.” Something seemed to occur to her, as she rubbed the back of her neck. “Hm, wait. Codices can’t lie, right? This might be a bit of a problem.”

“Not actually.” Mordenna shrugged. “I wasn’t about to force her to speak the truth all of the time. Vix can very much lie if she needs to.”

Wait. Codices normally couldn’t lie? Mordenna made an exception for her...? It seemed the more she learned about the terms of her own creation, the more it became clear that Mordenna had put a lot of thought and care into it. She squeezed her hands together, made thankful all over again. “—I will consider Bradford our Commander on the field, then.”

“Good to hear.” Eliza stepped off from the railing. “Once Bradford’s ready, we can go ahead and head out. Firebrand’s already in the Skyranger and she’s getting it warmed up for us.”

Mordenna got out his notepad. He had certainly written a lot in that thing, considering how much flipping he had to do to get to the page he wanted. “Alright. I’ve got my shopping list here and ready to go. I’ve got some of the intel I intend to use to pay for it still stored in my noggin, so you shouldn’t see too much of a deduction from your personal stash, Liz.”

“Investment in your projects is investment in XCOM,” she replied smoothly. “I wouldn’t mind if you did need to use some of our intel.”

“Still, I’d like to use my own resources where I can. After all, I’m going to need quite a bit for my personal projects. You do not—well, I suppose you do know how much alloys I go through doing my thing.”

“I’d know too,” Bradford muttered, rejoining the group. He had his armor on... and that shotgun was probably way too modded to be safe. Nobody else seemed to be concerned about it as Vix was, however, so maybe it was? “Considering I’m also watching our books. Still, like the Commander said, it’s a worthwhile investment. If you were doing something frivolous I might be raising more hell, but more weapons and armor isn’t exactly something I’ll complain about.”

“The point is made, I suppose. Still doesn’t mean I’ll be dipping into the intel for XCOM when I can help it.” Mordenna stashed the notepad again. “Still, we’re all here. Time to go?”

Eliza nodded, walking towards the Skyranger. “Sure are. This way, Convoy Seven.”

Vix trailed after Mordenna. This was going to be an interesting trip.
The ride over had been pleasant, at least, and Vix had gotten more talking done with her new family.

As it turned out, there seemed to be quite the dynamic between all of them. The Chosen clearly had a fondness for Eliza that showed even when they were occasionally teasing them. Bradford was the one to “straighten out” the interactions and generally try to direct some of the teasing away from Eliza and onto himself. From the way he grumbled about it, Vix would initially guess that he didn’t like it very much—but by the way he kept doing it, she supposed she was wrong. There were so many things about the nuances of social interaction that she still hadn’t fully come to grips with yet. She supposed she’d learn in time, and Mordenna had offhandedly mentioned that there was no better teacher than experiencing the situation itself.

The Skyranger eventually came to a stop, and Firebrand’s voice came over the speakers. “Convoy Seven, we’re at the dropoff point. Opening the ramp, and be safe down there.” After she said that, the cabin lit up red, and the back of the ship opened up.

Beside her, Mordenna undid his safety harness. “You think you can get to the ground on your own, V?”

She nodded, undoing her own harness and walking towards the back of the ship. “Theoretically, yes.” Theoretically. She looked out the yawning back of the Skyranger. Hitting the ground shouldn’t be a problem—her projection would handle the shock without too much of it going to her brain. It was just a far way down.

Vix took in a deep breath and leapt out of the back of the Skyranger. On her way down, she could feel herself instinctually slip into another dimension, one that slowed her rate of descent into an instant as her systems detected her velocity. Once she was near the ground, she appeared back in her usual one, no worse for wear. She was still reeling a bit from jumping from such a high place, but she knew she had to get out of the way for everyone else to make it down. She got away from the cords as she watched everyone else descend.

Bradford grunted as he hit the ground. “Feel like that landing’s only getting worse the more I do it,” he grumbled, the cords retracting and going back into the Skyranger.

Mordenna grinned, making his way over to Vix’s side. “Old age catching up to you, Brads?”

“Can it.”

Mordenna snickered, but ultimately Convoy Seven advanced. They began to approach what Vix supposed was the Black Market, going around to the side of the building. Two guards at the door looked up as they approached, and one of them rolled his shoulders. “Huh. You guys are here earlier than you usually are.”

Bradford approached them, nodding. “Bit of a special situation this time. Need to stock up.”

“Something about to bite your guys’ asses, huh?” The man knocked on the door in a specific pattern. “So long as you got the goods I suppose it’s whatever.”

It was a second, but the door opened. On the other side was a rather unassuming boy—based off of context she had heard earlier, she could only presume it was Ray. “Oh! Hello, guys. Come on in, the boss is waiting for you.”

He stepped away from the door and held it open, allowing them to walk in. The inside was a rather
nice reception area, furnished with nice couches and tables. There was even a coffee machine and a
tray of snacks over on a counter. As they went towards the back, Ray went “ah.” “U-um, sorry
guys. Boss’s policy is no obvious recording devices. That... that includes Codices.”

Vix stalled on the spot. She knew she was likely going to have to deal with this... and yet it didn’t
make the apprehension any worse. Mordenna crossed his arms, silent for a second. “... yeah. That’s
reasonable. Don’t wanna leave Vix here, but—”

“I can stay behind.”

Mordenna looked to Jax, who had just spoken. “You alright with that, Jax?”

He nodded. “I have no business with the Baroness, myself, and so long as there is one of us going
to accompany the Commander, I see no harm in my staying behind.”

Mordenna looked visibly relieved, even if his grin was more upbeat. “Thanks, bro. I’ll make sure
the Commander’s safe.” The rest of Convoy Seven moved towards the door, and Mordenna
pointed at Ray. “Play nice with my kid.”

“Of course, sir.” Ray watched them exit before what Mordenna just said seemed to hit him. “Wait,
your—?” Mordenna was already through the door and gone, so Ray just sighed and took a seat at
the desk next to the door. There was a pillow on it and a blanket draped across the back of the
chair, and Ray picked up his datapad. “Sorry that I can’t let you in, ma’am. The boss doesn’t like
being recorded, even if I’m sure you wouldn’t be.”

Vix was nervous being without her father, but... Uncle Jax was comforting enough. As he sat down
in one of the arm chairs around a table in front of Ray’s desk, she did as well. “It’s ok. I understand
the security concerns.” Still, she was curious about Ray. He seemed about as courteous and nice as
Mordenna had described. “So you’re Ray?”

“Yes! One and only.” He offered Vix a lopsided smile. “Secretary to the boss. I handle visitors and
balancing the books when I get the chance. I may not look like it, but I’m pretty good with
numbers.”

“I would not have guessed that you were not,” Vix replied.

“Oh? You... well.” Ray chuckled nervously. “I guess sometimes jokes aren’t true, right? Besides,
even if I’m good, sometimes it just gets a little hard to complete my work.”

“Why is that?”

“Well...” Ray scratched his cheek, looking to the side. “My, uh. I guess my brain doesn’t work
quite right? You know what narcolepsy is, right?”

Her systems certainly did. Falling asleep in the middle of what you were doing certainly couldn’t
be conducive to any sort of work. That lead her to the question of how he was able to maintain his
job, but she felt like that was a question she shouldn’t really ask. In lieu of speaking, she nodded,
and Ray continued talking. “Yeah, I’ve got that. Sometimes I feel like I’ve gotta sleep and then I
just gotta. Doesn’t matter how hard I try to not.” His grin didn’t feel genuine. “I guess I’m so lazy
that my body takes naps for me.”

“I would not take a neurological condition to be laziness,” Jax softly responded. “You cannot
exactly help narcolepsy, outside of medicines I am sure would be hard to acquire, if they are still
being produced.”
“They aren’t,” Ray muttered, looking down. “The gene clinics nowadays can just... get rid of stuff like that.”

“Precisely my point. Do not degrade yourself, Ray. You are doing what you can.”

Ray was silent at that, staring at his datapad. Vix didn’t know what she would do if she had a condition that just... made her stop like that. It felt like it would be really frustrating to deal with—and what would others think? Would they understand? Would someone who didn’t know how narcolepsy worked just think that he was taking naps whenever he felt like it? Would they listen if he explained? All these questions just made Vix feel bad for Ray.

Eventually, Ray sighed. “I guess. Just wish I could do something more about it—makes me think about somehow getting processed through those gene clinics, but I know that’s asking to disappear with what we know about them.” His smile came back, and this time it was less forced. “Besides, the boss has me convinced I’m not gonna lose my job no matter how hard I try. She’s known about what I’ve got ever since she picked me up and it didn’t seem to bother her any.”

“Despite her reputation,” Jax replied, leaning back in his chair, “I get the impression that the Baroness is far more lenient than she seems.”

“Oh, no, don’t get her wrong.” Ray’s expression turned serious. “If you stiff her payment or cause trouble down below, that’s lights out for you. You get kicked out and banned from coming back at best. She just... seems to have soft spots for me and XCOM, I guess!”

Jax nodded. “I suppose she is one of the ones smart enough to know what she has, and what XCOM is truly fighting for.”

“The boss sure is smart!” Ray grinned. “She’s kept this operation runnin’ fer... for...” Ray’s head drooped, and he groaned. “Uhhh... I’m... s’rry...”

Ray dropped his datapad and he sluggishly reached for his pillow. He managed to get it in front of him in time for his head to crash on it. Well, looked like Ray was out. She certainly didn’t begrudge him for something he couldn’t help, after all. Jax got up, quietly moving behind the desk and casting the blanket on the chair over Ray, covering him. When he returned, he relaxed in his own seat. “Let us keep our voices down,” he murmured. “Even if I am sure he would rather not be sleeping right now, it is best he gets what he can.”

Her definition of narcolepsy mentioned that humans with it could suffer insomnia right alongside it, so she could buy that. Still... the thought of sleeping was an interesting one. Vix had something like that in her protocols. Could she...? “Ah...” She began, voice lowered. “Do you mind if I try to sleep, too?”

“Of course not... but come here.” Jax opened his arms. “Just in case something does occur, you will be safe in my arms.”

Made enough sense to her. Vix got up and settled against Jax. Jax may have been wearing his full armor, but even his hugs gave her the same sense of security that her dad’s did. She relaxed, going ahead and activating those processes.

Sleep was interesting, in her case. It felt like she was floating aimlessly. The world around her had faded away and she could only vaguely register the feeling of Jax’s armor. Even then, it was so hazy that she questioned if she felt it at all. Not that she did much questioning—it was far easier to go with the flow than it was to think about anything at all. It was... something, she supposed. It was pretty relaxing to be here, but she definitely had things to do. Not at the moment, but when she
was back on the Avenger, she knew her dad might need her help. Maybe she could sleep when he slept. Still, it was all a little too much to think on, so she let herself drift, relaxing in the pleasant nothingness.

Her system’s clock totalled an hour or so of sleeping before more movement made her rouse, slowly kicking on her processes. She was still on Jax’s lap, and he was still hugging her, but he had a hand on her shoulder, gently moving it as if to wake her. She felt pretty fine—maybe not refreshed, but she supposed she wouldn’t recharge off of a nap even if her processes ran low enough to not consume much power. “Uncle Jax...?”

“It is time to go.”

She nodded, and as Jax withdrew his arms, she stood up. Ray was still where he was but he seemed to have moved slightly, arms now under the pillow as he was snuggled up to it. Mordenna was leaning on the back of one of the couches, a bag slung over his shoulder that seemed to be packed with items. He smiled gently at her. “Good morning, sleepyhead. We’re getting the stuff we bought moved out. We just need to get over to the Skyranger and then you can go back to sleep, alright?”

Vix hummed in thought. “I just wanted to see what being asleep was like. I think I shall stay awake until you go to sleep, yourself.”

Mordenna went “hm.” “Might be staying up for quite a bit, then, but I’ll explain that when we get home. For now...” He stood up and walked a little ways away from the couch, offering his free hand. “We’ve gotta get there first. C’mon.”

Happily, Vix zipped over the couch, taking his hand as Jax rose behind them and joined them in walking out. Today was a wonderful day, and she was looking forward to many more.
XCOM investigates the Psionic Gate.

Merry Christmas! Suffer.

There was some sort of deep, vague, cosmic dread settled in Mordenna’s gut about today, and he just couldn’t pinpoint why.

Maybe it was his pessimistic side. After they’d lost that mission to that damn Specter, things had been quiet for a bit. He’d gotten Jax’s armor done, was just about done with Fal-Mai’s, and he just had the *second* love of his life... well, enter his life. Vix had been adapting so well to life on the Avenger, even if he had to be gradually revealing more and more of how much of a bastard he was. Though she seemed to be taking everything he told her in stride, he felt like he was waiting for the bit of detail that would be *too much* and she would finally disown him for good. Of course, he had then taken a deep breath and reminded himself that things were most likely going to be fine—after all, no reason to be so pessimistic. Things usually trended upwards now that he was away from the Elders.

So progress was in this season, was the bottom line. Funnily enough, he was getting a bit of that progress done right now. Fal-Mai had been the first to receive an implant from Mordenna with Samhien’s help—he figured it was only fitting that he be the next one at the bat. It was a damn weird sensation as it was getting grafted to his back; Samhien was quite good about being delicate and he’d applied painkillers, but occasionally the tips of his extremities would tingle like they had fallen asleep and that always sent him reeling with nervousness. Vix herself was Sammy’s assistant at the moment, watching and making sure everything was getting hooked up to Mordenna’s specifications.

Of course, Mordenna couldn’t tolerate the silence if he could help it. So naturally, he’d launched into something that interested him. “Ok. I’m about to hit you with my next one.”

“What?”, Samhien muttered, continuing to work.

What Mordenna had been doing to ease his own mind off of the potential danger of the situation was testing how precise Samhien’s lie-detecting ability was. Samhien had said at first that he didn’t think it was quite accurate—but by the way things had been going, Mordenna was sure the Skirmisher was selling himself short. “Alright. Back at ADVENT, you couldn’t have paid me to go out in public. They had to physically wrench me out of the door with MECs on either side of me to get me to go. Once I was there I wasn’t exactly the best party guest, what with keeping my guns on me and seeking out every excuse I could to shoot them. Mostly with improvised shooting galleries with the barest hint of justification to them. I hate dressing up is half of the problem, and the other half was just hating the Elders and everything they stood for, per usual.”
Samhien gently hummed, half in some sort of soft song, half in thought. “—I definitely feel as if you are lying on the ‘dressing up’ front, though that is because I have seen you in specifically requested clothes myself. I would think the latter half of that statement is really the reason you despised being paraded around in public. There is another lie in there, I feel...” He paused for a minute to concentrate, and even with the painkillers, the feeling of Samhien working his tools back there made Mordenna grimace. “—sorry. I... feel as if you are being truthful about the guns... but you never got a chance to actually shoot them?”

“You sell yourself way too short on how accurate you are with that,” Mordenna muttered. “Yeah, you’re entirely correct. I like dressing up, truth be told, and I think I look damn fancy in a suit. Mm, no, vest and tie, I kill metaphorically in those. And yeah, as much as I brought my guns with me, I—” He grunted as his arm twinged. “Do I need to stop talking for a minute?”

“Maybe,” Samhien said with mild distress. “Sorry.”

Mordenna took a deep breath. He was fine. It... it was bad enough, sitting here on one of the beds in the Infirmary with his shirt off, because it let Samhien and Vix—and really anyone else who wanted to wander in—see just how much Odin had beat him. Mordenna had seen it himself—he had the back scarring, yes, about as bad as Jax since it had been over such a long period of time. But... he didn’t know how, but it had started to bleed onto his front. Starting where his heart was and blooming out about half a foot in each direction, uneven, the scar continued on his chest. He’d just supposed Odin had done it enough that it went all the way through—and unlike Jax, Odin fixed up any internal damage he might’ve caused, either afterwards or when Mordenna inevitably died next. It wasn’t pretty, and he was a bit insecure about showing it off. But he wasn’t insecure enough to let it get in the way of him advancing himself.

Samhien continued to work for a while, with Vix softly muttering suggestions and guidance behind him. He really hoped he wasn’t subjecting Vix to something she didn’t want to do when he asked her to help Samhien out in doing this. It was one of the first things he’d asked her to do in her one assignment of helping out. Nothing like seeing somebody operate on your old man’s back as a bonding experience, right? He sighed gently.

“Something on your mind?”

He supposed he might as well be truthful, considering who was behind him. “Just making sure, you’re alright with this, V?”

“You asked me to help and I’m happy to do it, dad.” Vix was pretty chipper, all things considered. “Besides, I can only imagine things might not be going so well if I wasn’t here to help, and I couldn’t sit by with that thought.”

Mordenna slightly nodded, mindful to not move too much. Samhien needed steadiness and concentration. No need for Mordenna to go and mess that up. He kept his silence for a moment, allowing him to work in peace. It took a little bit of waiting, but eventually the movements at his back stopped, and he could hear Samhien putting his tools away. “There. I apologize for the occasional inconvenience and long process, but your implant has been fully installed, Mordenna. Your work is as easy to operate with as ever.”

Mordenna chuckled, glad he could speak freely again. “You can say that it was rough to deal with, it’s alright.”

“Oh, please, Hunter. I would be telling my own lies if I did that.” Samhien walked into sight as he went over to the sinks, washing off his hands. “The general anesthetic should be wearing off soon enough, but the link should be ready to go by my accounts.”
“Well, you know what that means.” Mordenna twisted around to look at Vix. “Hook me up, daughter of mine.”

“Right.” Vix picked up the Specter cube on the opposite bed and Mordenna turned back around. Theoretically this should go just as Fal-Mai’s hookup did—with maybe even less problems, since the nanos didn’t have to be anything in specific. A few conference talks with Schro had also let him know just what he could get up to in regards to the nanomachines, so he knew what he could do. He just had to be ready for it.

Easy to say, hard to apply, he knew that. He felt the core of the cube nudge against the port on his back—and suddenly, well, it felt like he had a cube for a limb on his back. He closed his eyes and squeezed his face a little, remembering what he wanted to do here. He imagined the cube turning into—no. He imagined and felt that there was a long, prehensile tendril on his back now. Almost like a tail, but farther north than it usually was. Sure enough, the cube—which had been starting to “melt”—smoothed out and lengthened behind him. He brought it to his front to inspect it. “Well, look at me, all up a limb like some sort of android.” It was still standard as for the moment, gray and sleek. His eyes shifted over to his clothes and a hand formed on the end of it, effortlessly reaching over and grabbing his shirt.

Vix watched with interest. “—you seem to already have quite the control over it.”

“Mind over matter, and all that. Helps that I’ve got the extra mental capacity to handle it.” He brought his shirt over and began to put it on. As he buttoned it up, he imagined something like a trendy scarf would be easier to deal with than a tentacle poking out from beneath his shirt. Maybe something blue, to compliment his jeans and the whole XCOM deal? In short order, the nanos fashioned themselves into just that, keeping a thin link to the core and also numbing all sensation to the “limb.” Best he didn’t feel a scarf, and all. “There we are. Think I can walk off casually with this—I’ll feel my back again eventually, right doc?”

“Hopefully so.” Samhien dried off his hands. “I trust you do not need me to recite my usual script?”

“Yeah, I’ve got it at this point. Shouldn’t stay numb for long.” Samhien measured his doses well—Mordenna could already feel sensation return to his back. As well as some soreness, but eh. All in the name of progress. If he lost his arm like Fal-Mai did there’d be no question about replacing it. “I will become a robot someday,” he muttered. “The only question is when.”

“... what are you talking about, dad?”

“God knows. Even then I’m sure he doesn’t know the details.” Mordenna slipped off of the bed. “I am a riddle wrapped in an enigma printed on the eternal question of why the Elders are b— jerks.” Toning down his language around Vix had been a process, and he was mostly succeeding. Mostly. “Damn” was a word he kept. “Thanks, the both of you, by the way. I’m sure I could’ve done this myself but there would have been a lot more screaming and also I probably would’ve taken out one of my limbs.”

“In the face of that as a possibility, how could I not help?” Vix bounced around to his front. She was happily displaying a little electronic smile—over the course of her time on the Avenger, she seemed to find out that facial expressions helped out a lot in socializing. “Besides, it’s my job.”

He chuckled, tousling her datastream. “I know, but I still appreciate you. Same goes to you, Sammy.”

Samhien smiled warmly as he walked back to the two of them. “I appreciate it just as well,
Mordenna. Do be easy on yourself, won’t you?”

“I’ll try, but you know Eliza has that mission lined up today.” He cracked his knuckles. “Only a matter of time before she pulls me down there to go fight.”

Vix’s smile faded into expressionlessness. “... are you still sure I can’t go with you?”

Mordenna’s own smile fell, and he sighed. “I’m sure. Haven’t even trained you on pistols yet, after all, much less gotten your weapon done.” He really hadn’t even gotten halfway done with it. Theory was easy to craft, but in practice, he was having a hard time balancing the Elerium, even through judicious use of heat sinks. “I don’t want you out there when you can’t defend yourself.”

Vix clasped her hands together in front of her, wringing them a bit. “I know, but...”

Mordenna put on a smile again and patted her shoulder. “I’ll be back before you know it when it happens. After I get you all trained up, I’ll let you come with me. Be my spotter, yeah?” There was a part of him that wanted to keep Vix out of danger entirely, but... he knew that wouldn’t eventually shake out well. He could already see her sneaking out onto the Skyranger with some gun she’d taken from the Armory to help him in the field and end up getting herself hurt. Best that he encouraged safety.

Vix nodded. “Ok. I can see the reasoning is sound. I just... right.” She held her hands closer to her chest. “We should go back and put the finishing touches on Aunt Fal-Mai’s armor, shouldn’t we?”

“Oh, absolutely!” Mordenna clapped his hands together and looked to Samhien. “Anything else you need to do to me, doc? Or am I clear to release?”

Samhien chuckled, shaking his head. “I could not keep you here if I tried, Hunter, but you are free to leave regardless.”

“Well, you’re right on that front, but I’d still rather stay if there was something else to be done. Still, with that not being the case?” He clapped a hand on Vix’s shoulder. “How about we—”

The door to the room opened, and Mordenna turned around. On the other side was the Raven King himself—with a surgical mask on, interestingly enough, one that looked hand-made. He invited himself in, and this time Nevermore wasn’t on his shoulder, just trailing behind him as the rest of his court was visible outside, staying put for the moment. He waved to the three of them as he came in, eyes glowing as Nevermore’s did. “Hello, you lot. Am I interrupting something?”

“Not at all, we were just about to leave.” Mordenna pointed to his mask. “Something up?”

“Sick, yes, and definitely not wanting to spread it to my omen.” The man sounded far worse than usual, and that was saying something. “I was going to see if Samhien had any antibiotics or the such.”

“Well, first we’ll test to see what you have, indeed.” Samhien waved him over. “The two of you can exit, now.”

Considering he said they were free to leave earlier, this was likely a dismissal. Mordenna nodded, taking Vix’s hand as she offered it and walking out of the door. The ravens parted for them and a few even croaked greetings, which Vix cutely returned. It was off to the Workshop, then, to complete things. Of course, Mordenna couldn’t help talking to himself in such a good mood. “—so this means I can’t make my next set of armor airtight,” he began, thinking on his nanos, “but I don’t think I was going to do that anyway.”
Vix had been catching onto what her dad was fond of doing, it seemed, as she followed up on his musings. “What will it manifest as in your new armor?”

“God knows,” he muttered. “I’m half thinking of making it the coat for my Reaper ensemble, but I need all those damn pockets and I don’t need them to be able to disappear on command.”

“Maybe it could remain some sort of scarf?”

“Possibly.” Mordenna went to readjust his, but then it moved to a more comfortable arrangement. “This is pretty heavy as is, not that I begrudge it. I’m practically wearing a whole Specter around my neck, so that’s more my fault than anyone else’s.” Specters were still pretty light, of course. “I mean, it’ll form into whatever I need it to when I need it, so having something casual like a scarf for a standby form makes sense. It just also happens to be fashionable.”

Vix giggled. “Sometimes the simplest answer is the best one.”

“Got that right. Still, makes me wonder what else I’ll do for my armor.” He rubbed at his mouth with his free hand, nodding to a passing engineer. “Definitely going to need a lot of support for the tactical rigging, and I’m keeping my grappling hook. Might slap on another one per an idea I had a while back. Hard to say what else I’ll incorporate.”

“Could you not focus on the armor, but instead the items you would be able to bring with the additional space?”

“Fair point, and I like the way you think. Could do with some proximity mines in my kit, so long as nobody else tries to fall back to my position.” Even so, he couldn’t count on that in the heat of a firefight. “So maybe not, regarding those. Maybe I could start carrying some extra medical supplies? After all, I’ll always have the physical tools I need with my Specter support here, all I would need is the stuff that gets used up.”

“Samhien won’t be available for every engagement.” Vix trailed her fingers along the wall. “And backup systems are always a good idea.”

He nodded, smiling. “You’ve got a good head on your shoulders, V.”

She smiled back. “You’re the one who made it.”

“You’re the one dealing with it, after all.”

In lieu of a response, Vix just laughed again, which sent Mordenna’s heart soaring. God, he loved that girl like the father he was. He was glad to have her around.

They eventually reached the Workshop. Mordenna walked in, his eyes landing on Lily, tinkering with Fal-Mai’s new armor. “Hey, thought I was going to be the one to add on the finishing touches.”

Lily shrugged. “I figured you were out for a second, so I’d finish it up for you.” She then gestured behind her, where Rodin and a few of his Archons were lounging, watching Lily work. “Also, these guys wanted to sit in on me working on something.”

Mordenna gestured for her to move aside. “Just let me look at it first to make sure there’s nothing additional I wanna tack on.”

Lily obliged, stepping to the side. Fal-Mai’s armor itself was a far more reserved affair than Jax’s. Mordenna had largely stuck to the Wraith Suit design while making it, though obviously he toned
down the bright glowing lines accents into far more muted blue stripes. The armor plates on the legs and left shoulder were taking inspiration from a samurai-like aesthetic, though he still kept it sensible as he did. The belt retained its ability to hold her throwing knives, and the left arm had a custom Ripjack fitted to it. He made sure the latter came as kitted out as the Skirmishers could make theirs, plus an addition or two of his own. The bottoms of the boots had retractable cleats on them—the same tech used for Jax’s visor turned out to work well for other simple functions. There was no right arm to the armor, something he’d cleared by Fal-Mai. It was best she had the full range of manipulation for her prosthetic.

Still, he didn’t see anything else he’d want to add. He nodded. “Alright, you can go ahead and go back to work on it. Just wanted to make sure I hadn’t missed anything.”

Lily rolled her eyes, picking up her tools again. “Mordenna, I think you’re physically unable to miss details in engineering. The design specs for Fal-Mai’s arm alone were probably larger than the documentation itself. You’ve got it covered.”

“No harm in double-checking,” he muttered, backing off to let Lily finish up. “Job ain’t done until I’ve triple-checked everything.”

In his group, Rodin chuckled. “The mentality of a fine engineer, that. I suppose we needn’t worry if the Hunter ends up handling any of our projects in the Chief Engineer’s stead, hm?”

“Implying I would ever worry with the quality of XCOM’s engineers, my King?” The blue and silver Archon, whose name Mordenna had learned at some point was Virgil, gave a confident smile. “Their talent far surpasses many sculptors I knew—not to speak ill of them, of course.”

“Zhinri would have your head for that,” Rodin muttered, “even if the statement would be true.”

“He never was one for criticism.”

Mordenna just supposed it was another Archon the two of them knew. Still, left with relatively nothing to do, Mordenna supposed he’d have to sit back and watch Lily finish up the suit, himself. A lull came in the Archons’ conversation and he idly wondered about something. “Hey, Rodin? Ever think about heading out onto the battlefield with the rest of us?”

Lily groaned. “Are you going to pile more projects onto yourself?”

“That answer will always be yes, Lily, you should know that by now. Rodin, answer the question.”

Rodin laughed. “Of course! I have long been looking for an opportunity to join XCOM in their operations. Gratitude drives me, as well as my need for battle. I was hoping to bring me and mine on the next mission.”

“You, definitely. Your squad?” Rodin had four other Archons with him, all looking more native than the usual ones. “Don’t know if there’s enough room on the Skyranger, and Firebrand has us sit down for our own safety.”

He gestured grandly. “That, too, I have seen a solution to. After much discussion with her, and a few flight tests, we have determined that we can cling to the bars on the outside of the Skyranger for transport.”

Metal. Mordenna snickered. “Can only imagine what that conversation had been like. Nevertheless, noted. You guys ever need any new equipment, your staves modified, whatever, you talk to me.”
“The suggestion is noted, if there is enough time to equip ourselves accordingly before the next mission.”

“Well, Liz is making her way over to the Gate as we speak.” Mordenna shrugged. “Might not be enough time, but it’ll be fun to work with you guys in the field.”

Vix kicked her legs, having sat down a little earlier. “Who do you think he Commander will field?”

“Educated guess?” Mordenna sat down, rubbing his chin. “… well, us three Chosen, for one, assuming we all want to go. Jax is gonna wanna demo his armor in the field and Fal-Mai will too, so they’re in, and I am as well. There’s gonna be a ton of Chryssalids out there… so one of our medics. Sherry, maybe? Rodin will be considered just his own person if he can lead his Archons by himself, so that leaves two more seats open on the Skyranger if Liz wants to make use of all the extra seating. A Templar, maybe? About the only person who will go with the Warlock of that description would be Marlene, though.” He half-wondered if she had seen anything about this upcoming battle. “Maybe she’ll let Pattie and Benald out. Heard they’re starting to make advances in their psionics.” Benald himself had shown Mordenna his “party trick” of freezing his own beer in his hands. Pattie herself couldn’t quite get things up to boiling, but uncomfortably hot was within her range. Mordenna didn’t think psionics could do that… but psionics could apparently see into the future, grant strength, and be formed into physical weapons. Really, anything was game for those things.

“Sounds accurate to me,” Lily muttered, putting one or two more finishing touches onto Fal-Mai’s armor before standing up. “There. Fal-Mai’s armor is finished and it’ll be ready for her to go. You can call her—”

Lily was still talking, but the Commander had started speaking into his ear, so that’s where all of Mordenna’s attention went. “Mordenna. Mind coming over to the Bridge? We’re just about there and I want to get the squad straightened out.”

Mordenna pressed a finger to his ear, talking quietly, as Rodin had elected to reply in his stead. “Yeah, I’ll be there in just a moment. Mind if I bring Rodin down? He’s interested in leading his squad on the mission.”

“Certainly, as we’ll need to discuss the viability of it.”

“Got it. Be there soon.” By this time, the room had taken notice of his conversation, quieting down. He spread his hands out. “Duty calls. Mind coming with me, Rodin? Eliza wants to talk about you coming out onto the field.”

Rodin’s ensuing grin had just a little bit of bloodlust to it. “As desired! Me and mine will accompany you to the Bridge.”

“Couldn’t ask for a better escort,” Mordenna snarked, getting up. This was going to be an interesting meeting...

It was almost time.

The squad of Mordenna, Fal-Mai, Jax, Sherry, Benald, Pattie, and Rodin and his guard were gathered in the Armory. Rodin had successfully convinced Eliza that he could lead his Archons on
the field, and once he’d confirmed he’d already made sure there was a way for them to reach the battlefield without taking up all of the space on the Skyranger, the Commander had been pretty thoroughly convinced. Fal-Mai herself was wearing her new armor, and the look on her face when Mordenna had presented it to her... well, he was still cherishing it now. It certainly felt nice to make things for people and have them like them. Plus, giving her a little more protection out on the field after last time made him feel like he had a say in the matter of her being injured again.

Nevertheless, he was going through a final few cursory checks on his weapons. They were always in top shape, but it never hurt to check. Eliza was standing there as well, watching the squad prepare. Mindful that he was being watched, Mordenna took a moment to smile at Eliza. “Well? Any parting wishes of luck you’d like to get out of the way now?”

Eliza’s laugh warmed his heart. “I gave all of them in the Bridge. At this point I’m just here to make sure the Archons don’t get shaken off by Firebrand.”

“I have confidence in our grip strength,” Rodin spoke, “considering we saw to it in field trials.” Rodin himself had brought out his staff—and by the way the structure of it was modified, Mordenna half-thought that the beam-like projectile they usually ran with would come out as more of a shotgun blast. “I would not have suggested the maneuver otherwise.”

“I appreciate your forethought—I value that in my soldiers.” Eliza clasped her hands together in front of her. “Otherwise, I don’t have much else for you guys. Once the Skyranger takes off, I’ll go ahead and head up to the Bridge so I can guide you on the ground.” Her ensuing smile was touched with nostalgia. “I say ‘guide...’ I’ve needed to do that less and less nowadays. You guys usually have good heads on your shoulders. I’m starting to feel a little redundant.”

“Please, Liz, who would be the face of the Resistance otherwise?” Mordenna slotted his sniper rifle onto his back. “I may be just as pretty a face but I doubt people are already jazzed that the Chosen are working for XCOM, regardless of our reasons.”

Eliza rolled her eyes. “Most people don’t even know what my face looks like, Mordenna.”

“Well, the sentiment is there.” Mordenna spread his hands out. “You’re the one who’s making all of the executive decisions, anyway. You’ve been keeping this ship afloat whether you’ll take credit for it or not.”

“Alright, alright.” Eliza held her hands up. “Credit where it’s due, I know I’m to blame for XCOM living for so long. Elders wouldn’t be making as much of an effort to take me back if I wasn’t. You just keep your head on straight down there and help out your squadmates, ok?”

Mordenna chuckled gently, seeing the Skyranger open out of the corner of his eye. “No need to ask twice. Good luck, Commander.”

Eliza shook her head as he began to walk off. “I’m not the one who’s gonna need it.”

“Don’t need luck,” he called over his shoulder, “I’ve got skill!”

She laughed, but didn’t reply otherwise. Mordenna kept walking towards the Skyranger, watching as the Archons did indeed jet up with the thrusters still in their wings, mounting their staves onto their backs and clinging onto the rails on either side of the Skyranger. Mordenna himself took his spot in the Skyranger after taking his Darklance off of his back to make sure he wouldn’t be sitting against it. Time for a long trip.
Kalight knew there was trouble the instant one of the soldiers sought him out. He knew he wasn’t exactly someone that anyone would go to party with—about the only people that would go to find him would either be Benald and Pattie, or Marlene. Considering that it was Herod running towards him when he turned around to investigate the noise of rapid footfalls, that didn’t bode well.

Herod stopped for a moment to catch his breath. Even as he did, he spoke. “Kalight. We—we need you in the Commons.”

There could be only one reason. “—Marlene?”

Herod nodded, and that was all Kalight needed. He passed Herod and broke out into a sprint, feet pounding down the hallways. It wasn’t that Marlene was in any imminent danger—but whenever she got her visions, it was a rightfully worrying sight to everyone else. Plus, she needed his secure company in the aftermath as she sorted out what she could see.

He practically slammed his hand on the pad to the door and rushed in. Marlene was easy to spot, heart wrenchingly so. Everyone had gathered in the Commons to watch the upcoming mission, and it seemed Marlene hadn’t been an exception. What that meant now, however, was that she was surrounded by a ring of people with Samhien right beside her, supporting her head on his lap as she was on the ground. This seemed to be a more violent vision, with her limbs shuddering and her gauntlets involuntarily activated, shards flickering in and out as they tried to control her rampant psionics.

Kalight easily shouldered past and, in Leo’s unfortunate case, shoved people aside to get through the crowd. He kneeled at Marlene’s head, taking over for Samhien and cushioning her head as she shuddered. “I’m here,” he muttered, knowing it was unlikely she could hear him. He did it every time regardless. “It will end soon. I’m here.” Knowing there was a ring of people around him stuck with nothing to do, he looked up at them. “One of you, go get a glass of water. She’ll need it for when she comes out of this.” When it was Samhien himself who got up and rushed off, he moved onto his next topic. “When did this happen?”

“ Barely a minute ago,” came March’s reply. “We were all standing here and hanging around, waiting for the mission to start, when Marlene seized up and fell against... Herod, I think?”

“That was me,” Mary replied. “I was the one who had Herod go get you, because you’re always with her when his happens.”

“I appreciate you notifying me,” he replied. Perhaps he was imagining it, but Marlene’s psionics seemed to have become less frenzied when he started attending to her. “—it’s a guess at how long this will be...” What somewhat scared Kalight here was the timing. It seemed the Earth had some vague control over when Marlene would receive Her prophecies, as they all usually came during the early hours of the day or later at night for the Avenger. Never midday like this. Was what She was prophesying that urgent?

Suddenly, Marlene lunged and grabbed his arms. She was still seizing, still shaking, but the grip on his sleeves was desperate. Her braids were thrashing all over the place and her gauntlets were lit up to the point where Kalight was fearing for their structural integrity. “M—mmm...” She was trying to force something out.

“Don’t talk,” he urged, trying to get her to let go of him. “I don’t care as to how you’re doing it but
you need to be silent for your sake.”

“M-Mord…” Despite his best efforts, he could not dislodge Marlene. “Hhh... He’s...”

She groaned in pain and that was when he knew she needed to stop. “Psions, come here, I need help putting her out.” Obligingly, Leo, Clint, and a few of the gathered Mystics kneeled down with him. Without their psi-amps, he would’ve been in more trouble if he only had one or two of them helping him—but the Mystics’ powers helped the process along very nicely. As they offered their strength, he placed a gauntlet on her helmet. He wasn’t as strong with the mental aspect of his psionics, he would admit, but with his helpers? “Sleep,” he muttered, speaking the command into her mind as well.

He could feel Marlene resisting against them, and it seemed like some clarity was being restored even as they tried to make her slumber. “—Mordenna, he’s—Odin is—you can’t—”

“Sleep,” he insisted. Whatever prophecy she had could wait; this wasn’t urgent enough to risk her injuring herself with how she was trying to speak.

It took more struggling, but eventually Marlene’s grip on his arms weakened until her own fell, and she slumped against his chest. Her psionics quieted and her gauntlets went back into their resting state. Her weighted tubes completely fell, marking a rare time when her psionics were truly quiet.

Kalight sighed. Maybe he should have let her speak, but he wasn’t about to let her do it at the expense of her own health. She could’ve bit her tongue, damaged her muscles trying to fight her spasms, any number of things. It was best she rested, and when she woke, they could receive her prophecy then. He looked to the psions gathered around him. “Thank you all. I’ll watch over her for now. Watch the mission...” Marlene’s words came back to him. “And one of you go to the Commander, have her advise Mordenna to be cautious.”

“I’ll handle that,” Arsozu muttered. “May not exactly like the guy but if the oracle’s saying he’s in danger, well, it’s up to us to at least warn him.” With that, he parted from the crowd.

He looked back down to Marlene. Though he had justifications for his actions, the doubt in his heart remained...

The cosmic dread Mordenna had felt earlier that day was only getting worse.

The squad had landed a while back, and true enough, all of the Archons had managed to stay on. A few of them were clearly excited by the experience, but that had been tempered by the long walk ahead of them. Mordenna, of course, never minded long treks. If anything, they were relaxing to go on. But... well, he couldn’t deny that he was mildly nervous about what they were walking to. After all, Mordenna knew how those Gates worked. They could be pointed anywhere and be accessed by anyone on the other side, so long as their verification was valid. They probably wouldn’t be able to use it—himself included—but any authorized alien on the other side? Fair game. It could be a long one if they found out where they were and just streamed reinforcements through it.

Still, that was what he had effectively infinite ammo for. As they walked, Fal-Mai had taken up a spot at the lead. Didn’t take eyes like Mordenna’s to see the telltale markings of Chryssalid tunnels amidst all of the Blight-affected flora. This place was even worse than Jax’s Ascension Facility,
and rightfully so. Those gates constantly outpoured psionic energy, whether they were actively
transporting troops or not. The rocky hills and spruce trees had seen themselves overgrown and
irradiated with the psionic leakage. Mordenna didn’t feel too sorry for the troops who had to patrol
it, of course. Fal-Mai was the one keeping them updated on what was ahead, though most of her
reports had been Chryssalids moving about, especially underneath them. Rodin and his Archons
were close to her in the front—a vanguard if those Chryssalids decided to try to hand them their
asses.

Eventually, Mordenna’s eyes caught something on the landscape. “Company halt,” he muttered,
and the rest of Menace One-Five stopped with him. There, in the glint of the sun... a few Heavy
MECs, with an Andromedon with them. Seemed ADVENT weren’t sparing too many of the
overly organic troops around here, and he couldn’t say he blamed them. Ostensibly the
Chryssalids were “fighting” for ADVENT, but in practice? Anyone was fair game if they were
agitated enough. A second later, and a Specter rounded the corner. Standard fare, though he was
still waiting for that one called Cocytus to show up. “Commander, enemies right at 11 o’clock,
permission to set up and engage?”

“Permission granted,” Eliza replied. “Though after that you should be making a beeline to the
Gate. If we make ourselves known around here, it isn’t a stretch to say that they’ll start putting that
ting to use in warding us off.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Menace conformed to cover in the area and Mordenna did much of the
same, deploying his extra Specter limb into spider-like appendages to quietly set himself up in a
tree. He sighted in on the Specter, his scope helping him locate its core at this distance. “Menace,
ready to engage.”

The rest of Menace sounded off their readiness, and Mordenna watched as their setup paid off. The
Specter was down and two of the three MECs capitulated, leaving Menace to fight with the last
MEC and a battered, but not broken Andromedon. Mordenna let himself watch the rest of the
battlefield as his squad cleaned up. He was mildly paranoid, yes, but for good reason. That
Gatekeeper and Specter were likely to be lurking about in the area, if their previous track record
was any indication. Plus, with the sounds of fighting, that was likely to stir up the Chryssalids.
Mordenna hoped to whatever god would answer him that there wasn’t a hive nearby.

Well, good thing he was keeping an eye out. A Chryssalid came skittering around the corner and he
quickly put a stop to that. A glance over at the squad confirmed that all they were dealing with now
was the shell of the Andromedon, and that was something that Jax’s minigun could handle.
“Archons, Fal-Mai, Chryssalid duty. We pretty much just kicked the clown car with that opening,
not like we could’ve avoided it.”

Fal-Mai switched targets readily, whipping out her shotgun and putting a few rounds in the
advancing space vermin. Rodin himself leapt over his cover, and with a flourish of his staff,
artfully impaled an advancing Chryssalid. The ensuing firing of his staff confirmed Mordenna’s
suspicions as it was launched off of his weapon in a buckshot of plasma.

Honestly, Mordenna had to stop and watch Rodin work as they advanced. He knew he was a ruler,
but he was starting to see how exactly he became king of the Archons. He was strangely graceful
on his feet, pivoting and always aggressive despite his expertise in every movement. His staff was
more of an extension of himself and his skill of it reminded Mordenna of how Fal-Mai maneuvered
her own blade. Chryssalids kept falling at its behest and he wove in blasts of plasma within and
between swipes and jabs. The display was slightly dampened by the manic grin on Rodin’s face,
one that was shared across his subjects as well. Wasn’t hard to forget that Archons lived to fight,
watching them brutalize the incoming foes.
Unlike a Berserker, however, Rodin wasn’t lost in his frenzy. His head snapped to the side and with a flare of his jets, he was back in cover, just in time for some mag fire to stream past where he used to be. “Enemy squadron to our right, past that mound!” He then barked something in a language Mordenna didn’t understand, which was new to him. Maybe it was Archon? Whatever the case, his guard was on him in an instant, and with some more words, a gray-skinned, gold-colored metal Archon took up the opposite position on the mound. He certainly had them well-organized.

Speaking of close-knit groups, Pattie and Benald were close together in cover of their own. Benald reloaded his rifle with his free moment. “Any psi-susceptible ones in that pod, your highness?”

“Just more blasted robots,” Rodin replied.

What was about to happen next seemed to occur to Mordenna and Jax at the same time—and luckily, Jax took action on his hunch. Jax extended his gauntlets and formed an aerial shield over Menace. Just in time, as micromissiles slammed against it. Benald sighed. “Well, this is gonna suck, but I’m trying it anyway.”

Pattie looked at him incredulously. “Ben, you’re not gonna—”

“Not without you.”

Her shock turned into a grin. “Hell yeah, at least let me make bad decisions with you!”

Benald holstered his gun, drawing his psi-amp in time with Pattie. They channeled their powers into them—and this time, Mordenna noticed some key details. Mist began to form around Benald, and Mordenna could see frost start to form over his fingertips. Heat lines rose from Pattie and it looked like embers were streaming from her psi-amp. At their powers’ peak, Benald looked to Jax. “—lower the shield, boss!”

Jax complied, taking it down in time as the two of them rose, flinging their powers towards the group. Mordenna had been moving to get a better angle at the group, and now he could see the fruits of their labor. The pod had been two more MECs, another Specter, and a Codex, and he watched as the twinfold powers washed over them. The twin, twisting streams of their psionics had contacted the Specter, and the reaction was a sight to behold—ice bloomed out in jagged shards where it had hit, and the Specter was quickly frozen completely, but the process wasn’t done. A spark of light flashed from the center of the ice, and suddenly, the Specter itself exploded in a hail of shards and ice. Menace quickly ducked as that happened, with Jax providing a shield once more from the debris. The rest of the enemies were buffeted by the explosion, and the Codex predictably generated another copy of itself.

“That’s one way to kill a Specter,” Sherry grimly mused. “I thought you two couldn’t actually...?”

“N-not normally.” Pattie was clearly winded, slumping back behind her cover. “Ow, my aching skull.” Benald himself sunk down with her. It was hard to tell past the sunglasses and bandanna, but there was a certain pinch to his forehead that betrayed to Mordenna that he was probably in just as much pain as Pattie was.

Mordenna’s eyes tracked the Codex leaping through the Void, trying to get behind him. He whipped around and blasted a pistol shot at it as it reappeared, right through its brain. It was... a little less nice to kill them now. Almost stung a bit. “Well take it easy for a bit, superheroes.” Seriously. He knew Clint could detonate explosives, so he supposed this was some sort of natural evolution? Maybe? Psionics were weird.
Jax’s minigun revved and suddenly one of the MECs was in a few more pieces than normal. “The rest of us may fill in your stead,” he followed up, proving that point by snatching the cloned Codex out of its cover with a psionic claw and keeping it psionically grounded long enough for Sherry to score a clean hit.

A kick of Fal-Mai’s shotgun, and the last of the pod went down. Mordenna didn’t rest, adjusting his position to the top of the mound and checking the area out. The extra height showed him they were heading in the right direction. The Gate was a little way out, hidden naturally by the landscape even if the enormous amount of Blight was enough to give away its general location. Psionic flora had twisted around it and its emplacement, giving it the feel of being half-tech, half-plant. There seemed to be no more patrols—just some Chryssalids coming out of their burrows and heading towards their location. He sighted in and sniped one. “Liz? Visual on the target. No more guards seen at the moment, just Chryssalids.”

“Shadow Chamber says as much,” Lily replied. “I can kinda see the Gate through your camera. The power draw that thing must be generating...”

“Those things aren’t that power-heavy, actually,” Mordenna muttered, continuing to pick off Chryssalids. “They’re pretty much just establishing a stable shortcut through the Void—they give off a lot of psionic radiation, but they really don’t take too much power to operate. We’d be able to move it onto the ship once we shut it off, disconnect it from its grounding, and convince Jax here to haul it himself.”

Jax scoffed, swapping to his rifle to let his cannon recharge. “I would be interested to see if I can manage such a feat and if that is finally something I cannot carry.”

“We’re about to see, I suppose.” Mordenna spared a glance over to Benald and Pattie, who were still looking spent. “Sherry, keep an eye on the Twins. Rest of us are going to clean out the Chryssalids a bit more until we can actually secure the area.”

“Go ahead and do that,” Eliza chimed in. “Move in and secure the Gate afterwards. We’ll see about—” The Commander halted for a second, stoking some worries in Mordenna. Thankfully, she went back to speaking later. “Sorry about that. Mordenna, you’ve been advised to be careful.”

Mordenna chuckled, reloading. “Who’s warning me up there, Samhien?”

“Marlene, actually.”

Uh. That did not help with his sense of dread whatsoever. Mordenna’s fingers stilled, but thankfully his siblings and the Archons were there to pick up the slack. “—any, uh, any specifics on that warning, Commander?”

It was another moment before Eliza replied. “Sadly not. According to Arsozu here, that was about all she’d managed to say.”

Oh, Arsozu. Resident prankster of the Avenger to rival Benald and Pattie themselves. Mordenna didn’t really want to dismiss the warning, considering it could be real, but the fact that Arsozu was delivering it made him a little suspicious. “I’ll be as careful as I always am, Commander,” he assured her. No reason to say to her face that he wasn’t going to take the warning entirely seriously. Just a little bit. “The warning’s noted.”

There was a bit more Chryssalid extermination to be had, and soon the battlefield fell silent. As everyone reloaded, Mordenna looked to Fal-Mai, who had gotten closer to the ground, nearly resting her head on it. Once everyone finished, she spoke. “—the Chryssalids are all much farther
away or not present at all,” she said. “I believe we are largely safe to proceed.”

“Good by me.” Mordenna got off his perch as he holstered his rifle, though he commanded his extra limb to keep a hold of his pistol regardless. “I’ll see what I can do about disabling the Gate—there’s usually an access point right next to it.”

Jax looked to him, and though his visor was deployed, Mordenna could feel the concern through it. “Are you sure you should approach it, brother?”

“No other way it’s getting hacked reliably,” Mordenna replied. “Just connecting an external interface runs the risk of the Elders figuring out where we are and sending in reinforcements, assuming the idiots we just killed didn’t do that already. If I just shut it down manually, they won’t notice anything amiss until it’s already off.” Mordenna grinned at him. “I’ll let you put some of your psionics around my midsection, yank me back if anything happens. I trust you.”

That seemed to mollify Jax, as he nodded. “Alright. Lead the way, Mordenna.”

He would. Still, he motioned for the Archons to take point in cover behind him. He’d need them close, but not close enough to get clipped by anything that might come out of the portal. Mordenna felt a gentle pressure around his waist that made him look down. Sure enough, a cord of Jax’s psionics had been tightly wrapped around him. He gave Jax a reassuring thumbs-up before moving forwards, approaching the Gate.

At this distance, it was almost kind of awe-inspiring. Kind of. Mordenna had seen Gates in person before and had even travelled through them a few times. He knew how they worked and how they looked. This would be standard. Once he was on the main platform, he began to move towards the control panel.

Of course, nothing was ever that easy, and Mordenna’s life could never be simple.

It happened so fast that not even Mordenna had time to react. The portal in the Gate suddenly activated, there was a flurry of motion, and then Mordenna was getting slammed on his back. Fear, stronger than anything he’d ever known, clouded his mind. Half of it was mental manipulation. The other half was from what was now upon him. Codices, cloaked in the purple of psionics and with glowing red eyes, were pinning him down, sitting on his limbs with one on his chest. Whispers, familiar whispers tugged at his mind, robbing him of his own words as he stared at the Revenant upon him.

Odin—his Revenant—was on him. “Child. Even now you take from me what could have been just given, if you remained in my good graces.”

Mordenna would’ve had a witty response, but he was busy hyperventilating. He couldn’t tell what was his own fear and what was clearly Odin manipulating his emotions. Why wasn’t the rest of his squad doing anything? He tried to look over at them and more Codices appeared, planting their hands on his head and forcing him to look at the one on his chest. “Trust me, wretched son, even now I am exercising mercy. Your friends—your siblings have fled. I am merely sparing you from having to see that reality.”

“Menace!” As Eliza spoke, one of the Codices seemed to notice. “Why aren’t you—?!”

One of the Codices at the side of his head dug in and took out his communicator. In its palm, the device short-circuited. “She lies to you. She wants you to believe you ever would have had a purpose outside of me.” Mordenna wanted to scream out, to be defiant, to look and confirm that Odin was lying. He seemed to notice such, as his hissing chuckle emanated from all of the Codices
"Do you not believe me? Idiot. I will let you call for them. Go on. Call for help."

Enough of the fear lifted that Mordenna could feel his words come back. His heart felt like it was going to thump right out of his chest still, but he had to know. He had to know. "—Jax! Pull me back! Please!"

Nothing. It was now that Mordenna noticed that he could no longer feel the pressure of the cord around his waist. Only the lonely howl of the wind and the whispers in his mind answered him, hollowing out his chest and causing a worse despair than Odin could have ever instilled.

Odin laughed once more. "You doubt me and once again I am proven right. I gave you everything—a brilliant mind, servants at your disposal, a new life. And yet you rejected me at every turn. You deliberately made yourself a nuisance and dared to think that I was not your best recourse. You have proven yourself worthless. For that, I will set right what once went wrong. I am going to kill you, but even now I exercise restraint."

The main Codex leaned over, staring him in the eyes. "If you truly believe they will come back for you... I will make this slow. I will take you apart, piece by piece. If they come back for you... will they accept what’s left of you? Yes, it seems you were able to make them accept your pathetic sister by fashioning her a new arm. But what of you? If you have no eyes to see, no arms to tinker, will they be as forgiving?"

Seems Odin was expecting him to respond. However, if he was expecting Mordenna to panic, to scream, well... he was raised by Odin. He should’ve known Mordenna’s next action would have been to spit in the face of the main Codex.

The presence in the area magnified, and the Codex glared at him. "Defiant until the end, I suppose. I will be merciful... and make this slow." Odin planted a hand over his right eye... and his left hand raised. "Your precious Sight first."

The Codex’s hand plunged downwards, and there was a burst of pain at Mordenna’s left eye socket. He tried to hold back, but Mordenna couldn’t help but scream, his voice reaching a harrowing pitch as Odin yanked. Mordenna’s vision split and distorted for one second, and then suddenly he couldn’t see as much as he used to. He could feel the blood running down from his eye socket, the pain searing into his mind and bringing tears to his remaining eye.

"No!"

That—that was Jax. Before either Odin or Mordenna could react, a giant fist made of reddish-pink psionics slammed into a majority of the Codices, flinging them off of Mordenna. The rest scattered, fleeing to Mordenna’s left and presumably back into the portal. With his limbs free, all that Mordenna could think to do was curl in on himself and press his hands to his eye socket, half in trying to stem the flow, half from the pain. For once in his life, he could barely think, so suffocated by agony and sheer shock. His breaths came out in short wheezes, tears streaming down his face.

He wasn’t alone for long. Thudding footsteps raced towards him and he flinched, scrambling to get away. His Specter limb seemed to have seized in the attack and was now barely an appendage, scraping at the ground to help him get away. He stopped when he heard who it was, however. "Mordenna! Mordenna, it’s me!"

Once he heard it was Jax, he stopped struggling, slumping back onto the ground. He was scooped up and hugged, and it was then that he bothered to open his remaining eye. Jax had come to a kneel and had pressed Mordenna to his chest, arms so tight around him that Mordenna was sure he couldn’t leave even if he wanted to. He was slightly rocking, psionics flared and attempting to
mesh with his. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, he—he made it so I couldn’t move, none of us could—I should have been stronger, I’m sorry…”

That answered Mordenna’s half-thought question at least. He would’ve mulled over it more were he not in so much pain. Mordenna spared an arm to hug Jax, burying his face into his chest and sucking in a breath. Maybe he was fine with crying, but... not out here. Not in front of everyone on the Avenger, pretty much.

Of course, the option was taken from him when he could feel someone press against him on his opposite side. He didn’t even need to look to know that Fal-Mai had arrived on the scene as well, huddling close to him with her soft shroud tossed over them. A cursory glance showed that it wasn’t even powerful enough to conceal them—it was like a shimmering, purple blanket of mist. With the addition of Fal-Mai, Mordenna’s emotions spilled over and out of his control and he buried his face back in Jax’s chest and closed his eye, heaving a pitiful sob and squeezing his brother tightly.

More footsteps approached and he hated knowing he was looking this vulnerable in front of countless eyes. One set came over to them and stopped. “Mordenna.” That was Sherry, sounding very much like she didn’t want to intrude. “I... I need to see your eye. We need to stem the bleeding.”

He didn’t even want to think of being treated, because that required facing the reality of the situation—Odin had struck him again, and this time the damage wasn’t just cosmetic. But even despite his state, he wasn’t enough of an idiot to refuse treatment. Slowly, he turned his head away from Jax and towards the sound of Sherry’s voice, taking his hand away from his socket. “That’s—that’s good. You’re doing great.” Hands pressed against his face and he flinched. “It’s just me, it’s just me.” He knew that. But the physical memory from just earlier wasn’t helping.

Jax’s request for a meld was more insistent this time, backed up by Fal-Mai’s presence. Mordenna gave another shuddering sob and relented, letting them in. Jax’s first order of business was to take all of Mordenna’s pain onto himself. Mordenna tried in vain to take some of it back, knowing how much of it there was, but Jax was far psionically stronger than he was and stonewalled him, even as he hissed in pain. With his pain gone, Fal-Mai was the one to extend her signature, supporting his and doing the best mental equivalent to a hug she could manage. Jax arrived to assist just a little while after her—and Mordenna got caught up on his psionics. There were notable courses of red underneath all of the purple and pink. It had been there before, but now... it was almost as if the other colors were having a hard time holding the red back.

“Mordenna.” Sherry’s voice brought him out of his thoughts. “I’m going to administer some painkiller, then I need to hold your eyelids open to treat the wound.”

“D-do it,” he managed. Jax may have been taking all of his pain, making him feel none of it, but he’d take off what burdens he could from him. After a second, there was a pinch on his cheek, then that side of his face began to numb to physical sensation. Something occurred to him and it took all of his willpower not to move while the needle was still in him. “Th-the Gate. You need t-to—”

“It’s handled,” Sherry replied. “We’ve got the Archons guarding the portal as Shen disables it. We may be drawing attention right now but—” Sherry stalled for a moment, as if her voice was about to break. “—but you need the help. It’s going to be alright.”

With that, the needle withdrew, and he knew what was going to come next. Wanting to focus on anything else right now, he mentally retreated to the mind meld. “What... what happened to you guys?”
Jax’s signature was full of regret and guilt. “When Odin came out of the Gate... he washed fear over all of us. None of us could move. It... it took seeing him... do that to you for me to resist.”

He knew Jax was beating himself up, but... the fact that Jax had overpowered an Elders’ hold on him spoke volumes on both just how strong Jax could be—and how much it must’ve hurt to see... well, Mordenna didn’t want to think about that. It was enough to know that his siblings cared enough to defy the Elders to save him.

Though, speaking of his siblings... he could feel Fal-Mai’s own guilt over not being able to resist. He mentally turned to her. “That was Odin, Fals. Jax only broke out because he’s a psionic powerhouse. I... I don’t blame you for being unable to come help.”

“I should’ve been able to,” she insisted. “If Jax could do it, then why can’t—”

“Don’t,” Mordenna insisted somewhat forcefully. “Don’t pull that right now. Not on me. We went through this with me and your arm. I’m willing to accept there was nothing you could do if you think the same. But if you think there was something you could’ve done, well, we know where that would lead.”

Fal-Mai was silent for a moment, which made Mordenna think he’d been too harsh. But eventually she rallied back to him. “You’re right. I struggled as hard as I could against his influence, but to no avail. So long as one of us was able to stop him, I shall leave the matter at rest.”

Yeah. Honestly Mordenna was glad she wasn’t going to go on and on about it. He realized now how much of a hypocrite he was for thinking that—because wasn’t that what he did and what he admitted he did? He sighed. Well, more to focus on other than that. They got the Gate, sure, but... he was down an eye now. Field deployments were out of the question until he readjusted how he shot—if Eliza would let him back out being down an eye at all. That prospect wasn’t the prettiest. He was starting to find himself more away from the killing, yes, but he wouldn’t be there to protect his siblings. Fal-Mai and Jax would just have to watch out for each other, and that wasn’t going to cut it to him.

He scowled slightly, and Sherry “hmm”ed. “Are the painkillers not working? I can up the dosage.”

“No, they are, just...” Mordenna sighed again, opening his eye. Seeing Sherry having her hands and tools leading right into his new blindspot was disconcerting to say the least. “I’m not jazzed about this whole situation, frankly.”

Sherry nodded. “Only natural. Fact of the matter is, you survived. Seen some of my squadmates not even manage that.”

... Mordenna would know. Angel came to his mind and he looked away, mood further sullied. She probably knowingly brought that back up. He still had a lot to answer for.

His siblings must’ve noticed his sullen mood, as Fal-Mai mentally nudged him to get his attention. “Everything will be alright. We can go home and—”

“But for once I’d like to dwell on something,” he snapped. He didn’t mean to be angry, but it was far better than crying. His surface justification was not getting any tears in Sherry’s way, but... he knew it was because he hated seeming so vulnerable. “Maybe it isn’t the right way to handle it but this isn’t exactly something I can say ‘well what can you do’ about and move on. Everything won’t be alright because I don’t exactly have all of myself anymore. I’d think you’d understand, Fal-Mai.”
Fal-Mai immediately went silent and Mordenna knew what he’d done. He withdrew from the link even as Jax tried to keep him in, saying something about resolving what he’d just said. “Sherry. How much longer.”

“Actually,” she said, withdrawing her tools, “I’m done now. Take it easy and let the socket breathe —”

“Great. Thanks.” Mordenna wormed out of Jax’s grip before he could tighten it and he got up, walking off. He needed to be away from his siblings, right this second. Fal-Mai would need a moment to deal with what he’d just said—

He heard Jax’s footsteps behind him. “Don’t,” he hissed, continuing to walk. “Not now.” As he walked, Jax continued to follow. Mordenna could feel his frustration building, but he wasn’t about to unleash it—at least, not here in front of everyone else. He got to an area that was out of direct line of sight from the Gate and he wheeled around. Sure enough, Jax was right behind him, his visor retracted. “Can’t you listen to a single word I fucking say?! What’s it going to take for you to leave me alone?” Mordenna knew he was just being abrasive to get Jax to leave. If Jax left now, he wouldn’t need to suffer more of Mordenna’s mood. Mordenna wouldn’t hurt him any more than he already had.

“If you want me to leave you alone,” Jax replied simply, “you will have to kill me first. Mordenna, you are hurting. I would understand that—I took your pain before Sherry gave you a painkiller.”

“And I never asked for you to do that!” Mordenna threw his hands out. “Do you think I ask to be constantly coddled by everyone around me? I’m getting fucking sick of it! What fucking use am I when every five minutes everyone has to stop and tell me everything’s going to be fine?! I’m just a goddamn burden on everyone here!”

“Is that what you’re going to selfishly insist?” Jax took a step towards him and Mordenna moved back a little. “Do you really think you are a burden on us?”

“Yeah! Because it’s the truth!” He gestured in the direction of the Gate. “I was told to be careful by our goddamn oracle and what did I do? Approach the goddamn Gate myself!”

“You said yourself that it was the best way.”

“Sometimes I’m a huge fucking liar, as it turns out! Shen’s having a lovely time up there shutting the Gate off herself—if we’d just let her shut off the Gate instead of me, none of this would have happened! I’m a fuckup, Jax, and I don’t fucking deserve to be here!”

Jax locked eyes with him, his gaze strong. “So. When we get home and you are aboard the Avenger, would you like to repeat all of that to your daughter?”

Mordenna’s chest suddenly hollowed out. He... he had someone waiting for him back there. Someone depending on him. “I...”

“Is that what you are going to do? Are you going to look Vix in the eye and tell her you are going to abandon her because you do not wish to inconvenience the rest of us?” Jax spread his hands out. “Even if you decide to part from us and take her with you, are you going to deprive her of the rest of her family? Won’t you ultimately be a burden to her as well, if that is what you claim you are to the rest of us? I know you are being abrasive to me to get me to leave you alone, out of some misguided attempt to spare me suffering. But, Mordenna...” Jax’s eyes softened. “It hurts me to see you hurt. To see you in agony like this. You have changed from grief to anger to not show vulnerability.” Jax let his arms drop. “Are you so willing to turn your back on what Eliza taught all
of us...?"

No. No, he wasn’t. Jax’s words cut deep as he intended them to, and Mordenna lost all of his rage and frustration. Grief and guilt swiftly filled the cracks and he crossed his arms, hugging himself. “No. I... I-don’t want to do that. I’m just...” He grimaced, his sadness threatening to spiral out of his control. He shouldn’t have been holding it back in light of what Jax had just said. Yet...

Jax further approached him, and this time Mordenna didn’t back away. “...just say sorry, Mordenna. All you need to do is apologize.”

He could do that. “—I’m sorry,” he eked out, voice trying desperately to break on him, “t-to you. And F-Fals.” He took in a shuddering breath. “I know she’s—she’s here.”

“Good.” Jax placed his hands on Mordenna’s shoulders. “Now apologize to yourself. You have called yourself a burden and thoroughly implied that none of us desire to have you around, which is slander of the highest order again yourself. This liberal self-destruction... it hurts us all to see you do that.”

Apologizing to himself seemed stupid, but Jax was right. Even with all the work Eliza had been putting into him... Mordenna always tore himself down. Sometimes it was jokes, sometimes it was something more serious like he just did. The damage that had been doing to him... it wasn’t pretty to think about. Mordenna barely managed another “I’m sorry” before a sob stole the rest of his words.

That seemed to be all Jax wanted. He drew Mordenna into his arms and hugged him tightly—and sure enough, there was a presence at his back. Didn’t take a mind like Mordenna’s to say it was Fal-Mai. Mordenna practically collapsed against Jax, and this time he let his sadness flow freely. He sobbed against his brother, finally dealing with his feelings. He wasn’t worthless, no, but it hurt so much to lose something so treasured to him. He’d lost one of his greatest assets and he couldn’t protect his siblings as much as he wanted to anymore. Mordenna just wanted to dwell on his sadness, to vent for the moment. He needed to.

Thankfully, his siblings were there to comfort him. They initiated the link again and Mordenna let them support him as their signatures radiated reassurance. He was so, so lucky to have them. He was lucky to have Vix, and he was lucky to have Eliza.

Eliza... she couldn’t have been holding up well in light of all of this. First Fal-Mai, now him. Mordenna grimly wondered if Jax was next for a second before dismissing the thought. There was no need to speculate about something like that. He had people at home he needed to reunite with—and he was sure Vix had seen what happened. She was probably so broken up about having just been told he’d be fine...

Mordenna heaved another sob, louder thanks to that. His poor daughter... if he couldn’t protect himself... no, he shook his head. That was an Elder—that was Odin who did that. It was out of his hands. He could protect Vix. But when he got home, she’d need as much comfort as he did now. He was ready to be there for her, and maybe get a little bit of his grieving out then, too. Vix wasn’t his personal therapist, but he wasn’t invincible. Knowing her dad could be vulnerable too would hopefully help her.

Eventually, god willing, Mordenna calmed down. He was left breathing deeply, face damp and throat raw. He took in another breath before even thinking of replying. “...thank you guys. For everything. I... I love both of you.”

Fal-Mai hugged him a little tighter. “We love you too, Mordenna, and we always will. Are you
“No,” he admitted, “but... we’re getting there. You two are helping so much. I’m—I’m probably gonna be a major grump for the next few days as I get over this. I’m just gonna say sorry now if I get abrasive.”

“You lost an eye, Mordenna,” Jax replied. “It’s only natural to be hurting with such an injury, physically and emotionally. But we will be there with you every step of the way.”

Mordenna nodded, heaving a cleansing sigh and just slumping against his brother. He could use all the support he could get. Good thing his siblings loved him.

That was a disaster.

Argus could only watch through the security cams with the rest of the Trio as Odin’s Phantom, clearly battered, weakly struggled back over to where his body rest. They all crawled up onto the glass and sank in afterwards, reuniting with him. When the call had gone out regarding proximity on one of the Gates being breached, Odin had leapt into action without so much as warning the rest of them. He’d forcefully projected his Phantom into the real world, had them sprint out and to one of the access Gates, and, well... they had all seen what had happened from there. A blow struck, and a blow returned. Argus could only wonder how Odin was holding up.

They didn’t need to wonder for much longer. The whispers mounted, but they were far more strained than before. Quieter, as well. Argus backed out of the security feeds just in time to see Odin weakly manifest among them, hunched, his projection weak. Cronus was the first to speak, his tone sneering. “So the mighty Odin cannot control a mere Chosen, hm?”

“Shut up, wretch,” Odin snarled. Even his voice was pained—Jax had scored a clean hit. “That should be a matter of concern. Are all of you as blind as I intended to make Ref-Il or did you see what happened for what it really was?”

Argus certainly did. As Jax broke Odin’s hold on him, two red sets of spectral arms had unfolded alongside his usual two. They disappeared quickly, but Argus could argue one of them got put to use getting Odin’s Phantom off of Mordenna. “—the seal on his Phantom is weakening.”

“Nonsense,” Cronus hissed. “You are merely becoming weaker by the day, Odin. It’s plain to see to the rest of us—you should not rely on such mudslinging!” Of course prideful Cronus would insist that his work was flawless.

For once, Helena sided with them. “Oh, abandon your pride, Cronus! We all witnessed the same event. That Phantom of his will break out given enough effort. Seeing Odin’s attempt on Ref-Il’s life must have been enough emotional strain to cause your rather weak tampering to start to—”

“Dare you accuse me of weakness?! ” Cronus rushed to meet Helena. “What have you accomplished next to me, you miserable excuse for an Ethereal?! First your Assassin escapes you, then your Specter Prime flees with the Gatekeeper Prime! You have failed the most out of all of us!”

Low blow, considering Argus was right there, and Helena knew that. She matched Cronus’s heat. “And you are the one who enabled your reject of a Chosen to strike against an Elder! Your
stubborn pride will be the downfall of the rest of us—that freak has a Phantom stronger than ours and yet you **insisted** to use it!”

Cronus must’ve been out of a strong response to that, as his head whipped to Argus. “We would not be in this situation at all if it were not for Argus’s insistence to keep that Commander whole! They have been the one undermining us at every turn!”

Rarer still, Odin rose slightly, joining in allowing Argus to stay silent. “I beg to differ. You were the one who went off on your own making your own servant from files you barely understood.” Odin’s voice dropped to a threatening whisper. “All of this has been your fault, and you know it.”

That did it. Cronus’s Phantom roared into view quite literally, and he raised a hand to smite Odin.

“**Enough.**”

That voice. That presence, like the thrum of the universe, the resonant singing of far-off stars, the cosmic drone of a black hole. Argus, Helena, and Odin immediately bowed, one set of hands clasped behind their backs and the other placed together in front of them, palms together. Cronus himself whipped around, faced with the total presence of the Uber, the **Overmind.** His different helmet marked his status—a superior among equals. His projection even stood taller than them, rightfully imposing. At his side was his advisor and former lover, though the status now was debatable, considering. Angelis herself retained the same helmet as the rest of them, but it had been fitted to allow red strips of cloth to dangle down from it at key points. Equal, yes, but decorated.

Cronus’s signature cowed in fear and his Phantom immediately retreated, and he took to the bow. “O-Overmind. Please excuse my behavior. They were—”

“You know your failings.” The Overmind effortlessly talked over Cronus. Cronus was a king—the Overmind was a god. “Elder Odin. Your injuries?”

“I’m winded,” Odin managed, trying to sound unaffected, “but ultimately it will heal in time.”

“Your words are your own.” The Overmind turned his infinite attention to Argus, and Argus felt their lifespan get a little bit shorter. “Argus.” Argus never got their title from the Overmind. It was a subtle mark of disrespect. “Your Avatar Project?”

“It has encountered difficulties,” they began, knowing it wouldn’t be enough, “but with the Hunter forced to—”

“In every report I get from you,” the Overmind spoke, “I hear excuses. XCOM meddles, that I understand, but your progress is slow even by your standards. Do you think me blind, Argus?”

“No.”

“Then dare I ask of the Siren again?”

Argus went silent. There was no way to outmaneuver the Overmind here. He was not as privy to misdirection and clever excuses as the Trio were, and the Overmind actually bothered to personally read Argus’s reports. It hadn’t escaped the Overmind’s notice on how late the Siren project ran, and now, Argus’s slower pace because they were working on an additional, modified Avatar for their purposes affected the Avatar Project.

The silence was deafening. At this point, Argus accepted the fact that this was where they would die. The Overmind had the reasons and the means to kill them. The Avatar Project was far enough along to be completed by anybody else, even if the quality would somewhat suffer. This was where
Instead, something far worse happened. “It is clear you need guidance to carry out this project to completion. There seem to be difficulties involved that only you face. I’m sure you realize how much this project means to the rest of us—after all, you retain your empathy where we do not. Do you not feel sadness for our suffering, Argus?”

... not really. Argus knew they all had reason to die out entirely with the injustices they had committed on a cosmic scale. Lying directly to the Overmind would surely be caught out, however. Was honesty the best option? Was it better to take refuge in the audacity of telling the truth? “... I feel something, Overmind,” they replied, going with a third option. “Not sadness. Fear.”

“Something we share. I fear for our futures. Despite your shortcomings and acting out, you are our best hope of fighting against that which we have seen in this Earth. Your Siren project was key, which is why I allowed it to drag on for so long. But now you leave me with two decisions.” He extended his hand, and suddenly Argus was short of breath, feeling like their head was splitting open. Their limbs weakened, bringing back painful memories of when they still existed in their physical body, fighting back against the degeneration. “I cut off your life support and kill you. The Avatar Project takes longer and we lose our best mind for it, but at least our one defective Ethereal no longer walks among us. Or...” The Overmind withdrew his hand, and Argus no longer suffered. “I allow you to live. But it clear you cannot operate without supervision any longer.” He turned his head to Angelis. “You will be granted the luxury of working with Elder Angelis, who will see to it that you are able to complete the Avatar Project in record time. After which, if she deems you worthy... you may see to using the fruits of your efforts yourself.”

That was an impossible task. Angelis was reasonable, but every Ethereal in the Collective knew that the writing was on the wall for Argus. Once the Avatar Project was complete, they were either getting stripped of their “useless” emotions forcefully... or dying. With Angelis watching them, there would be hardly any space to work on the other Avatar. They had still gotten so much progress done on it that perhaps it would be workable... and if they developed it in tandem while applying the same changes to the other Avatars...?

Argus didn’t like it, but the choice was clear. “I would be honored to work with Elder Angelis, Overmind.”

The Overmind nodded approvingly. “Good. I sometimes forget that despite everything, you can see reason occasionally.” He then turned to Angelis. “My Angelis. I’m assigning you to Argus. Any objections?”

Angelis shook her head. Her presence meshed perfectly with the Overmind’s, to the point where it was hard to tell the two apart. “None. I will see Your will done.” The Overmind was practically a god to the rest of the Ethereals. Argus personally avoided such designations in their own mind, but used it in speech when he was around to be safe. Occasionally the others didn’t when he wasn't around, but he got his proper honorifics more often than not.

Angelis floated to stand among the Trio, Cronus hurriedly getting out of the way as she passed. As he did, the Overmind turned his attention to him. “Elder Cronus. I believe you owe me an explanation for what I witnessed you doing. Shall we have a more private conversation?”

Oh. Cronus was in for it. His signature quieted to nothing, and he deepened his bow. Perhaps he knew what Jax felt, now. “... yes, Overmind. I will accompany You.”

The Overmind looked back to them. “Carry on about your duties. Elder Cronus will be back when the time is right. And Argus...” His robes raised slightly as his power engulfed Cronus, starting to
cover him as well. “Finish something, for once in your life.”

With that edict, the Overmind and Cronus disappeared. That left the rest of them in his silent wake.

Angelis herself wasn’t quiet for long. “No time to be wasted, Argus.” Practical as always. “I’m going to do a review of your files and progress thus far and then we’ll see about putting the project into manageable overtime.”

“Yes, Elder Angelis.” This was going to be hell. XCOM help them...

Works inspired by this one: Comfort the Shining Pheasant by ZephyrusGenesis

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