The Howling Art

by megaweapon

Summary

It is in the nature of Guardians to forget. Those brought back by the Light must make a conscious effort to remember, and in the end, chasing down your memories can be an unwise and dangerous thing to do. Still, if you're determined to go haring off into the perilous and murky depths of your past, tampering in things best left forgotten, you might as well bring some company.
Part One: Hell and High Thunder

“Alas, the storm is come again! My best way is to creep under his gaberdine; there is no other shelter hereabout: misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows.”

-William Shakespeare, The Tempest
In the still place at the heart of the storm, he slept.

If one were especially determined, they could reach him. The biggest obstacle was not in fact the effort required to pierce the veil of thunder and howling winds—though that was a formidable obstacle indeed, and not a task for the faint of heart—but rather it was the simple fact that unless the searcher knew where to look, they simply wouldn’t find him.

The storm itself stretched an unfathomable distance through space and time.

He’d been sealed here by his own volition, lost in the tumult of this world of thunder, and he preferred things that way, because outside of this quiet place, in the waking world, there was only misery. He didn’t want to wake to that—who would? So, he let himself sleep, sheltering his many deep hurts in the balm of dreams. It was better this way. It was for his own good.

Elsewhere in the solar system, the inquisitor sent from a broken home watched and waited in place unfamiliar to her. The scavenger (to whom all places were more or less alike, in the end) kicked a trail of cheerful moon-dust behind him. The exile, consumed with grim determination, searched for sustenance and supplication.

Most importantly though, the one who walked with scars etched across his memory, the missing piece of this dormant mechanism, looked to his small, bright companion and said, “Shall we check the bounties for today?”

A child slept, entombed in a cradle of earth. A frightfully dangerous object (small enough to hold in two hands) sat secure at the heart of an ancient center of learning while the jungle gnawed the walls around it. A hollow world stuffed with lawlessness and the memory of miracles churned in all its unruly, neon-spangled glory. A room full of secrets and ancient shame lay locked in ice, ready to stir to life at the touch of any inquisitive mind brave enough to come and liberate them. Rusting spires groped desperately at the sky as drifts and dunes of red dust broke against them like waves.

And at the end of it all, he was still there, sleeping. He might have slept for longer, or perhaps forever, had it not been for that little spark of light that replied, with all the flippancy in the world, “Might as well.” Ultimately, it was three words that set everything in motion, the smallest thing imaginable that caused the worlds-spanning cascade of things to come. But, then again, that was often the way of these things, wasn’t it?

In the heart of the City, a decision was made; across the boundless black of space, a storm brewed.
A Guardian meets a secret agent, and they go for a walk in the woods. Meanwhile, on the moon, somebody else indulges in a little classic literature and peeps at a hungry alien.

To anyone else, it would have seemed to be a bounty so simple as to be borderline dull: a bit of basic recon in a relatively wild and uninhabited part of the world, more as a safeguard against any possible hidden activity than a directed effort to bring back intel on the enemy. It wasn’t the ease of the mission that had piqued Walker-17’s interest, though. It was the location.

“Old British Columbia, it looks like,” his Ghost had said. “Hm. Sounds more like a vacation than a patrol, if you ask me.” When Walker-17 hadn’t replied, his Ghost swiveled mid-air to face him. “Walker? Are you all right?”

“How? Oh, oh yes. I’m fine, Matthias.” Walker-17 paused for a moment, and then went on, softly, “The Great Bear Rainforest. That’s what that place used to be called.” He fell into silence again, and the Ghost waited patiently. Moments like these were not uncommon with Walker-17, but they were also not terribly uncommon with many Guardians. It seemed that every other person they’d met had found themselves haunted by dreams of the time before they’d joined this fight against the Darkness.

“Do you want to go?” Matthias asked simply.

Walker-17 nodded. “Yes. Yes, it… seems familiar. But I can’t remember if I saw it myself, or if I just think I did.” The mental image that hovered in the back of his mind was nebulous, a soft, green land choked by mist, a forest riven through with channels of water from the sea that carved it into little islands. For some reason, the flash of memory suggested a land viewed from a great height. From above. He couldn’t explain the feeling, but he didn’t have to. By now, his Ghost was close enough to him that he could sample Walker-17’s thoughts with reasonable clarity.

“Well, even if you haven’t been there, it certainly looks like a place worth a visit.” A comfortable quiet stretched between them before Matthias looked back to Walker-17. “But, aren’t rainforests supposed to be… tropical?”

Walker-17 had given a low chuckle. “Not this one.”

That had been a three days ago. It was the fourth morning that Walker had greeted from the wilderness, the fourth day he would be spend wandering through the green-choked avenues of the forest, in the shade of the towering Sitka pines and the cathedral-like silence that lingered beneath them. They’d finished scouting the entire area they’d been assigned by day two, but Walker-17 had lingered, driven by some urge he couldn’t define.

By now, they’d both begun to suspect that the feeling that had brought them here was just some baseless impulse. It wouldn’t be the first time that they’d chased a lead as nebulous as a "feeling"
and come back with no results whatsoever. The general consensus between them, however, was that if one was going to go haring off after a memory that might or might not exist, there were certainly worse places to go about it than here.

“Even after all the places we’ve been, and everything we’ve seen,” Walker-17 murmured as they walked slowly through the mist, which the rising sun had been thus far unable to dissipate, “this place is still so beautiful.”

Matthias silently agreed.

Walker-17 stopped by a stream. Moss had grown thickly over the rocks that jutted up through the water, transforming their sharp, hard outlines into something soft and plush. “I think we’ll leave here tomorrow,” he said. “I can’t help but feel like this is all so familiar, but I just don’t know if…” He trailed off, and shook his head with a disappointed sigh. “I just don’t know.”

“It’s all right,” his Ghost assured him, floating closer. This wasn’t the first time they’d had a conversation very like this. “We both know how tricky memories can be, for Guardians. It probably doesn’t help that you’d been dead for a long, long time before I’d found you, either.”

His Guardian gave a dry chuckle and shook his head. “You have such an elegant and reassuring way with words, Matthias.” There was no genuine rancor in his voice or in his mind, only wry affection for the strange little creature that had brought him into this world. Matthias made a soft sound, an imitation of a huff of air, and nudged his shoulder.

And then, quite suddenly, in the middle of the gesture, the Ghost went still. “Wait a minute.” He zipped away from Walker-17, floating high above his head and swiveling rapidly about. “I think… we might have company.”

“A bear?” Walker-17 asked.

“No.” Matthias angled himself down to stare gravely at his charge. Almost before he’d finished speaking, a low, rumbling roar could be heard in the distance, growing both closer to their location and louder in volume. “Most definitely not a bear.”

All things considered, this day could have gone better.

First of all, the weather had been dreadful, but Virna Roskar found weather in of itself to be somewhat of a hassle to deal with. There were no clouds, or storms, or snow on the Reef. Here on Earth, though, an oppressive fog had lingered over the land all morning, strung up between the towering pines in an impenetrable latticework. It made reconnaissance difficult.

Luckily for her, though, her targets’ eyes burned blue through the fog, and the movements of the Fallen in the mist were easy enough to track through her scope. The same could be said for Virna, though. Like all Awoken, her eyes burned with their own ambient light, but she was much too small, and much too far away to be spotted by such means.

Hopefully.

She’d been on the move for the past hour and a half, a constant back-and-forth between desperate sprinting and moments of absolute stillness. The ground was just as green as the trees around her, covered in a thick carpet of moss and lichen that muffled her steps. That was good; she had the best chance of surviving if she remained unseen, unheard. If they found her, and cornered her, the odds that she’d be able to stave off all their amassed forces weren’t good. Unlike the strange deathless emissaries of the City, she had no Ghost to bring her back.
She didn’t mind solo missions, of course. It had been a long time since she’d worked with a partner, but sometimes the monotony of the task, with no-one around to speak to, got to her. She had always worked better with someone else she could bounce her thoughts and suspicions off of, and this time, such counsel would have been tremendously useful.

It wasn’t often that you saw the yellow-clad Fallen of the House of Kings out in the open at all, much less in such great numbers.

Vague questions could wait for now, as she had more immediate practical concerns to deal with, such as continuing to avoid detection. Virna had been crouching next to an overhang of rock by a stream after her last close call, listening intently. There was some kind of muffled commotion, farther off—had they spotted her? Was something else going on? She couldn’t be sure. After sparing a moment to take careful stock of her surroundings, she hoisted herself up, first up onto the overhang, and then up into a nearby tree, scaling it swiftly and silently.

Virna balanced in place, utterly still. A breeze was picking up through the trees, rustling the leaves and her short hair. After a moment she un-slung her sniper rifle and peered through the scope in the general direction of the noise. The trees and the fog proved too thick. Again. At least I can use the fog to my advantage, as well, she thought to herself. Even in this weak daylight, she’d been able to disappear. And I finally have a decent vantage point. Maybe my luck is turning around.

The wind picked up as she contemplated her next move, followed by a low, muffled roar. Virna’s brow furrowed. A storm?

A moment later there was a tell-tale flash of warm light through the trees and the soft roar intensified into a noise that nobody would mistake for thunder. The fog was suddenly scythed away in the wake of a Fallen skiff, which was rising up from where it had apparently been concealed in a ravine in the middle distance, sending the leaves into a frenzy of motion. Virna held utterly still. Almost before she could complete the question of whether or not they’d seen her in her mind, she saw one of the mounted cannons swiveling her way.

“You have got to be kidding me,” she announced to the universe in general.

A moment later she was leaping out of the tree, narrowly avoiding the bloom of heat and the rain of splinters that engulfed the place she’d been sitting in moments before. Virna hit the ground in a roll, ignoring the jolt through her bones and using the momentum to bring herself to her feet in a single, fluid and altogether quite impressive motion.

The very next instant something skidded on the soft earth and slammed into Virna, knocking her clean off her feet.

Training and muscle memory took over as she hit the ground for the second time, and she rolled to her feet, unsheathing the knife from her boot and prepared to meet this new threat. To her confusion (and somewhat to her relief—but mostly confusion) it wasn’t Fallen. It was difficult to tell under the robes and the helmet, but the person who’d hit her appeared to be human.

Wordlessly, he pushed himself up into a sitting position and swiveled his blank, rounded helmet to regard her. She didn’t drop out of her stance, or put away her knife, for that matter. She just stared, until a small, geometric shape swooped into view, hovering over the stranger’s body. “Oh, are you—sorry about that,” the little machine said brightly, his optic flicking over to regard her, “we didn’t see you, there.”

“Guardian,” Virna said, slowly.

There was an expectant pause. The Ghost looked to her, then to his Guardian, and then to her
again. “I’m guessing,” the Guardian finally said, “that you saw the Skiff.”

Virna wasn’t quite able to keep her expression from matching the sudden deadpan tone of her voice. “You mean the one that blew up that tree?” She gestured upward with her knife. He followed the movement.

“The very same,” he concluded.

“The one that I just dropped out of. That’s on fire.”

Before the Guardian could respond beyond a soft chuckle, his Ghost floated forward, the bright blue light of his single optic narrowing to an anxious point. “I’m all for banter when the occasion calls for it, but I think maybe we have other things to worry about right now? Possibly? Like the giant alien ship that could be bearing down on this position? Full of soldiers? Or guns?” The Ghost turned to glance worriedly in the direction of the skiff. “Soldiers and guns?”

“Good point,” Virna replied briskly, hopping to her feet. The Guardian silently followed suit, brushing off his robes, while Virna gave him a once-over. The shape of the helmet and the style of armor told her, immediately, that he was a warlock. He was clad all in shades of silver and brown, which were colors decent enough for blending in to the fog. There’s been a slight tinny edge to his voice when he spoke that suggested it was synthesized, but whether or not this was a by-product of the helmet, she couldn’t say.

Before either Virna or the Guardian could make a move, the Ghost zipped off. His Guardian followed suit, and, figuring that there were worse places to be that morning than in the shadow of a functionally immortal warrior of the Light, Virna followed. They moved in swift silence for a while, waiting for the roar of the skiff’s engines to fade as it took off over some other part of the forest. Eventually, the Ghost led them under a tree whose boughs were so gnarled and bent they sagged almost to the ground. The surrounding ferns provided further cover, giving them a secure little dome of green under the tree.

“We should be fine here, for a while,” the Ghost declared, after they’d ducked inside. Virna wasn’t sure exactly what sort of method the little machine was using to determine which places were and were not safe, but she was inclined to trust its judgment, for the moment. If she was wrong, then she would be guarded against any future temptation to put her faith in chatty flying robots that she could fit in her hand.

They waited quietly for a few moments, listening, but the only sounds that filtered through were the natural rustle of the leaves, and the far-off sound of a stream. Virna finally relaxed, assuming a cross-legged seat on the ground, and the Warlock beside her sat heavily and gracelessly on his bottom, resting his back against the trunk. His Ghost flittered restlessly about beneath the branches, peering up between the gaps in the leaves.

“So,” Virna looked to the Guardian. “What brings you out to this patch of godforsaken wilderness? Felt like a walk in the woods?”

He drew his knees up and rested his elbows on them. “Scouting for the Vanguard. Would you believe,” he lowered his helmet, his voice taking on a low, conspiratorial tone, “that there are rumors of Fallen activity in this forest? I was sent to see if there was any veracity to these claims.”

Virna cocked a brow. “Verdict?”

“Inconclusive,” the Guardian announced gravely. Virna felt a slight smile tug at the corner of her mouth. “What about you?” he went on, nodding to the sniper rifle strapped to her back. “Doing a little hunting?”
“Mostly just watching. You saw the colors back there; the House of Kings is moving through this forest. As far as I know, there’s nothing out here, but anytime the Kings are on the move, it’s in everyone’s best interest to know.”

The Guardian nodded slowly. As she spoke, his Ghost had descended out of the branches and turned to regard her. “You…” he spoke slowly. “You don’t have a Ghost.”

“I don’t.” Virna shook her head. “It’s only me.”

“Do you live around here?” The Ghost floated closer, taking her in. Virna stared evenly back. There seemed to be no reason for its behavior other than plain curiosity. She wasn’t the only agent of the Reef to have run with a Guardian, and her comrades talked about the other Ghosts they’d met. There seemed to be something universally guileless about them, almost innocent. “I haven’t see many Awoken on Earth. Outside the City, that is, and we’re a long way from there.”

“I don’t. Just visiting,” she replied casually.

“You’re a Crow,” the Guardian said suddenly, breaking his thoughtful silence, “aren’t you?”

After a moment, she nodded slowly. “Good guess.”

The Guardian shrugged. “You hold yourself like a warrior. We’re nowhere near Felwinter or the City, and I know for a fact that the Reef has been interested in the movements of the remains of the Fallen Houses after the whole Skolas fiasco.”

“Do you now?” She asked, keeping her tone neutral.

“I do. Commander Venj has sent me on more than one casual reconnaissance mission for the Reef. Usually for a bounty, of course.”

Virna relaxed slightly. Some Guardians, she knew, would probably regard the Reef as borderline hostile, and the feeling was occasionally mutual. It had been Guardians who had brought Skolas back to the Queen, though, and she saw them wandering through her home often enough, testing their strength in the Prison of Elders or seeking favor with her Queen.

The Warlock watched her. She wondered if he was trying to gauge her expression. Finally, he said, “If there’s anything I can do to help, let me know. I’ve more or less done what I came here to do, anyway.”

“A generous offer,” Virna replied carefully.

“Not so much generous as just—logical. If the Kings are up to something important, we should probably figure out what it is. We’ll both stand a better chance of getting out in one piece if we’re watching each other’s backs.”

Virna watched him in silence for a moment. She’d already made up her mind to accept his help, but it wouldn’t hurt to put a little awe into this stranger, and hold him in her inscrutable, electric-yellow gaze. It was all part of the familiar footwork that came with feeling out a potential ally, a dance she knew well. Finally, she smiled, breaking the mask. “Why not? A walk in the woods is always better with company.”

The Guardian nodded and held out a gloved hand for her. “Walker-17. And Matthias.” He nodded towards his Ghost.

She shook his hand. “Virna Roskar, at your service.”
Elsewhere, in the Sea of Serenity, a Hunter was opening a door.

It was a particularly interesting door. The sharp line of the door’s outline was an unexpected, harshly geometric contrast to the rocky and irregular contours of the moon rock around it, and it was sunk into the side of another, larger crater, in a manner almost reminiscent of a storm shelter. He’d almost missed it entirely, and this was because he hadn’t been looking for it.

The Guardian hadn’t come here on some broader mission, or even by request of one of the many blinking patrol beacons scattered throughout the moon. He’d found this place simply by seeing it, and he’d seen it because he’d been standing on the edge of a nearby crater. He’d been standing on the edge of a nearby crater simply because he’d wandered there.

Wandering was something Coyote-3 did quite often.

The door was electronically locked, but his Ghost made quick work of that. Cautiously, the Hunter stepped inside, the edge of his trailing cloak brushing lightly over the thin scattering of lunar dust that he tracked inside on the soles of his boots. The room was sterile and unassuming in the light cast by his Ghost’s optic: cargo crates pushed up against one wall, a line of largely-empty shelving units, and a couple of closed doors on the far end. “Huh,” was Coyote-3’s eloquent summation of his surroundings.

“I wonder what it was,” his Ghost murmured. He swiveled this way and that, turning the darkness around them into a series of flickering shadows. “There’s not much to hide from in this region of the moon. Well, not aboveground, anyway.”

“It’s probably pre-Collapse. Maybe a storage area. Who knows?” Coyote-3 strolled slowly around the room, pausing by the shelves. There was some ammunition there, an old pistol, and, among a few odds and ends, an honest-to-goodness book. He picked it up and read the golden lettering along the slim volume’s spine. *Just So Stories.* “Hey, Flicker. Found something for you.”

His Ghost joined him after a moment, and in the light of his eye, Coyote-3 flipped through the pages, pausing over the illustrations and whichever passages happened to catch his attention.

*Wild Dog said, “O my Enemy and Wife of my Enemy, what is this that smells so good in the Wild Woods?”*

*Then the Woman picked up a roasted mutton-bone and threw it to Wild Dog, and said, “Wild Thing out of the Wild Woods, taste and try.”*

“Go back to the beginning,” Flicker said, “so I can scan it.”

Coyote-3 quietly complied, first holding up the blank, black cover of the book in front of the Ghost’s appraising optic, and then turning it, page by page. This wasn’t the first time they’d come across something old, something worth preserving. His Ghost’s personal databanks were full of old stories, old pictures, and had been long before he’d found his Guardian. Flicker had an undisguised love for the written word, and seemed to consider it a personal task to archive as many old books as he could.

“Some of this seems familiar,” Coyote-3 murmured as he flipped through the pages. His Ghost glanced briefly to him, but did not say anything.

Living with déjà vu was a constant reality for some Guardians. Like all of the Traveler’s chosen warriors, Coyote-3 didn’t remember much about his life before his resurrection. All he could glean
from his the time before was bits and pieces of the broader history all Exos shared: he’d been built, apparently, before or during the Collapse. It was likely—and in his own mind, highly likely—that he’d once been human, and that he’d allowed some agent of the powers that be to take his mind and transfer it to this construct.

At last, they came to the end. “Done!” Flicker’s optic dimmed a bit and he floated away from the book.

“An antique like this could be worth something,” Coyote-3 murmured. There was something charming about the book’s turn of phrase, and its detailed and whimsical descriptions of its own illustrations.

“More than likely,” his Ghost agreed. The little construct turned away from him and the book, casting his light over the rest of the room. Coyote looked up from the book and jerked, startled as the Ghost’s light passed across something lying on the floor by the wall. “Whoa, whoa, back up a second.” He pointed. “What’s—“

Flicker followed the movement of his hand and flinched backward in the air as his eye illuminated the desiccated remains of a human body.

“…that,” Coyote finished, softly. He stepped forward, kneeling down beside the corpse. Flicker joined him, moving over the body and scanning it as he did. “Not wearing much armor. I’m guessing he wasn’t a Guardian… how long d’you think he’s been dead?”

“Only about three years,” Flicker replied, solemnly. “He must have found this place and used it as a shelter.” After a few more moments of scanning, he went on, “There’s… not much of him left, but on his arm, and his ribcage—traces of Hive weapon damage.”

Coyote squatted down next to the body. Three years ago was only shortly before he’d awakened, himself. There had been Guardians on the moon, then. There’d been the City. If someone had known this man was here, had found him, it was likely that he could’ve been saved. Imagining what it must have been like, to die here, alone, with no companions to help you… “Sorry, buddy,” he murmured. He glanced down at the book in his hands, momentarily warring with a small, shameful spark of selfishness, before he reached out and placed it gently on the corpse’s chest.

“I picked up his genetic profile,” the Ghost said, softly. “We can add it to the database when we get back to the city. See if we can find a match for him.”

“Thanks, Flicker.” Coyote-3 stood. The grim task of naming the dead was another task that Flicker had taken upon himself long before he found Coyote-3. It seemed important to him that they were remembered. Coyote-3 agreed. “C’mon, let’s see how deep this goes.”

Flicker and Coyote-3 moved on through the facility, leaving the somber scene at the entrance behind. The previous occupant had locked some of the doors, but they were no barrier to Flicker. The first place they encountered was a pantry of sorts: cargo crates were stacked neatly against the wall, and in wheeled racks that had been pushed to the edges of the room. Inside the crates, there was nothing but compact ready-to-eat ration bars. Coyote-3 didn’t eat, and didn’t remember eating, but he was doubtful that these could have been considered appetizing.

As they investigated the next floor down, they came upon more small rooms cluttered with bric-a-brac: scrap metal piled as neatly as possible, cups full of bolts and screws, stretches of cloth, and a few battered ammo crates, most of which were empty. Coyote-3 investigated it all with a thoroughness born of curiosity, taking his time. He didn’t seem satisfied that he’d investigated something until he’d picked it up, or touched it.
Aside for the makeshift storerooms, there was nothing else of note. Though there were outlets and mounts, there were no computer banks, no screens on the walls, no electronics left of any sort. Whatever this place had once been, it was now mostly just a hole in the ground. A blast door at the end of a stairwell leading down gave them pause, largely because the keypad to it had fallen out of the wall, but with a little creative re-wiring on Coyote-3’s part and Flicker’s attention, they coaxed it to open.

There was a landing behind the door, and then more stairs, still leading down. As soon as they stepped inside, they realized that this place had gone undisturbed much, much longer than three years. “I don’t think the fellow upstairs made it down here,” Flicker murmured as they stepped into the dark. “Hm. Or maybe he didn’t want to. This place doesn’t look…”

Coyote-3 followed Flicker’s gaze and stared at the wall. “Stable?” he offered. The metal that comprised the walls and the roof had buckled under the weight of some past disaster. He could see the bare rock in places, and even this was riven with cracks. “Well,” he said, “we’ll just have to make sure we step lightly.”

“You step lightly,” his Ghost replied, “I’ll stick to flying.”

They’d made it about halfway down the stairs when Coyote-3 quite suddenly paused, holding up a hand and dropping to a crouch. Had he heard something? He couldn’t be sure. “What’s that sound?” he whispered harshly.

Flicker dimmed the light of his optic and drifted closer to Coyote-3’s eye level. After another moment there was a distant thud and a crashing noise, muffled by the floor between them and the source of the sound. “…something’s upstairs,” he whispered back, “in one of the storerooms.”

Coyote-3 sighed. It couldn’t have been more than two hours since they’d arrived to investigate, and already there was trouble. “Well, it’s probably not Taken, at least.”

“Maybe we should have locked the front door behind us.”

“C’mon, let’s see what we’re dealing with.” Coyote-3 turned and trotted right back up the stairs, gradually slowing as he made his way through the complex. The closer he got to the sound, the more careful his steps became, and by the time they were nearly upon it he was creeping along at a low crouch, with Flicker trailing a short distance behind him.

“It’s in the pantry down the hall. Where the rations are,” Coyote-3 whispered.

Flicker’s optic blinked. “Are… are there animals on the moon?”

Rather than answer, Coyote-3 very carefully poked his head around the corner, so that he could see down the hall and through the pantry doorway. He had to be careful, seeing as he wasn’t exactly dressed for camouflage. The bright orange of his armor wouldn’t be hard to spot, in the gloom. As it were, he needn’t have worried.

The sight before him couldn’t have possibly been any less intimidating.

Crouched in front of one of the open cargo crates was a single Dreg, with a green shank hovering by its side. The Dreg was holding a device in its hand, some small rectangular thing with a simple screen readout on the top of it. The pre-packaged rations that Coyote had pulled out were scattered all over the floor, and the Dreg was passing the device over them. The readout flickered as it passed over each one. Red, red—green. The Dreg snatched up the packet that had registered green and stood to deposit it in a simple knapsack, crudely sewed together from lengths of cloth, that was dangling from the shank.
Coyote-3 scooted back out of sight, and out of earshot. “A Dreg. Scavenging for food, I think. I didn’t know Fallen could eat our food.”

“Me neither,” Flicker slid forward to cautiously peep around the corner. “Though I’d honestly hesitate to call that stuff food.”

“Yeah.” Coyote-3 nodded, and followed suit, poking his head back out directly underneath where Flicker was hovering. The Dreg was silent, and methodical, sometimes double-checking parcels that had flashed red for it. Coyote-3 had fought many, many Fallen since he’d been resurrected by his Ghost in the Cosmodrome; one of the very first things he’d learned about this new world, in fact, was that the Fallen wanted to kill them. He’d never seen one eating, though. He’d never thought about them doing the simple things a creature needed to do to stay alive.

It would be a simple matter to drop the Dreg and its shank—two shots, two kills, and it would be over. It would be the most sensible thing to do, considering that this was the enemy. Coyote-3 hesitated, though. His instincts were telling him to make short work of his foe before he became a problem, and yet…

Though he’d never admit it, he often thought about who he was before this world. If he’d volunteered for the Exo program, he had to have been a soldier, or at least a citizen who believed in the fight enough to allow such a thing to be done to them. Coyote-3 clung to the idea that there was some sort of nobility to his past, that if he could stop every now and then and try to re-connect with that forgotten self, he could maybe rise above the harsh realities that governed the world he lived in. Darkness dominated everything around them, but that didn’t mean he should let it change who he was, right?

“Look at that,” Flicker murmured. The Dreg was turning one of the green-lit parcels this way and that, peering at the labeling, almost as if it were trying to read it. “Guess it found something it liked.”

O My Enemy…

“C’mon. Let’s leave it,” Coyote-3 finally declared. “We can go back downstairs for a while. If it comes back with a squad, we’ll deal with ’em.” Coyote-3 shuffled backwards, and the turned to trot away, down the corridor, pausing to make sure, once, that the sounds of rummaging hadn’t stopped.

Flicker followed silently. Coyote couldn’t feel any consternation or animosity through their mental bond regarding his decision to leave the Dreg alone, and, sensing his thoughts on the matter, Flicker simply said, “With you, all the way.”

If Coyote-3 could have smiled, he would have. “Thanks.”

Virna led Walker-17 down the deer trails she’d been using to get from place to place. “There are a few old buildings in this area, but I don’t think they were scientific or military installations. I’m guessing they were built here for the park itself. The Fallen are using them for shelter, but they always search first. They seem to be looking for something.”

Walker-17 nodded. “Possibly… We’ve been here for four days, and today is the first day we’ve seen evidence of the Kings moving through the region.”

“Four days?” Virna raised a brow questioningly.

“Wandering, mostly,” Walker-17 replied.
She nodded in return. This fellow seemed quite willing to casually answer anything that was asked of him. Her instinctive assumption was that it was possible he was putting up a front of some kind, but the general air he projected was one of simple, open honesty. Guardians were such strange folk. “Not a bad place to do it,” she concluded.

“No, not at all. It’s been very peaceful right up until aliens started setting trees on fire.”

Virna grinned. “Right. Anyway, I’m going to try and circle back around to the launch site, see if we can spot them. Now—I’m sure I don’t need to tell you this, but stealth is the top priority right now. No offense, but the few times I’ve worked with Guardians, they’ve tended to have a ‘blast-everything-in-sight-first-ask-questions-later’ sort of attitude.”

“I see you’ve been travelling with our Titans.”

“Now and again, yes, but if you want to talk about the finer points of being very conspicuous, the words ‘Nova Bomb’ come to mind.”

Walker-17 gave a low chuckle. “That’s fair.”

“The point is,” Virna went on, “I need you to try and keep a lid on whatever primal and terrifying powers are under your command, at least until we’re noticed, and maybe not even then, if we can make a speedy getaway. If we tip our hand too early, they might bounce.”

“Understood.” Walker-17 nodded. “As of right now, I’m accompanying you on your mission—not the other way around. Direct me as you need to.”

She glanced towards him briefly, trying to see if she caught a hint of sarcasm in his voice. There was none. The fellow was being perfectly genuine when he said these things. Either he was an embarrassingly earnest sort of fellow or he was very bad at putting up a duplicitous front. At last, they came to the outskirts of a clearing, and through the mist they could see the faint dark outlines of a building.

Fallen were moving around and through the structure, mostly Dregs, with a few Vandals visible. Virna and Walker backtracked a bit, getting well out of earshot. Virna drew her gun and peered through her sniper rifle’s scope. “Well, they’re clearly looking for something. That looks like an old ranger station…”

“It must be important, if the Kings are here personally. We see them so very rarely,” Walker-17 murmured.

“True, but this is also a very remote place. The odds of them running into anyone out here were pretty low, so the risk of being seen must have been, too,” Virna spared him a wry glance. “Of course, that also begs the question: what could possibly be all the way out here?”

Walker-17 nodded. They fell silent again as they watched, and eventually, the Fallen began to regroup outside. They heard the skiff appearing before they saw it, and retreated even further back to ensure they wouldn’t be seen. The vessel simply descended, picked up its passengers, and turned away, towards another part of the forest.

Matthias zipped up through the branches and watched it go. After a few long moments, he returned to them. “They set down near a beach to the west. It looks almost like they have a camp there.”

Virna straightened and nodded. “They do. I saw it earlier. Looks like their search is covering a pretty wide area… Well, let’s see if they left any clues behind.” They approached the ranger’s station and ducked inside. The building was mostly empty, well and truly gutted; leaves carpeted
the ground from where they’d drifted in through long-broken windows. There were the remains of shelves still bolted to the walls, and a pile that looked as if it had once been a glass display case.

There was something solemn and mournful about the place. Matthias floated about, carefully scanning the place for any sign of a hidden door or any unseen technology.

“Virna,” Walker-17 said abruptly. “There is something, actually. This is going to sound… quite frankly, a bit odd, but part of the reason Matthias and I have lingered here so long is because I feel connected to this place, somehow.”

Virna stood up from where she’d been crouched, sweeping leaves away from the floorboards. “What exactly are you saying?”

He cycled a sigh through his ventilation system. “I don’t remember much about my life before I was brought back. That’s common for Guardians. Memories are a bit messier for Exo, though. I’m not sure how familiar you are with how it works…?”

“Not very.”

“Well, we have our memories wiped from time to time. It’s like adding clear water to a muddy lake, though—you stir up the old sediment. It never truly goes away, I think. And ever since I got here, I had a feeling that I’d… I’d been here before.” Walker-17 looked away, out of one of the windows. “That there was something important here.”

Virna nodded slowly. She did not typically deal with vagaries and hunches, but such things were not unknown to the Awoken. Her people had been touched by the Void, and some of them had come away strangely changed by it. Virna hadn’t had visions of her own before, but she knew other Awoken who did. Even so, something about this felt profoundly different. Walker-17 was watching her, and though she couldn’t see his face, she saw the pensiveness in the way his shoulders were drawn. He wasn’t sure if she believed him, perhaps. Or he possibly thought she did believe him, but would react poorly.

“Well,” she finally said, “if you have a breakthrough, let me know. Sounds to me like you, too, are here looking for something, on some level. And if the Kings are looking for the same thing you are, then I think we’d better find it first, and frankly? I’ll take any advantage I can get.” Virna saw him relax slightly. “But for the moment, I think we’d better stick to any tangible evidence we find.”

“Absolutely,” Walker-17 replied with a quick nod. “And speaking of which…?” He looked questioningly to Matthias.

“Nothing,” he said, floating back over. “It’s just a normal ranger station.”

As if on cue, a slight breeze swept through the area, slinking in through the windows and faintly stirring the uppermost layer of leaves. Virna looked to the doorway. “Looks like the fog is dissipating a bit. Let’s go ahead and get back into cover for now.”

She led the way back out into the forest. They moved up gradually sloping terrain, making their way for higher ground, hoping that it would give them a better view of where the skiff landed next, when it left camp. As the day brightened and the mist fell away, the forest gradually stirred to life: the eerie muffled pall that had hung over everything shifted into something brighter, sparkling with birdsong and crisscrossed by shadows sharpened in the sunlight.

For a while they simply enjoyed the soft sounds of the forest. Every now and then Matthias would dart ahead, or peal off to the woods in some random direction, and come back, just as silent. The
way Walker-17 glanced to it made Virna wonder if they were communicating somehow, but she didn’t ask. Of course, if the precedent they’d set was anything to go by, Walker-17 probably would have answered her. He’d continued to be very open about himself with her.

*I wonder just what sorts of questions he’ll answer?* Virna didn’t get much of a chance to talk to Guardians outside of the very brief collaborations she’d undertaken in her service to the Queen. Eventually, her curiosity got the better of her. “Walker,” she asked, looking back over her shoulder, “if you don’t mind my asking—and feel free to *not* answer if you do—what’s with the numbers? I’ve only met a few Exo, but they all have numbers as part of their name, no matter where they’re from.”

“It’s… a signifier. Of how many times we’ve had our memories wiped,” Walker replied slowly. Virna was unable to keep the shocked expression from flitting across her face. He’d had his memories wiped *seventeen times?* “It’s not really very common to have double digits.”

“Oh,” was all she could say to that.

“It doesn’t bother me,” he assured her hastily, “I can’t remember it happening, but I have this sense that… that it was for my own good, somehow.”

“Is your name the only thing you remember from before? At all?”

Walker-17 shook his head. “No, no. I earned up this name myself. What my name was before my Ghost found me is a mystery even to me.”

Virna sensed the opportunity to steer the conversation away from such heavy topics. She cocked a brow. “Earned?”

“Yes. I had to range far and wide back in the days when I was still cutting my proverbial teeth as a Guardian. If the distance is too close to justify using your ship it’s customary for Guardians to use Sparrows. Our Ghosts summon them down. Only, in the early days, I had a bit of a problem.”

Matthias sighed and contrived to look somewhat guilty. “I still have no idea what went wrong.”

“It’s quite all right,” Walker-17 assured him. “But at any rate, whenever I summoned my Sparrow, I’d get it running for about five seconds before it dissipated. It just kept vanishing, and after I went flying into the dirt one too many times, I decided it wasn’t worth it. So, I walked. I crossed paths with the Guardians working in the area from time to time, and eventually they started identifying me as ‘the walking warlock’ or ‘the walker.’ So, I figured, I’d just take it as my name.”

“Good choice. I like Walker better than Walking Warlock,” Virna replied.

Walker laughed.

“And you?” she turned now to Matthias. “Were you created with a name? Or did someone give you one?”

“I was… given one,” Matthias said. She’d noticed the way he suddenly jerked to look in her direction, and the rapid little twitch of his optic between Walker-17 and her as he spoke. Obviously, he was somewhat surprised to have been addressed directly—surprised, but not displeased. There was also a hint of hesitancy between each word. Was he not used to speaking to strangers? “A long time ago, before I ever found Walker, actually. Before the City.”

It was Virna’s turn to be taken off-guard. “That long ago…?” She glanced to Walker-17, and then back to Matthias.
The Warlock remained silent and let his Ghost explain. “Oh, yes. We were created the day the Traveler died. All of us are very, very old.” He floated closer to her as he spoke. His words were coming more easily now, more comfortably. “It took me hundreds of years to find my Guardian. But I did! Well. Obviously.”

She nodded with a slight smile. “I’d honestly never really thought about it. Ghosts, and what you do before you find your Guardian. What it must have been like.”

“Perilous. Exhilarating, sometimes. Often terrifying,” Matthias replied, a hint of dryness coming to his tone. “So, as you can see, nothing much has changed.” He swiveled in midair to fix Walker-17 with a level stare. “Though that depends entirely on the recklessness of your Guardian.”

Walker-17 tilted his head. “I’m certain I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said innocently.

It was impossible not to notice the easy camaraderie between them. The bond between Ghosts and their Guardians was yet another mystery Virna was willing to unravel, if she ever got the time. Before her quiet observations or the conversation could continue further, the familiar distant roar of a rising skiff could be heard. The Kings were on the move again.

“Looks like it’s back to work,” Virna said, nodding to her companions. “Let’s move!”

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Chapter End Notes

I'm going to try and keep my author's notes brief and view, but if you're reading this, hello! And thanks for making it this far. I got tired of waiting for Bungie to give us a novel for their Destiny franchise, so I figured I'd go ahead and write one.

This story's going to be in three main parts, as you might have seen, and it will primarily focus on a ragtag group of original characters with the occasional canon interaction. At the time of this posting, Part 1's been written out, and Part 2 is underway--if things continue along as they have been, this is indeed going to get around novel-length. I'm going to try and update weekly.

I'm also cross-posting this on FF.Net. If you've got any questions or comments I'll be happy to answer them!
Chapter Summary

Coyote makes a new friend and, having priorities, immediately teaches him human swear words. Virna and Walker find what someone else was looking for.

Deeper into the facility on Luna, there were more interesting things to investigate than old cargo crates. They found electronics that were still intact: computer banks and monitors from the Golden Age, or maybe even older. There was enough emergency power to boot them up, and Flicker got to work harvesting as much data as he could, while Coyote-3 curiously scrolled through screens and screens of text. It hadn't been more than five minutes before the monitor in front of him abruptly flashed red, demanding some manner of password from him, and when he tried to back out, the system locked down. "Oops."

There was a distant, muffled slam, followed by a grinding, cracking noise. A tremor ran through the floor, building momentarily in intensity, before it faded to silence and stillness. "What did you do?" Flicker asked, darting towards him.

"Well, according to this screen I, uh… 'activated containment protocols.'" Coyote-3 looked worriedly to his Ghost. "What did you say this facility was for, again?"

"You know, why don't we find out from up there." Flicker turned away from the console and floated forward. "If there is an up there. And get out of here before any alarms go off and bring in every enemy for miles."

Coyote-3 nodded and stepped away from the console, jogging to the doorway and striding briskly towards the stairs. "Yeah, I think it's time to maybe head on back. I hope our hungry friend got what it came for."

"And that it didn't go and get anyone else," Flicker added. They hurried back, through the halls and up the stairs through the dark. It wasn't long before they reached the blast doors once more.

Coyote-3 paused mid-step, one foot raised. The first thing he noticed was that the Dreg was there. The second thing he noticed was that the blast door he and Flicker had finagled open appeared to be shut. This was an estimation rather than anything based off of certainty because the door in question was half-buried behind a wall of dull grey moon-rock; the force of it slamming shut had been too much for the distressed passageway.

It's lucky it didn't get crushed, Coyote-3 thought, looking at the Dreg. It was crouched in front of the rubble, pushing against a narrow chunk of rock with its full weight, raising it up with great difficulty. After a moment, there was another grinding, shifting noise, and its shank skidded out of the mess, battered, sparking, but still functional, and trailing its bag. Before Coyote-3 or Flicker could say or do anything further, the Dreg turned to follow the movement of its shank, spotted them, and froze.

For a moment the two just stared at one another. One of the Dreg's hands twitched slightly towards the pistol at its hip, but it pulled away before it could complete the motion. Coyote-3 had fought many Dregs before, but they usually didn't hesitate quite so much. They were bold creatures. This one seemed to be waiting for him to make the first move. This one seemed to be
sizing him up.

Smart. Coyote-3 took a deep breath and slowly raised his hands in the air, palms facing forward, showing himself to be unarmed. "Easy, now. Look, I'm not gonna hurt you unless you make me."

He could feel Flicker's uncertainty through the link they shared. The Dreg held its stance, still tense with pent-up aggression. Its shank was making an insistent, low beeping noise, but the bag of food had been hung over its gun, and it didn't seem to be able to fire yet.

"I'm… sure you have no idea what I'm saying, but just try and hold tight for a second, yeah? I don't even have a gun in my hand, see?" Coyote-3 held still.

The Dreg tilted its head. Unlike the members of the Fallen that outranked it, it did not wear a mask, which meant Coyote-3 saw all of its expressions—such as they were. The Fallen's face seemed to be mostly comprised of teeth, which were not known for their emotive potential. It was clear from the gesture, though, and the way it squinted two of its four eyes, that it was confused.

"If you'll just keep it cool for a minute or too, I'll try and crack that puppy open, and you can go on your way. Lord, I know you have no idea what I'm saying, but maybe my voice is soothing enough? Is that a thing?"

The Dreg inhaled sharply and let out the breath in a gesture that was very like a snort. And then, to the surprise of everyone in the room who wasn't the Dreg, it spoke. "Confused, yes. But only because you say, 'crack puppy.'"

Coyote-3 stared at it in dumb astonishment for a moment. "Colloquialism," he said, without thinking about it.

The Dreg's assumed an expression so intensely deadpan that Coyote-3 couldn't mistake it, even on a face so alien. He gave a little laugh, despite himself, which only seemed to deepen the creature's disdain. "Sorry, sorry. I mean, I'll get the door. For both of us."

"And then, you will shoot."

"Well… no, not unless I have to. I could've shot you before I said anything. I could've shot you-" He nodded towards the bag hanging from the shank, "when you were snatching up all that food."

The Dreg's eyes narrowed further and it took a hopping, sideways step towards the shank.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to take it. I don't even eat." Coyote-3 shrugged.

"Why would you help?"

"Why not?"

"More reasons than I know how to say," the Dreg replied. Its voice was low and strangled, clearly struggling with human speech, but Coyote-3 thought he could a hint of something like exasperation in there.

"You know, you're probably right. But, right here and now, I don't really feel like I need to hurt you. Not unless you hurt me. Truly. Whaddya say?"

The Dreg seemed to consider its options for a moment. There was no doubt in Coyote-3's mind that it knew it would die if they fought. It was all a matter of survival instinct versus pride at that point, and survival instinct seemed to win. The Dreg straightened from its couch and nodded, taking careful, slow steps away from the door and the rubble, never once turning its back on
Coyote-3.

He was so used to thinking of Dregs as "small." Their Captains towered over them, and even the Vandals typically stood head-and-shoulder above them, but the Dreg was easily his height. Coyote-3 strode up to the rubble nonchalantly, inspecting the rocks. "Well. This is a problem. What's it look like on the other side?"

Flicker scooted forward in the air, hovering as close to the door as the rocks would allow. Bright blue light filtered from his optic as he scanned it. "Looks like more rocks on the other side. Great. I hope you're both prepared to do some digging. Let me get the door."

Coyote-3 nodded. The Dreg had immediately turned its attention towards Flicker, and was watching him with an expression that was hard to read. Fascination? Wariness? Coyote-3 couldn't tell. The only thing this Dreg's body language was telling him was that it was very nervous.

Flicker's scanned shut off, leaving them in darkness again. "Uh. Problem."

"Yeah?" Coyote-3 tore his attention away from the Dreg.

"I can't open this door." Flicker swiveled in midair to face them.

"You mean, because of the rocks?"

"No, what I'm saying is that the door broke itself. Mechanically. I can control it, if I wanted, but the mechanism that opens it isn't working." Flicker turned away from the control panel.

"So, we'll have to bust our way out?"

"This is a blast door. We'd need a ship's firepower to get through it, which is to say nothing about all the rock in the way." The Ghost gave a simulated sigh. "We've got a better shot of finding another exit. Give me a moment, and let me see if there's another way out." Flicker turned and went back to scanning the keypad.

The Dreg had watched all of this in silence, still staring at the Ghost Coyote-3 looked its way, and after a moment, said, "Remarkable little guy, isn't he?" The Dreg glanced his way briefly, but said nothing.

"Okay, we've got a back exit. We'll have to go down a few levels, but it comes up in another crater wall." Flicker pulled away from the door and swiveled to face his Guardian. "Let's go."

Coyote-3 held up his hand, and Flicker hovered over it, vanishing in a shower of brilliant drifting specks of light. "I dunno how much of that you understood, but if you follow me, I can show you the way out."

The Dreg let out a long breath, deflating somewhat, but it nodded silently. Without any sort of further preamble, Coyote-3 turned and led the way. This was, perhaps, one of the weirdest situations he'd ever found himself in, but he was determined to mitigate the awkwardness by sheer force of will alone. *I've got nobody to blame but myself;* he reasoned, *since this was my brilliant idea.*

The Dreg and its shank followed. They walked in silence for a little while and, somewhat to Coyote-3's surprise, the Dreg was the one who broke it first. "Where does it go?"

"My Ghost?" Coyote-3 looked over his shoulder. When the Dreg nodded, he went on, "It... well, actually, I have no idea."
"He," Flicker said, reappearing suddenly, "dissipates until he becomes subsumed into his Guardian's Light. I mean, I'm still here, and I'm still me, but shrugging off my physical form is just something that a Ghost can do."

The Dreg peered at him. Coyote-3 looked to Flicker. "Maybe explain that to it in simpler terms? I doubt it knows the word 'subsumed,' Flicker."

"He," the Dreg said suddenly. The timbre of his voice suggested an imitation or mockery of Flicker's.

"Right. Sorry—he doesn't know the word 'subsumed.'"

"I know 'subsumed.'"

Coyote-3 looked back to regard the Dreg skeptically. "Do you now?"

"Absorbed. Pulled into something else," the Dreg said.

"Absorbed. Pulled into something else," the Dreg said.

Coyote-3 stared for a few moments before he shrugged. "I mean. Yeah, okay. You got it. Your vocabulary's much better than I thought it'd be."

Flicker floated slowly towards the Dreg, regarding him with a bright, curious optic. "That brings me to a good question, though—how is it you speak our language? You were going through the food up there. Could you read the writing on the packages?"

"A little," the Dreg replied. "Nothing but Hive tech, Earth tech here. If you want something good, you read for it. Earth languages easier to learn than Hive languages."

Flicker bobbed. "You're not too bad."

The Dreg regarded him in inscrutable silence. It hadn't taken long for either Coyote-3 or Flicker to assume a casual air with their temporary traveling companion, and he seemed a little off-balance because of it. The four of them (counting the shank) walked (and floated) in silence for a while.

"So, where did you even hear the word 'subsumed'?

"Human reports on Taken," the Dreg replied. Coyote-3 was satisfied by the answer, and they walked in silence for a few more moments, and then it was the Dreg's turn to be overcome with curiosity. "What do you mean by, 'crack puppy'?"

"Well, I was talking about cracking open the door. But I called it 'puppy' because… uh, because sometimes, we call things 'puppy.' For… no really good reason, now that I think about it."

They fell quiet again as they descended the stairs. Flicker led the way, illuminating their path in a faint cone of light, right up until they came to another door. "All right, this door will open up to the second part of the facility. It's going to be a long way up, but we'll manage."

The door swung open, and bathed them all in sickly greenish-yellow light. The Dreg gave a colorful Fallen curse, and Coyote-3 took an instinctive step back. Flicker made a soft, wordless sound of astonishment and floated away from the door. Five feet in front of them was a wall, but the hallway stretched on to their left and their right, in either direction. The entire tunnel was bristling with sharp, slender crystals, and had been covered in bones, chitin, and goodness knew what else.

All three of them slowly poked their heads into the corridor stared down the length of the Hive
tunnel. They looked, in unison, to the left. Then they looked to the right. "Well!" Coyote-3 declared cheerfully, "guess we're gonna go back there and blast our way out."

"That… might not be an option," Flicker interjected, speaking in a harsh whisper. "First of all, I don't think we have the ordinance to do that. Cave-in, remember? And second of all, they'd hear us eventually. It's a wonder they haven't heard us yet."

"So what's your solution here?" Coyote-3 whispered back.

"This tunnel still might connect; we can try and sneak our way through the other complex."

Coyote-3 sighed. It sounded like a pain, but it was a plan, which was more than he had to offer. He turned to look back at the Dreg, who had removed the sack from his shank and was slinging it over his shoulder. "What's your vote… uh. I didn't get your name."

"No names," the Dreg replied tersely. He was re-arranging the housing of the shank's built-in gun, and began to speak to it in his native tongue. The shank immediately swiveled towards Coyote-3, but at another barked command from the Dreg, it swiveled right back, turning to the Dreg expectantly, as if awaiting orders.

"So, I should just call you 'Dreg,' then?"

The Dreg finished arranging his pack and looked up. "'Dreg?'"

"It's what we call you. Specifically, you, though—the littler guys." Coyote-3 paused. "I mean, it's not all that flattering, but, yes—we call you Dregs, the guys above you Vandals, and the guys above them Captains."

The Dreg was silent while it translated these ranks into the ones it knew. Finally, with another huffing snort, it nodded. "That will do. Shank won't fire unless I command it. Targets only Hive, for now."

Flicker looked first to the Dreg, and then to Coyote-3. "All right. Are you ready?"

Coyote-3 shrugged and hefted his hand cannon. "As I'll ever be."

The three of them moved forward, swiftly and silently down the hallway. Flicker led the way, keeping the light of his optic dim enough as to not attract attention. Eventually, he swiveled towards the wall. "This is the place where the door would have been," he whispered.

Coyote-3 nodded. "About the kind of luck I expected us to have. What's it look like, going forward?"

Flicker turned away and darted a little ways down the hall. "It's clear. Slopes upward. Could be our ticket to the surface."

Coyote-3 suddenly halted, holding a hand up. "Something on the tracker."

Almost as soon as he said the words, the familiar shrieking howl of a charging Thrall echoed down the chamber.

The Dreg scuttled back a few steps, but stopped when he saw that Coyote-3 wasn't following. It was unsurprising that the Dreg's first instinct was to run. Coyote-3's was to fight. He waited until he saw the first pale humanoid figure barreling around the corner and then opened fire, calmly and neatly plugging each Thrall as they surged forward. In moments, the hallway was a mass of thrashing limbs and gnashing, disturbingly human-like teeth. When one got too close and slipped
under his guard, he brought his arm around in a single, fluid motion, almost like a punch, and stabbed it in the side of the head.

The Thrall didn't stop coming, though, and Coyote-3 needed to reload. Somewhat to his surprise, the hiss of energy-weapons fire sounded from over his shoulder. The shank was covering him. "Coyote, there's too many!" Flicker called, alarmed, "we need to go!"

Coyote-3 turned on his heel as his Ghost vanished again. "C'mon!" And ran with the growing crowd of Thrall hot on his heels. The Dreg had since whipped out his shock pistol and fired behind them as they ran. Most of his shots went wild, and the ones that hit didn't seem to slow the advance of the enemy. His shank was proving to be invaluable, though, releasing an unyielding barrage of cover-fire as it hovered at their heels. For a few moments, they made headway.

The respite was short-lived, though; one of the Thrall flung itself forward, latching onto the shank and bearing it down to the ground. The Dreg shrieked something angrily, and the shank shot wildly, obliterating the Thrall's skull-like head with a one-two shot under the chin. As it struggled to rise again, a second Thrall flung itself at the shank, and a third, tearing into the machine, which exploded in a shower of flaming shrapnel. With nothing holding them back, the Thrall surged forward again.

The doorway to the complex they'd left was fast-approaching, on their left. "Flicker! Do we turn or go straight?"

"The complex is a dead end; go straight! We might have a chance of losing them in the tunnels!"

The pack that was following them was still close, but it had stopped growing. Coyote-3 abruptly skidded to a halt, turning as he did, his long cloak swirling in the air behind him. "I'm about done with this," he snapped, unclipping a grenade from his belt and tossing it to the ground in front of him. The grenade split into brilliant orange projectiles which spiraled up and away from the floor, twining through the air as they sought out their targets. As each dart struck home, the Thrall's carapaces burst into flame.

The grenade carved a wave of Thrall out of the front of the charge, but there were yet more to deal with. Coyote-3 raised his hand cannon to deal with the final few that were still making their advance.

Shk. It had happened so fast he hadn't even seen it—one moment a Thrall was coming for him, jaws agape, and the next, a sparking shock-dagger was protruding from the middle of its head without seeming to have occupied the intervening space.

"Nice throw!" Coyote-3 barked over the retort of his gun. The Dreg darted forward to his side, keeping himself low, and as the final Thrall approached over the last flickering flames of the grenade's fire, he lunged forward, dispatching it with a point-blank blast from his pistol.

The two of them stood for a moment, listening intently into the silence, which was broken only by Coyote-3's ventilation systems (a low whir) and the Dreg's panting (a sound that Coyote-3 would describe, if he were asked to, as the sort of noise he'd expect an asthmatic cat to make). "Well." Flicker materialized out of Coyote-3's chest, looking down at the bodies of the Thrall. "That could have gone better, but it could have gone worse."

Coyote-3 nodded. He watched in silence as the Dreg stepped forward, planting one foot on the face of the first Thrall he'd killed so he could yank his shock-dagger free. "Should we… should we go back?"

Flicker turned around, drifting down the corridor slightly. "I… don't think so. Some distant
movement on the tracker; those Thrall might have stirred up more Hive. We should just… move forward, I suppose." He turned back to his two companions and the geometric planes of his armor shell lifted and fell in an approximation of a shrug. "One of these tunnels has to go up sooner or later."

"Hive network is enormous," the Dreg said, trotting back over to them. "Entire underground belongs to them."

"He's right." Coyote-3 put his gun away. "There's no telling how long we could be stuck down here."

"Well, it's up to you, then. Don't get me wrong, Coyote, I'm not saying you couldn't probably fight your way out of most situations, but… if something happens to you, out here, all alone…" Flicker trailed off. The Hive had permanently killed Guardians and drained their Ghosts of light before. It wasn't hard to imagine that the same thing could happen to a wandering Hunter lost in the heart of Hive territory. "The best chance we've got—all of us—" He swiveled to regard the Dreg with his optic, who tilted his head slightly, surprised, "—is to move forward and try and find another way out."

Coyote-3 sighed and shrugged. "It's all the same to me, really. You?"

The Dreg shrugged back and looked over his shoulder. "No other choice."

Quite to his own surprise, Coyote-3 felt a pang of guilt. "Sorry," he said, before he could stop himself. When the Dreg looked to him, confused, he went on, "the complex went into lockdown because me and Fli—me and my Ghost were poking around. I wouldn't really, y'know… wish getting locked in a hole with the Hive on anyone. Truly."

The Dreg blinked slowly, and, after a moment, inclined his head slightly. "The Hive is my enemy, and your enemy."

"And the enemy of my enemy—" Coyote-3 began.

"—is my friend," the Dreg joined in, speaking in unison.

Coyote-3 gave a little startled laugh, and started walking, motioning for the Dreg to come along. "Where did you learn that one?"

"Saying among my people. One of the few we have I common," the Dreg replied.

Flicker made a low "hmmm" sound as he floated along. "No offense, but I've yet to see any of the Fallen use that one in practice."

"Your kind doesn't, either," the Dreg pointed out.

"Point," Flicker and Coyote-3 said simultaneously.

They continued on in silence for a while. Flicker eventually drifted ahead, scouting the corridor and making sure they didn't stumble upon anything unpleasant. Every now and then the Dreg would throw a suspicious look over his shoulder, as if he expected to see some new danger in the shadows, but the hallway remained quiet and still.

"Sorry about the shank," Coyote-3 blurted abruptly.

The Dreg shrugged, but there was a slowness to the motion, an exaggerated slump, that suggested it bothered him more than he let on. "We're alive," he said, "and what I came for, I have."
"Yeah. What's with the food, by the way?" Coyote-3 asked. "Flick—my Ghost and I watched you scanning it, or something. You know, we figured you'd be gone by the time we decided to go back up. Guess we were wrong."

"Very wrong," the Dreg agreed. "You both said your names before. Careless. I already know them now. Flicker—" He gestured with one arm to the hallway in front of them, down which the Ghost had disappeared. "—and Coyote. Doesn't matter anymore, if I know them."

Coyote-3 just shrugged. He honestly didn't mind, one way or the other. When it was clear that was all he was going to add, the Dreg went on. "Got food because we need food. There is never much on this place—not for eating, for building, for offering. Even less, now. Food for my people, but mostly, for my Servitor."

"That stuff's gotta be years old. If the guy upstairs brought it in, then it's at least three years old. It probably," Coyote-3 warned, "won't go down easy."

"It will go down, though. That is what counts."

Coyote-3 considered this. He knew precious little of the House of Exile—only that they lived here on the moon, and that they had no official banner or symbol that anyone had been able to identify. They all wore green, and it was unlikely that you'd find any other House's representatives on the moon. As Cayde-6 once said, you had to be crazy to live among the Hive.

Faced with his ignorance, and figuring he had no better chance to learn, he looked to the Dreg again. "So, you're House Exile, right?"

The Dreg gave him a long, inscrutable look. "That is what you call us."

"What do you call yourself?"

The Dreg paused again, considering his answer, before he spoke in his native tongue: it was a low, gravelly, harsh sound, as meaningless to Coyote-3 as all Fallen chatter was. "But from what I know," the Dreg went on, "it means much the same in our words, as it does in yours."

Coyote-3 nodded. "So, I mean… if you don't mind my asking, what's your deal? The only thing I know about you guys is that your main motivation seems to be to kick the shit out of the Hive as often as possible."

The Dreg blinked. "I don't know what you're saying."

"You fight the Hive a lot."

"Yes. Living here, that is going to happen," the Dreg replied dryly.

"That goes without saying, but is there a reason you're here? Specifically?" Coyote-3 looked to the Dreg, who stared back at him, his four eyes narrowed slightly. "Hey, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to. I'm not asking because I'm looking to use this against you, or anything. I'm just curious. I'll keep anything you say to myself. Truly."

"You say that word a lot," the Dreg said. "'Truly.' What is this?"

"It's… hm." Coyote-3 had been about to say it meant the truth, but he wasn't sure if that was a helpful explanation at all. "It's when you're being… sincere?" he tried. The Dreg shook his head. "It's when—you know what a lie is? When you lie?"

The Dreg nodded.
"Well, the opposite of a lie is the truth. And when I say truly, I mean, I'm telling you the truth. The opposite of a lie."

The Dreg spoke slowly, carefully shaping the word with his teeth, his flicking mandibles. "Truly."

"You got it." Coyote-3 gave a thumbs-up. He waited patiently while the Dreg gathered his thoughts on what he would and wouldn't say to the Guardian.

"House Exile is… where you go, when you have nowhere else. When your Kell disgusts you. When you grow tired of being fodder for the enemy. When you want to leave, otherwise. There is no Kell of House Exile. No Archon. Mostly… what is the word you used? Dregs. Vandals." He gave a short, bitter sound that might have been a laugh. "Mostly Dregs here. Vandals few. Captains fewer. Barons—fewest of all. Living here is dangerous, but it is also…” He paused, struggling for the word. "Without… without boundary. Or restrictions."

"Free?" Coyote-3 offered.

"Yes. Free. You must still be useful, and there is very little to go around—very, very little—so it is harder, in some ways. Very dangerous, with so many Hive." He shook his head. "Nowhere is safe, in this entire system. Might as well live in danger and be free."

"You're not wrong about the system being dangerous, especially now, with everyone at everyone else's throats, but—and no offense here, pal—nobody asked you lot to come here."

The Dreg stared at him. "I was born on Venus."

Coyote-3 stared back, and then simply nodded. He didn't know what to say to that. He supposed he shouldn't have been surprised. After all, it had been hundreds of years since the Collapse, and the Fallen had arrived shortly afterward. They'd been here for generations. For so many of them, this had to be the only way of life they knew.

It was uncomfortable, thinking of things like that. Coyote-3 knew that in some ways, he couldn't afford to feel sympathy for the enemy, not if he was going to survive. The vast majority of Fallen had made their intentions clear, and it didn't look as if they were going to change anytime soon. But this fellow, whoever he was, was not "the vast majority." He was an individual, and he had to be considered on an individual basis. There were a few of them that lived among the Awoken of the Reef—Variks the Loyal even commanded the Crows, now that the Prince had disappeared.

It wasn't as if the Fallen were just a force of nature to be dealt with. They were, in the end, people. They were, if the old stories were to be believed, creatures of the Light, somewhere deep down. If he'd been born into a society that trained him from day one to be hostile to another, would he be any different? Part of him wanted to avoid thinking about it because it made him uncomfortable, but another part of him seemed to understand that he should think about it because it made him uncomfortable.

Before he could strike up the conversation again, Flicker returned. "I've got good news, and I've got bad news."

"Oh, lord. Good news first?" Coyote-3 asked helpfully.

"There's not a lot of activity up front, aside from some scattered packs of Thrall. It looks like the Hive have moved out of this area for now—hopefully long enough for us to get through here. The bad news… well. I'd better just show you." Flicker darted ahead again, and Coyote-3 sped up to a jog to follow him. When he rounded the last corner, he froze, and the Dreg drew up beside him shortly.
Ahead of them was an enormous cavern, stretching as far as the eye could see. The far end disappeared in a luminous green haze, and the entire expanse was criss-crossed by walkways and platforms. It reminded Coyote-3 of the Dreadnought in its composition: there were pockets of cover, but by and large, it looked as if moving through the place would leave them all uncomfortable open. It also looked as if they'd just stepped into a labyrinth.

Coyote-3 crossed his arms. "Well. Shit."

Most of the rest of the day was spent creeping through the woods after King patrols, watching as the Fallen investigated site after site, only to walk away empty-handed. Their investigations yielded more or less the same results: the abandoned structures were interesting enough in their own right, but there was nothing unusual about any of them.

The fog lifted as the day passed, and as afternoon began to slant towards evening, the woods were filled with shifting, amber light. "There's probably a hell of a sunset going on beyond these trees," Walker-17 remarked, looking skyward as they approached yet another mostly-overgrown structure. It was a simple, squared-off arch of concrete, with a door that had long since rusted off its hinges, built directly into the mountainside.

Virna nodded, but didn't respond. Sunsets, along with weather, were another one of those odd alien things you got when you visited planets. She stopped outside of the structure, peering at it and crossing her arms. It was very, very simple, which made it very, very suspicious in her mind.

"Looks like a storm shelter," Walker-17 murmured.

"Or a bunker. From the outside, anyway," Matthias said.

"I'm going with 'bunker.' C'mon." Virna stepped inside. It was predictably dark, except for the areas suffused with the lazy afternoon light from outside. It was a simple, plain room, all featureless concrete, with no remains of any kind of furniture or fixtures. "Storage, maybe?"

"Maybe," Walker-17 said as he followed her in. Matthias swept forward and immediately began scanning, his eye swiveling around curiously. "Hm. No wonder it didn't take them long to fi—"

"Whoa, whoa, over here, you two!" Matthias called excitedly. Virna and Walker-17 hurried over. The bright blue of his scanner was fixed to a section of wall. "This isn't concrete. It's hiding—something. There are controls in here. Give me a minute, and I'll see what I can do."

Walker-17 and Virna exchanged a glance, and then immediately got investigating, running their fingers over the wall and searching for a catch or a seam. The door itself felt no different than the concrete walls on either side of it. "They did a damn good job of hiding... well, whatever-it-is they're hiding," Virna said.

"Try the floor. Looks like it—oh, wait. No. Got it. Step back!" Matthias floated backwards. Virna and Walker-17 followed suit, stepping away as the wall began to move with a grinding noise. It didn't slide to the side or split in the middle, but rather it slid up, into the ceiling. "Huh. Pretty theatric, if you ask me," Matthias murmured, deactivating his scanner. All three of the explorers paused to exchange glances, and then wordlessly stepped forward through the threshold.

The corridor before them made a hard right turn, which they followed. The darkness thickened and enveloped them entirely as they moved forward, eventually encompassing them until Matthias activated his light. There wasn't much to see—the tunnel was comprised of the same bare concrete the bunker had been.
Eventually, though, they stepped out of the tunnel and into open space. It was too dark to see anything beyond the glow of the Ghost's optic, but they could feel the vastness of the space around them, and hear it in the echo of their footsteps. Walker-17 glanced to Matthias, who nodded and zipped off to see if there was anything they could use to light the place.

"You two must've been together a long time," Virna said. Walker-17 looked to her, somewhat startled by the non-sequitur, and she explained. "You don't even talk, sometimes. You and Matthias. He seems to know what you're thinking."

"Oh. Well, that's because he does." Walker-17's gaze turned away, following his Matthias's progress along the wall. "At least, to an extent. It's a thing that happens between Guardians and their Ghosts, most of the time."

"It's called," Matthias shouted from across the room, "neural symbiosis!"

Walker-17 nodded. "Yes, that."

"Now hold on, you two, I think I found a control panel." A moment later a cone of brilliant blue light flickered into view across the room, tracing a latticework of scan-lines over a dust-covered console.

Virna nodded, taking this new information in. On the one hand, she hadn't expected the bond between a Guardian and their Ghost to be so deep, but on the other hand, she couldn't say she was terribly surprised, either. Everything about what made a Guardian a Guardian was profoundly strange. "Well," she said, as the lights hummed above them. "The trees above this place have been growing for decades. Whatever they buried in the mountain couldn't have been very—"

The lights flickered once, twice, and then burned brightly, illuminating the long, unmistakable silhouette of a ship.

"…important," she finished. The sight of the vessel was startling enough, but the illumination also revealed that this chamber was much, much bigger than she had anticipated.

Silently, Virna and Walker-17 approached the vessel. It had the general profile of a long, pointed ship, and there was an all-around sturdiness in its geometry. Two thick wings, and a body with no visible viewport: just broad, flat planes of metal that drew up against one another in slightly-rounded angles. It was supported by an extensive latticework of steel struts, keeping it in place, cradled safely against time and gravity while it waited for its chance to touch the sky.

"Is it rusty?" She asked, puzzled and fascinated.

"No—that's the color it's painted," Matthias replied, floating back over to join them. The ship's hull was streaked with shades of ochre and reddish-brown. "It looks almost like camouflage. For a desert, maybe?" Virna trotted underneath the ship, weaving through the supports below it and peering at its underside. The shock had worn off, so it was time to get a much closer look. Walker-17 slowly strode along the length of it, under the wing and closer to the vessel's nose. Broad, black lettering marched along the side of the vessel, proudly displaying its name.

"Thunder Child," he said. "The name… I know I've heard the name before. I know I have." He looked hopefully to his Ghost. Could this be what had brought him to the Great Bear rainforest? Some memory of this place, of this ship?

"Let me see if I can find anything out!" his Ghost zipped away again, hovering over the various consoles in the room, looking for some sort of repository of information.

Virna reached up and leaned experimentally on one of the support structures holding the ship off
the ground. Finding it sound, she hauled herself up, clambering her way up the network of metal struts as quickly and securely as a squirrel in a tree. Walker-17 tilted his head to watch her, amused and impressed. "Having fun?"

"You know it," she replied, looking down to offer him a grin before she pulled herself up onto the wing. "Not every day you find a Golden Age ship in good condition." Virna prowled along the wing, inspecting the hull critically as she went.

"I've got good news and bad news," Matthias said as he zipped over. "The bad news part one: there's nothing in these databanks. Most of them have been physically destroyed."

"That's alarming," Virna called, squatting on the wingtip of the ship.

"It's... definitely weird, yes," Matthias replied. "Furthermore, the ship's in dreadful disrepair. It looks solid enough on the outside, but it's going to need a lot of work before it's back up to pristine condition again."

Walker-17 nodded. "And the good news?"

"It'll fly. At least as far as the City."

Up on the wing, Virna cocked a brow and looked down at Walker-17. He lifted his helmet and returned her gaze. "Well, we both found it," Walker-17 finally said, "I don't... really think I can claim this as just mine."

"We can figure all of that out later," Virna said, waving a dismissive hand. There it was again, though: that guilelessness, that openness. She couldn't tell if Walker-17 was just inherently trusting, or if he was just that green. She appreciated the giving nature he was displaying, but she had to wonder if it had ever come back to bite him before. Surely, it had to have? There was time enough to worry about that later. "If it's in bad shape, I wouldn't want to risk putting it through a jump, anyway."

"That's for the best," Matthias agreed.

Walker-17 nodded again, drawing a sigh through his ventilation system. "Well, all right. We can take it back. Miss Holliday could almost certainly fix it. She could fix anything."

"Believe it or not, I've heard of her." Virna sat on the wing and let her legs dangle over the edge. "Guardians that want to talk ships on the reef bring the name up every now and then."

"She's the best there is," Walker-17 said earnestly.

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"She's the best there is," Walker-17 said earnestly.

"I guess the best will do." Virna's grin faded to a simple smile. "Now, since we're negotiating, I figure I should let you know that I'm going to report this, obviously. My mission here is recon, and I might not know what this ship is or does, but I know it's old, and I know that the Kings might have been after it."

"That seems fair."

"All right. The sooner we get this out of here, the sooner we can figure out who made it!" Virna pulled herself to her feet again and stared upward. "Now, getting it out is going to be the fun part... I'm guessing the roof opens?"

"Yes." Matthias floated up to join her, peering at the huge seam that ran the length of the roof. "Of course, when they built it, I don't think they expected it to be covered in dirt and trees someday. It might not open at all."
Walker-17 continued to stare in fascination up at the ship. "Well," he said, "let's find out."

"That is another word you say very much," the Dreg said, glancing briefly to him as they moved deeper into the Hive tunnels.

"Which one, now?" They'd been moving in silence for a while, and the Dreg's sudden speaking had caught him off-guard.

"'Shit.'"

Coyote-3 made an indelicate snorting sound through his ventilation system, but managed to keep from bursting out into the sort of loud laughter that would draw unwanted attention. "That's a curse word. You know? Cussing?" The Dreg stared at him blankly, so he went on, "It's considered rude."


Coyote-3 gave him a thumbs-up. "You've got it. Wanna return to favor? You got any curse words?"

"Eliksni speech is difficult for a mouth that isn't designed for it."

"Yeah, well, technically, my mouth's not exactly designed for human speech, either," Coyote-3 pointed out, "but I manage. I bet I could do it."

The Dreg regarded him with faint confusion for a moment, and then lapsed into thoughtful silence. At last, he spoke, and the word that rolled from his throat was a good deal less complicated than Coyote-3 had expected. "Ka."

"Ka?"

The Dreg nodded. "Ka, or kas, depending. Directly, it means 'burn.' Often used in anger."

"So you wouldn't call someone 'ka,' you'd tell them to 'ka'?"

The Dreg nodded again.

"Hmm." There was something appropriate about that—about a Fallen curse word being something dramatic and violent, an ill-wish rather than a simple exclamation. It made his own offering seem kind of pathetic in comparison. "'Shit' means... well. Literally, excrement."

Unsurprisingly, this word didn't ring a bell at all. "Y'know. When you're done with food. Done with it."

Flicker, who'd been content to float a short distance ahead, had apparently been listening to the conversation, for he spun in midair to face them. "Coyote, I just want you to stop and appreciate this moment, because I'm sure I'll never forget the time you explained the finer points of human waste excretions to a Dreg in the middle of Hive territory."

Coyote-3 laughed, mostly at himself. "What can I say, our conversation matches the surroundings."

Their surroundings were not, perhaps, worthy of such a disparaging description: they were traversing an enormous bridge, one that arched gracefully across the bottomless space below them. "You know, I'm a little worried," Flicker murmured, "by how little Hive I'm seeing."
"'No Hive where you think there should be Hive' seems like the opposite of a problem to me," Coyote-3 replied.

"Could mean they're somewhere else," the Dreg opined. "Where you don't want them to be."

"Hmm…" Coyote-3 nodded. "Point."

Regardless of the reason, the hours stretched on in relatively undisturbed silence. Every now and then a distant noise would make the trio pause, but they were never able to define the sounds beyond a roar, or a cry, and in those first hours they never saw someone.

It soon became apparent that there was not going to be a quick way out. "Lord," Coyote-3 sighed, "Maybe we should have tried our luck with the rocks."

"Cave-in will kill you just as dead as the Hive," the Dreg said with a shrug.

Coyote-3 nodded, and they pressed on. After a few more hours of wandering had passed, he began to notice that their alien companion was beginning to flag a bit. His steps weren't quite as quick any longer, and there was a slump to his shoulders that indicated weariness. Coyote-3 checked his own energy reserves; he wouldn't need to drop into recharge for at least another twelve hours, but his companion wasn't likely going to be able to make it until then.

"We should try and find some shelter," Coyote-3 said after a moment, "so you can sleep."

The Dreg abruptly straightened, having apparently not realized how obvious his fatigue had been. "I am fine."

"You need to get some rest. I'm not going to need to stop, myself, for another half a day. I hardly ever sleep, really, so I can keep watch, no problem."

The Dreg still seemed reluctant, but after another half an hour of walking, he finally acquiesced. Coyote-3 couldn't blame him for his reticence. He couldn't imagine anything less appealing than trying to sleep in Hive territory while your sworn enemy watched over you. But I will, he told himself. I'm going to see this through.

He was keenly aware that this fellow wouldn't even be down here if it wasn't for him. Some part of his mind was snapping at him that it was profoundly stupid to be worried about the welfare of a single Dreg when he'd killed dozens without a second thought, but Coyote-3 refused to listen to it. That was then, and this was now. He was better than his instincts, and he was better than this harsh world was trying to make him become. At the very least, he had to try to be, in memory of the person he'd been before.

They found a suitable spot shortly thereafter (as much as any place in Hive territory could be called "suitable"). It was a small, alcove with only one exit and entrance, mercifully clear of the wriggling larvae that Hive liked to keep around. Coyote sat cross-legged near the entrance, pulling his hand cannon out of its holster and giving it a once-over while the Dreg tried to get comfortable at the back of the cavern. Flicker hovered nearby, watching the exit.

It went without saying that sleep did not come quickly or easily. The Dreg lay there, eyes hooded, staring at the ceiling while Coyote-3 began to disassemble his gun for cleaning. The silence stretched on, interrupted only by the rasping of the bore brush and the gentle click-click of components being eased into place. Coyote-3 had just begun to think the Dreg must have fallen asleep when the Dreg spoke.

"Do Guardians not eat?" Coyote-3 looked over at the Dreg, startled by the abruptness and the
strangeness of the question. "You say you barely sleep. You do not eat. You say something is wrong with… with your face? Your mouth? Is this because of the Great Machine? The gift?" He gestured to the Ghost.

"Oh! Oh, no. No, it's not because I'm a Guardian. I guess, though, that if a Guardian died of starvation… their Ghost would bring them back?" He looked to Flicker, who turned. The Ghost's plates rose and fell in a shrug. "But I don't eat because I'm an Exo. Same with the whole mouth situation. No tongue, no lips—hell, I don't have much of a face, when you get right down to it."

"You're machine?"

Coyote-3 nodded.

The Dreg stared at him, and there was a very subtle release of tension from his shoulders, a slight shift in his demeanor towards something slightly more relaxed. He didn't say anything, but he nodded and looked away, down the corridor. Coyote-3 didn't know what to make of that, but since the Dreg didn't offer any explanation, he didn't ask.

Whatever conclusion he came to, it seemed to help him sleep, because shortly thereafter he dropped off at last.

There was no true "day" on the moon, either on the surface or below it, but they spent most of the next one traveling. They finally left the larger chambers for small, purposeful-looking tunnels, only to find themselves meeting dead end after dead end, which forced them to spend half of the time backtracking. Frustration dampened any desire for conversation. Coyote-3 finally had to call for a halt when his own energy reserves were nearly depleted, but he didn't rest long. He could get a full recharge later, when they were somewhere safer.

Flicker kept watch, the Dreg caught a nap, and then they woke again, and moved again. The endless network of passages and dead ends continued to thwart their every effort to escape. Coyote-3 somewhat jokingly suggested they try and blast their way out straight through the roof, but that was the extent of fresh conversation.

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The Dreg had begun to flag again, and this time Coyote-3 wasn't sure why. He felt that if he drew attention to it, though, he was likely to insult his companion somehow. It became clear when they took a short rest a few hours later, though: the Dreg pulled one of the rations from his back and, with a shame so profound that even Coyote-3 could sense it, gave in and ate one of the nutrient blocks.

Even when they started moving again, humiliation hung about the Dreg's shoulders like the tattered remains of his cloak.

_He can't have a lot of food in there_, Coyote-3 thought to himself once they'd gotten moving again. _And once he runs out of those, that's it. We've got to get out of here._ He looked to the roof as they walked, wondering how far down their wandering journey had taken them. _Or that Dreg might starve._
Emergence

Chapter Summary

Several things come out of the ground in a variety of fashions. Virna and Walker do not have a yard sale, and Coyote gets into a sword fight.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was, as it turned out, enough emergency power left in the structure to activate the opening sequence. “It’ll start, that I can guarantee,” Matthias said as he floated back over to where Walker and Virna were waiting. “What I can’t guarantee is whether or not it’ll finish, with all that earth on top of it, not to mention the trees. You’d be surprised how resilient tree roots can be.”

Virna had one arm crossed across her chest, and the other holding her chin against her thumb and forefinger, her eyes narrowed in thought. “So, even if this does works, you can basically guarantee it won’t likely be a fast process.”

“Correct.”

“Or a quiet one.”

Matthias bobbed. “Also correct.”

“So, we’d better be prepared for a firefight,” she concluded, glancing to Walker-17. “Possibly even an extended one. Maybe there’s some way we could barricade the tunnel entrance…”

“No, no, I’m not opening this up while you guys are still inside,” Matthias interrupted, aghast.

“We’ll be safe if we watch from the tunnel, I’m sure,” Virna replied.

“Best not to risk it. If something goes wrong, I’m sure I could bring Walker back.” Matthias had swiveled to face her. “But I can’t bring you back.”

Virna didn’t look as if she knew whether she was more amused by this somewhat matronly behavior or touched by it. Walker-17 guessed she settled for a mixture of the two. “All right. Fair enough. If we’re waiting outside of the bunker, though, we’ll be sitting ducks unless we arrange for some cover for ourselves…” She turned away, surveying the room. After a few moments, she began to prowl about, inspecting the support struts that held up the Thunder Child, the various terminals scattered throughout the room, and the small boxes of tools. “You said there was nothing you could salvage off those terminals, right?” she asked, looking to Matthias.

“Right.”

“And they don’t look like they’re bolted down. Exactly how much can you lift? Or push?” Now she looked to Walker-17, her eyes flicking up and down, clearly sizing him up. Walker-17 was quite tall—noticeably moreso than most Guardians—but he leaned more towards a lean, almost slender construction, rather than a bulky one. Of course, body mass was not exactly the most accurate indicator of strength where mechanical beings were concerned.
“A fair amount,” he said, “more than you might think, looking at me.” In the end, they decided it was best just to simply gauge his might by putting it to the test. Walker-17 and Virna’s strength combined proved to be enough to move some of the larger terminals away from the wall, but it was a slow, laborious process. Matthias floated along with them after he had finished prepping the systems for re-activation and double-checking all of the power relays.

The terminals looked humorously out of place in the soft green grass outside of the bunker, and they were soon joined by an empty cargo crate that Matthias had discovered in the Thunder Child’s hold. They arranged their meagre cover into two lines, and neither Walker-17 or Virna could say that the entire spectacle looked particularly robust. “Well…” Virna said, surveying their handiwork. After a moment, she shrugged.

“Well.” Matthias echoed her thoughts.

“Maybe… it’ll buy us a few seconds of sheer confusion,” Walker-17 replied, folding his hands behind his back.

“It’s something, at least.”

“Well they’ll think we’re having a yard sale.” He went on.

Virna gave a soft, snorting laugh and punched his shoulder. “Let’s hope your fighting is better than your stand-up routine.”

He gave a slight chuckle. “All joking aside, yes. It won’t hurt, and I think it will help. It’s honestly more cover than I’m used to working with, anyway.” Walker-17 looked to her with an expectant air. “What else do you think we might need to do?”

“I’m guessing you’re going to be the single most dangerous thing on the field,” she said, “so you’ll be drawing a lot of their fire. I’m going to hang back and pick off whoever I can. If they decide to come ‘round and flank us, we might have to retreat to the tunnel—“ Here she turned to look at Mattias, who, judging by his bright optic, had been about to protest. “—which I know is not ideal, but it’s better than getting caught between two waves of Fallen.”

Virna went on, “I’d also have an exit strategy ready if we’re not able to crack this thing open and it looks like we’re going to be overrun. You can remotely call your ship, right?”

“Yes. I can have her down here in just a few moments.”

She nodded in silent confirmation. Dusk was falling by then, and the two of them grew silent. Virna and Walker looked back to the bunker. Now that they knew what lay inside, they could clearly see how artificial the hill looked, how broad and flat. “Even without the trees,” Walker-17 murmured, “they moved a lot of earth to conceal this.”

“And all of this is literally in the middle of nowhere. Which,” Virna went on, looking back to Walker, “is another point we need to consider. If the Kings are here looking for this—and right now, I think we should operate under the assumption that they are—how did they find out about it? What else might they know about this that we don’t?”

Walker-17 shrugged, and paused for a single beat longer than was normal. “I wish I knew, I truly do.”

His hesitancy hadn’t escaped Virna’s notice. “Something on your mind?”

The Warlock jerked a bit, not having expected to be caught. “Ah—yes. Sorry, I just… feel very strongly that we can’t let that ship fall into their hands. The thought genuinely disturbed me. It’s…
another one of those things. I don’t exactly know how I do, I just…” He turned away from her to look back to the hill. “I just do.”

“Hopefully, it won’t come to that,” she replied.

“Yes, of course. It’s also just… this is starting to look less and less like a hunch and more like something I might have forgotten. I’m not so sure it’s a good idea to go digging up the past, myself. But I still feel that making sure the Kings don’t get their hands on this ship is more important.”

He was still visibly pensive, and Virna reached up, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “It wouldn’t be the first time I ran with someone who was relying on their intuition. Awaken, remember? Probably won’t be the last, either.”

Walker-17 cycled a long, slow ventilation, letting the tension drain from him as the air did. “Thank you.” He raised his head to look at her. In the gathering dusk, the washed-out grey of her armored garb and the blue-purple tint of her skin seemed to fade into the shadows, throwing her lamp-like eyes into vivid yellow relief. He was struck, for a moment, how strangely wicked she looked, how otherworldly.

She tilted her head, and he realized he’d been silently staring. “And don’t worry,” he went on, “I wouldn’t let a feeling put us in danger. Well. More danger. Above-the-baseline danger. I’m not going to keep you here if it looks like this has become untenable. I’d just… if the worst happens, and we do have to leave, then I feel like we need to make sure somebody knows.”

“Whether we leave with the Thunder Child or not, this is all getting reported when I get back to the Reef,” Virna said, giving his shoulder one last pat before withdrawing her hand. “So you can rest assured, someone else will know.”

“Thank you, Virna.”

She just flipped him a salute in response. “Thank me,” she said, “when we’re on our way out of here.”

It was another half an hour before Matthias announced that the bunker was ready. He also seemed fairly confident that the entire structure would open, tree roots or no. Virna took up position near the bunker and crouched behind her cover with her rifle at the ready. Walker-17 stood further out, making no real effort to conceal himself and watching the darkening woods expectantly.

It all began without any sort of preamble. One moment, the woods were silent, save for the sounds of the forest’s nocturnal insects waking, and the next moment, a tremendous groaning was filling the air. They both looked to the base as the groaning grew into an earth-shaking cacophony: the grinding of rock, the snap-snap-snap of roots being ripped from the ground, and the low, rumbling squeal of tortured machinery.

Matthias appeared next to Walker-17 in a flash of light. “Okay! I got it working—“ he shouted, but his voice was soon drowned out in the noise. His optic flickered and his plates move in a way that suggested a wince. Walker-17 felt Matthias pushing against the neural link as he vanished.

“It’s going about as slowly as we thought it would,” he heard his Ghost say from within, “and we’ll almost certainly have company soon.”

Walker-17 brought his scout rifle to bear. The ground juddered and shook under their feet as the hatch doors opened with torturous slowness, gradually shrugging off the grip of the land.

Just when he wondered whether their luck was going to hold out, he saw the tell-tale distant
flicker of bright blue eyes. The Kings had come to investigate. Virna took the first shot—he almost felt rather than heard the bullet whizzing by him. The resounding roar-and-crack of the sniper rifle was almost completely drowned by the sound of the hill tearing itself apart behind them. The set of blue eyes reeled back, and was gone.

The gunshot, faint though it was in the wider cacophany, seemed to serve as a signal; within moments Fallen were pouring from the woods around them, filling the air between them with wildly-firing arc-bolts. Virna held her position, solid and still, and very calmly lined up another shot, while Walker-17 stepped forward and began firing away. As Virna had said, he was undoubtedly the most dangerous thing on the field, and within moments he was drawing fire.

Walker-17’s mind slipped into the familiar space it occupied during battle: a cold, calm focus enveloped his mind first, a sensation he’d always thought of as something inherently Exo. His scout rifle roared in quick succession, cracking off shot after shot with mechanical precision. When it was time to reload, he ducked behind the terminal he and Virna had pushed out for cover, and within moments, he was at it again.

When it became obvious that their first initial assault wasn’t going to overwhelm their foes, the Fallen fell back. Walker-17 couldn’t hear them shouting to one another, but he could just barely make out the tall, caped figures of the Vandals in their midst organizing their underlings to utilize the superior cover of the woodlands around them.

He was forced to break cover when they sent a grenade his way; it struck home on the dirt right beside the terminal, which erupted in a shower of twisted metal and sparks. Walker-17 skidded to a stop, and then stood his ground, returning fire and simply absorbing their shots. He was slipping deeper into that cold calm at the back of his mind. The pain of each shot sizzling home could barely reach him here.

Another grenade went sailing over his head, and for a moment a spark of alarm cut through the stillness, and he turned on his heel, shouting Virna’s name—but it was drowned in the roar of the sundering earth and the retort of the guns all around them. She’d seen the grenade, though, and, mouthing a curse, she rolled out of her cover, retreating for the mouth of the bunker tunnel. When the flash and bang of the grenade faded away, she darted back out again, this time retreating up the hill itself.

Rocks and dirt showered down all around Virna. Belowground, her cover had been destroyed; up here, she had a chance of being lost in the sea of shifting machinery. She ran along the broad strip of earth between the edge of the hill and the edge of the doors as they made their slow, monolithic journey upward. The doors were passing the halfway mark, and enormous clods of root-choked soil were falling away as the angle of the doors became steeper and steeper. A single tree, which had been clinging stubbornly to the ground, toppled at last, its roots giving way with a resounding crack.

Virna immediately scampered behind the trunk, letting the shifting leaves shield her from view as she prepared her rifle once more.

Walker-17 had seen all of this happen in a handful of seconds, but he had no further time to worry about the safety of his companion. The tell-tale silhouette of a yellow-caped Captain broke from the shadows, holding two sparking swords. His strides were confident, unafraid; he moved through the ranks of his underlings like a galleon over the waves.

The Warlock took a step back and hurled a grenade towards his foe. The rumble of thunder filled the air, somehow cutting through the tremendous noise of the bunker. Brief gray wisps of cloud churned in the air, and lightning sizzled in the space where the Fallen had stood…and was still standing. He’d been staggered by the grenade, and likely lost his shields, but he wasn’t down yet.
The sound of his grenade’s small storm had sent a frisson through Walker-17. Thunder. He felt the icy grip on his mind splintering and beginning to slip away.

Crack! Another shot from Virna cut down a Vandal that had been coming around one side of his Captain, trying to flank Walker-17. The Warlock stepped back, but not fast enough to avoid a one-two vicious blow of the Captain’s swords. Arc energy sizzled and spat over his plating. Walker-17 brought his arm up and unleashed a quick burst of it out at the Captain, who reeled back for a moment, but still did not fall.

Anger pounded through Walker-17’s mind, anger and protectiveness. This thing in the hillside, this ship he’d never seen before today, was inexplicably important to him. He couldn’t let it fall into their hands, of that he was deeply and unwaveringly certain. On the shadowy hill behind him, great clods of earth toppled and crashed into the forest as the hatch-gates opened wide. The air stirred restlessly around the Stormcaller. The scent of ozone cut through the night, sharp and galvanizing.

Emboldened by their indomitable Captain, the Fallen in the forest surged forward to overwhelm their foes with one final, crushing rush. The fury reached a fever pitch in the back of Walker-17’s mind, an endless white-hot scream that rattled his thoughts apart. There was nothing left in him but instinct and lightning. Thunder rolled through the air once more, Walker-17 lifted from the ground, and entered into the Stormtrance at last.

Seething arcs of white-hot electricity writhed from his hands and through the forest, seeking their targets, obliterating everything in their wake. The Captain that had been standing before him made one last, desperate lunge before he, too, was caught in the storm’s grip; the arc devoured him. Not even ashes were left. It felt like all of the Warlock’s rage was pouring out of his arms and through his fingertips. Walker-17 reveled in it.

When the storm had coursed its way through him and spent itself, it did so abruptly. Walker-17 came back down to earth heavily, his helmet already flicking up and seeking its next target. The advancing ranks had been devastated, and the Fallen that were still there had fallen back, undoubtedly calling reinforcements. Walker-17 began to stride forward, taking up his rifle again, but in that moment he heard Matthias and Virna both calling to him, one voice in his head, the other very far away.

The fact that he could hear them at all startled him enough to draw him partway out of the battle-fog in his mind, and he half-turned. The hill had been torn apart, and the great hatch was open to the sky. As he watched, the Thunder Child rose into the night. Virna stood on the side of the hill, her hair and clothes whipped wildly in the wind of the ship’s passing, still calling for him. Her sniper rifle had been returned to her back.

Walker turned on his heel and ran over, and in the next few moments he felt the sizzle-and-shock of Matthias drawing him from the ground up into the ship. The interior was dark and indistinct, and Walker-17 simply stood there, one hand braced against the nearest wall. In another instant there was a lurch that nearly knocked him off his feet as the Thunder Child leaped forward, leaving the battle and the forest behind.

Walker-17 didn’t react, except to steady his stance. Electricity chased itself in little sparks over his robes, his limbs. He was venting heavily, his head bowed, muzzily aware that Matthias was floating very near his head, and speaking to him. Very slowly, Walker-17 raised his head. There was a restless quality to the air of the cockpit, as if there were still outside. “Come back, Walker,” Matthias was saying, hovering in front of his face, his optic bright. His voice was low and calm. “Come back; be here now.”

The familiar cadence of his Ghost’s voice began to draw Walker back to the present. The
Warlock’s shoulders gradually lost their tension, and the air in the cockpit stilled. Bit by bit, the electricity clinging to him fizzled out. It was over. *Be here now,* he told himself, mentally echoing his Ghost’s words. He could feel Matthias reaching for him over the bond, and focused on that until his thoughts began to return to normal.

Taking a deep breath, Walker-17 looked around the cockpit until he spotted Virna. She was seated in the pilot’s chair, swiveled and watching him intently. Intently, but not warily, he noticed—she seemed taken aback by the display, but she was not intimidated. That eased Walker-17’s guilt a bit. He hadn’t meant to lose control like that. “Are you all right?” he finally managed to ask.

Virna nodded. “Didn’t even take a hit. You?”

“Quite fine,” he replied, nodding back. He still felt oddly disconnected, but this was a feeling that he knew would only pass with time.

Matthias remained hovering by his head, watching him for a few moments longer, before he seemed satisfied that his charge was well. “Virna, you’ve got a lock on us?”

“Yes,” she replied. “My ship’s on its way. It’ll follow us back to the city.” Apparently, while Walker-17 had been calming down, she’d been remote-accessing her ship’s controls. Virna reached up and ruffled her own hair, clearing the worst of the dirt and twigs from it. The gesture was so casual that Walker-17 almost laughed, despite himself, and for a moment, he felt a touch more grounded.

“I’ve got the *Rocinante* following us, too,” Matthias went on, looking back to Walker-17. “All right! Well. That was altogether a lot louder than I thought it was going to be, but it looks like we pulled it off.” He floated cheerfully towards the viewscreen, watching the forest roll away beneath them. “Let’s see if we can’t figure out what this ship is all about.”

Walker-17 nodded silently. Discovering that was now more important to him than ever.

When it was time for their next rest, he knew he had no choice but to eat again. The Dreg was weak, and if it came to another fight, he would be a liability. Survival was the only thing that mattered, in the end, but he couldn’t let the ramifications of his failure slip past him.

Shame rose in his throat and nearly choked him as he reached into his bag and pulled out one of the ration blocks. Slowly, refusing to look up, he unwrapped it, and ate. There wasn’t much of a taste to it, but it was dense in a way that filled his stomach comfortably. He forced himself to eat slowly, to live every painful second of this weakness.

Though the Dreg knew the circumstances of this situation weren’t anything he could have controlled, guilt and frustration at his own body’s lack of fortitude weighed heavily on him. He was meant to bring back the food as an offering, and here he was, eating it himself, because he was too feeble to go on without it. Humiliation hung heavy and hollow in his chest. This weakness was why he only had two arms. This weakness would be what kept him from ever rising above his station.

He tried to burn the moment into his memory, so that he wouldn’t forget. He couldn’t let himself be this helpless, ever again.

His companion, the Thief of Light that called himself Coyote-3, was pointedly ignoring him, turned away completely and inspecting his weapon. The Dreg could tell that Coyote-3 could sense his shame. He seemed to be trying to give the Dreg some measure of dignity by pretending not to notice. He really didn’t understand anything, did he? Nobody else’s actions could give him
dignity. Only his own actions could do that.

Still, foolish though he might be, it was probably a gesture of kindness or sympathy. The Dreg had not expected to find himself in this position, but he would take full advantage of it. He was aware that working with the Thieves was something most Eliksni were far too proud to do, but there was little room for pride here, on this bleak rock. Survival was the only pride you could afford to have.

And soon, it was time to move again, through this never-ending nightmare riven through the bowels of the moon. The Dreg barely had any food left, certainly not enough to make a proper offering to their Servitor any longer, which meant that, assuming he survived this, he would have to strike off in search of something else to bring back to his troop. It had been weeks since he had seen his troop, but he was determined not to return a failure.

Coyote-3 was walking ahead of him, with his Ghost leading the way. The Dreg wanted to blame this Light-Thief for his troubles, and if he thought about it logically, he wouldn’t be in this situation if Coyote-3 hadn’t done whatever incredibly stupid thing he’d done to get them trapped down here, but his sense of self-recrimination was too deeply-engrained in him to allow it. He was here because he was weak, because he’d failed to prove himself among his comrades, and had elected to take this pilgrimage instead.

The Guardian abruptly stopped, holding up a hand, interrupting the Dreg’s thoughts. “Something up ahead,” he whispered harshly. “Voices down the way—hear ‘em?”

Stepping up beside him, the Dreg listened, peering into the darkness. A low, rhythmic murmur of voices filled the air. “Yes,” he hissed, “they are praying.”

Coyote-3’s helmet tilted towards him slightly. “Really?”

The Dreg nodded. The House of Exile had been watching the Hive since before he’d come to the moon, since before he’d even been born. He couldn’t speak their language, but he’d learned to differentiate the various timbres of their voices. I was like hunting: you learned the cries of your prey, and also their predators, so you knew where and when to strike.

The low-voiced, rhythmic cadence of their chant was something he and his kind had only just begun to hear last year, before the arrival of their God-King. This wasn’t the sort of chanting that would summon any new hellish monster, or the chanting that preceded one of their tithe-rituals. It was a gesture of supplication and submission—something he could understand on a simple level, he supposed. The implications of such a thing were a bit worrying in of themselves. Had their Taken King done something to re-assert his hold on the moon? The Dreg felt a sudden desire to see his troop surge through him.

Later. He could worry about the reason for their prayers later. For now, it was better to focus on the implications of them. The Hive they could hear were engaging in a ritual of submission, and that could be taken advantage of. He struggled to put what he knew into words the Guardian would understand.

He wanted to say, “What you’re hearing is one of the Hive’s humbler rituals, one where they reaffirm their own subservience rather than work themselves into a killing frenzy, or demand what they’re owed from their underlings. If we must fight them, we should do it quickly, and finish them before their blood is up.”

What he actually said was, “Oryx. They are praying to him. Making themselves low. We should kill them quickly.”
Earthling languages were hard.

Luckily, his companion seemed to get the important part of his message, which was the “killing” bit. “Yeah. If we have to, then yeah. We might not even need to fight them, if we can find a way around.” The Dreg made a low chattering sound to himself, a wordless scoff, shaking his head. Guardians had always seemed so keen to fight then he’d met them in the past. Of course fate would curse him with the one that seemed to want to sneak around his enemies instead.

The choice was soon made for them, though: the path ahead of them had no branches, no alternate paths, and funneled them forward until they could see the broad chamber at the end. A handful of Acolytes and one Knight were kneeling before a carved likeness of their King: crude, mostly symbolic, but unmistakably Oryx.

That was interesting in and of itself, but what was more interesting was the fact that this chamber was open to the sky, bathing the statue and the supplicants in starlight. The Dreg squinted up into what was visible of the night sky. He knew that somewhere out there was the planet the humans called Saturn, where their King was lurking. He wondered, briefly, if the timing of this ritual had something to do with the position of the planet.

Coyote-3 backed up slowly, until they were well out of sight and earshot. His Ghost vanished to the safety of his Guardian’s Light. “Looks like that’s our way out.”

The Dreg nodded and hefted his shock pistol. “You take the Knight. I will shoot the others.” He’d stand a better chance trying to pick off the Acolytes while they were focused on the most obvious threat in the room. The strategy would require this Guardian to trust the Dreg not to shoot him in the back…

“A simple plan.” Coyote-3 nodded. “Sounds good to me. You ready?”

The Dreg nodded and, with no further preamble, Coyote-3 stood and sprinted, flinging himself into the fray. The Dreg gave a low, exasperated trill and moved after him with significantly more stealth as Coyote-3 made a prodigious leap from the edge of the chasm into the middle of the ritual below, holding his hand cannon aloft.

A single shot to the head had dropped one of the Acolytes before they even knew what hit them. There wasn’t even a cry, only a muffled sizzling noise as they exploded into sparks and ash. Coyote-3 managed to plug the Knight with two rounds before she fully roused, turning and hefting her cleaver with a roar.

In response, the Guardian holstered his pistol and unsheathed a sword (of all things!) from under his cloak, bringing it around in a flaming arc of orange light. His blade met the Knight’s swinging cleaver in a shower of sparks. The Dreg snorted to himself as he moved furtively along the perimeter of the room. He didn’t know if Coyote-3 was doing his best to be as distracting as possible or if he genuinely just wanted to fight the Knight sword-to-sword out of some bizarre sense of sportsmanship. Both seemed equally likely.

Now it was his turn. The remaining Acolytes in the room immediately opened fire on Coyote-3, and as soon as the Dreg had adequate cover, he began to retaliate. His own fight was a much more careful, methodical affair. The Dreg’s shock pistol didn’t have the same flashy firepower as the Guardian’s hand cannon. Even so, he managed to drop one of the Acolytes with his first volley, but as he was reloading, another Acolyte spotted him and raised up a cry.

Yet another Acolyte turned and the Dreg dove back behind cover as void-bolts sizzled through the air around him, scorching the wall. Taking a deep breath, he popped out of the other side of his cover, returning fire. The second Acolyte staggered back, and at that same moment, in the center
of the room, the Knight gave one last roar before Coyote-3 finished her; solar fire erupted from her body as the sword lunged home, filling the room with golden light.

It once again turned the focus of the room towards him, and the Dreg took this as an opportunity to move closer, haranguing his second target as Coyote-3 lunged across the room towards his next quarry. And there was no mistake about it—the Acolytes were quarry here. They might have been surrounded, but the Hive were the ones being hunted here.

Exhilaration hummed in the Dreg’s bones, but he kept himself in check and ducked back into cover as the Acolyte returned fire. Everything collapsed quickly after the Knight fell. Coyote-3’s fiery sword carved it way through most of the remaining Acolytes, while the Dreg finally dropped his second target. He dashed forward to a closer bit of cover, turning his attention to a third target.

It was the last Acolyte standing in the room. Defiant, it screeched at them, and then in the next instant two knives—one sparking with arc energy, one burning like the sun—streaked across the room and hit home, burying themselves in its face, ending whatever passed for its life. There was a moment of stunned silence as Coyote-3 and the Dreg looked at each other before they realized they’d both had the same idea, at the same time.

Coyote-3 laughed and strolled towards the remains of the Acolyte. “I’ve gotta say, that’s one of the most stylish ways I’ve ever ended a fight.” He knelt down and retrieved their knives. The Dreg approached cautiously, watching as Coyote-3 sheathed his own, flipped the shock-dagger in the air until he was holding it by the blade, and then offered it, handle-first, to his Fallen companion.

The Dreg would remember that moment later—standing in the ashes of their enemies, the air thick with the acrid stink of burning chitin, and this Guardian, offering his shock dagger back to him as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Silently, he took it.

“Now, c’mon,” Coyote-3 said, turning, seemingly oblivious to the gravity of the moment. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

The Dreg snorted and put his weapons away. He was just as eager to end this trip through the moon’s underworld. “Yes. Let’s.”

Virna was shocked to be allowed on the Tower. There were other civilians about, of course, denizens of the city who went about the day-to-day tasks that kept an enterprise this enormous running, but she’d assumed that she’d be vetted a little more vigorously before she was allowed into Guardian HQ. All it had taken was for Walker-17 to nod to the dock crews and say, “She’s with me.”

The flight to the city had been mostly quiet. Everyone was tired, and absorbed in their own thoughts (save, perhaps, for Matthias, who was observing the somewhat unusual, antiquated design of the Thunder Child’s interior with charmed puzzlement). For her part, Virna was beginning to see that a lot of things about the way Walker-17 behaved were making sense. It was entirely likely that somewhere in his heart (or… heart analogue, or whatever it was that passed for a heart in an Exo), he knew that his openness, his guilelessness, was a good way to get taken advantage of.

But it was abundantly clear that anyone who abused his freely-given trust would only be able to do so once.

I guess you can afford to be gentle to the world with power like that, she thought to herself. It was an interesting dichotomy: the ability to be fierce seemed to take away the desire to be fierce. Were
all Warlocks like this, she wondered? The question lingered in her mind as they exited the Thunder Child. Matthias seemed just as chipper as ever, but Walker-17 seemed to have once again grown pensive as they walked away from the docks, where all three ships had been secured. Before she could bring the matter up in any capacity, he said, “I apologize.”

“For what, exactly?” she asked patiently.

“The... the display. I mean, I certainly didn’t intend to hold back, but I hadn’t expected to lose control like that.”

Virna shrugged. “We were in a firefight. Control or no control, you never came close to collateral damage in the form of me, and it was all very effective, at the end of the day.” He looked to her, his head held at a quizzical angle, and she couldn’t help but grin. “I’ll admit, that was probably one of the most impressive things I’ve seen all month... but you’re a Guardian. I honestly expect it.”

Walker-17 stared at her for a moment longer before he took a deep breath... and laughed softly. “You know? You’re right.” There was another pause. Walker-17 reached up, flipping the hatches that kept his helmet closed and sealed, and removed it at last, tucking it under his arm. “Thank you.”

His face wasn’t all that different than any other Exo face she’d seen; his plating was plain black, and a little on the dull side, rather than being polished or reflective. When he spoke, a faint purple light flickered in the region that served as his mouth, and his eyes were the same color. They squinted slightly as his plates moved as close as they could to an arrangement like a smile. “I appreciate you being so understanding.”

Virna waved a dismissive hand. “Don’t mention it.” Walker held her gaze for a moment longer, though, before he nodded. For a moment they walked in companionable silence. This hastily-arranged partnership had certainly turned out to be an intriguing one. It was also going to make for an interesting report, when she got home. On the heels of that thought, more pressing biological matters made themselves immediately known, disrupting the quietness between them.

Her stomach gurgled.

Walker-17 blinked widely, looking so startled by the noise that Virna was unable to resist a quick laugh, just as amused at herself as she was at Walker-17’s reaction. “Well, who am I to argue with that? You know any place I could scare up some food, Walker?”

“I... I’m so sorry, I hadn’t even noticed—did you eat at all today?”

“No, but to be honest, I forgot, too. It happens.”

Walker-17 nodded and looked away, squinting at their surroundings. Virna was surprised at how subtle the articulation of his metal face truly was, and how continually expressive he managed to be. “Well, as long as you know that I can’t actually provide any sort of recommendation based on personal experience—“

“Noted.”

“—I hear there’s a good noodle shop the next district over. Matthias? You remember it?”

Matthias, who had been floating peacefully along, flicked his optic towards them. “The Pho place? Mm-hmm.”

“Well, let’s go.” Walker-17 looked back to Virna. “Is this going to be the first meal you’ve had in
“The city?”

“It sure is,” she replied gravely.

He smiled again. “Well! I’m honored to be your host.” There was a pause. “…unless it turns out the food’s bad. In which case, I renounce all responsibility.”

Virna laughed, shaking her head and following her two new guides into the city.

She wasn’t sure what she’d been expecting lay beyond the City’s walls, but the sight that greeted her wasn’t quite it. Perhaps she’d thought the Guardians’ home would be a little more militaristic, or that it would have that air of desperation that all final bastions seemed to possess. The City sprawled around them in an unusual patchwork of moods. They passed through well-lit sections, draped in ivy, as pristine and lovingly-tended as the tower, and also through areas teeming with life, crowded with ramshackle stalls of goods, open-air restaurants, and small gardens.

Despite all of this, it didn’t seem at all chaotic, or harsh; there was still an air of domesticity that prevailed over all. Of peace. The people who lived here were protected, and they knew they were protected. They trusted their guardians, and allowed their hopes for the future to flourish behind these walls.

It was a far cry from her own home, in many ways. She was contemplating this when they finally arrived at the small, very informally-arrayed noodle stand, and Virna turned her attention away from her introspection long enough to look over her menu and ask their waiter for his recommendations. There was a single counter where customers could sit and eat, and she and Walker-17 were the only patrons there for the moment.

Well, technically, she was the only patron. The fellow running the restaurant didn’t seem to mind the Exo’s presence, though. “So, what’s your next plan, where the ship is concerned?” She asked, resting her chin on one hand as she waited for her food.

“First of all, I need to get it to Mrs. Holliday,” he replied. “All mysteries aside, it’s going to need some very practical work done on it before it’s going off-planet anytime soon.”

“It was running on emergency power when we left,” Matthias said, appearing and bobbing between them. “Once it’s fully operational, I’m going to see if there’s anything left on its internal records. Flight logs, or anything like that.”

“If we find something,” Walker-17 went on, “then I suppose that will determine what our next course of action will be. Beyond that…” He shrugged. “If it’s a dead end, then I suppose it’s a dead end. But at least the ship’s safe.”

“And, more importantly,” Virna said, “it’s not in the hands of our enemies.”

Walker-17 nodded emphatically. “At any rate, I won’t venture far. Are you planning on staying on Earth, in the meantime? I… honestly have no idea how long it might take to repair the ship. It could be days. It could be more than a week.”

Virna shook her head. “I’ve got to get home, and deliver my report in person. Odds are good that they’ll put me on standby after this, to wait and see what you might find out. Anything of interest to the House of Kings is of interest to us. We don’t need another Skolas situation on our hands—especially not now.”

“Very well.” The Warlock nodded again. “I’m pretty certain I said before that this was just as much your discovery as mine, so I can let you know when we find something out, if you like.”
“Sure thing. Let me get you my frequency.” They went about exchanging their comm frequencies and other means of reaching one another, and by the time that had all been taken care of, Virna’s food had arrived. “What did you call this stuff?”

“Pho,” Matthias chimed in, “It’s supposedly very good. Especially the spicy stuff.”

Matthias turned out to be right. Virna hadn’t realized how hungry she was until she’d lifted her chopsticks and taken her first bite of noodles. The broth itself was, indeed, exceedingly spicy, but the burn only made the meal all the more satisfying. Walker-17 waited long enough to make sure she was enjoying her meal (he received a thumbs-up), before he took to chatting pleasantly with the cook.

He seemed delighted to have been picked as the restaurant of choice for bringing in someone completely new to the city. Despite the fact that she was a complete stranger here, there was a palpable air of conviviality. It was somewhat reminiscent of the way Walker-17 carried himself: there was a trust there, or, at least, a desire to trust. Her instincts told her that this sort of thing couldn’t last—she knew very well what kind of harsh world it was out there, felt it keenly even now—but for the moment, she was willing to brush her doubts aside and simply enjoy the hospitality.

Night was deepening all around them, drawing in the close of the day, and honestly? It couldn’t have gone better.

Chapter End Notes

I just feel it's important that all of you know I am 0% sorry for he "grounded" pun.
Chapter Summary

The Dreg says goodbye, and Coyote does inadvisable things with a Sparrow. Walker gets a little bit of much-needed advice.

As soon as they surfaced, the Dreg knew they were in trouble. He recognized the landscape, because he knew it well: their journey underground had taken them far away from the crater where they’d started, and they’d ended up on the outskirts of his own troop’s territory. Every time I think my luck is holding out, he thought bitterly to himself, something new goes wrong.

Coyote-3 seemed oblivious to his companion’s mood. He’d stopped a few steps outside of the lip of the hole they’d emerged from, opening his palm so that Flicker could materialize into it, where he stood in silence. The Dreg had gathered that, to some degree, each seemed to be able to each perceive what the other did. There was an undeniable link there. What must it be like, to be so closely wedded to the Great Machine’s power?

No time for thoughts like that. If they continued forward, it was likely that they’d run into a far-ranging patrol. That would end badly for everyone—the Light-Thief was strong enough to kill many of his comrades, if he was provoked, and even if he didn’t try and fight… the Dreg didn’t really want to lead him into an ambush.

It was a stupid feeling, it was a wrong feeling, and he knew it, but the least he could do for repaying this stranger’s freely-given loyalty was to see to it that he didn’t meet an end at the hands of the House of Exile. The Dreg mulled over what to do as they walked away, and once they were a fair distance from the place where they’d emerged, an idea came to him. “Coyote-3.”

The Guardian jerked, obviously startled to hear himself directly addressed for the first time. He turned. “Yeah?”

“I need rest. You go, if you want.” The Dreg shook his head. “But I need to rest.”

Coyote-3 shrugged and put his hands on his hips, taking in their surroundings. “Rest sounds like a good idea, actually. I didn’t get a full recharge back in there. C’mon, let’s find some cover.”

The Dreg nodded, and a soft sigh of relief cycled through the rebreather in his throat. He figured that the Guardian wouldn’t leave him behind. Just telling Coyote-3 what he needed would have been easier, but this way… this was better. If he didn’t have to explain his reasoning out loud, then perhaps he could avoid thinking too hard about it. They stopped underneath an overhang, a place that was well out of sight (which was good, in case one of the patrols passed by in the distance). The Dreg settled himself against one of the rocky walls, curling up.

Coyote-3 flopped backwards on the ground, stretching himself out in the moon dust in the least dignified manner possible. “Feels good to be back out in the open again. Never thought I’d be so grateful to see so much nothing.” He gestured lazily to their rocky surroundings.

Flicker gave his Guardian a wry look. “Personally, I’ve had my fill of the moon, for now.” He rose a little higher in the air, spinning briefly. “Looks like we’re clear for a long, long way.”
That seemed to satisfy Coyote-3. “Well, I’ll wake up when I wake up. Rest easy, you two.”

“I’m waking you up after four hours,” Flicker informed him, floating back down to hover over his Guardian’s masked face. “It’s high time we got back to Petra about those scouting missions.” With that, he dissipated once more, vanishing from sight. The Dreg closed his eyes before Coyote-3 could drag him into any sort of conversation, pretending to sleep. He waited, and eventually there was a rustling noise as the Guardian turned onto his side. The sounds of his ventilation gradually became slow and regular.

Experimentally, the Dreg opened one set of eyes. Coyote-3 had his back to him, and didn’t move. Moving very slowly and carefully, he pushed off from the wall and stood. The Dreg had no way of knowing whether or not Flicker could see him, but nothing stopped him as he took a few slow, sideways steps away from the Guardian. He stood at the edge of their makeshift camp and stared.

Still nothing. It seemed as if Coyote-3 and Flicker were both dead to the world. The Dreg clicked his mandibles in a mixture of relief and exasperation with himself. This had, without a doubt, been a strange handful of days (the strangest he could remember for a long, long time), but it was done now. This Guardian and he were clear of the Hive and of any threat that might have united them.

It was time for things to return to their proper order, and for them to go their separate ways.

Without a word more, he turned, walking slowly and carefully away from camp, not speeding to a trot until he was sure he was out of earshot. The Dreg kept to the rocky outcrops as best as he could, leaving as few tracks as possible. It would be better for them all if he just vanished without a trace.

Back at the camp, Coyote-3 held very still. He hadn’t been able to fall into recharge, and had instead just been staring at the lunar horizon, mulling over the events of the past few days and his course forward. When the Dreg had stirred and stood, he felt a thrill of anticipation go through him—anticipation and dismay. Was this it? Was the Dreg going to try and kill him in his sleep? If it came to that, Coyote-3 knew what he had to do, but he genuinely hoped that wasn’t the case.

It turned out not to be. He watched behind the visor of his helmet as the Dreg simply turned and walked away. Coyote-3 was of two minds; part of him wanted to say goodbye in some fashion, but the other part of him knew this was better. If they met again, it would probably be in battle, after all.

“What do you think he’s going?” He felt Flicker ask from within.

“Home, probably,” Coyote-3 replied softly. He felt Flicker’s agreement brush against his mind, and settled down more securely. He lay there for a long time, letting his mind wander. “You know, I’ve run into a lot of Dregs in my time. Loud fellas. He didn’t really act much like one, though... had his act together, that guy.”

“Agreed. If I had to guess, I’d say that, under different circumstances, he’d have been promoted by now. It’s more likely than not lack of resources that’s keeping him down.”

Coyote-3 mulled this point over. The situation for the House of Exile was definitely more precarious than most. How desperate did someone have to be to raid the Hive just to keep themselves from going under? Something the Dreg had said had also stuck with him. I was born on Venus. That fellow had to have come here willingly. He’d chosen to live this hardscrabble life. It was, in its own way, a brave thing to do.

And now, their tenuous alliance was at an end. It wasn’t as if Coyote-3 expected there to be any
other outcome, of course, but he still felt a slight sting of regret. He felt as if there was something more than could have been done or said, but he couldn’t, for the life of him, determine what that missing something could be. “Oh, well,” he said to himself.

It was probably for the best. What else was there for them to say? “Goodbye, if I see you tomorrow, I’ll probably kill you?” Once again, he was reminded that he couldn’t afford to sympathize with that Dreg, or with any of the Fallen. If they ever got into the city en masse, they would destroy everything, and kill everyone—not just the warriors, but the noncombatants. The children, the infirm. They’d almost done it once before at the Battle of the Twilight Gap, which had happened long before Coyote-3’s re-awakening.

Even so, it couldn’t be denied that they weren’t all ubiquitously irredeemable. When Coyote-3 tried to picture that quiet, wry-humored Dreg in the same position as those nameless hordes, he couldn’t. Variks the Loyal had been punished harshly for daring to speak up against his Kell when Skolas had decided to employ those same guerilla tactics, and he’d even gone so far as to betray the entire House of Wolves to stand by his principles.

It all came back to that same simple fact: the Fallen were individuals, at the end of the day, more or less like everyone else, and that was how they had to be judged. Of course, Coyote-3 thought to himself, it’s kind of hard to remember that when you’re being shot at by a whole contingent of these individuals. He cycled a sigh to himself. He was thinking in circles. He could save the philosophizing for later. For now, it was time to move on, and focus on more practical things.

As Flicker had said, it was high time he got back to the Reef, so that’d be their next stop. They’d make their way back to the Tower eventually, as well. They had records to dump, after all. Maybe after that he’d look up some of his traveling companions. It had been a while since he’d been part of a proper fireteam, and Coyote-3 was getting a little tired of wandering alone…

His thoughts were interrupted by a distant screech, a dreadful and unmistakable rending sound. Coyote-3 recognized it, and it chilled him to the core. He sat up abruptly, looking to the sky in disbelief. “No way.”

In the distance, beyond the ridge, a sphere of darkness appeared, rolling through the air with a sort of slow, deliberate menace. Flicker appeared suddenly, his optic wide in disbelief. “Taken? Here?”

“I’ve heard stories—” Coyote-3 was scrambling to his feet. “Folks who’ve been sent on patrols to find them. And they did. But I’ve never seen it, myself. I always thought it was only near the Hellmouth.”

The rise of the ridge they were resting under hid most of the landscape behind it from view. “That wasn’t one of the Taken Hive that fired that blast,” Flicker said suddenly. “That was from a Taken Fallen. A Captain.”

Coyote-3 and Flicker simultaneously snapped their attention to each other as realization hit. Neither of them had to say anything at all. The Guardian opened his palm and Flicker zipped into it. Within a moment, they’d summoned his sparrow and were off. “Get the ship on its way,” Coyote-3 called over the teeth of the wind.

He’d known the moment he approached the outpost that something was wrong.

The Dreg hadn’t meant to venture deeper into his troop’s territory—after all, he had no offering, so he needed to be off on his pilgrimage again—but the sight of the empty crates scattered about and the weapons lying in the lunar dust, had stopped him in his tracks. Tracks… he cautiously
approached what had clearly been the site of a struggle, skirting the perimeter and examining the ground. There were no tracks in the dust that weren’t Eliksni.

Another troop? He doubted it. The House of Exile didn’t exactly operate as one, cohesive unit. He could expect to find no warm welcome if he trotted up to a strange troop, and might even be refused if their resources were stretched too thin, but they still didn’t fight one another. Competition was normal for and healthy for Eliksni, but Exile, for all of its other oddities, was still a unified House.

The air was stale and scentless. Without the patterns of weather and the lack of animal movement through the area, it was difficult to say how long ago this had taken place. The Dreg scrambled up onto the remains of a human structure, one whose origins were long lost to time, and swung up with ease onto the low, domed roof. He could see nothing but rocky wasteland in all directions.

And then, from the ground below him, a shrill sound rose, like a distant scream. He didn’t recognize it, but it still sent a thrill of adrenaline through him. The Dreg turned just in time to see a brilliant swirling light, wreathed in darkness, appear in the field below him, flanked by similar singularities all across the field. Before the Dreg could do more than lower himself into a crouch, preparing to scramble off, there was an eruption of blue-white light: and standing before him, something—someone—that was at the same time alien and horrifyingly familiar.

For a moment he just stared, stunned. These beings were shaped like Eliksni, but they looked as if they’d been made of darkness. And then the tallest figure among the Taken, a stately, caped Captain, turned towards him, unleashing a multi-toned, ethereal scream as he sent a roiling ball of pure shadow barreling the Dreg’s way. The Dreg’s instincts kicked in, and he leaped off the structure. He landed poorly, though, and stumbled, crashing onto the unforgiving rock hard enough to knock the breath from his lungs. He stood, only to be knocked down again by a shot he didn’t even hear coming. Pain blossomed through his side.

Gasping, vision reeling, he didn’t slow, but clawed his way to the closest available cover he could find, which was an outcropping of stone. The Dreg’s back slammed against lunar rock as he struggled to catch his breath, which was catching from pain and from shock. This cover wouldn’t last forever, and probably not even very long. Realization and horror had numbed his mind. He’d lost them. Even with their faces obscured, he recognized his former comrades, now twisted into something unrecognizable, now tools of their most hated enemy.

He’d strayed away from his troop for so long, and now he’d lost them. The Dreg clamped a hand onto his side, trying to stem the flow of purplish blood. It must have been a sniper. Unbidden, a name sprang to his mind. Yetrak, a Vandal he’d known. He’d always been the best shot of the entire troop. Had it been him? The Dreg pushed away the notion. It was too viscerally disturbing to bear.

He wasn’t bleeding out, but he couldn’t take many more hits like that, and the Captain had very nearly killed him with that last attack. He’ll do it if I don’t get out of here, the Dreg thought to himself. He’ll kill me without a second’s hesitation.

The Dreg put his head down, crouched, and darted for the next outcropping, making a snap assessment of the battlefield as he ran. The greatest immediate threat was the lone Captain, and he was flanked by dozens and dozens of four-armed Vandals. A first the Dreg was confused. So much of his troop had been like him, two-armed and lowly. Where were his fellow Dregs? As his eyes darted from figure to figure, though, he understood. Those four-armed snipers were the Dregs. When Oryx had Taken them, he’d given them back their arms.

It turned his stomach with rage and frustration. His mandibles clicked in uncontrollable disgust as he slid behind another outcrop. There was something perverse about it, something that only
sharpened his hatred—but he had to focus. Rage was no good to the dead. The Dreg took his shock pistol in his hand, ignoring the searing burn in his side as he did, and popped out of cover, firing a barrage of arc-blasts at the nearest Vandal.

The damage, if any was done, seemed negligible, and it only served to draw their attention. The Dreg scurried back to cover and prepared to leap free, to try and find a place that he could fight back from, but in an instant the Captain on the field had teleported in front of him. The Dreg skidded to a stop. A cold weight settled in his chest. The Captain was Droveks. His Captain. The Eliksni who’d led the troop, whose strength he’d willingly bent his knee to, now stood over him, a sparking sword in either hand.

The Dreg hesitated for a moment. Then, he drew his shock dagger, shifted his weight onto his back heel, and prepared himself to fight, and then to die.

He’d been so shocked by the sight of his former commander that the sound of an engine hadn’t even registered until it was a full-throated roar. Before he could even summon up confusion by the sound, a Sparrow was launching off the outcrop he’d been using as cover, soaring above his head. The world seemed to move in slow-motion, every detail sharp and vibrant in his mind: the thing that had been Droveks, looking up; the Sparrow, making a perfectly parabolic leap through the air; the Guardian astride it, trying to control it with one hand while he brought his sword around in a sweeping, flaming arc with the other.

It was, for a single moment, as impressive as it was ludicrous, but Sparrows were not meant to be driven with one hand. Coyote-3 missed his target entirely, nearly tipping his sparrow end over end as it skidded across the ground, dumping its pilot along the way. The Captain stared. The Dreg blinked. From across the field, there was a muffled, “Shit.”

Then the Hunter stood, shaking off the moon-dust, and, without even pausing to gather the shattered remained of his dignity, charged straight for his opponent.

Coyote-3 and the Taken Captain collided. The Dreg was blinded by brilliance and sparks. When he cleared his vision Coyote-3 had moved in front of him, trading blows with the Captain, wielding that same fiery sword. The Dreg was left to momentarily wonder whether Coyote-3 had a death wish, or whether he always fought blade-wielding opponents out of some misguided sense of chivalry. The he turned, watching as the remaining Taken converged in fits and starts towards their position, drawing in all around them. He put his knife away and began firing, trying to keep them at bay while his companion fought off the remains of Droveks. It was a hopeless endeavor from the start.

“Too many!” The Dreg snapped over the sounds of combat.

With a final swing, Coyote-3 released Droveks from his subjugation at last. The Taken Captain gave a final screech and dissipated in a swirl of darkness. Coyote-3 withdrew, standing back-to-back with the Dreg, and sheathing his sword in favor of a firearm. “Flicker! Where’s that ride?”

Apparently, the Ghost was listening. The dull roar of an approaching ship could be heard over the shrieks of the Taken and the retort of Coyote-3’s hand canon. A dark grey vessel swung down at the edge of the battlefield, kicking up whorls of moon dust as it did. Coyote-3 glanced to it, nodded, and began to bolt towards it.

The Dreg hesitated. He looked back to his former comrades, and he a dreadful hollowness spread through him, swallowing him from within. In that moment he almost felt as if he, too, had been doomed by the Taking of his troop. Would it be more honorable to stay? To fight them and die with them?
Before he could answer the question, Coyote-3 was skidding back, having noticed that the Dreg was not with him. “Let’s go, let’s go!” He barked, grabbing one of the Dreg’s arms with a free hand and yanking him along. Within moments the Dreg had snapped out of it and was running alongside him. Each step towards the ship cleared his thoughts. He couldn’t stay. Oryx’s will might linger in this place. He would be willing to die for the memory of his troop, but he would not allow himself to be Taken.

Coyote-3 fired and fired to clear the way, and when it was time to reload, the Dreg picked up where he’d left off, laying down a barrage of arc-bolts until he was ready again. The last obstacle in their way was a Taken Vandal who’d planted herself firmly before them and was sighting along her scope. The Dreg had known her, back before Oryx had given her her arms back.

His free hand snapped down to his side and he drew his shock-dagger, flinging it forward. As always, it flew straight and true, striking her square in the place where her face had used to be and sending the darkness that made her roiling in all directions. Coyote-3 made a breathless sound of disbelief and snatched up the dagger from the ground as they ran without breaking stride.

And then they were directly under the ship, close enough, it seemed, for the Ghost to work its wonders. One moment they stood there, buffeted by the ship’s wake, their ears ringing with the angry screams of the Taken, and then they were dumped into the cockpit. The stillness was jarring. The cries sounded very far away now, muffled by the vessel’s hull.

The ship lurched and flung itself into the air before either of them could say anything. Coyote-3 scrabbled for his seat, and the Dreg tumbled back to collide with the far wall, wincing as a fresh shock of pain shot through his side. Flicker appeared as he gasped to catch his breath. “Sorry, sorry. But we’re clear now.” He swiveled to take in the cockpit. “We’re clear.”

Coyote-3 collapsed into the pilot’s seat. His ventilation system sounded a lot like breath, heaving in and out, in and out, and in the silence, it was underscored by the softer, muffled hiss of the Dreg’s rebreather. Nobody spoke. The Dreg let his eyes wander around the compartment in dumb shock. Something incongruous drew him quite suddenly to the present. There was a potted plant secured to a bracket on the wall—something small, stunted-looking, and green, with trailing vines.

The Dreg’s eyes flicked to something else. A tattered picture of a mountain range had been secured to the wall with tape. On the dashboard console of the ship, there was a small figure with an incessantly bobbing head. Hanging from some point in the roof of the cockpit was a single, dangling piece of cardboard in the shape of a tree. On the wall beside him, above the door leading out of the cockpit, was something wildly out-of-place next to the other knickknacks: a long, elegantly curved bow, thrumming with a low, dark energy. Each oddity drew him out of his shock bit by bit as he gradually realized that the room he was sitting in was mostly full of junk.

He took a deep breath. It didn’t do anything to dull the edge of sharp sorrow that was cutting through him, but it did, at least, bring him back to the present. From his chair, Coyote-3 spoke. “Do you want… I mean. I can guess what happened. Is there anywhere else we could check? For survivors?”

The Dreg raised his head to look at Coyote-3 once more. It was a generous offer, and an odd one from a Guardian. He couldn’t help but feel suspicious, even if it seemed ludicrous after that Coyote-3 had just done for him.

“I won’t use anything you tell me to come back and raid you guys, or anything,” Coyote-3 said.

The Dreg tilted his head. “Truly?”

They did.

Coyote-3’s ship skidded over the lunar surface, far enough above the ground to avoid provoking an attack from below, but low enough to get a decent view of what they passed over. The Dreg gradually approached the viewscreen, gripping his side with one hand and Coyote-3’s chair with the other, watching the landscape roll by.

Every now and then the Dreg made corrections to their course, relaying them through Flicker. At first they passed other outposts, which were empty and in a state of clear disrepair. As they moved further into the heart of his troop’s territory, he saw more obvious signs of fighting. There were scorch marks on the structures, the remains of pikes, and scattered and burned supplies. There were no bodies, and the Dreg didn’t know whether or not he should consider that a mercy.

They flew along for over an hour, searching for signs of life. They found none. Seeing each blasted site only drove home the extent of the devastation. With one hand on the control panel in front of him, the Dreg hung his head and said, at last, “No more. No more places to go.” He felt dizzy, but he couldn’t tell if it was from blood loss, exhaustion, or devastation.

“I’m sorry,” Coyote-3 said. As far as the Dreg could tell, he seemed to genuinely mean it. It wasn’t hard to imagine that, if they’d met under different circumstances, they’d have killed each other. To die, however, was one thing, and to be Taken, to be enslaved to Oryx’s twisted will, was another entirely. The Dreg didn’t question this moment of unlikely camaraderie. He just accepted it. “Is… is there anywhere I should drop you off?”

The Dreg lifted his head and turned away from the control panel. “Doesn’t matter now.”

Silence hung heavy between them. The Taken couldn’t have consumed the entire House of Exiles, but if he tried to join another troop, he’d be starting at the very bottom of the pecking order, if he was even admitted at all. The House of Exile served no Kell, and never would, and there was very little former structure, but the situation on the moon was dire. Supplies, food, and especially ether were in short supply, and an outcast wandering into a new troop might very well be turned away, simply because they couldn’t support him. On top of that, there was no telling how badly the other sections of the House had been hit, either in manpower or resources.

He’d turned his back on everything when he’d come to the moon and abandoned his birth-House. And now, everyone and everything he’d found here was gone. He had nothing left.

“There isn’t anyone else you can go to?” Coyote-3 asked uncertainly.

“Not anymore.”

The silence returned.

It lingered for a few long moments before Coyote-3 went on, softly, “Hey… look. I planned on going to the Reef after this. Not sure if you’ve ever heard of it, but it’s where the Awoken live. Until very recently, it’s where the House of Wolves was based.” The Dreg raised his head, and Coyote-3 turned in his chair to face him. Flicker shifted to the side so that he could look around his Guardian to meet the Dreg’s eyes. “Most of them sort of… well, rebelled, but there are a few who stayed. And House Judgment’s run out of the reef.”

The Dreg blinked widely. The movement was reflected in the curve of Coyote-3’s visor. “House Judgment lives? I thought… the last, not killed by Skolas?”

“Nah. I’m pretty sure he gave it his best shot, but the last time I checked, Variks was alive and well. Sort of half in-charge these days, actually. The point is… I mean. If you want—if you’ve got
nowhere to go… there are worse places to be than the Reef.”

The Dreg stared at him in silence for a few moments before looking down at his hands. He didn’t say anything.

“If you change your mind,” Coyote-3 went on, “you can just ring me up and I’ll bring you right back here. I’ll give you my transmission number.”

The Dreg looked up again, and for the second time since entering the ship, asked a very simple question. “Truly?”

Coyote-3 nodded. “Truly.”

The Dreg closed his eyes and took a deep breath, holding it for a moment before he let it loose as a sigh. He hauled himself upright, wincing as pain sizzled under his skin from the wound in his side, and proceeded gingerly forward, until he was standing near the ship’s viewscreen again. The Dreg steadied himself with one hand gripping the head of Coyote-3’s chair. Guardian and Ghost both watched him expectantly. He took one last, long look at the moon’s surface as it rolled away under the retreating ship. He had come here long ago, looking for a better life, and it seemed he would leave it much the same way.

“Yes. I’ll go,” he said, finally. Coyote-3 nodded again and turned silently to his console, gloved fingertips dancing over the controls with practiced ease. Flicker was still watching him, though after a moment his optic flicked away, as if he didn’t know what to say. The Dreg marveled at how expressive this little creature could be, clinging to the distraction as grief began to well up within him.

“I don’t think I have any medicine that would help you,” Coyote-3 said, glancing back to the Dreg. “If you wanna sit or lie down until we get there, the door at the end of the cockpit opens up to a sitting room. There’s a couch there. It’s not a whole lot of space, I mean, this ship is pretty small, but it’s enough to, y’know, live in.”

The Dreg nodded and turned. The door hissed open even before he’d finished approaching it, probably the work of the Ghost. Coyote-3 hadn’t been kidding. In fact, he’d been overly-generous. The “sitting room” directly behind the cockpit was more of a hallway, with two closed doors leading off from it and a hatch that most likely led to the cargo bay. Sections of the wall had been stripped to make the cramped hallway as wide as possible, but the space that had been given by these arrangements had promptly been eaten up again with junk.

A long, padded piece of furniture (the “couch” Coyote-3 must have been referring to) had been stuffed underneath an alcove, and there were a fair number of shelving units that had been bolted to the walls, with items secured in straps or by railings. The same ramshackle air that permeated the cockpit was here in abundance, as well. He was beginning to get the idea that Coyote-3 was something of a compulsive scavenger, if the detritus with which he’d filled his ship was any indication.

The Dreg paused in the doorway, one hand on the frame. He looked over his shoulder. Both Coyote-3 and Flicker had their attention back on the console, and the silvery horizon of the moon dipped away as the ship pointed its nose starward. “Evoksis.”

Coyote-3 and Flicker both turned to look at him. “Pardon?” the Ghost asked.

“My name. It is Evoksis.” With that, the Dreg turned and stepped through the door, which hissed shut behind him.
It was dawn at the Tower, and Walker-17 was entering the shipyard. The Thunder Child was waiting there, already being attended to by the people and frames under Amanda Holliday’s supervision. He stood there for a moment, watching sparks fly out from under the welders’ tools and listening to them calling to one another as they worked. It was strangely, deeply comforting to see the vessel in the hands of his allies, being taken care of.

Walker-17 clung to that feeling. He was going to need to listen to his proverbial gut if he was going to unravel the mystery behind this vessel.

“Walker, right?” He turned to see Amanda Holliday herself approaching him, wiping her hands on an oil-stained rag. Unconsciously he stood a little straighter, standing at attention. “The fella that brought her in for repairs?”

Walker-17 nodded. “Indeed, Shipwright Holliday.”

She paused long enough to spare him a wry half-grin, but didn’t correct his excessive formality. “She’s just about good to go. I’ve gotta ask—where’d you find this thing?” She put one hand on her hip and gestured back to the Thunder Child. “It’s not too far off from some of the older ships I’ve patched up, but I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“A rainforest, if you’d believe it,” Walker-17 replied with gentle amusement. “I’m afraid it’s as much of a mystery to me as anyone else.”

Holliday nodded. “Well, give us a few days to finish tuning her up, and then you won’t have any trouble operatin’ her. We did a little retrofitting, brought her jump drives up to code—just easier on us in the future if we’re workin’ with universal tech across the board—but otherwise we didn’t change anything. What’s real interesting though, is that she’s got an entirely separate computer system installed—and not a small one, either. It’s pretty extensive. Built-in, not part of vessel operations.”

“Did you find out what it was for?”

She shook her head. “Not operational. I can tell you that it’s missin’ parts, but that’s about all I can tell you. We don’t really have any other examples of this kinda thing. I’ll keep an eye out and see if anything new passes through that might be useful, but near as I can tell, you’ve got a square hole, and all we’re working with is round pegs.”

Walker-17 nodded and looked back towards the ship, lapsing into thoughtful silence. If Amanda Holliday hadn’t been able to put together the pieces required to repair the Thunder Child’s redundant system, then the technology might very well not exist. Nobody knew ships like she did. “Thank you again, for all your help,” he finally said, looking to her and nodding. “I’ll let you know if we figure out anything new about it.”

She grinned and brought one hand up to flip him a quick, friendly salute. They exchanged a few more pleasantries, arranged to see to it that his own personal ship, the Rocinante, was cared for, and then Holliday excused herself to attend to the other affairs that required her attention in the shipyard. Walker-17, for his part, had one more stop to make before he could consider his duties here complete.

He headed into the Vanguard’s offices.

As usual, he found the three leaders of the Vanguard—Commander Zavala, Cayde-6, and Ikora Rey—all standing around their table, absorbed in tasks of their own. Slowly, folding his hands behind his back, he approached Ikora, inclining his head and speaking softly when he reached her. “Master Rey.”
“Yes, Guardian?” She replied, looking up from her books.

“I’m… struggling with something, presently. I could use your counsel.” She merely nodded silently to him, which he recognized by then as an indicator to go on. “First and foremost, I should inform you of the practical ramifications of my last reconnaissance mission…”

He told her about his journey to the Great Bear National Rainforest, his encounter with Virna Roskar, and the *Thunder Child*. Ikora Rey not only led the Warlocks, but also the Hidden, her own personal network of spies. Walker-17 was not so arrogant to think that if he couldn’t solve this mystery, nobody could. If he hit a wall, there was always the chance that his leaders would find a way past it. The simple act of talking about the events helped soothe his nerves, helped to untangle his thoughts.

When he was done, her initial response was a soft and serene, “Interesting.” She was thoughtfully quiet for a few moments. “If you are asking me whether or not you should continue to investigate this… well. I think you know by now what I would say.”

Walker-17 felt a slight smile in his faceplates. “I think I do, too.”

“That said,” she went on, “I’ll certainly keep my own eyes and ears open. Whatever else happens, this seems to have started on Earth.”

Which meant it could be a direct threat to the City, in not so many words. Ikora Rey often spoke in vagaries, leaving her conversational partners to put together the missing pieces behind her cryptic turn of phrase. Walker-17 never minded. It was as if she were dealing in the philosophy of Warlocks on a microcosm with every interaction: Ikora Rey encouraged her followers to seek their own answers, to unravel mysteries on their own. At times, it could be frustrating not to receive more direct input from his leader, but over the years, Walker-17 had learned to appreciate it, and the skills he’d honed from such things.

“I feel I should also let you know that the Crow I collaborated with will also be involved in this, so you can assume everything I know, she’ll know,” he said.

“Not ideal, but we can work with that.” Ikora glanced back to her table. “The Reef are, after all, our allies.” Walker-17 nodded, and fell quiet for a moment. He cycled a quick breath, and was about to excuse himself, before she said, “But that’s not the only thing that’s troubling you, is it, Guardian?”

Leave it to Ikora to see right through him when she wasn’t even looking at him. “Ah… no.” He paused to gather his thoughts. “I am convinced that I’m involved in this directly. I’m—I think I’m beginning to remember things. And I’m not sure whether this is for the better.”

His leader nodded slowly, not looking up from her book. “You’re uncertain as to whether or not remembering is more dangerous than forgetting?”

“Yes,” he said, feeling a rush of relief at having his fears so neatly summed up. “Yes. That, exactly.”

“Well, Guardian, I can’t tell you the answer to that. Nobody can—not yet, anyway.” She finally raised her eyes and regarded him again. “I’m sure you’ve heard of the phrase, ‘he knows just enough to be dangerous?’”

“I have.”

“It seems very likely that you’re inching towards that possibility, right now. There’s only one cure
for that scenario, and it isn’t knowing less.”

Walker-17 nodded, turning her words over in his head. “I… thank you, Master Rey. You’ve given me much to think about.”

Ikora Rey inclined her head. “Of course.” He excused himself, and as he was turning away, she called to him. “Oh, and Walker?”

He looked back over his shoulder, somewhat surprised to have been addressed by name. “Yes?”

“I would speak to Banshee, when you get the chance,” was her final directive. It left Walker-17 somewhat puzzled, but he simply nodded again. He’d only ever exchanged cursory conversation with Banshee-44. Walker-17 was about as interested in firearms as much as any Guardian needed to be, but he wasn’t an aficionado by any means.

The more he thought about it, though, the name… Banshee-44. Oh. If there was anyone who would have a first-hand perspective on dealing with difficult memories, it would be him, wouldn’t it? Walker-17 glanced back to Vanguard hall one last time, watching as Cayde-6 began speaking about something that required the attention of the other two Vanguard leaders.

Once again, he smiled softly to himself and, armed with his guidance, ascended the stairs to the Tower commons. The brief chat with Banshee-44 did help to quell his lurking uneasiness, despite the other Exo’s very gruff manner. There was something about how powerfully practical Banshee-44 was that seemed to force the rest of the world into perspective. It was one thing to get caught up in the murky questions that lurked in the back of the memory-blasted recesses of an Exo’s mind… but at the end of the day, the weapons Banshee-44 sold were the things that brought Guardians safely home.

And so, he left for his quarters on the Tower feeling a little more confident about his situation, and significantly more comfortable with the steps that lay before him. To be sure, the mystery that lay before him was unusual, but he would handle it the same way he handled all of his problems: with carefully study, determination, and, if needed, with firepower.

He entered recharge feeling fully re-affirmed with his place in the world, and with what he could expect. He would not wake the morning feeling the same way, because for the first time in his living memory, Walker-17 did something no Exo was ever supposed to do.

He dreamed.
It was the first time Walker-17 could ever remember dreaming, and he was unprepared by how vague and yet curiously defined the dream was. He knew things without knowing how he knew them. When he tried to pick apart the details behind each impulse it all seemed to fall apart, but the more he relaxed his concentration, the firmer those impulses seemed to be.

He was sitting in a chair, in front of a terminal with a screen. He’d swiveled away from the screen and was facing the rest of the room, where an argument was taking place. The shape of his body felt familiar to him. In this dream, he was still himself, still an Exo.

“This isn’t about hurting our investments, or about taking pride in our work. This is about survival. We can’t afford to make the same mistakes Dr. Shirazi did. It’s about more than just getting shut down, this time—which would be bad enough, considering how much is riding on our success, here—the ramifications could be… it could be terrible. Horrifying.” The first speaker was a man that Walker-17 felt he knew. When he tried to focus on the man’s face, his features seemed to slide away, too slippery for his mind to hold in its grasp. “We’re lucky we contained Site 6 at all.”

The second speaker, a woman, had her back to Walker-17. He felt that he knew her, too. “I understand that Dr. Shirazi screwed up. We all do. But SIVA wasn’t alive. He is. I can’t even begin to tell you the ways that this is unethical—”

“You’re not wrong,” the man interjected. “You’re not. All right? Unethical, yes. Illegal? No. There’s no precedent for this sort of thing, and at the end of the day, nobody has to know.”

“It will get out, eventually.”

“But only,” the man said, “after we’ve done what needs to be done.”

In the dream, Walker-17 spoke. He couldn’t understand his own words, for some reason, but he could feel the underlying emotions that accompanied them, and as he talked, as the two other people in the room turned to him, he felt two things: a touch of concern, and underneath it, a broad, all-encompassing fear.

“I know.” The man’s voice softened somewhat, losing a hint of its edge. “I know. But you’ve both got to understand our position here. Things are… they’re falling apart. Not just here, either. Everywhere. It’s like the rebellions all over again, but it’s happening throughout the entire system. We’re not in the best position to deal with these disasters, either—we’re stuck relying on a small group of debtors and ex-convicts for the Exo program. We didn’t earn their loyalty. We bought it, and some of them have already turned on us.”

“We’ve made contingencies for this,” the woman insisted. “He’s a contingency, and we’ll be
compromising him if we do this. I understand that things are getting bad. You think I don’t?
Ishtar’s still recovering from the Vex fiasco. All the sabotage in the belt. The missing colony on
the moon. The messages people say they’re getting from the rim—I know about all of that. I’m not
saying it doesn’t matter. But my God, if this goes wrong, do we really want to turn him against
us?”

“The point is, it’s not his choice,” the man said, “it’s not your choice, or my choice, either. The
Conjuration Protocol is the lead’s brainchild. She’s the one who’ll decide what we do.”

The woman sighed and ran a hand through her hair. After a moment, she looked back to Walker-
17. “You’re just as involved in this as we are, of course. What do you make of all of this?”

Walker-17 was filled with an inexplicable fear. He couldn’t tell if it was some echo of his current
emotions, if the horror came along with remembering this moment, but there was a thread of
resilience in the middle of that fear. Right there, at that desk, he was afraid, but somehow,
 somewhere in the back of his mind he knew the worst was yet to come. He said something, softly,
in his dream. It echoed those feelings.

The man nodded slowly. Silence fell, filled with dread. At length, he spoke again, his voice
subdued as he looked to the woman. “Look. He’ll forgive us,” he said, looking to the woman, “at
the end of the day, he’ll have no choice.”

Chapter End Notes

Just a heads-up: this isn't a full chapter. The full chapter update will come later this
week. This is just a bonus intermission. There will be a few more of these sprinkled
through the story as it progresses, and here you guys are getting your first hints as to
who's involved with this ship and with Walker's past. By the end, hopefully I'll have
given you enough info to figure it out before the characters do!

Either way, catch you guys later in the week.
Allegiance

Chapter Summary

Virna contemplates the various allies of the Reef. Walker-17 borrows a book, and Coyote-3 finds something that does not belong to him.

When they arrived at the Reef, Coyote-3 was honestly somewhat unsure as to what he was meant to do. Evoksis hadn’t returned to the cockpit, and when Coyote-3 had poked his head out into the hall to check on him, he saw the Dreg lying on the sofa, either asleep or simply resting. He’d crudely bandaged his own side, but the rags he’d used were soaked through with blood. Evoksis didn’t stir.

“Is there… some kind of procedure to this?” Flicker asked when Coyote-3 had returned.

“I have no clue,” Coyote-3 replied, shaking his head. “I mean, first stop—we need to get him to a clinic or something. He got hurt down there. And I was just going to roll up to Variks and just. I dunno. Ask him?”

Flicker contrived to look somewhat exasperated. “I think it’s going to be a little more complicated than that, Coyote.”

It was. As soon as they’d docked, Coyote-3 had asked one of the nearby guards about a clinic for Fallen, which, of course, had prompted the exact sort of questions he’d expected, which in turn required him to explain that he had a wounded Dreg aboard his ship. This, naturally, caused somewhat of a stir. Before long four guards were waiting outside of his ship, and Coyote-3 was turning back with a sigh to rouse his guest.

Evoksis was already up when he walked in, sitting on the couch and watching him. The Dreg’s eyes seemed dimmer than usual. Coyote-3 couldn’t tell if this was because of pain, poor health, or emotion. “Hey, so… we’re here. I asked around about a doctor. They’ve got folks who treat Fallen here on the Reef.”

“Eliksni.”

“Huh?” The word sounded vaguely familiar, but Coyote-3 couldn’t quite place it.

“What we call ourselves. Eliksni.”

“Oh.” After a moment, the Guardian nodded. “Right. They’ve got places here that treat Eliksni. But, uh, you’ve got to go with some guards, apparently. I guess that makes some sense, considering all that’s happened…”

“The Reef and the Wolves, at war a very long time,” Evoksis rose to his feet. “This is not surprising.”

“You… going to be okay?” Coyote-3 asked uncertainly. He stepped side to allow Evoksis to move past him, and then followed. “If this isn’t, you know, what you had in mind—”

“It is fine.” Evoksis didn’t look back. “Can’t really go back. No matter what happens here…” His
voice trailed off for a moment. “Better. Better than the Taken.”

Coyote-3 felt an inexplicable surge of guilt. He supposed, in a way, that Evoksis’s words made sense: even if he ended up imprisoned or killed somehow (which Coyote-3 honestly doubted, but he wouldn’t blame someone in Evoksis’s position for assuming it might happen), it was better than ending up as one of Oryx’s slaves. Even so, what a horrible place to find oneself, when those were the only two options they had.

They stepped outside, and the guards were there, ready to receive them. One of them stepped forward and briefly looked Evoksis over before nodding. “Come with us.”

And it was as simple as that. Evoksis stepped towards them and didn’t look back until Coyote-3 said, “Hey! Take care of yourself, man.”

The Dreg only nodded once before turning away, and within the next few moments two guards had stepped behind him to surround him. Coyote-3 lingered, wondering if he should do something more, but the guards had made it clear to him that he wouldn’t be allowed to follow. Having no other recourse, he stood by his ship and watched them go.

“I hope everything turns out all right for him,” Flicker finally said, softly. “I really do.”

Coyote-3 nodded slowly. For a few more moments they stood in silence, before Coyote-3 finally sighed and said, “Come on. Let’s go see Petra. We’ve got stuff to do.”

Virna stood with her hands folded behind her back, watching the crows fly in. There were no living crows on the Reef, but the drones that often accompanied her fellow agents had been carefully and lovingly crafted in their image. Each feather was distinct, a delicate and shimmering work of art. They gathered together outside of the Crows’ new makeshift headquarters in silent droves.

It hadn’t been so long ago that Virna had stood below them and heard the quiet murmur of their voices. The mechanical crows used to be intelligent, used to be alive, in their own limited way. The AIs inside of them had been simple, which put them barely higher than an obedient animal, but Virna had always liked their soft, rasping voices. They’d been loyal to the Queen and the Prince, one and all.

The old crows had disappeared after Prince Uldren had. Nobody knew exactly what had happened to them, or where they could have gone. Some speculated that the apparent death of the Prince had activated some kind of incurable paradox in their programming. All that was known was that, one by one, they’d used the warp-cores built into their bodies and vanished. None of them had ever returned, and nobody had been able to track them down.

These new crows were silent, more dronelike. Their new master didn’t seem concerned with their ability to speak, or with any of their predecessors’ borderline sycophantic behavior. These birds were just as elegant as any, but they were lifeless.

Watching their silent, rustling masses brought the memory of the Reef’s loss back to the forefront of Virna’s mind with surprising force. It was always like that: she thought she was fine, and then the next moment some incredibly trivial thing struck her right where it hurt the most. No time for thoughts like that, she told herself. One of her fellow agents was leaving the information suite, and nodded to her. It was Virna’s turn to go speak with her new boss.

Variks the Loyal stood before a bevy of screens, which provided the room’s sole illumination. Virna had often wondered what he thought about his abrupt promotion. It was difficult to tell. He
turned his masked face to her, nodded once, and Virna folded her hands behind her back, launching into her report. Variks simply listened, letting Virna roll through the entirety of it uninterrupted. “In the end, we got away,” she said as she was wrapping up, “I’m waiting to hear back from the Guardian on what made this ship a possible target for the House of Kings, but it’s likely to be a few days.”

“House of Kings rarely let themselves be seen,” Variks said slowly, “Difficult to judge their strength. Their intentions.”

Virna nodded briskly. “That’s partly why this was so… unusual, sir. They weren’t subtle about it when they came and tried to take the ship from us. If it had just been me there, I think they would have. Either way, the ship’s safe at the City, and he Guardian looking after it seems eager to keep me involved.” She allowed for the slightest hint of humor to enter her voice. “Very cooperative.”

Variks made a low, burbling noise: his species’ version of a laugh. “Guardians often are.” He contemplated his screens for a moment before giving a short, decisive nod to her. “Stand by. Take assignments on the Reef. Wait for your Guardian. Tell me what you learn about this ship, and we will see what could have interested House of Kings so much.”

“Yessir.”

He nodded to her again, a simple dismissal, and Virna turned to go. If anyone had asked her, ten years ago, whether or not she’d be taking orders from an Eliksni, she would have laughed. Virna Roskar remembered the Reef Wars. Everyone remembered the Reef Wars. And yet…

Virna prided herself on her ability to read people. It was part of her job to predict their actions and reactions based on what she knew about them and about their situations. She’d spent less than twenty-four hours with the Guardian called Walker-17 and she already felt she had a pretty good grasp on his basic motivations. Variks, however, had always been a little more difficult to read. It wasn’t until fate had provided them all with a series of horrible yet momentous occasions that he’d had a chance to react in a way that would be informative for anyone watching him carefully.

And Virna had been watching him. Virna watched everybody.

There was just something about Variks. It was common knowledge that he was key to ending the conflict, and he had served the Queen with every bit of loyalty his name suggested since then. If he was planning something nefarious, or had grand designs of his own, the moment the Reef received the blow of losing its leaders would have been the opportune time to strike. He hadn’t, though. He’d quietly assumed control of the Crows, helped organize Petra’s own scouts and Corsairs when she was too deep in her grief to, and then stood by once she had gathered her strength to take command.

It was also no secret as to what it was that Variks was primarily concerned with: he was keenly interested in the movement of the Fallen Houses because he was looking for his Kell of Kells.

This, of course, begged another question. What would he do, if he found this person? Nobody knew for sure, but Virna’s money was on the possibility that he would try and unite the remaining Eliksni Houses as their allies. It had been difficult to join forces with people who had been at active war against you only years before, but they’d managed it once. Virna believed they could do it again.

And, as it turned out, she was going to get her chance to put that belief into personal action, because when she reported to the Crow ranked immediately above her for an assignment, she was saddled with a job that, quite frankly, surprised her.
“So, I’m babysitting?” she asked, with more humor than rancor.

The Crow regarded her with amused, half-lidded eyes. “If he’s a baby, then he’s the biggest one I’ve ever seen. But, no. I’m sure he can ‘sit’ himself. One of the guard lieutenants is going to be questioning him, and it’d be a good idea to have one of us stand in to watch. You said you were going to be stuck here for a few days?”

“Yep. Last I heard, the closest estimate was three or four. Waiting on a Guardian to get back to me.”

“Good. That’s perfect.” He handed her a small datapad, but then paused. “Your contact in the City’s a Guardian? Good luck with that.” Her only response to this was to cock an inquisitive brow, so he went on. “Just watch yourself. They’re not exactly known for being, y’know. Careful.”

Virna shrugged. “Our first little scuffle went well enough. Stealing a bit of Golden Age tech out from under the House of Kings’ collective noses is a victory in my book. Besides, if you need to work with a partner, it doesn’t hurt to have a partner that can’t really die.”

“See, that’s the point,” he said, “I know they seem normal, but Guardians… they’re a little bit crazy. All of them. And some of them are a lot crazy. Someone once told me they thought the light cooked their brains, and from what I’ve seen, I’m inclined to agree.”

“Look, I’ll be careful.” Virna held up both hands in a gesture of mock-surrender. “This isn’t my first assignment. You know that. And right now, frankly… we need all the help we can get.” A somber silence followed this proclamation. Both Crows felt the weight of their predicament settling on their shoulders. Virna pushed on, before it could drag her down. “Anyway, maybe your friend is right. Maybe they’re all a little unhinged. I might be, too, if I was in their position.”

Virna knew very well that there was more to the Guardians’ situations besides the practical application of their functional immortality. What must it have been like, to wake from the dead with absolutely nothing, not even memory? Even for the Guardians that had been lucky enough to remember something of their past selves, it couldn’t be much easier to be thrust into a world several hundred years removed from everything they knew. Guardians were creatures without a real heritage, without a culture. All they had was the City, and the fight.

Was it any wonder that they threw themselves wholeheartedly at the task they’d been raised to perform?

She kept this all to herself, though; her comrade likely didn’t want to hear her wax philosophical. “Anyway,” she went on, “last time I checked, it was the Guardians who helped end Skolas’s rebellion, and it was those crazy bastards that led a counter-attack on the Dreadnaught and established a beachhead. Sometimes you need a little thinking outside the box.”

“It was also the Guardians,” the Crow pointed out, “that killed Crota, and brought Oryx here in the first place.”

“Well, would you have done anything different, if we found the hive squatting in the asteroid belt?” Virna asked, crossing her arms. This, at least, gave her companion pause, and she relented a bit. “Hey, it’s okay. I get it. I will be careful, okay? I didn’t forget for a minute down there that my risks were two steps above his risks. I’m still safer than I would be if I were chasing this lead down alone.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, yeah. Just remember what I said.” When Virna merely saluted by way of response, he looked briefly down to the data-pad he was holding. “Right. Well, a few days are the
perfect amount of time for what we need you to do. Your charge is getting patched up right now—apparently he came here right after a fight—but head down to C Block. The guards’ll tell you where to go. If the interrogations go well, you might be helping him get acclimated, too, so get your ‘diplomatic’ face ready.”

Virna held up the pad and made a soft “hmm” sound. “So, who is this mysterious stranger whose thrown his lot in with us?”

“A Dreg that came here from the moon, apparently. Calls himself Evoksis.”

Interrogation turned out to be a fairly standard affair. From the very beginning, the Dreg had been accompanied by the guards, who watched over him at all times and very frequently discouraged him from trying anything underhanded. “The only thing between us and the vacuum of space is an energy field that’s so thin you can’t even see it,” one of them had reminded him, gruffly. “So I’m sure you can imagine how easy it would be the chuck some troublemaker through it.”

“Of course,” Evoksis had replied. So far his handlers had all been universally brusque, but none of them had shown him anything worse than borderline rudeness, which was more than he’d hoped for. They’d also left him to stew in the interrogation room for a little while before the door finally opened to admit two Awoken women: one of them was a guard who wore an air of authority as tangibly as a cloak. Her helmet had been removed, and her eyes burned blue in the dimness of the room, a color almost as brilliant as an Eliksni’s eyes.

The other was somewhat younger-looking, dressed in black and grey civilian clothes. She was shorter than the first woman, but more sturdily-built, more obviously muscular. The guards were armed, but there was something in her stance and her stillness that spoke to Evoksis’s instincts: this woman should be the last one in the entire room he provoked. She simply leaned on the far wall and watched without saying a word while the interrogator took a seat across from Evoksis.

“Before we get into the thick of it, you understand the terms of your clemency, correct?” she asked as she settled in. “If you have any reservations about disclosing the history of your troop’s movements or the movements of other troops on the moon, tell me now.” She watched him for a moment. “If you’re going to become part of the Reef, you’re not just going to inherit our allies. You’ll inherit our enemies, as well.”

The Dreg nodded slowly. “House of Exile is made of outcasts. This is… similar. To when I left my birth-House.” He raised his head to look the interrogator in the eye. “Other Houses, no allies of mine. House Exile had no allies.”

“If it makes you feel any better, we’re not likely to get caught up in their affairs,” the interrogator replied, with a small nod. This wasn’t surprising. The House of Exile very simply didn’t leave the moon, and their primary concern was the Hive. Evoksis knew there were rumors of a small pocket population of them on Mars, but he dismissed it as just that: rumors. “So, to be clear, you understand what you’re doing by coming here?”

Evoksis paused to give this decision the weight it merited. When he tried to turn the thought over in his mind, all he could think of was the twitching, distorted bodies of his former troop. All he could think of was his hatred for their King. *You have two options before you, he reminded himself, return to the moon, knowing your survival will be a struggle, and try to forget all that you’ve lost. Live forever hoping that he does not come for you next. Or, you stay here, with these people who hate Oryx as much as you do, and join their fight against him?*

“Yes,” he said, simply.
“Good. Now, let’s begin…” The interrogation continued. The knowledge that the Dreg had of his former troops movements was not likely to be of any practical use, seeing as how the troop had apparently been devoured by Oryx’s power, but the interrogator was determined to glean everything she could from this fellow’s store of knowledge. He was obliged to give the details of how he’d come to be there, which in turn required him to tell his story of how he’d met Coyote-3 on the moon, and how they’d escaped the Hive together.

Throughout it all, the woman in the back of the room simply watched.

“And you’re positive,” the interrogator went on, “that it was your troop that you saw, before you left? Not possibly Eliksni who’d been moved from Earth, or from Venus?”

“Yes,” Evoksis said softly. “I recognized them.”

The subject of Taken on the moon was of obvious interest to them. Evoksis had precious little to tell them aside the details he’d gleaned from the start. He had, after all, been away from his troop for quite a while, but that still gave them a timetable to work with. The interrogator gave no clue as to what conclusions could be drawn from this.

“All right,” she finally said, after another hour’s worth of questions, “You’re dismissed for the day. We’re going to assign you a liaison to help you get acclimated. We don’t have any permanent residence set up for you, yet, so you’ll be given a place to stay on a night-by-night basis for now.”

The woman who’d been standing at the back of the room finally stepped forward, and stood patiently by the interrogator as she went on. “I don’t think I need to tell you how little tolerance we’re willing to show you as far as misbehavior goes. As long as you keep our hands to yourself and keep out of any fights, I think the first few days’ll go just fine.” She stood. “Any more questions before we let you go?”

Evoksis shook his head. The interrogator simply nodded and stepped aside. He was somewhat surprised to see the guards go with her, leaving him momentarily alone with the woman in civilian’s clothing. “Evoksis, right? I’m pronouncing that correctly?”

“Nearly,” he replied, and she smiled very slightly. “Eh-voke-sis.”

“Right, gotcha. I should’ve known; you fellows love your long o’s.” This meant absolutely nothing to Evoksis, but she didn’t linger on the point. “Right. First thing’s first, let’s get you something to eat. You must be starving by now, after having sat around here all day. I’ll show you around when we’ve gotten you lunch.” She extended one hand across the table as Evoksis stood. He recognized the gesture, alien though it was, and reached out to return it, mindful of his claws. “Virna Roskar. I’ll be your liaison to the Reef.”

It was another beautiful morning on the Tower. Walker-17 was standing at Master Rahool’s stall, turning in his latest finds. He’d been quiet since waking up, for reasons Matthias knew well. Walker-17’s anxiousness resonated strongly through their neural link. Matthias, himself, had been surprised to learn that he experienced his Guardian’s dreams just as strongly as if he were the dreamer.

They’d barely talked about it, largely because no words had been necessary. Walker-17 was distressed, but he kept it to himself as much as he was able. For now, Matthias was content to let him try and keep his mind off things. After all, they couldn’t do anything about the dream, and couldn’t investigate recent events until the Thunder Child was operational again. Matthias simply hovered quietly by his side, offering support, filling his end of the neural link with calm.
“Matthias!” The Ghost pivoted from where he’d been hovering at the sound of his name, called in such a familiar voice. “Hey, over here!”

“I saw the message you left up, on the bulletins. The one asking about that name.” The voice belonged to another Ghost, one who had zipped ahead of his partner. Matthias flew away from Walker-17’s shoulder to meet him. “Thunder Child—it’s the name of a ship.”

“Well, yes! That’s where we found it. On the side of a ship,” Matthias replied.

“No, no no,” the Ghost went on, “I mean, the name comes from another ship. A fictional one. It’s from H. G. Wells’s War of the Worlds. An old ironclad. In the story, it perishes bravely at the hands of alien invaders. It’s a very exciting chapter, actually, if you’ve never read it.”

Matthias gave a little laugh. “Well, I’d expect you’d know, Flicker.”

Years ago, after Matthias had brought him into the Traveler’s service, Walker-17 had expressed surprised to initially learn that Ghosts often kept up with one another, and even used the same public messaging systems that the denizens of the City used, but quickly saw the sense in it. Matthias had been on his own for a long, long time—he’d lived a full life before he’d managed to find his Guardian. Ghosts on their own made enemies, and they made friends.

Flicker was one such friend.

Flicker’s Guardian, a Hunter, approached the group with considerably more leisure than his Ghost. He looked more or less as Matthias always remembered him: clad shades of orange and brown, with a hand cannon holstered at his hip. “Hey, Matthias. What’s this about books, now?”

Between the two of them, the Ghosts explained that Matthias had left a public message on a Ghost-specific channel asking if anyone had ever heard the name “Thunder Child” before, and in what capacity. Flicker, who was always gathering data from any source he could get, be it electronic or directly from the page, had recognized it immediately.

“Don’t we have a copy of that?” his Guardian asked.

“I… actually, I think we do.” As Flicker was speaking, Walker-17 was making his way over, having finished his business with the Cryptarch. His optic gave a brief, enthusiastic flicker of brilliance. “Hello, Walker! It’s been a bit, hasn’t it?”

Walker-17 nodded. “Good to see you both again. Been keeping out of trouble?”

“Of course we haven’t,” Coyote-3 responded. “What kind of Hunter would I be if I did?”

They exchanged a few pleasantries, and after which Flicker suggested they go back to Coyote’s ship. “C’mon, let’s go get it.”

Walker-17 blinked at Matthias. “‘It?’”

“War of the Worlds,” Matthias explained, with subdued amusement. Walker-17 just stared at him, clearly even more confused, before Matthias relented with a little chuckle and explained the news that Flicker had brought, while Flicker caught Coyote-3 similarly up to speed.

“Hm.” Walker-17 lowered his head in thought. “Well, it couldn’t hurt to look it over. You see… well. It’s a bit of a long story, but something very interesting happened to us a few days ago.”

“Yeah?”
Flicker zipped away from them, pausing a few paces away to stare pointedly at his Guardian, and they began to follow. Walker-17 recounted his tale as they walked. He told Coyote of his week-long sabbatical in the rainforest, his chance encounter with a wayward Crow from the Reef, and their subsequent discovery of the Thunder Child. Coyote-3 listened. His face was impossible to see behind the bright orange visor of his helmet (which he hadn’t taken off, even on the Tower), but it was easy to tell from the tilt of his head that he was curious.

That wasn’t a surprise to Matthias. Like most Warlocks, Walker-17 was a deeply investigative person; he couldn’t turn his back on a mystery, and would carefully unravel a question until he reached its answer. Coyote-3 had all the inquisitiveness of a Warlock and none of the attention span. He was curious, but it was a highly indiscriminate form of curiosity. Everything seemed to interest him. Matthias had once confided to Flicker his surprise at how two people could be so alike and yet so different.

“They are quite a bit alike, aren’t they? Except that I’d say Walker is wise,” Flicker had replied, “and Coyote is clever.”

Matthias had concurred with the analysis.

As they drew near the hanger, Walker-17 looked up at the sleek, dark outline of Coyote-3’s ship and chuckled. “I see you still haven’t named it, yet.”

“Hey now,” Coyote-3 replied, “XVI-776 is a name. It’s just not a very good name.”

XVI-776 was, in fact, the default serial number that had come with Coyote-3’s ship. He hadn’t officially named it, and when Walker-17 had asked about it once, he’d just shaken his head and said, “Picking out a ship name is sacred. It takes time.”

Frankly, Matthias didn’t get it, but he saw no harm on Coyote-3’s eccentricities.

As usual, the interior of his ship was a cluttered mess. Their search had them digging around in the cargo hold, and then in Coyote-3’s quarters, and then through the shelves in the hall, before they finally met with success in the cockpit. Coyote-3 had to get on his hands and knees and fish around under his pilot’s chair before he procured it. It was an electronic pad with the book loaded on it, rather than the physical book itself. “Aha! I knew it was in here somewhere.”

“Mm-hmm,” Flicker deadpanned, staring down at his Guardian. Without rising, Coyote-3 passed the pad up to Walker-17, who turned it over curiously in his hands. “We need to invest in a proper bookcase some time, Coyote. Or maybe give these books to a library, or some other place where they’ll be cared for properly.”

Coyote-3 was staring at the space under his ship’s dashboard, and didn’t respond.

“You don’t mind if I take this for a while, and read it?” Walker-17 asked, “I… I know it’s a long shot, but there might very well be something in here that could help me.” He heard a muffled “sure” from somewhere on the floor, and Walker-17 tore his eyes from the pad long enough to look over and see what nonsense Coyote-3 was up to. “Coyote?”

Coyote-3 stood from where he’d been kneeling, holding a long knife in his hand. Walker-17 had fought enough Fallen to recognize a shock dagger when he saw it. “Picked up a souvenir on your last patrol?”

“Sort of,” Coyote-3 murmured. “My last passenger left it here.”

“Looks like they picked it up off a Dreg,” Walker-17 mused, leaning over Coyote’s shoulder to stare at it.
“Well, my last passenger was a Dreg,” Coyote-3 replied.

There was a long pause. “And how,” Walker-17 said, his voice betraying patience rather than any measure of genuine surprise, “did you come to fly around with a Dreg on your ship?”

Coyote-3 told him and, because he was a fellow who valued the worth of a well-told story over his own pride, he didn’t leave out the parts that were wholly and undeniably his fault. He recounted the cave-in, the long trek underground, and the battle that awaited them at the altar to Oryx. “And when we were out, he told me he needed to rest for a bit. Only… he lied about that. Turns out he wanted to sneak away. Can’t really blame him, because things would’ve gotten awkward if he’d have come up on his squad with a Guardian.”

Coyote-3 went on softly, “But it turned out they’d been Taken. Flicker and I heard the commotion all the way back at camp, and booked it over. Managed to get him out of there before he got killed—or worse.” He was unable to suppress a shudder. “Ended up taking him to the Reef. You should’ve seen him use this knife, Walker. He had some killer aim. Never saw him miss a face with it.”

Walker-17 chuckled. “Sounds like he made quite the impression.”

“Yeah.” Coyote-3 nodded. He lapsed into silence again, and after a few moments he looked up. “Y’know what? I think I’m gonna take it to him.”

“The knife?”

“Yep.” Coyote-3 turned the shock-dagger over in his hand again. “I mean… poor fella lost so much already. The least I can do is give his dagger back.”

“Do you think you’ll even be able to find him?” Matthias interjected, floating forward.

“Well, I know his name, but that’s about it. Figure I can ask around the Reef until I find him, if he’s still there.”

Walker-17 nodded slowly. Matthias could sense his reservations through their neural link. While he didn’t disapprove of what Coyote-3 had done, it wasn’t quite as easy for him to drum up fellow feelings for someone who was, essentially, the enemy.

Even so, Walker-17 and Matthias had both known Coyote-3 too long to be surprised that, in a manner of moments, he’d taken it into his head to hare off on some sort of outrageous and highly unlikely endeavor. “If you give me a few days, I can come with you. The Thunder Child’s not quite ready to make the leap yet, but I’ve been told she’ll be star-worthy before too long.”

Coyote-3 set the shock-dagger down on the dashboard. Walker-17’s simple offer of companionship had injected a bit of pep back into the Hunter’s voice. “Deal. It’s been entirely too long since we’ve hit the road together, anyway.”

“Can we see this mystery ship of yours?” Flicker asked. Walker-17 saw no reason not to give them a pre-launch tour. The four of them made their way to the shipyard and, after getting the okay from the ground crew, approached the Thunder Child. On the way, Walker-17 filled Coyote-3 in on what Amanda Holliday had told him about the ship. The size of the vessel had been apparent to Walker-17 when he’d watched it being freed from its earthy tomb, but seeing its bulk next to the ships of the other Guardians—against his own ship, Rocinante—only served to drive home how much larger it was.

Coyote-3 gave a simulated whistle. “That thing’s big enough for a proper crew.”
“It is,” Walker-17 agreed.

“Hmm.” Coyote-3 strolled closer to the ship with Walker-17. “A redundant system, you said, right? A research vessel, maybe? I can think of a lot of reasons you’d want to separate a computer system from the rest of the ship, especially if you’ve got something to hide.”

Walker-17 nodded. “Yes. My first guess would be that the redundant system was used to hold valuable information.”

“Information we can’t get at, unless we find a way to fix it,” Matthias added.

The next instant the two Exo were whisked up into the cockpit by their Ghosts. The interior of the Thunder Child was done in shades of ochre and brown, all faux-wood finish and gleaming brass fixtures in the places where there was room for ornamentation. The cockpit was significantly larger than either of their personal vessels’, as well. There were chairs for both the pilot and the co-pilot, and behind those, three more, arranged in front discrete banks of low monitors. Coyote-3 whistled again. “This,” he declared, “is damn fancy.” Despite the old-fashioned aesthetic governing the cockpit’s design, all of the instrumentation seemed just as hi-tech as anything Walker-17 had ever flown before.

“This is like something out of Jules Verne,” Flicker said, darting about enthusiastically. “Is the rest of the ship like this?”

“Mostly. Virna and I gave it a quick once-over. It can hold a crew of twelve, if it needs to. Space for a small armory, a lab, and a decent-sized cargo hold.” Walker-17 ran his gloved hand over the brown synthetic leather that covered the pilot’s seat. “This is a vessel you could live out of.”

“I live out of my ship,” Coyote-3 said, plopping down in one of the extra chairs.

“You survive out of your ship,” Walker-17 retorted, looking over his shoulder with amusement written plainly in his faceplates.

Flicker turned away from admiring the ship’s glowing instrumentation display long enough to add, “He sleeps in the pilot’s seat more often than not.”

“Flicker, you traitor. How could you sell me out like this?”

“I assure you,” his Ghost went on dryly, “it’s for your own good.”

This launched a debate between Coyote-3 and his Ghost about the pros and cons of recharging in a pilot’s chair. Walker-17 chuckled. Since being reunited with his friend, a general feeling of goodwill had settled over Walker-17, but the phrase that Flicker had uttered had cut right through that relaxed, happy air. He looked away from the conversation, towards the broad viewscreen. Matthias could easily sense the turmoil in his Guardian’s thoughts. For his own good. It was something Walker-17 had said to him time and again. He felt that he knew somehow, deep down, that he’d been wiped for his own good. All of the questions and uncertainties of the dream came rushing back at once. Matthias floated towards him and lowered himself until he could meet Walker-17’s downturned eyes with his optic. It was a wordless query: are you okay?

Walker-17 smiled again and nodded slightly. “All right,” he said, looking up and over at his traveling companions. “I’ve got to talk to a lady about a ship, and you’ve got a delivery to make. Three days, we meet back here?”

Coyote-3 settled more comfortably in his chair and threw Walker-17 a thumbs-up. “You know it.”
They stayed in the ship for half an hour longer, talking about their plans and listening to Flicker’s occasional enthusiastic outbursts about the ship’s design and construction. While they strolled around, Matthias floated forward until he could nudge Walker-17’s shoulder. “Once the ship’s operational, I’ll be going through whatever data’s stored on this ship while we travel. I don’t expect it’s much, but if there’s any transmission logs or flight logs, well… it’s something.”

“Thank you,” Walker-17 said softly. “‘Something’ is good. ‘Something’ is a start.”
Strange Bedfellows

Chapter Summary

Coyote-3 gets a nickname; Evoksis gets a chance to prove himself. Walker-17 gets some reassurance, and Virna gets a new friend. All of them, together, get the show on the road.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Three Days Later

The flight to the Reef had been as smooth as anyone could hope for. In fact, Coyote-3 was somewhat surprised by how normal it all was. The Thunder Child took to slipstream with the same enthusiasm as any ship he’d ever ridden in, and it was almost disappointing how mundane it all was. He mentioned this while they were disembarking onto the Reef. Walker-17 had laughed at him.

“When it comes to ships, I’ll take a nice, safe boring,” he said, “and save the dangerous ‘interesting’ for... everything else, more or less.” Walker-17 paused to take in their surroundings and, with a decisive nod, turned to Coyote-3. “All right. I called ahead and Virna said she’d be free by now, so I’m going to meet her. We’ll all gather at the plaza before we go.”

“Gotta.” Coyote-3 gave him a thumbs-up. “I’ll go see if I can’t hunt down my guy.”

“Best of luck, Coyote,” Walker-17 said with a nod, taking his first steps away.

“Thanks. I might need it. Just be sure you don’t forget, and leave without me, yeah?” he called after Walker-17.

Walker-17 briefly spun on one heel to face him with a hand draped dramatically over his chest. “Perish the thought.”

Coyote-3 didn’t have any means of contacting Evoksis, and certainly hadn’t made any arrangements, so his search was much more prolonged and less businesslike that Walker-17’s. His only strategy was to simply ask around.

His wandering brought him into one of the primary marketplaces in that particular region of the Vestian Outpost. Once Guardians had been granted full access to the Reef, it hadn’t taken long for the various merchants of the Reef to creep as close as they could to their typical point of arrival. The Outpost had been made from the gutted remains of a Ketch, and as such, broad, open-air areas were few and far-between, so every inch of the available space had been used.

Coyote-3 couldn’t tell what the atrium had once been used for, but it had been gutted of most of its interior structures, the better to make room for the somewhat ramshackle stalls and storefronts now packed inside of it. It might have been an alien Outpost, but there was something innately familiar...
about the marketplace. The market itself wasn’t too far removed from the ones that were scattered throughout the City: all bright awnings, glittering wares, and the occasional flare of flame from a grill. The sounds of merchants and customers bartering and the distant smell of cooking food was just as familiar here as it was anywhere else.

The way the walls magnified the sounds of the market made it seem somehow more crowded and expansive that it actually was. All in all, for all its comfortable familiarity, it was somewhat of a daunting place to look for someone. Coyote-3 still held hope that a Dreg in Exile colors, relatively fresh from the moon, would be distinctive enough for people to remember.

Luckily, it was; an Awoken woman running a tailor stall ended up pointing Coyote-3 in the right direction, and it wasn’t long before he spotted Evoksis through the gaps in the crowd. He was standing next to a kebob stand, eyeing its wares critically. Coyote-3 slowed to an easy stroll as he drew up beside the Dreg. “I was wondering if you could help me, sir. Looking for a fella about your height. Wears green. Got a face only a mother could love, and a stylish mohawk.”

Evoksis blinked and looked over his shoulder. He’d recognized the voice as soon as he’d heard it, even if he’d probably only vaguely grasped the entirety of what was being said. “It’s you,” he said bluntly, turning to face Coyote-3. “And already you are saying words that make no sense. Mohawk?”

Coyote-3 laughed. “It’s the thing you’ve got. That crest. When humans wear their hair like that, it’s called a ‘mohawk.’”

“I see.” Evoksis deadpanned. “Enjoy it while it lasts. Will clip it, maybe.” He glanced to the side, nodding to Flicker in greeting.

The Ghost bobbed cheerfully back. “Good to see you again!”

Evoksis stared back for a long moment, and Coyote-3 wondered what he must have been thinking. It was profoundly odd to be standing in his company again, but a good kind of odd. “And you, as well,” he finally concluded, his eyes flicking between them both. At length, he began to walk, and gestured for them to come with him.

Coyote-3 felt something like a tiny spark of triumph, and he followed.

He was being watched. They both were, actually. Virna had been off and on accompanying Evoksis for the past three days, and for the most part she was content to give him space every now and then. She simply observed him, unseen, as he inspected the Reef on his own. She’d always believed you could learn more about a person based on what they did when no-one was watching. Thus far, she firmly knew two things about Evoksis: first and foremost, she highly doubted he was a danger to the Reef. He was almost certainly telling the truth when he’d said he came from the House of Exile. He looked like an Exile. Evoksis was skinny to the point of being nearly malnourished, and Virna had spotted the tell-tale signs of Ether deprivation in the way his hands shook from time to time, and from the darkened skin around his eyes.

All in all, he was not the most intimidating person she’d ever seen.

He also seemed, above all, to be a pragmatic fellow. Virna saw the way he carefully observed everything around him and listened to the chatter of the denizens as they walked by. When he was with her, he asked many questions, mostly about the minutiae of live on the Reef. He was also particularly keen on expanding his vocabulary. Everything about him seemed to suggest he wasn’t just trying to smuggle away important details for someone else’s ears. Evoksis was trying to learn
from his environment.

The other fact had come to her had been a little harder to pin down. Evoksis was quieter and more thoughtful than most Dregs she’d come across (either as an enemy or a temporary ally), and some of this she chalked up to simply being his disposition. Anyone who had survived the things he had couldn’t be stupid. Evoksis was also prone to staring into space for long periods of time. She’d not yet seen him show a spark of amusement, or anger: nothing but a still seriousness that bordered on sombreness.

She eventually recognized it as something very simple. The second thing she knew for sure about Evoksis was that he was grieving. It was an uncomfortably familiar feeling.

_No time for thinking like that_, she told herself firmly, _I'm here to meet someone_. It wasn’t hard to spot Walker-17 moving through the crowd of the marketplace, as he stood almost a head taller than almost anyone else. Virna slipped away from the shadows and moved towards him, slinking easily through the crowd and appearing at his side. _There you are. You’re certainly punctual._

Walker-17 jumped, and then gave a little laugh at his own skittishness. He regarded her with that squint in his eyes that was the Exo version of a smile. “I’ve made you wait three days. I figure that’s long enough.”

She grinned and waved for him to follow. “C’mon. I’ve got us a place to sit down.” She led him to her old vantage point and swung up onto a cargo crate that had been draped in fabric, which gave them both a decent view of the marketplace. She briefly scanned the crowd, noting Evoksis’s position, and said, “So, what’ve you found so far?”

“Not a whole lot. Not yet, anyway.” Walker-17 relayed the information about the _Thunder Child_’s redundant systems. Virna narrowed her eyes thoughtfully at this, but said nothing, and simply let him run through the entirety of his explanation. “Another Guardian came here with me, too,” Walker-17 said, when he’d finished delivering the news to her, “He might be able to lend a hand if we need one.”

“He’s a friend,” Matthias clarified.

Virna suddenly sat up straighter, peering into the crowd. “Is your friend kind of short? Dressed all in orange? Wearing a helmet even though we’re indoors?”

“Er… yes?” Walker-17 seemed both surprised and a little worried. “Why?”

“Well, he’s walking off with my Dreg.” Walker-17 only blinked slowly, clearly more confused by this statement than anything else. Virna couldn’t resist another little chuckle. “C’mon, we’ll catch up with them. If your friend is in on this, he might as well hear it too, right?”

Walker-17 shrugged and stood. “Works for me. Want me to call for him?”

“No, no. Not yet.” She followed the Hunter’s progress through the crowd. He was very clearly walking with her charge, not just near him. They seemed to be talking. It was interesting, and she didn’t want to break it up immediately, not when she could watch and possibly learn something new. “It won’t take us long to catch up to them. Besides, they wouldn’t hear us yelling in here, anyway.”

Evoksis still walked with a stoop, which made him seem generally smaller than he actually was. Flicker had lowered himself down to be at a more comfortable eye-level with him. “How’ve you been adjusting to the Reef?”
“Well enough,” Evoksis replied. “Crows sent me a liaison. Helping me adjust. She is nearby.” He looked away from them, back to the bustle of the market. “A lot to do here. I know how to do almost none of it.”

Coyote-3 tilted his head sympathetically, but didn’t speak. Evoksis didn’t know if the Guardian could personally understand how he felt. After all, Coyote-3 had been resurrected with a reason, given a purpose. Even with Virna’s assistance, Evoksis still felt helplessly aimless in his new home. He wanted to be doing something. At the very least, he wanted to be pursuing his revenge, but he also understood why he would have to wait before his new handlers would trust him with such matters.

It was frustrating, but ultimately he couldn’t be too annoyed that his new allies were acting sensibly. That was a good thing. Evoksis could at least console himself with the knowledge that it was all better than the prospect of going back to the moon. “Docking caps removed, though,” he went on, “and that is good.”

“Your what got what, now?”

Evoksis stepped back and lifted the stumps of his lower arms. They’d been bandaged up to protect them and promote healing, but the caps that had been surgically affixed to the ends were gone. “Docking caps. Used to keep Dregs’ arms from growing. No splicers in my troop, on the moon. Rare in House Exile. Some here.”

The Guardian had stepped back to get a better look at Evoksis’s arms. “Nice! Looks like you’re well on your way to a promotion, eh?”

Evoksis narrowed his eyes and gave his head a short, decisive shake. His arms might one day regrow—at the moment the Ether he scrounged up was not quite enough to make this happen—but with four arms or two, he was still a Dreg for now. He would be, until he earned the right to call himself something else. The thought that he might have been handed a promotion he didn’t deserve was insulting enough that a low, clicking rumble worked its way from his throat.

“Oh! Right, I didn’t even—I came here, specifically, to give you this.” He reached around, pulling something out from where it’d been sheathed against his thigh, and presented it to Evoksis. “It got left in my ship, in the shuffle.”

It was his shock-dagger. Evoksis blinked and reached up to take it. He’d thought it had gotten left behind in the battlefield where he’d fled from his former troop. “Ah.” He’d never thought he would see it again. It wasn’t a particularly valuable piece of equipment, at the end of the day. Shock-daggers were highly useful and thus ubiquitous. Even considering the fact that Eliksni were now vanishingly rare on the Reef, after the rebellion, he was sure he’d have been able to find a replacement eventually.

But he did appreciate the gesture. It was startlingly kind. But, then again, this wasn’t the first.
unexpectedly thoughtful thing this Guardian had done. Evoksis sheathed his dagger back in its proper place and looked up, nodding at Coyote-3. “Thank you.”

“No sweat.”

Evoksis stared blankly at him.

“Uh, it means ‘you’re welcome.’ Sorta.” After a pause, he began to chatter on, explaining the meaning of the metaphor “no sweat,” which only confirmed Evoksis’s growing suspicion that humans and their ilk were in some way obsessed with using bodily functions in their slang.

They wandered through the market, and Evoksis, having resigned himself to his new shadow’s attentions, allowed Coyote-3 to coax him into talking about his time on the Reef. Every now and then they stopped at stalls, where bored-looking shopkeepers paid them, more often than not, little attention.

“So, you had a crash-course in system politics yet?” Coyote-3 asked, turning an object that looked for all the world like a simple brass compass over in his hand. The light chased itself over the compass’s brassy surface in an eye-catching and very fetching manner.

“Fill in gaps, mainly. My troop…” He faltered briefly. “My troop came from many places. Lots of news.” He turned away from the stall, and so did Coyote-3, strolling along beside him. Before Evoksis could allow himself to sink further into his melancholy, he spotted the flash of brass out of the corner of his eye. “You will pay for this?”

“Huh?”

Evoksis gestured to the compass in his hand.

“Oh! Oh, shit, I’m so sorry,” Coyote-3 said, turning on his heel and returning the compass to the countertop. The shopkeeper spared him a cursory glance, but very quickly went back to reading something on a hand-held data-pad instead, apparently uninterested in her own wares. A poorly-paid employee, Evoksis thought to himself, or perhaps family who doesn’t want to be there.

He looked up to Coyote-3, a vague hint of amusement in his voice. “She’lot. You really are a thief.”

“I am not a thief. I just very clearly did the opposite of thieving, right in front of you. And furthermore…” Coyote-3 tipped his head to one side, and the amusement in his voice was anything but vague. “What the hell did you just call me?”

“She’lot. Our word for you, for Guardians,” Evoksis replied, “‘Thief of Light,’ it means.”

“How flattering.” Before they could explore this latest revelation, movement out of the corner of his eye drew Coyote-3’s attention to his surroundings. He seemed quite surprised to see another Guardian approaching them, with Virna in tow. “That was fast. How’d you find me so fast?”

Evoksis offered an answer to his question. “Virna is my liaison.”

This required a bit of explaining, which Virna did, after a brisk handshake and greetings that were exchanged all around. The four of them walked together away from the hustle-and-bustle of the shopping district, seeking a quieter place to speak. Evoksis paused, considering his options, but eventually concluded that he didn’t have anything more pressing to do, and trotted along with them. Nobody initially remarked on his presence, and nobody protested it.

They ended up heading at a slow stroll toward the visitor’s plaza. They were in no hurry to reach
the plaza itself, as the walk through the corridors offered more relative privacy than the broad open space itself.

Walker-17 caught Coyote-3 up in what he and Virna had discussed. Evoksis saw the Guardian glancing to him on occasion, and sensed a slight uncertainty in his mannerisms. He doesn’t trust me, which isn’t terribly surprising. Clearly, he’s more discerning about his company than Coyote. Despite this, though, his presence continued to be tolerated as the three of them chattered on about this mysterious ship of theirs.

Matthias took the lead in the conversation when it came to what they did know about the ship. “So, as far as what I was able to salvage on the Thunder Child… frankly, it’s not much, but I was able to pull some flight logs. Most of the data’s been lost. Deliberately erased, and all. But I was able to put together some coordinates that this ship visited shortly before it got locked away. From what I can tell, the last stop was an old research facility on Venus—Ishtar Collective, of course.”

“Is it even still standing?” Virna asked.

“The best I could say to that is probably. The last records I have of the place are nearly a hundred years old. More likely than not, the jungle’s swallowed it. There haven’t been skirmishes in the area for a long time, so if the Vex or the Fallen have been there, it’s not something we know about.”

Walker-17 nodded decisively. “Well. It’s a start.” He looked to Coyote-3, who gave him a thumbs-up, and then to Virna. “Do you think you’ll be allowed to come?”

“I think they’ll let me travel to a secret research facility to investigate an active piece of Golden Age technology that was possibly put together by the Ishtar Collective,” Virna replied, a glint of sly humor in her eye. “That tends to be the sort of thing intelligence networks become interested in. But… I should say, Walker, that if you bring me along, I’m getting all of this info back to the Reef. Back to the Crows.”

Her expression grew somewhat more serious. “Especially if it could benefit the Reef. The Taken War’s been harder on us than anyone else. You have to understand that I can’t walk away from any kind of technological advantage we can secure against Oryx or the Fallen.”

Evoksis watched this all silently. He could see Virna’s loyalty: fierce, unwavering. If everything he’d heard about what had happened to the Awoken when they attacked Oryx was true, it was likely a loyalty tempered by the fires of loss. She wielded it like a weapon.

Walker-17 nodded. “Of course, Virna.”

Now, at last, Virna turned her attention to Evoksis. “Investigating this is my primary assignment, Evoksis. Odds are, you’ll be reassigned when I leave. Are you comfortable with that?”

Evoksis opened his mouth to reply, but then paused as a thought struck him. “No need. I’ll go.”

“Wait—you want to come along?”

“Born on Venus,” he went on, “can guide you through the jungle.” He paused to look at each of them in turn. “Good warriors, maybe, but the jungle is not something you can fight with guns. You, at least—“ Here he gestured to the Guardians. “—are not pathfinders.”

Impulsive? Perhaps. Evoksis knew that such a proposal would be a long shot, but there was a slight chance that he would be allowed to prove himself on the field, and if he was allowed to go, at least he would be doing something.
Virna put her head to one side, her eyes narrowing slightly in thought. Evoksis could see the wheels turning in her head. “I’ll ask permission,” she finally said, slowly. “Makes enough sense, though. That’s one less mouth to feed here, if you’re out there, anyway.” And the worst that Evoksis could do if he was taken on this assignment was run off. He wasn’t likely to get far with two Guardians in tow. He didn’t, however, intend to run off.

Evoksis nodded and then looked to the Guardians, his head tilted questioningly. Walker-17 stared blankly back at him, apparently unsure of what he wanted, but Coyote-3 quickly chimed in, “Yeah, of course you can come!” A pause. “As long as it’s okay with you, Walker.”

Walker-17 turned his vaguely suspicious attention back to Evoksis for a few moments. Finally, he nodded. “I’ll take all the help we can get.”

“Well, all right then.” Virna picked up the pace. “Let me check in with the boss. See what the verdict is.”

“I’ll prep the ship for launch.” Walker-17 looked between Virna and Evoksis. “I don’t carry food with me, of course, so we’ll only have what you bring. Do you need to pick up any other supplies? Either of you?”

As it turned out, they did, so the group agreed to split up, and arranged to meet back at the plaza.

Walker-17 was the first to come back. Rather than sit, he ambled over to the railing that looked out upon the vast purple gulf beyond the Ketch, his arms folded neatly behind his back. He’d checked and re-checked the coordinates with Matthias, hoping that something would come to him the more he spoke about them, but at the end of the day they were just a handful of possible coordinates, numbers that stirred no memory.

Matthias glanced to him, sensing his uneasiness. “Maybe it’ll come to you when we get there.”

“Maybe.”

“And if it doesn’t, well, I guess no harm done. We’ll still have the ship, I suppose.” He trailed off, and they stood for a while in comfortable, companionable silence. “Walker?” Matthias finally asked, “Are you sure you want to do this?” Walker didn’t respond verbally, but simply inclined his head while Matthias examined the emotions filtering through their link.

He was nervous, to be sure, but there was also a sense of obligation. It hadn’t been a mere whim that brought him to the Thunder Child. He was remembering something, and even now, he was unsure whether or not he should remember it. Regardless of anything else he felt, under it all was a sense of obligation. There was an undeniable link between him and the ship.

“I don’t know if what I’m doing,” Walker-17 finally said, “is selfless, or selfish. On the one hand, we might find something at the end of this road that helps the City and the Reef. Information, or lost research, or, if we’re very lucky, Golden Age technology. So many things were lost to us in the Collapse... to bring even a fraction of it back to the City would be tremendous. On the other hand, I still don’t know whether or not trying to remember these things is... safe.” He was a little afraid. He didn’t say so. He didn’t need to. “Especially after...”

“The dream,” Matthias replied softly.

“Yes. The dream.” Exo were not supposed to dream, as a rule. Walker-17 had heard Banshee-44 mention dreaming before, but the one he’d experienced nearly a week ago had been his first, his only, and he wasn’t sure what to make of it.
He’d looked into the experiences of some of his companions, and most of them said that the majority of dreams were fragile things which tended to fade, sometimes even immediately upon waking. Walker-17’s remained starkly vivid, down to the last detail, and one thing had become very clear: it felt like a memory. And the memory was of an argument over someone else’s well-being.

Nestled deep within Walker-17’s mind, next to a tiny spark of fear, was a suspicion of who that “someone else” was.

Walker-17 went on, “And on the other hand, I have to admit I am curious. I want to know why I have these memories. Even though some part of me feels that I shouldn’t want to know these things, I still do. If I chase them down—what if something dangerous is waiting? What if this is all a mistake? Am I sacrificing my own comfort for the sake of those I fight for, or am I putting my home and my allies in danger to satisfy my questions about myself?”

He fell silent for a few long moments, lowering his head further. “I don’t know the answer. I don’t even know which of these is the question I should be asking.”

Matthias floated closer, silently offering comfort. “We can find out together. You’re not alone in this.”

“No,” Walker-17 agreed, lifting his chin and regarding Matthias warmly. “I’m not.”

Amusement filtered through the bond. “Well, I also meant our new entourage, of course. But of course you’re never alone.” The Ghost floated closer and nudged his shoulder affectionately.

Walker-17 nodded, and took a moment to consider his other companions. He’d traveled extensively with Coyote-3 before, and he already knew they worked well together. His first adventure with Virna seemed promising, too, and Walker-17 was curious about what sorts of things a Crow might do to make it out there in the unforgiving and Darkness-drenched world. That curiosity extended to Virna herself. Walker-17 was interested in what she could do, but he was also interested in what she was. Who she was.

As for Evoksis, he wasn’t sure how to feel. Coyote-3 seemed quite taken with his new friend, but that was hardly surprising, as he was a very gregarious Exo. Walker-17 knew better than to judge one individual for the crimes of an entire race, but as of yet, he didn’t quite trust Evoksis. Virna had an obligation to him, though, and Walker-17 figured she would likely be watching her charge closely enough. In the end, it was Evoksis’s harmlessness that made the whole situation tenable. Evoksis wouldn’t be hard to dispatch if he tried to turn on them. He was just a Dreg, after all.

Before Walker-17 could reflect on those matters too deeply, his companions began to filter back in. Coyote-3 was first, followed shortly by Evoksis. After short, customary greetings were exchanged, the three of them stood in silence for a while, admiring the view with Walker-17. Evoksis was the first to look away, and Walker-17 followed his gaze. He was staring across the plaza at the alcove one would normally find Variks lurking about in. He was staring at the banner of House Judgment.

Walker-17 mulled over whether or not he should say anything. Part of him was reluctant to engage Evoksis at all, but if he was going to get to know him on better terms, he might as well make the first overtures of camaraderie. If his distrust turned out to be founded, at least he could say he tried. “Normally he’s out and about.” Both Coyote-3 and Evoksis looked to him. “Variks, I mean. Must be busy.”

Evoksis nodded slowly. Silence lingered, and Walker-17 was about to turn back to the view when the Dreg asked, quite suddenly, “What is he like?”
Coyote-3 responded, this time. “Variks the Loyal? He’s something else. He’ll hold one hand out to help you and rob you blind with the other if you give him half the chance. Even then, you’d best not let your guard down, because he’s got two other hands and God only knows what he could do with those. He’s shady as hell—I’m pretty sure everything in the Crystal Barrows is stolen—and he’s as clever as a fox and twice as resilient. In short…” Coyote-3 crossed his arms. “I like him.”

Walker-17 chuckled softly, wondering how much of that went over Evoksis’s head. He seemed to get the gist of it, and made a low burbling noise, possibly his own approximation of a laugh. “Variks leads the Crows now,” Walker-17 chimed in. “I’m not sure if Virna told you? She works for him. He and Commander Venj have been holding the Reef together since we lost the Queen. They’re a good team.” He nodded. “He’s a good ally. Loyal as his name says he is.”

“I, personally,” Coyote-3 added, “always thought that nickname was meant to be ironic. Y’know, considering what he did to Skolas.”

Evoksis tore his gaze away from the banner and looked at the Guardians. “Maybe not Loyal to the Kell of Wolves, but Variks is not a Wolf. Loyal to his own House. Judges his deeds by Judgment’s creed. That is a deeper loyalty.”

Neither of them could really argue with that. After a few moments of contemplation, Coyote-3 finally said, “Point.”

“You should see him, sometime,” Walker-17 added. “If you’re interested in House Judgment.”

Evoksis very quickly shook his head. “No. I could not look at him.” And with that cryptic statement, he fell quiet, leaving Walker-17 wondering what he could have possibly meant by that.

“Oh, by the way, um, I meant to ask—you need Ether, right?” Coyote-3 asked, “I don’t have any of the stuff with me, but I’ve got some Ether seeds in storage. Can those, be… y’know, processed? Somehow? Can you still use them?”

“I can,” Evoksis replied.

“All right. Next chance I get, I’ll snag ‘em for you. My ship’s at the City, so it might be a bit.”

Walker-17 watched Evoksis’s reaction closely. He was no expert on Eliksni expressions, but he seemed to be both somewhat surprised and… exasperated? Had Coyote-3 made some kind of faux pas? Evoksis finally simply nodded. “Generous.”

“Well, it’s not like I can use it,” Coyote-3 said with a shrug.

“Still generous. Complicated.” Evoksis waved a hand, dismissing further conversation and leaving Walker-17 to wonder what that meant. The barest spark of curiosity welled up, dispelling a trace of his suspicion.

It wasn’t much longer before Virna re-appeared, nodding at the group before they were in earshot. “We’re good to go,” she said as she approached. She wasn’t alone, either. Perched on her shoulder was what looked like a black bird, with sleek, gleaming feathers and a heavy, pitted beak. It tilted its head and regarded the others with a single, unblinking eye.

Flicker glided forward, his optic bright and curious. “That’s--! …not a real bird,” he said, realization gradually entering his voice.

“Nope. There are two kinds of Crows on the Reef. The agents themselves, and these guys.” Virna
gestured to her feathered companion. “Very elegantly made surveillance devices. They can pipe visual data back to the Reef, bring word of anything they might see on their own, and get back here faster than we could. If the worst should happen, this little guy can pop back home with its warp core.”

“Well, good to have you aboard,” Flicker said. The crow stared back at him blankly.

“The older models had AI built-in, but they all disappeared. After… after the Prince did.” Virna paused briefly, just for a beat, but Walker-17 noticed the verbal stumble. “This little fella’s new. It’s just a basic drone.”

“Maybe he’ll pick up the art of conversation on the way?” Flicker asked.

“Hope springs eternal, right?” Virna shrugged with a half-smile and returned her attention to the rest of the group. “And you’ve been cleared, Evoksis. Consider this an evaluation. If you do well on this mission, it’ll go a long way towards getting you established. So, that’s the long and short of it. I might be recalled if there’s an emergency—so I’ll be bringing my own ship, just in case—but otherwise, I’m in.”

“Well, if there’s an emergency, we’ll help you,” Coyote-3 volunteered, apparently not feeling that the permission of his fellows was necessary.

It wasn’t. At least, not for Walker-17. He nodded at her, and Evoksis blinked slowly in a manner that seemed to suggest acquiescence. “If you like,” Matthias piped up, “we can have your ship follow us. There’s plenty of room on the Thunder Child, after all.”

Virna took a deep breath, and for a moment Walker-17 got the impression that she was preparing to launch into some form of explanation… but instead she stopped, closed her mouth, and then nodded. “Well. Why not?”

“Might as well travel in style, right?” Coyote-3 asked.

She grinned at him. “Might as well.”

Virna had been inside of the Thunder Child before, of course, but she’d not had a chance to properly appreciate its intricate and eccentric design. The walls were covered in wood-mimic panels, all of which had been carefully molded to the contours of the spaceship. The entire configuration gave the illusion of great planks and beams curving over their head. She ducked into one of the unclaimed quarters, which was mostly bare. One of the walls was dominated by an expansive viewscreen which was trimmed in copper. Everything around them glowed in shades of brown and gold. There was a sense of ancient luxury to it that she couldn’t quite place.

“I can’t get over how cleverly this wood effect was done,” the Hunter’s Ghost babbled enthusiastically, zipping around the interior. He was sporadically activating his scanner, temporarily bathing sections of the curved interior walls in blue. “It’s all high-density polymers and alloys, but it looks like wood, doesn’t it?”

“Smells like wood,” Evoksis agreed.

“Really?” This seemed to only push Flicker to further heights of excitement. “That’s so interesting! A lot of work went into making this ship look a certain way. I wonder if it was some wealthy person’s pet project? Or a luxury transport for high-ranking officials?”

“Well, hey, that’s what we’re here to find out, right?” Coyote-3 asked, watching his Ghost. He still hadn’t taken his helmet off, but amusement and affection were plain enough in his voice.
Between her day’s travel with Walker-17 and her few days’ worth of work with Evoksis, Virna felt she had a solid beginning as far as understanding the temperaments of her companions went, but Coyote-3 was a new and wholly unknown quantity. So far, her knee-jerk analysis of him would amount to “relatively harmless.”

The whole “immortal, nigh-unkillable warrior of the Light” aspect notwithstanding.

Walker-17 was moving towards the bow of the ship, stepping between the soft brown leather chairs and looking down over the instrumentation. Behind them, in the hall, Matthias, Coyote-3, and Evoksis were staring at Flicker, who was enthusing about the ship’s old-fashioned interior and comparing it to that of several fictional vessels, none of which were familiar to her. Judging by the squint of Evoksis’s eyes, they weren’t familiar to him, either.

Virna turned away from the display and took the few steps into the cockpit with a slight smile. “You keep some interesting company, Walker-17,” she said, propping her elbow up on the headrest of the copilot’s chair. The crow hopped from her shoulder to the top of the chair and stood there, taking in its surroundings with sharp little movements of its head.

“I can’t argue that,” he said, glancing up as his gloved fingers moved over the controls. “And... thank you, Virna. For coming along. I know that running off after such a nebulous lead can’t be standard procedure. I hope it doesn’t negatively impact your standing…?”

She stepped around the chair and shook her head as she sat in it. “Guardians aren’t the only ones touched by powers greater than themselves, remember?” she said. “When an Awoken has a vision, it’s taken seriously. This isn’t so different.”

Walker-17 raised his head to meet her gaze. The luminous purple of his eyes cut through the comfortable dimness of the ship. “Have you ever had a vision?”

She shook her head. “No. The Void’s only barely touched me. Just a brush of its fingertips,” she added with faint amusement. “But in all honesty, my job is usually harrowing enough without throwing visions of the future into the mix. I prefer things this way.”

He nodded slightly, pausing for a moment. “Regardless,” he went on, “thank you. I mean it.”

“You’re welcome,” she replied simply.

Walker-17 smiled softly, holding her gaze for a moment longer before he looked back to the instrumentation, and she felt a faint lurch go through the ship. “Best take a seat, everyone,” he called, sliding into the pilot’s chair. Matthias floated out of the wall and hurried to his side. Coyote-3 and Evoksis entered shortly thereafter.

There were enough seats in the expanded cockpit for all of them (plus one). Virna took a moment to look the scene over. Before them, the viewscreen was still showing her the familiar vista of her home: wrecks drifting in violet-dusted desolation. The cabin exuded a quaint, antique charm, an ochre warmth that permeated the entire space like a bulwark against the cold of space. Her new companions were arrayed all around, seated in their chairs or floating next to their charges.

She couldn’t shake the indelible feeling that something was beginning in that moment, something more important than the casual air that permeated the cabin suggested. Maybe the void is giving me a goodbye gift, she thought, with wry amusement. A bit of prophecy before I go.

“So,” she said, looking to Walker17, “to Venus?”

“To Venus,” he confirmed. “And after that…” Walker-17 glanced to his companions, and then to
his Ghost. “After that, we’ll have to see.”

Chapter End Notes

This marks the end of part one! If you've gotten this far, first of all, let me thank you for reading. By now you probably have an idea of what to expect as far as what Parts 2 and 3 will entail, and they'll probably be comparable in length to this one. Keep your eyes peeled for: group bonding, some pre-Collapse corporate skulduggery, and general shenanigans. Now, for some mini-acknowledgements.

The Eliksni language translations I've been using were deciphered and compiled by the Bungie/Youtube user Sarsion! They have a great video up on their channel that's definitely worth a look to get a peek at Eliksni grammar structure and vocabulary.

Obviously I'm diving into the Grimoire to pull the lore for all of this, and the next two parts will get even deeper in there. If you want to get caught up on your lore game, I highly recommend Youtube user Myelin Games's channel, which has been indispensable to me as I was refreshing my knowledge. It's a great round-up of facts about each subject, as well as a source of some interesting speculations.

Thank you to everyone who has left a review, or some kudos. I always, always delight in feedback.

There will probably be a break of one week, maybe two, before Part 2 starts, as I want to have all of it written in the rough before I begin to post chapters. See you then!
Part Two: Mysterious Ways

“\(I\) forgot for what \(I\) had traveled, and I surrendered my mind without struggle to the maze of shadows and songs.”
-Rabindranath Tagore, "The Journey"
Wild Land

Chapter Summary

The adventurers travel over Evoksis's home turf. A time-honored Earth tradition is explored. A little life advice is dispensed. A question is answered.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was late afternoon when they arrived on Venus, angling towards the surface until they were gliding over a forest that undulated below them as restless and seamless as an ocean. Walker-17 leaned back to take in the sight through the viewscreen in front of them. “It’s so much greener that I expected…”

Venus had impressed him when he’d first arrived, years ago. There was something to be admitted in the way it stubbornly clung to the lushness it had enjoyed during the Golden Age, but even so, the signs of decay were there. It was evident in the sulfuric pools and the ever-growing patches of bare, yellowing ground. The vegetation of the world typically had an air of desperation clinging to it. It was resilient, but it was not lush.

This was another story altogether; the forest was wild and thick, with a deep emerald heart that brightened to lighter shades as leaves strained up through the canopy. Every now and then they saw water flashing briefly below them, a narrow teal ribbon that wound through the trees. Small flying creatures scattered as their ship dipped lower, and small nimble shapes darted into the shelter of the deeper branches.

At one point, the ground abruptly dropped away. Walker-17 and Flicker simultaneously gasped in delight at the sight before them: a sheer cliff, bristling with trees nearly to the very edge, and flowing between them, flinging itself down the cliff-face in a gauzy mist, was a breathtaking waterfall. They guided the ship lower.

“It’s treacherous ground,” Matthias finally declared. “We could try and drop you here, but I wouldn’t recommend it.” They flew along the narrow canyon formed by the drop for a few moments. Trees clung stubbornly to the rock face here and there, and in the slimmer gaps, the canyon was laced through with vines. “It is lovely, though.”

The Thunder Child raised its nose to the air and arced back up over the forest, searching for a drop zone closer to their coordinate-range.

The canopy was nigh-impenetrable. The Thunder Child itself didn’t have any mounted weaponry, so blasting their way into the forest wasn’t an option, but nor, it seemed, would be landing terribly close to the facility. “It should be somewhere in this area,” Matthias said, peering at the display on the viewscreen as the ground rolled by. “We don’t have so much a pinpoint on where this place is we do a possible range of where it is.” Walker-17 saw only trees, and the rare glimpses of the ground he could catch between them was smothered with vines and undergrowth.

Eventually they decided to set down; they had their general region to look through, and any more detailed searches would have to be carried out on foot. After some more flying, they found a clearing wide enough to admit the Thunder Child closer to the ground, and in a few flickers of
light the Ghosts had everyone out. The jungle loomed all around them. This was a far cry from the forest Walker-17 and Virna had crossed paths in days earlier. The Great Bear Rainforest had radiated an air of age, of a sedate world, gripped by cold, whose harsh edges had been dulled by time and the growth of green things. The forests of Venus were a wilder thing altogether. The air all around them was as warm as the breath of a living beast.

“The general direction we want to go,” Matthias said, swiveling to indicate what he meant, “is that way.”

Evoksis nodded and stepped forward without a word. Walker-17 watched him, and the way he kept swiveling is head this way and that, drinking in the sights and sounds all around him. He’d said he was from Venus. Was he feeling homesick? Nostalgic? It was impossible for him to tell. The Dreg finally turned to them, nodded decisively, and began to trot into the underbrush, pulling his knife free as he did. Virna’s crow abruptly launched from her shoulder and, with heavy wingbeats, carried itself into the canopy.

It was slow going. The underbrush of the rainforest was just as unyielding as the canopy had been, dominated by great broad-leaved plants and choked by grasping creeper vines. Evoksis led them between the trunks, showing them with plants parted easily and safely to admit their passing and occasionally pointing out ones to avoid. “Thorns,” he would say, simply. “Stinging insects.”

The green-tinged shade provided by the trees gathered into a deeper, hungrier darkness as twilight rolled in. As they passed a particularly large, gnarled tree, Evoksis put his knife between his teeth and quite casually clambered up it, digging his claws into the bark, hoisting himself up with the branches and the vines that clung to the trunk.

Walker-17 was reminded, briefly, of the ease with which Virna had climbed the support structures that had been holding the Thunder Child, and was quietly amused. They waited in patient silence while Evoksis clambered out onto one of the branches and peered about, getting the lay of the land. “When do you want to camp?” he called down.

Nobody was particularly tired yet, but the onset of night would make the search difficult to the point of near-impossibility. The entire area had been eaten alive by the forest, and they might very well pass by the only sign of civilization without even noticing it in the dark. “Maybe in another hour or two, I’m guessing,” Virna called up.

Evoksis nodded and scurried down the trunk, turning and leading them down whatever path he’d managed to scout out from the tree. They trudged on. The heat and humidity were still formidable despite the gathering shadows, which only served as a grim portend for what the weather was going to be like the next day, under the full force of the sun.

About two hours after sundown, they finally stopped. There was a brief discussion over the pros and cons of building a fire. It would be more for light and comfort than for actual need, and if there was anything dangerous lurking in the rainforest, a fire would make it much easier for them to be found. In the end, though, the risks were few enough to justify one. The worst they’d likely have to worry about was curious jungle fauna, and that was nothing they couldn’t handle.

Virna and Evoksis were the only two who knew anything about properly building a fire, as neither of the Guardians had really ever needed one. Finding dead wood in such a lush place was a challenging task, but Evoksis managed it, and carefully arranged the tinder and the surrounding stones into as near a perfect circle as he could, pushing each of the border stones flush.

“Is there some kind of advantage to that?” Coyote-3 asked, watching with his hands on his hips at the painstaking care that went into creating the fire.
“For luck,” Evoksis replied. When Coyote-3 only tilted his head sharply in silent question, Evoksis traced the shape of a circle in the air with his hands. “It is a holy shape.”

“Oh.”

After they’d established camp, Evoksis excused himself and left. Walker-17 watched him go, noting the ease and speed with which he vanished into their surroundings. He wondered, briefly, whether or not the Dreg would even come back. After all, he was from this place, wasn’t he? And it wasn’t as if he could return to the moon…

Evoksis did come back to camp, though, and when he did, he wasn’t empty-handed. He was holding two plump, brown-feathered birds by the legs, and a large clump of broad, thick leaves. Walker-17 was no expert, but they reminded him somewhat of pheasants. “Dinner,” Evoksis said simply.

“Did you not bring any rations?” Virna asked, clearly puzzled. Her crow had returned to her, and was perched above, an indistinct shadow rendered brassy by the flickering fire’s light.

“Yes. Have them. But these are fresh.” He strung the birds up on a low hanging branch and walked to the very edge of the firelight. The group watched in curious fascination as he began to clear a space. After a moment, Coyote-3 hopped to his feet and trotted over, offering his help.

“Did you get these guys with your knife?” he asked as he stamped down the brush. Evoksis nodded, and he laughed, unabashedly delighted. “Y’all should see this guy throw. A real deadeye.”

As soon as the area was flat enough, Evoksis laid the leaves down, fetched his birds, and began to casually field-dress them with his knife, starting with the feet. It was crisp, brisk work, silent except for the occasional snap of bone. “Very thin skin,” he said, glancing up to Coyote-3 who was squatting nearby, and Virna, who had leaned over curiously to watch. “Peels right off.”

The leaves were soon spattered with blood—but less blood than Walker-17 would have expected—and loose feathers, which drifted off as the wind caught them. Evoksis casually gutted them in one fell scoop, separating some of the organs out and wrapping them up in smaller leaves. He fastidiously buried the offal that he didn’t intend to eat and, less than ten minutes, had two ready-to-cook birds laid out before him.

“Impressive,” Virna said, as he gave the birds a quick rinse.

Evoksis’s eyes squinted slightly and he bobbed his head once. It looked like a gesture of pleased acknowledgement, but Walker-17 couldn’t be sure. “Now, to cook them.”

This required a rack, and soon everyone was up and casting about for sticks that would do. The group had been silent since they set foot in the rainforest, discouraged from talking by the less-than-pleasant weather and the tough going, and this activity broke it at last. It wasn’t long before both birds were impaled over the fire on a crude, but serviceable rack, and the leaf-wrapped organ meat was sitting on the coals at the edge of the blaze. The smell of roasting meat filled the air—an odd smell, and not one that Walker-17 found particularly appetizing, but he could only imagine that it registered differently for his organic companions.

“Try some, when it’s done,” Evoksis said, nodding to Virna. “Safe for humans. Probably Awoken.”

Coyote-3 looked to her curiously. “Are there some human foods you guys can’t eat?”
Virna shook her head. “None that I’ve come across so far.”

“So what’s the big, y’know, difference? If you don’t mind my asking,” Coyote-3 added hurriedly. “Aside from the purple skin, and the glowing eyes and all.”

“I don’t mind, but I couldn’t honestly tell you, except to say the Awoken are naturally Void-touched. If there’s any more specific biological differences…” She shrugged. “It’s never been something that came up enough for me to learn about.”

“Hmm.” Coyote-3 put his head thoughtfully to one side. The firelight glinted off the orange visor of his helmet. Walker-17 had put his own helmet away almost immediately, and once they’d made camp, almost everyone had shed a few layers—Virna had ditched her armored jacket, and Walker-17 had removed his heavier raiment—but the Hunter hadn’t even so much as lowered the hood of his cloak.

“Did you learn this growing up here?” Virna asked. Evoksis nodded simply, reaching forward to turn the spit.

A brief silence fell over the group once more. The endless calls of insects and other small night-creatures filtered through the thick humid air. “I never noticed that Venus was so noisy,” Walker-17 murmured. “I mean, naturally noisy—noisy because it’s full of life.”

“Instead of gunfire,” Coyote-3 added helpfully.

Walker-17 nodded. For a few moments the only sounds were the chorus of the creatures of the night. “Quieter, in the dangerous places,” Evoksis said. “Even when the gunfire stops. Nothing living there. Afraid of the Vex, of the Eliksni. And now, the Taken.” His pale eyes narrowed and he looked into the heart of the crackling fire.

The silence that settled over the group was more somber, then. “Hopefully we won’t see any while we’re here,” Matthias finally said, softly. “There’s no reason to believe that they’ll show up in the middle of nowhere like this, but they like to show up without warning, so…” he trailed off.

“We’ll be ready,” Coyote-3 said. “I’ve killed lots of Taken. I’ll probably kill a lot more before the war’s done.” This was said without bravado or any measure of gravitas. It was a statement delivered lightly, as if he were talking about the weather.

Virna cocked a brow, either amused or surprised by this incredibly cavalier attitude regarding contact with reality-bending living nightmares. “If I never get close to one, personally, I’ll consider it a victory,” she said, “I don’t have the same protections as you two.” Here, she nodded at Walker-17 and Coyote-3. “I’ve never seen an Awoken get Taken, but frankly, I don’t want to be the first to find out whether or not we can.”

Evoksis poked the fire. Sparks lifted off from the blaze and streaked into the air. “Hive magic. Dark—darker than your Void. Best not to tempt it.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” she replied in agreement. After a moment, Virna between the Guardians. “But I wonder—what makes you two immune?”

“I’d always assumed,” Walker-17 said, “that it had something to do with the Traveler. I don’t think Oryx can do anything to us as long as our Light is strong. But Guardians can lose their Light, if they’re not careful.”

“Maybe Oryx is so pissed off at us for the whole Crota thing that he doesn’t want to Take us.” Coyote-3’s hypothesis held much less intellectual merit. “He just wants to kill us, instead.”
“Being Taken, worse than death,” Evoksis said, looking up from the fire. “Made to serve a false House. Filled with Oryx’s will.” The Dreg’s mandibles rattled against his jaw, teeth clicking together rapidly, faintly. Walker-17 didn’t have to be an expert in Eliksni body language to recognize it as a sign of agitation. “Better to die with your freedom. With your honor.”

Flicker made a low “hmm” noise. “I’d always thought that it had to do with Guardians being fundamentally incompatible. That’s one of the first things we found out about Taken—they require a living host.”

There was a long pause. Very slowly, everyone else around the fire turned their head to stare at Flicker. He sensed that he’d perhaps said something odd, and his optic blinked, flicking rapidly between his companions’ faces. “I mean, technically, most Guardians aren’t. There are Ghosts who’ve met their Guardians while they’re still alive, of course—I talked to a lot of them, in my travels, who later told me that they were released before their Guardian had even been born—but most of our Guardians have died at least once. Coyote was dead when I found him.”

“As was Walker,” Matthias added.

“I would think, in theory, that maybe Oryx could Take a Guardian who’d never died, if he managed to capture them and drain their Light but…” Flicker’s plating rose and fell in a shrug. “For the rest of them, I think they’re just not alive enough.”

There was another long pause.

“No offense,” Virna said slowly, “but that’s just a little creepy.”

“None taken,” Coyote-3 and Walker-17 answered in almost perfect unison. They swiveled to face one another.

“That really didn’t help, did it?” Coyote-3 asked, looking to Virna. “I swear we all don’t operate on a hivemind or something weird like that.”

“I’m not even sure how you’d classify an Exo who’d never died,” Flicker went on, his voice low and thoughtful. “Are they born when they become an Exo? Or do they die when they stop becoming human?”

“Stop becoming human?” Virna asked.

“There’s not a lot of hard evidence, as far as concrete records go,” Walker-17 interjected, “but it’s generally accepted that most, and very likely all, Exo were once human. The exact process by which we were made isn’t really known.”

“I’ve met some folks that say they remember it,” Coyote-3 added. “For the record, I don’t.”

Walker-17 nodded. “Me either. But nevertheless, I have every reason to believe I was born human.” He would be lying if he said he wasn’t curious about his life before he was an Exo, but Walker-17 had known for a while that the odds of finding anything out about his distant past were low. But then again... this entire endeavor was evidence against that, wasn’t it? So far, in the dreams, he remembered himself as an Exo, but what if that was just because it was his mind’s only frame of reference?

What if the pavestones of these mysterious ways had been laid by him when he was still human?

“Ascension,” Evoksis said. The sudden interjection brought Walker-17 out of his thoughts, and the group’s attention back to him. “To... I don’t know the word. Moving to a high existence. Towards holiness.”
A few vocabulary suggestions (and their respective definitions) were offered before Evoksis settled on “apotheosis.” Walker-17 and Coyote-3 seemed a little perplexed by this, so Virna offered what insight she had. “Prime Servitors aren’t gods, per se—correct me if I’m getting any of this wrong, of course, Evoksis—but machines are venerated. I think the degree of such depends on your House.”

“Wait, if machines are holy, what does that make us?” Coyote-3 asked. For the first time since their journey began, there was a faint timbre of discomfort in his voice.

Evoksis gave a huffing snort. “Not gods, if that’s why you are bothered. It makes you… like.” He struggled with the words for a bit longer. “A pilgrim. A disciple. I think. I don’t know how holy you consider your great machines to be.” The Dreg shrugged.

Coyote-3 relaxed, visibly more comfortable with the notion that Evoksis viewed him as some sort of alien analogue to a priest, rather than as some sort of divine figure. Once again, Walker-17 could see Virna regarding his companions with faint curiosity. He could practically see the wheels turning in her head. She’s taking notes, he realized. Reading people in detail was probably necessary for someone in her line of work. He wondered how many times Virna had watched him that way, taking him apart in her mind?

The group fell quiet again, watching the fire, letting the calls of the nightbirds and the crackle of the fire fill the silence. “Maybe we should change the subject,” Coyote-3 finally said, “to something a little less… heavy.”

“Agreed,” Virna chimed in.

“I mean—we’re here by a campfire,” Flicker said, his optic darting between his companions in a way that could only be described as hopeful, “we could tell a story, or something.”

Virna and Evoksis were both a bit perplexed by a suggestion that seemed, to them, to be out of the blue, but Matthias assured them it was a time-honored Earth tradition. “Typically,” he said, “campers like to offer one another ghost stories. But, really, anything would do.”

Virna shrugged. “I’m fine with it.”

“All right,” Coyote-3 asked, “who’ll start?” Nobody immediately rose to the occasion. The rest of the group didn’t possess the Hunter’s deliberately and resiliently casual air. The gravity of the topic had reminded them of their differences. They felt a little uncertain, a little awkward, and it showed.

The pause stretched on until Flicker bobbed in the air. “Well. I suppose it’s only fair, since I suggested it. Besides, I’ve got no shortage of stories in my memory. Let’s see…” His optic flickered as he turned his focus inward, apparently rifling through his internal database. “Ah, all right. I think this will do, for our current surroundings.”

He required, it seemed, no further prompting. Flicker rose a little higher in the air, managing to affect a grand air despite being roughly the size of a softball. “In the bosom of one of those spacious coves which indent the eastern shore of the Hudson, at that broad expansion of the river denominated by the ancient Dutch navigators the Tappan Zee, and where they always prudently shortened sail and implored the protection of Saint Nicholas…” He paused for the briefest moment, taking in his audience. “There lies a small market town which is generally known by the name of Tarry Town.”

Coyote-3 gave a light chuckle partway through Flicker’s introduction, apparently recognizing the story. The other three fell into rapt silence, having never before even heard of The Legend of
Sleepy Hollow. Flicker was a storyteller full of gusto and enthusiasm, extolling the narrative as much with his delivery as with the words themselves.

There was a brief pause in the middle of the story to take dinner off the fire. Evoksis simply broke the spit in half, offering one of the birds to Virna. “The whole thing?” she asked, somewhat taken aback. He made a clicking noise at her, to which she nodded, accepting the proffered food. “Thank you, Evoksis. That’s very generous of you.”

“One of those, too,” he nodded to the leaf-wrapped packets of organ meat. “Best part.”

“Ah, thanks, but I think I’ll stick with this.” She hoisted the skewered bird in a gesture almost like a toast and settled back down.

Evoksis shrugged, but didn’t seem displeased by her refusal. They settled in to eat, and when Flicker took up the narrative once more, saying, “Ichabod was a kind and thankful creature, whose spirits rose with eating as some men’s do with drink…” It settled over the party almost like a directive. Despite the uncertainty which had lingered moments before, despite the strange circumstances of their lives, despite how very different they all were, a spark of conviviality was born that evening.

Dinner ended well before the story. Evoksis had eaten his bird down to the bones, which he’d then snapped between his vicious-looking teeth and swallowed whole. Virna, who’d had no intention of doing the same, had wordlessly passed her leftovers over to him as well, to be summarily devoured. He saved the organ meat for last, lingering over it almost like a dessert, as he watched Flicker bob and dart across the air around the campfire in enthusiasm for his tale.

The entire camp was respectfully silent as Flicker drew to a close, lowering his voice measure by measure until it was barely softer than the crackling fire. “…and the plowboy, loitering homeward of a still summer evening, has often fancied Ichabod’s voice at a distance, chanting a melancholy psalm tune among the tranquil solitudes,” he murmured, drawing away from the firelight, “of Sleepy Hollow.”

Further unity was found in the groups’ universal struggle to understand the language of the story. The writing style was so archaic as to be thoroughly confusing for Walker-17 at times, but there was enough charm woven into the narrative and enough plain descriptions of things and circumstances that he wasn’t completely lost in this sea of unfamiliar names and places. He wasn’t, as it turned out, the only one.

“Flicker, I speak this language fluently, and even I had some trouble keeping up with parts there,” Virna said, sounding more amused than frustrated. “Still, I liked it.”

“Oh, sorry about that,” Flicker replied, abashed. “It’s just a favorite of mine.”

“When I understand all of your story,” Evoksis said dryly, “I will consider myself fluent in your language.”

“Me too,” Coyote-3 chimed in.

This provoked a soft, but genuine laugh from Flicker. “Well. I did my part. Do you want to go next?” He swiveled towards Evoksis. The Dreg blinked at him, taken quite by surprise.

“I am… not sure. Hm.” Evoksis looked down at the fire again. “There aren’t many stories we tell, just for pleasure. Not many songs. There used to be. Lost now.” He poked the fire again, sending a cascade of sparks swarming up into the air. Their brilliance chased elaborate lines in the dusk. “The closest I would have is the Starcatcher. But it’s a small story. It is not like yours.”
“I’d still like to hear it,” Flicker said, very softly.

Walker-17 couldn’t say for sure, but he thought that something in the gentle sincerity of the Ghost’s voice is what softened Evoksis’s resolve. The Dreg nodded and lowered his head, gathering his thoughts. “There is a story,” he finally began, “that is as old as time. It was told before the Whirlwind. We knew it before we knew the Great Machine. The one who would catch the stars. He has never been named. He has always been.”

He had started off in his usual halting, stilted way of speaking, but as he went on, the cadence of his voice began to flow more smoothly. Evoksis raised his head and looked from face to face, through the camp. “They say, the story was told when we were strong. When we were noble. Not Fallen, as you call us now. As, maybe, we are. But even then, the story told of a time when we would be lost. When we would need someone who could reach out and take the stars. And from the lowest, the... the least of us—what you call ‘Dreg’—he would rise.”

The entire camp was still, utterly rapt. Not a single one of them had heard a Fallen folktale before, and certainly not from one of the Fallen themselves. Evoksis looked into the fire. “And he would stand between his people and his enemies. He would look his enemies in the eye, and he would say, ‘I am a marvel with ten thousand arms.’ Ten thousand stars would burn in his hands. ‘You will not hurt my people,’ he would say, ‘now, or ever again.’”

Silence followed in the wake of his story. Nobody seemed to know what to say—except, of course, the one among them who loved stories the most. “That’s very stirring, Evoksis,” Flicker said. “Would you mind if I archived that? For myself?”

Evoksis looked up and straightened, shrugging. “Go ahead. It is a lie; a story told to keep the unruly low in their place. A balm. A promise of something that will never happen.”

“A fairy tale,” Walker-17 said, “that’s what we’d call it, anyway.”

The Dreg tilted his head, his eyes narrowing in a way that Walker-17 was coming to recognize as amusement. “‘Fairy tale.’ Yes. That will do.”

By that point, night had well and truly settled in, and it was time to start thinking of sleep. “I’m good for another forty-eight hours,” Coyote-3 said, waving a hand. “I can keep watch.”

“All right.” Virna stretched out on the ground, using her rolled-up armored jacket as a makeshift pillow. “I’m going to trust you on this, but if I have to hop up in the middle of the night to fight some horrible beast in my civvies, I’m blaming you.”

Coyote-3 laughed and gave her a thumbs-up. “I’ll be sure to lure any and all horrible beasts as far away as possible.”

Soon, stillness fell over the camp, broken only by the flickering of the fire. Walker-17 sat with his head lowered, silently turning over the day’s events, and wondering whether or not they would find answers in the jungle. Regardless, he thought to himself, I’m not sorry to have come here. Even if this loose alliance ended by daybreak, it would make for an interesting story to tell, someday.

“This is nice,” Coyote-3 said. Walker-17 chuckled at how synchronous their thoughts must have been. “It’s been a while since I traveled with a team. Even longer since I traveled with you. We need to team up more often.”

Walker-17 nodded absently. “It is nice.” He saw the glint of the firelight on Coyote-3’s visor shift out of the corner of his eye as his companion inclined his head. Walker-17 had kept his tone fairly
neutral, but Coyote-3 knew him too well to be fooled.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. Just… thinking. It’s been a long time since Matthias found me.” He spared his Ghost a fond glance. “After a while I think I gave up on figuring out what my life was like before… well. Before. It’s put me in an odd state of mind, I suppose. At least, in the quiet moments, where I have nothing else to occupy my thoughts.”

Coyote-3 nodded slowly. “I can see how that would be weird. Yeah, definitely.”

“Have you ever spent time wondering about who you were, back then?”

Coyote-3 inclined his head slightly. “A little. Maybe.” The reluctance in his tone was telling; odds were good he’d done more than “a little” thinking, if Walker-17 were any judge. “I know I must have been human, and I had to sign up for the Exo program, but that’s about it.”

“So, no more or less than the rest of us,” Walker-17 said.

“Yeah.” There was another, much longer pause. When Coyote-3 spoke next, his voice was very soft, barely audible over the crackle of the fire. “I think I was a soldier, maybe. I joined the program for a reason, after all. It’s a hell of a commitment, y’know?”

Walker-17 merely nodded.

“If I was going to let them make me into a machine, I had to believe in something. There’s a sort of...” he gestured vaguely with one hand, struggling to find the words. “Inherent... nobility? In giving up your body. I guess that sounds kind of conceited, but you know what I mean. Anyway. Everything I’ve got’s speculation. But I think I might have a vague idea.”

“Thank you for sharing that, Coyote,” Walker-17 said softly, sincerely. The Hunter nodded, and they fell into silence again. Coyote-3 hadn’t said it in so many words, but there was an obvious hopefulness behind his speculation. They lived in a dark, dangerous time. It was easy to lose sight of the Light. Clinging to a noble past—even if it was half-remembered—was one way to stay grounded, he supposed.

“Anyway,” Coyote-3 went on, after a few moments had passed, “the only thing I can do to save myself after an embarrassingly honest moment like that is nap the awkward away. Might as well get some recharge while we can.”

“I’ll keep watch.”

It didn’t take long for Coyote-3 to fall asleep, which left Walker-17 alone with the flickering remains of the fire. As he looked over his new traveling companions, he was once again struck by the oddness of the scene, and smiled, despite himself.

“I’m sure there have been stranger alliances.” Matthias said, sensing Walker-17’s feelings. “And this is probably not going to be the strangest thing we do.”

Walker-17 gave a short snort of laughter. “You’re probably right. But, these are my memories we’re chasing down. I’m pretty sure I’d know by now if I was involved with anything too unusual.” There was a pause. “Or, at least, I hope I would.”

Matthias bobbed a shrug. “Only time will tell.”

They both fell into silence once more, letting the soft emotional impulses of the neural link convey
their sentiments. The night passed peacefully, which was a rare luxury that both watchers took the
time to fully enjoy. Virna was the first to wake. She looked to Coyote-3 and gave a snort.
“’Keeping watch,’ I see.”

“He embarrassed himself so hard he knocked himself out,” Walker-17 replied. Virna laughed,
sitting up and giving a long, luxurious stretch that ended with a soft *pop*. Walker-17 blinked,
alarmed. “Are you all right?”

“Hm?” She asked, blinking sleepily at him and relaxing.

“You made a noise.”

Virna laughed again, and while she was assuring Walker-17 that popping her back wasn’t doing
any damage to her, Evoksis woke, too, with a wide yawn that would’ve made a shark run for
cover. “It’s not quite dawn yet.” Virna went on, “but if you guys are ready, I am. We might as
well make a little progress before the sun comes up.”

Coyote-3 was soon up, and the group agreed. They left nothing behind but the remains of their
fire, which Evoksis had fastidiously buried.

The quietness of the forest unnerved Virna at first. It was a far cry from the cacophony of life that
they’d encountered upon first arriving, and she found herself pausing restlessly, again and again,
to try and see if she heard anyone aside from her companions moving through the underbrush.
Evoksis was leading the way again, this time sticking to the ground. He eventually noticed her
frequent pausing, and when she explained, he shook his head. “Always quiet, before dawn.”

That was a little more reassuring, but she remained on her guard. As they moved along, she
thought she saw the first hint of dawn filtering through the trees in the distance, before realizing
that the color was all wrong. It was too cool, too soft.

Something was glowing ahead: blue-green light was filtering through the trees. Virna froze,
holding one hand out to halt her companions, her eyes narrowed suspiciously. She stepped closer,
slowly. After staring for a few moments, she saw that the glow wasn’t moving through the forest.
It was flickering slightly, but the source of it seemed to be stationary.

Evoksis made a low, multi-toned trilling noise from behind her. “Not dangerous,” he said.
“Actually the opposite.” He stepped nimbly around Virna and trotted boldly towards the light.
Virna looked back to Coyote-3 and Walker-17, shrugged, and followed.

The trees ahead parted over a broad stream—possibly a tributary of the river they’d seen from the
air, earlier. Thousands of flickering lights were floating on or just under the surface of the water,
turning the shifting surface into something akin to a starfield. Walker-17 made a soft sound of
surprise and delight, and knelt by the water’s edge. “What is this? A chemical reaction?”

“No. Water is safe. Plants growing in it. But these—“ He gestured to the glowing points of light
on the surface of the water. “Are eggs. And those—“ He gestured to the air above the water. “Are
what made them.”

Small, slender creatures were darting about in the night, skimming low over the water. They
almost looked like living fern leaves, bereft of true limbs, but marked from head to tail by dozens
of delicate feathery fronds that rippled as they moved through the air. They possessed the same
steady blue glow that their eggs did, but every now and then a brighter flash would travel down
the trunk of one’s body, or through their long, trailing antenna.
“They’re… worms?” Coyote-3 asked uncertainly.

Evoksis shrugged. “Something like that. They eat the flowers. Glints.”

“Sprit blooms,” Walker-17 translated. “So that’s where they get their glow.”

For a few moments they all just watched the creatures, preoccupied with their dance in the night, utterly enveloped in their own tiny lives and unconcerned with the rapidly-changing and dangerous world around them. Virna knew that simple creatures like this had a habit of enduring hardships that sent more complex organisms into extinction, and she wondered, briefly, if these small creatures would outlive them all.

The creatures began to pair up, matching the flashing patterns of potential suitors, and, intertwined, made little diving passes at the water, skimming the surface and leaving more glowing eggs behind. “Well,” Coyote-3 said, at last, “that explains all the eggs. You go, little guys.”

Again, Evoksis gave a soft trill of amusement. Virna watched him for a moment, in the faint glow of the stream and its inhabitants. She remembered the air of solemnity that had clung to him when they first met, the weight of grief that hung over Evoksis’s shoulders. For the first time, she saw that weight lessen a bit. He said he’d grown up on this world: did the sight of these creatures provoke some fond memory? She couldn’t be sure. Evoksis seemed, at the very least, soothed for the moment.

“Come,” he said at last, “easier to walk along the bank. Travel faster, and with light.”

The going was easier with along the bank of the stream, and made perhaps a little more so by the gentle illumination it provided. The soft blue glow didn’t so much dispel the darkness as define it, outlining the verdant jungle’s edge in watery hues. It was a strange, dreamlike trail to walk, and for a while they appreciated it in silence. The Ghosts flew off every now and then to give the region a fresh scan, but they returned with no news.

Virna was the first to break it. “So,” she said, looking over her shoulder at Coyote-3, “you happen to know Evoksis and Walker. Pretty big coincidence. I know how you met Evoksis, but how did you meet Walker?”

The conversation was light, and Virna kept her tone friendly, but she was keenly interested in Coyote-3’s response. So far, she knew less about him that either Evoksis or Walker-17. He seemed good-natured enough, open and friendly, but Virna still wasn’t sure how to classify someone who’d casually cross the gulf of space to return someone else’s knife.

“He showed me the ropes,” he responded, without hesitation. “Back when Flicker first got me on my feet. Flicker introduced us, actually.”

“I’d known Matthias for a while,” Flicker explained. “Over a hundred years now, actually.” He swiveled in midair to face Matthias, who likewise turned to face him. “Before you found Walker, even.”

“Yes,” Matthias confirmed, in his quiet, steady voice. Listening to the Ghosts talk one after the other made the differences in their respective timbres more pronounced; Flicker’s voice was higher-pitched and animated. Matthias’s was deeper, calmer. “Flicker and I kept in touch. When we heard he’d finally found his Guardian, Walker offered to help.”

“He needed it,” Walker-17 chimed in. Even in the dimness, Virna could see the squint of a slight smile in his eyes. “The Tower was big on team-building runs at the time. Still is, really. Figured I could help an old friend and a new one out at the same time.”
There was that guilelessness again, that open, freely-given friendliness. It was hard to reconcile with the Stormcaller Virna had seen reveling in his own power, annihilating his enemies. She wondered if Coyote-3’s gregariousness was balanced by similar vicious tendencies, and whether such juxtaposition was just a common idiosyncrasy of Guardians.

“There’s where I got my sword, actually.” Coyote-3 nodded to Evoksis. “The one I pulled on the Knight? Remember?”

“How could I forget,” Evoksis replied dryly, “it was nearly as long as I am tall. And on fire.”

“I never see you use yours, though,” Coyote-3 went on, looking to Walker-17.

“I still have it.”

“But you never use it.”

“I use it,” Walker-17 said, “when the occasion calls for it.”

This devolved into some good-natured back-and-forth jabs between the Guardians regarding the respective fighting styles of Hunters and Warlocks. Walker-17 was obliged to ask Matthias to produce his sword and show it to Coyote-3 to prove that he had it, after which he simply slung it over his shoulder. Virna tilted her head slightly, meeting Evoksis’s gaze sidelong. She grinned and gave a little shake of her head. Guardians.

Somewhat to her surprise, he huffed softly and repeated the gesture. Guardians indeed.

The glow began to dim as the stream widened and grew swifter, and the Ghosts floated off once more. It wasn’t long before they’d left the breeding ground behind altogether, and now the stream churned against outcroppings of rock like a living thing. A distant roar could be heard, muffled by the trees. “The waterfall, it sounds like,” Walker-17 said. “It must be nearby.”

“Have we really walked that far?” Coyote-3 asked, incredulous. “Damn. We made good time.”

“We had a good guide,” Virna said, nodding to Evoksis. It took him a moment to realize what she meant, and when he did, glancing back, he seemed a little surprised. Nevertheless, he nodded back in acknowledgement.

Before they found themselves at the waterfall’s brink, Flicker zipped through the forest and called them to make a detour. “I think we found something!”

They veered from the banks, and Evoksis found them a wider trail relatively quickly, probably used by the local fauna to get to the river. Dawn finally broke as they left the river behind, and by the time they reached the place the Ghosts were leading them to, the jungle was coming alive again, and the air was filled with weak, watery light.

“I think we’re here,” Matthias said, lifting his optic. “At last.”

If they’d seen the structure at a distance, and hadn’t known what they were looking for, they might have missed it. The building was nearly entirely consumed by the rainforest. Its low, blocky silhouette had been softened by endless streamers of creeping vines. A tree was growing straight through what was once the roof; Virna’s crow glided out of the canopy and landed neatly on one of its branches. They couldn’t even immediately see a door.

“Well, there’s got to be a door here somewhere,” Flicker said, darting about the building’s front. “Maybe we can pry it open.”
“All we really need is a window. You show me a window, and I can jimmy it open,” Coyote-3 declared, turning and trotting towards the corner of the building. “I’ve never met a window I couldn’t defeat. It’s one of the few things I actually remember.”

“Breaking and entering common in your line of work?” Virna asked, amused.

“More often than you’d think.” Coyote-3 called before he disappeared around the corner. The rest of the group split up, keeping near the structure. Evoksis effortlessly scuttled up the chaotic network of vines, making his way to the tree and trying to see if it had torn a hole wide enough to clamber into, with no luck.

Virna was treading carefully, keeping her eyes to the ground. Walker-17 was beginning to make headway with a clump of vines that had plastered themselves to a wall. This all went on for several minutes before there was a low, metallic thunk somewhere inside the structure, followed by a harsh grinding noise as something beneath the vines moved aside. Walker-17 and Virna rushed to the spot, while Evoksis crouched above it on the roof. Under the layer of plant-life, a door had slid nearly fully aside.

Something shuffled in the green-choked gloom, and then an arm thrust out through a gap in the creepers, clad in shades of orange and giving a thumbs-up. “Found one. We’re in business,” Coyote-3 called. “Now stand back!”

Brilliant orange light illuminated the gloom beneath the vines and within a moment flames and sparks could be seen dancing just out of sight. It wasn’t long before Coyote-3 hacked his way through from the inside with the flaming sword he’d been so proud of earlier. “There we go.”

“You know,” Virna said, slipping easily and nimbly through the small gap and into the room behind him, almost before he could even react, “we have knives. We could have cut these vines a little less dramatically.”

“You have a knife,” Evoksis added, dropping down to the ground from the roof and shooting Coyote-3 an accusatory stare.

“Hey, I live by the very simple and eminently practical rule that anything that can be done with a flaming sword, should be done with a flaming sword.”

They moved into the verdant gloom, with Virna’s crow bringing up the rear as it swooped in through the doorway. Wan slivers of light worked their way in through the small cracks between the vines; aside from that, only gently blue glow of the Ghosts’ eyes and the flickering fire of Coyote-3’s sword provided any light. Most of the floor of the building was buried under a later of dirt. The all-present vines twined their way around the room, consuming it as surely from within as without.

“Not much left, it looks like,” Virna murmured softly. Anything that had once been furniture or fixtures had been smothered by the creepers. She looked questioningly to Walker-17.

He had stopped in the center of the room, resting one hand against the trunk of the tree that had twisted its way up through the roof. “I think I’ve been here” he said. His voice was barely louder than a whisper, and it had a hollow, trancelike quality to it. “But there… this building shouldn’t be by itself. There was an entire complex here. Because of… because of the view.”

“Walker?” Coyote-3 asked softly, very obviously concerned.

“The waterfall.” Walker-17 blinked and gave his head a little shake, drawing himself back to the present. “There was a complex, built near the waterfall. Mainly for its hydroelectric potential, but
also… well. It is a beautiful view.”

“We didn’t see any buildings near the waterfall,” Coyote-3 pointed out.

“It’s been a very long time.” Walker-17 cycled a deep ventilation and seemed to snap to himself at last. “This is a storage facility.” He began to move through the room with brisk, businesslike strides. “They kept records here and… and things.” He moved around a mass that could have once been a desk, and Matthias zipped away from him, towards a wall.

“There’s another door, here,” the Ghost said, “Give me a moment.”

Virna, Coyote-3, and Evoksis all drew up alongside Walker-17. “Are you okay?” Coyote-3 asked, still speaking in that very quiet, very concerned tone.

Walker-17 nodded. “Yes. It’s… very disconcerting. But it’s something to work with. I’m almost positive I’ve been here before.”

“There,” Matthias floated away, and a light could be seen radiating out from somewhere under the vines clinging to the wall. Using their knives (and their claws, in Evoksis’s case) the travelers managed to clear away the vines, revealing a broad display panel and keypad on the wall.

Flicker floated closer, peering. “Looks like it’s still working. Thank goodness for emergency power.”

“We’re, what, two for two on that?” Virna asked, crossing her arms.

“Three,” Coyote-3 said, crossing his arms. “If you count everything that happened on the moon.”

Walker-17 stepped up to the door. The outline of it was still mostly smothered by the plant growth, but it was still just barely discernable. He simply looked at it, standing in silence, for a few long moments.

“So,” Flicker went on, “do you happen to remember the code to get in?”

“I’m sure we could hack our way through,” Matthias replied.

“We’re going to have to hack regardless,” Coyote-3 said, gesturing to the vines.

“No need,” Walker-17 said simply. He reached up to remove his left glove. For a moment the startling complexity of his mechanical hand was bared in the gloom, and in the next he raised his arm and pressed his palm flat against what looked like the screen of the display.

It flickered once, twice, and then flashed green. The door in front of them shuddered and, with a grinding sound, began to open. It made it partway before the mass of vines halted its progress, but it was more than wide enough to admit them. There was darkness beyond it, and a staircase leading down.

For a moment, everyone was silent.

“Well,” Virna finally said, “There’s one question answered, at least.”
Part 2 begins! I'm actually not 100% done with the entire section (some health issues got in the way of writing-time, bleh) but I'm mostly done and it should be rolling out on a weekly schedule until we hit Part 3.

As you might have noticed, the sort of metatextual theme of this story is "old books," and there are a lot of old books referenced in this story. The very first reference is in there before chapter one even begins.

Also, Virna's small observation about the difference timbres of Matthias and Flicker's voices is 100% a riff on the two different Ghost VAs. I imagine Matthias with Peter Dinklage's voice acting, and Flicker with Nolan North's.
Chapter Summary

A few answers are uncovered, which leads to more questions. Flicker makes a big mistake. Evoksis momentarily accepts a new title, and the group finds its collective footing at last.

The stairwell didn’t descend more than perhaps one story, and was mercifully clear of vegetation. “Why is it,” Coyote-3 asked as they made their way downstairs, “That we’re always heading into the basements of these places? Did people just keep everything underground before the Collapse?”

“We did find the Thunder Child underground,” Virna replied.

“Yeah! What’s the deal with that? It’s a ship!”

Nobody had an answer for him. The staircase ended in a basement. Aside from a simple terminal on the far side of the room, a handful half-empty racks and shelving units, and a few doors lining the walls, it was empty. Walker-17 and Matthias made their way over to the terminal, followed closely by Virna. Coyote-3 strolled over to the racks to see what he could find. Evoksis stood at the foot of the stairs, and stayed there.

“Well, if we’re going to find any information worth finding,” Matthias said as Walker-17 stood by the desk, leaning over and bracing his hands on it, “it’s going to be here, I’ll wager.”

“You know what to do,” Walker-17 replied. He set his helmet down on the desk and, after a moment’s consideration, un-slung his sword and did the same with it.

Matthias got to work. A bright blue beam of light flickered between his optic and the computer, and within a few moments the display came up. “Here, you can look through these manually. I need to—Flicker! You’re better at pulling large quantities of data than I am. Lend a hand?”

Flicker obligingly zipped over and the Ghosts began to chatter back and forth, working in tandem. Walker-17 tapped at the keyboard interface, sifting through the various directories and sub-directories that Matthias had pulled up.

Virna leaned in over his shoulder, peering at the screen. “That’s… a hell of a lot to go through.”

“You’re not kidding.” Walker-17 shook his head. “We’re going to need to do some serious cross-referencing.”

“Might as well start now.” Flicker swiveled to face him. “Ready when you are!”

“Let’s start simple. Pull everything for me that references the keywords ‘Thunder Child.’” There was a surprising wealth of results. As Walker-17 pored over what they’d found, a few things became apparent to him, the first of which was… “It was made here,” he said excitedly, looking momentarily at Virna. “The Thunder Child was built on Venus.”

“Do they say what it was for?” Virna asked.
“Mmm… no, I don’t have anything more illuminating that repair reports and a few equipment manifests.” He shook his head and got back to work. “And it looks like there are a lot of them.”

“Try looking for the last reports. Maybe we can find out why they sent it away?”

“Good idea. Flicker?”

“On it.”

The last few reports were mostly more of the same, but the final report was a little more intriguing than a servicing log. “Says here that something was… removed,” Walker-17 murmured as he scrolled through the text. “it doesn’t say what, though. There’s some intentionally cagey wording here.”

“More skullduggery?” Virna asked. Walker-17 nodded.

Matthias had floated back slightly to give Flicker room to work, and now turned to face Walker-17. “Could it be the Thunder Child’s missing component?”

“I don’t know. Let’s see… the whole thing was handled by one Dr. Ada. Funny, I didn’t see that name on any of the other reports. And apparently… apparently this item was scheduled to be destroyed,” Walker-17 sighed. “That’s the last I’ve got on it. Not even anything telling me when they destroyed it.”

“Maybe they didn’t.” Virna suggested. “Hmm… do you have access to any personal missives? Anything that was sent researcher-to-researcher?”

“I can look,” Flicker said, and after a moment, he went on, “Yep. Not a lot, though, and nothing from outside this building. If there was a wider complex out there, by the falls, it doesn’t look like a lot of messages came through to here.”

“It’s still a start. You got anything sent by our new friend, Dr. Ada?”

He did. The files were heavily corrupted, and most of them were simple requests and reports. The last message was formatted in a significantly less formal fashion, though, and it was much, much shorter. Virna put her hand on Walker-17’s shoulder and leaned in eagerly.

“I think we can all agree that the Conjuration project was a complete mistake, but we can’t afford to throw everything we worked for away, just like that. You’re not the only one saying this is for the best. Obviously, at least one other person did, or we wouldn’t be in this mess. The fact is, we might need to go and get him someday, and there’s no way to do that unless we can put everything back together again.

If they’re not able to pull what they need out of our courier, this is the only way we’re ever going to find him.

Don’t make me write up a formal reprimand, Lee. This goes all the way to the Director.”

Walker-17 had gone very still. Matthias drifted over to his free shoulder. “Walker…”

“I saw.”
Virna looked between the screen and Walker-17. “What?”

Walker-17 continued to stare at the screen for a moment before he cycled another sigh and straightened. Virna released his shoulder and backed off. “A few nights ago, I had a dream.”

Coyote-3 had, up until this point, been turning over some gleaming metal device of indeterminate scientific function. He perked up at Walker-17’s words, set the device down, and hurried over. “Wait—a dream?”

Walker-17 nodded. “Exo aren’t supposed to dream,” he explained. Even Evoksis seemed interested now, though he didn’t leave his post at the foot of the stairs. “And until now, I’ve never done it. But in the dream they… they mentioned something called the Conjuration Protocol.” He went on to explain the dream in more detail, though a lot of it had since left his mind. Mostly, he just remembered the feelings that went along with it: the fear, the confusion.

Coyote-3 simulated a whistle. “That’s some pretty wild stuff, man.”

“You think you were involved in this Conjuration project they mentioned?” Virna asked.

“I had to be, in some capacity. I’m guessing the project itself involved developing the Conjuration Protocol I heard about, but I don’t know what the Protocol was. And… who the ‘he’ was they mentioned.” Walker-17 looked down at his hands. One of them was still un-gloved. “Or how the Thunder Child is involved in it.”

“Well, only cure for that is to dig for more info,” Coyote-3 said. “Now, you said that something was taken off the ship, and was supposed to be destroyed? But wasn’t?” When Walker-17 nodded, Coyote-3 gave him a thumbs-up and began to walk backwards. “Then it’s probably here. Let’s see if we can find it.”

“I’ll keep looking for more relevant information,” Flicker said.

“I will help,” Evoksis rasped.

The group split up. Virna made quick work of the few things stored on the shelving units, appraising them with a critical eye. Matthias flitted about between everyone scanning each offering to see whether or not it was in any way compatible with the Thunder Child’s systems. It was soon apparent that whatever they were looking for wasn’t in the main room.

“Hmm.” Coyote-3 prowled about the edges of the room, inspecting the doors. “I’m guessing that if they were trying to keep something valuable locked up… it’d be here.” He stopped before sturdy door that had been secured with both an electronic and physical lock. Coyote-3 pulled a slim leather bundle from one of the pockets in his armor and unrolled it, revealing a small set of gleaming metal tools. “Matthias, can you lend me a hand?”

Matthias made short work of the electronic lock while Coyote-3 worked on the other. “Are those lock picks?” Virna asked, peering over his shoulder. “Honest-to-God lock picks?”

“Yes,” Coyote-3 said, “believe it or not, this isn’t the first time I’ve needed them.”

Evoksis made a soft, clicking laugh.

Coyote-3’s helm snapped back to regard him. “You better not be about to She’lot me.”

“I would never,” Evoksis replied, still quite obviously amused.
“Where did you even find something like that?” Virna asked.

“They were on him when I brought him back,” Flicker called from the computer. “Hey, when you guys are done there, I’ve got a question.”

“And now…” Coyote-3 murmured, “open, says me.” He dispatched with the lock briskly and efficiently, stepping away and gesturing grandly for Walker-17 to enter. The room was small and lined with sturdy-looking clear cases that had been sealed away against the elements.

One of them was notably larger than the rest. A mass of circuits and wires secured to a rust-brown casing was sitting inside. “Matthias?” Walker-17 asked, crouching in front of it. Virna peered over his shoulder. There was a vague familiarity in the aesthetics of the device, even stripped to its bare circuitry. It looked like it might have belonged to the ship.

A quick scan confirmed it. Matthias bobbed a nod. “This is what we’re looking for.” Once they’d liberated the object, Walker-17 carefully lifted it for Matthias to stow away. A shimmer of light briefly streaked over the surface of the object, and then it was gone.

“Excellent! Let’s grab all this stuff and pop the other doors, too. Might be something valuable in there.” Coyote-3 said.

“We should make sure there isn’t anything else here that belongs on the Thunder Child,” Walker-17 replied, “but I don’t think we really need anything else here.”

“Doesn’t mean it’s not worth a look!”

Flicker made an exaggeratedly loud, simulated throat-clearing noise from across the room. Evoksis had, by that point, joined him, but he was the only one. “Guys?” The rest of the group made their way over, and he continued. “So, I found something… a little weird.” He swiveled back to the screen and the directory text vanished to be replaced by a single report. “This report here talks about sister facilities. Apparently, whatever these people were working on was sort of scattered around the system.”

Walker-17 leaned forward, eagerly raking his eyes over the text. “Does it say where they are?”

“I don’t have locations, but I think I can find them if I dig a little more. But the really strange thing, see, isn’t the facilities themselves.” The report scrolled all the way to the bottom. It was signed by the familiar name of Dr. Ada as well as a symbol in the lower-right corner: a stylized CB, comprised of a single arc and two rounded triangles.

Walker-17 straightened in disbelief. “Clovis Bray? This is Ishtar territory. This is an Ishtar facility. What does Clovis Bray have to do with this?”

Coyote-3 looked at the screen, then at Walker-17, and then back at the screen. “It sounds familiar, but, uh, what’s Clovis Bray?”

“Golden Age company,” Virna supplied briskly. “Behind some pretty hefty scientific advances. Back in their heyday, they were what you’d call bleeding edge.”

“Huh. …never heard of him.”

“That made you, Coyote,” Walker-17 said, turning away from the screen to look at his friend. “And me, too. Clovis Bray was in charge of the Exo program. They were also involved in the construction of the Warminds, colonization efforts—even Engrams. Those things you take back to Rahool? Someone in Clovis Bray invented them. They were the most powerful faction in all of Freehold, back before the Collapse. So much of what we think of as Golden Age technology
“Look,” Coyote-3 held his hands up in a gesture of surrender, “I’ve been at this for only two years—"

“Three,” Flicker supplied.

“Three years, and I don’t know a damn thing about basically anything. And I’m not gonna pretend like I do.”

“I should ask you to put that in writing,” Walker-17 said, with a hint of humor in his voice. “All right… well. That complicates things. Flicker, were you able to find out anything more concrete about the sister facilities?”

“Not yet, but I’m pretty sure I can find them. Give me a second.”

Evoksis had been gradually drifting away from the console as they spoke, edging back to his place at the base of the stairs. Virna watched him out of the corner of her eye. He was clearly tense—was he about to bolt? He could have easily done so while they were searching for their missing component, if he’d wanted to. Watching him would be more useful than directly confronting him, so she didn’t say anything or draw attention to him.

Coyote-3 did, though. “You’ve been a little tense ever since we got down here, Evo. What’s wrong?”

He began to speak, but caught himself in the middle of it, narrowing his eyes and staring at Coyote-3. “‘Evo?’"

“Nickname,” Coyote-3 replied. He tilted his head. “Yes? No...?”

Evoksis seemed to consider it for a moment before he gave a sharp trill and said, “Go ahead. But I am fine.” He returned his attention to the staircase. “Bad feeling.”

On the heels of that statement the air filled with a single, low bass note; it hit them all almost like a physical force, and the emergency lights around them momentarily dimmed nearly to total darkness. The crow, which had been perched on the desk, fluttered to Virna’s shoulder in a startled flurry of feathers. Virna only had time to exclaim, “What the--!??” Before the note faded and the lights returned.

“Sorry! Sorry. That was me.” Flicker said. “Er. Ambiguous wording, here. In the system. I was looking for those facilities. I think I just... sent them a signal, somehow?”

“That was a big signal,” Matthias said doubtfully.

“Yes. Apparently those facilities are... off-planet.” Flicker’s optic was blinking rapidly, and he sounded quite sheepish. “Anyway, I’m just going to pull everything I can from here. If we’ve got what we came for, we can go over this on the ship.”

“Good idea. I, too, will pull everything I can,” Coyote-3 said, trotting over to one of the as-yet-unlocked doors.

“Maybe we should—“ Virna began.

She didn’t get to finish her sentence, because in the next moment two brilliant points of light materialized in the air of the basement. Evoksis hissed something vehemently in his native tongue and skittered away from them, drawing his pistol. Walker-17, Virna, and Coyote-3 likewise
scrambled to get themselves ready.

“Oh dear,” Flicker cried, “I think that was my fault!”

Walker-17 had just enough time to grab his helmet and jam it on before the lights swelled to a blinding brilliance, and when the flash had subsided, six Vex Goblins were standing in the room. In the next instant, the air was full of fire, and the two Guardians surged forward to meet their foe. It was the first time the entire group had been tested in a situation where they had to fight, or die.

It was nearly a disaster.

Virna had leaped to the other side of the terminal and drawn her sidearm, and from there she could see it all. There was absolutely no cohesion; Coyote-3 and Walker-17 were formidable foes, shrugging off the fiery bolts from the Goblins’ slap rifles, but they weren’t covering each other, at all with each leaving the other vulnerable.

Neither of them were nearly as vulnerable as Evoksis, though; the Vex had appeared between him and the bulk of the group, which left him alone and without cover. Nevertheless, he fired gamely at the nearest Goblin, which turned to him as if the arc-blasts from his shock pistol were no more than an annoyance. They probably weren’t. He leaped out of the way as the Goblin began to fire, came down hard on his side and gave a burbling croak of pain. Evoksis’s injuries from the moon still hadn’t fully healed.

Virna immediately leveled her sidearm and began firing, trying to draw its attention away while Evoksis recovered. The Goblin turned to face her, and Virna dispatched it with three rapid-fire shots to the belly.

The first wave was gone. “Form up, guys, form up!” She yelled, vaulting over the terminal. “Evoksis, you all right?” He nodded. “Okay, let’s get the hell out of here. Flicker, do you have everything?”

The little Ghost hadn’t abandoned the terminal even once during the fight. “Yes! I’ve got it. I’m sorry—I think the signal drew their attention.” He zipped back over to Coyote-3, who was snatching up Walker-17’s forgotten sword and sling it over one shoulder. Flicker stayed close to him as the group turned and began to bolt up the stairs. “Which means we probably—“

They reached the top of the stairs just in time to be blinded by the flash of a fresh wave of Vex arriving. Virna immediately dove for cover once again, using the vine-choked remains of what might have been a desk. Coyote-3 also leaped, but into the fray, his hand cannon already firing. “Walker, cover him!” Virna shouted, reloading her gun. “You’ve got more range and a bigger clip.”

Walker-17 didn’t question her, he simply nodded and held his position further away, picking off the enemies with his scout rifle.

“Evoksis, here,” she waved him to her cover. “We’ll alternate. Pick your targets; we’ll need to handle the stragglers.”

The second wave was much more formidable than the first: six Goblins and two Minotaurs. Virna and Evoksis settled into a rhythm, never letting up their barrage of fire. Coyote remained close, while Walker held the line; Virna occasionally called out a warning or directed them as was needed to keep up a consistent rate of fire. “That Minotaur’s going to rush us, get ready—!”

Moments after her warning the sparking, heavily damaged machine charged. Walker-17 took a step back and thrust an open palm at it. Hungry claws of lightning raked through the air, ripping
the Minotaur apart. For a moment they all stopped to catch their breath.

Round two had gone much better. “Okay,” Virna said, “let’s get the hell out of here.” They ran for the entrance and burst into the jungle. Virna’s crow soared high above their heads, black wings pumping as it flew. “How soon can the Thunder Child be here?”

“It’s on its way,” Walker-17 said. “We need—“

More points of light began to shimmer in the air—a lot more. Wordlessly, they turned down the clearest path before them. “We can head for the river,” Coyote-3 called, “and then down towards the falls. Probably an easier extraction point.”

“Sounds good!” Virna called. They made it a few more paces before a handful of Vex appeared in front of them, cutting off their escape and forcing another confrontation. “Dammit. Stick with the plan!”

This time the group moved like a machine. Evoksis barked something at Virna in his native tongue (apparently not realizing he’d slipped into it in the heat of the moment), and then dove off the path into the thick jungle. Superior cover, his native terrain—good thinking. The sheer ferocity of Walker-17 and Coyote-3’s assault provided suitable cover for Virna, and Evoksis was able to pick off one of the Goblins without even being seen.

They were fighting well, but the advance party had done its job, which was slow them, and soon they had reinforcements coming at them from behind. Virna took a knee and barely managed to avoid getting hit square in the chest with a Sol-bolt. “We’ve got company, you guys!”

The front shifted; Walker-17 had seen the near miss and very quickly interposed himself between the Vex and Virna. Coyote-3 came around her left side, and Evoksis emerged on her right, each of them firing in almost perfect tandem—right up until Evoksis’s shock pistol jammed. He chattered what sounded like a curse and stepped back, and as Virna covered him, yet another contingent of Vex appeared, boxing them in once more.

“We’re going to have to push through!” She called. “Get ready to charge!”

Coyote-3 finished off the second group with a well-thrown grenade and the travelers turned on their heels, charging straight for the contingent of Vex between them and the river. Evoksis tried to fire his pistol a few more times, but it seemed well and truly done; he cursed again and held one hand over his knife’s handle. “My weapon is down!”

“Here!” Coyote-3 tossed him Walker-17’s sword.

Evoksis almost didn’t catch it, and nearly dropped it. “What is this!?”

“It’s a sword!”

“I know it’s a sword!” But the very short window they had for chatter was done, and Evoksis, with a curse, unsheathed the blade and leaped forward, swinging it in a sparking arc. It forced the Goblin in front of him to step back a few paces. His swipes were clumsy and slow, but he managed to get under the Goblin’s guard and drive the sword directly through its belly, sending white fluid bursting in all directions.

“See! You’ve got it!” Coyote-3 crowed over the retort of his gun. The group was running again.

“Oh, yes, thank you,” he snapped back, “now I am the most powerful Dreg in the system.” He slung the sword over his shoulder and saved his breath for running, after that. They sprinted on, expecting another wave of Vex to come for them with each step, but they reached the river.
without incident. Virna called for a quick stop, and everyone paused to catch their breath.

“They broke off that chase pretty quickly,” Walker-17 said, “I wonder why?”

“There’s not very many of us,” Virna said with a shrug. “Maybe we’re not worth the resources.”

“Quick thinking, back there,” Coyote-3 said. It took Virna a moment to realize what he meant.
“Not really used to fighting in formation—much less a formation that can lose half of its people.”

Virna nodded to him. She hadn’t had time to examine her actions closely during the fight, but she’d taken charge back there. Neither Coyote-3 nor Walker-17 seemed rankled by it, and they had no reason to be; it had worked out for the better. “We’re not a bad team.”

Evoksis nodded. “We should hurry. Try and get to the waterfall.”

They moved along the river, watching the woods tensely. Everyone was on high alert, but the Vex seemed to have broken off their pursuit for the moment. Evoksis was still trying to figure out what had gone wrong with his shock pistol, and, seeing this, Matthias floated over to him and offered to do a scan. Somewhat surprised, Evoksis accepted.

“It’s busted. Burnt out completely. This is an old gun,” Matthias said, flicking his optic up to look at Evoksis. “Probably older than you.”

Evoksis made a low trilling sound of amusement. “Probably.”

They moved along for another five minutes quietly. The quality of silence was the first hint that something was wrong. Evoksis peered into the tree line. The lack of noise was something he expected, close to the facility and the sounds of the fight, but the stillness had followed them this far. Were the Vex still lurking in the woods? “Something is wrong.”

Walker-17 looked to him. “What is it?”

“Too quiet. Another bad feeling.”

“Your last one was spot-on,” Virna said, “so I’m inclined to trust you. You think the Vex are following us?”

“Would have heard them. Seen the flashes.”

Coyote-3 shrugged. “Maybe it’s just... quiet?” Evoksis shook his head slowly. “Well, I guess we should pick up the pace, then. We can probably outrun whatever-it-is, if we’re lucky.”

They weren’t lucky. A shrill, bone-chilling cry filled the air and once again, a point of light appeared in front of them... but this one wasn’t the same size and conformation as the portals the Vex used. Evoksis froze in horror as another opened, and then yet another. For a moment he wasn’t there in the rainforest: he was back on the moon, staring at the abandoned outpost, and all around him were...

“Taken!” Virna cried. For the first time since the fighting began, she sounded unnerved. A flash of darkness swept through the area, and three groups of three Goblins, their hulls blackened and shimmering with starlight, appeared on the shore. “Walker! Coyote! You’ve fought these guys; what’s the plan?”
“Split them up!” Walker-17 called back, “they’ll shield each other if they bunch up!”

Virna nodded and began firing. Evoksis scurried up to her side, drew his shock dagger, and sent it flying straight for the glowing orb that hovered over where the Goblin’s face had been.

It went down. Virna gave a brittle laugh over the sound of her gun, “Coyote was right about you!”

A spark of pride ignited somewhere in him, below the layers of horror and fear. It blossomed, and Evoksis focused on it, drawing himself from his stunned state. He wanted to fight these beings. He wanted to kill these beings. These monsters, these abominations—he still had the sword, but it wouldn’t do to get too close to them. “Weapon!” He called.

This time, it was Walker-17 who passed him a weapon. Evoksis caught the pulse rifle, braced it against his shoulder, and began firing into the Taken, gritting his teeth as he did. When the group he and Virna had been focusing on went down, he vaulted over the rock she’d been using for cover and quickly retrieved his knife. Shrieking a challenge, he turned the rifle on another group.

He’d gotten a few bursts in when a sudden wave of dizziness hit him. Evoksis stumbled back, confused. Had he been hit? Was he losing blood? Fear thrilled in the back of his mind, and he tried to move away, but his legs felt heavy and ungainly, and he only stumbled again. Get away, his instincts were screaming at him, but his body was sluggish to obey. Get away!

“Fuck!” That was Coyote-3’s voice, coming as if from a great distance. The next instant the Hunter crashed into him, knocking him to the ground. Coyote-3 crouched over him, holding Evoksis there with one hand braced on his chest as he looked up, away from him, at the sky—

--a writhing sliver of darkness and starlight was folding in on itself, rapidly disappearing, burned away by the presence of the Guardian’s Light. Cold horror swept through Evoksis. That thing had been the retreating will of Oryx, and it almost claimed him. He’d almost been snatched right up into that fissure. Coyote-3 looked down to him and clambered off, hauling Evoksis up. “You all right?”

He nodded dumbly and hefted his rifle again. “Walker!” Coyote-3 called. “We’ve gotta get out of here! We’re protected, but Evo and Virna aren’t!”

Virna looked across the battlefield towards him, her eyes wide. Clearly, she hadn’t thought about the possibility of being Taken. It was still questionable whether or not it was possible for an Awoken, but she didn’t look as if she wanted to find out. She turned and helped Walker-17 finish off the last of the first wave and rose to her feet.

“Matthias, get the ship ready,” Walker-17 said as he turned on his heel. As one, they ran. Evoksis was of two minds in that moment. The tiny spark of pride and fury in his heart had blossomed to a hungry flame, and he wanted to stay and fight these abominations. They’d stolen so much from him, they’d hurt him, and he wanted to hurt them back. At the same time, he couldn’t get the memory of that horrible moment out of his head, that dreadful, disconnected feeling.

As they pounded on, the roar of the waterfall grew louder. Groups of Taken began to materialize along the path, but the group plunged on, taking potshots when they could. The dark figures followed them in fits and starts, filling the air with sizzling bolts of energy. The travelers didn’t slow.

And then, before them, the river curved sharply to the right, the trees thinned to a wasteland of slick, rocky ground, and the open sky appeared before them. Hovering in it, starkly rusty-brown against the sky, was the Thunder Child. “Almost there!” Virna called. They leaped off the riverbank and onto the rocks at the fringe of the forest.
The shriek of a Taken portal opening almost drowned out her words, and after the flash there was... nothing. Evoksis stared at the space where something should have appeared, confused for a moment, before the faintest hint of electricity traced itself over an invisible form. He tried to call a warning, but the enormous creature barreled straight into them, scattering the group with an effortless swing of one arm.

Evoksis was knocked straight into one of the jutting rocks. The breath left his lungs in a rush of pain. He forced himself to get up. He brought his rifle to bear, firing at where he thought the Taken Minotaur had been, but the bolts whistled harmlessly through the air.

Taken Goblins were beginning to close in. He saw Virna pushing herself out of the water, coughing and firing her sidearm at the same time. Walker-17 and Coyote-3 seemed to have likewise recovered. He had to reach them. They needed to regroup, needed to continue pressing forward...

The invisible Minotaur fired again, this time at Virna. She rolled out of the way, missing the brunt of the blow, and Evoksis immediately swung the pulse rifle in the direction he’d seen the shot come from, firing in short, angry bursts. With each successive hit, the Minotaur stumbled back, and its form became more and more distinct.

Evoksis could see the shapes of other Taken shifting endlessly out of the corner of his eyes, but he ignored them. He just advanced on the Minotaur, moving sure-footed over the treacherous terrain. This was my home, once, he thought to himself, this is my native ground. You can’t possibly Take me here.

He tried to fire again, but the rifle only clicked. Evoksis had no Ghost to synthesize ammunition, and he’d spent the only magazine he had. That left only his knife and, of course, the ridiculous sword Coyote-3 had lent him.

The ridiculous sword would have to do. Evoksis put the rifle away and unsheathed it. His comrades were firing away once again as the Taken drew closer. A sudden crack-and-rumble of thunder filled the air, and Walker-17 thrust an arm forward, sending a miniature storm scattering in front of him, lashing his foes with lightning. Coyote-3 threw his knife, and when it struck home, devouring flames tore at the dark forms of the Taken. Virna dispatched three in a row with three devastatingly accurate shots from her sidearm. They were nearly surrounded, but the efforts of his comrades kept the shadowy hordes at bay. One by one, the Taken around them were falling.

It felt good. Despite the breathtaking pain in his side, despite the terror of having come so close to being Taken, despite the sharp memory of everything he’d lost, it still felt good to be there, in that moment, part of the war machine the four of them formed. Evoksis saw the water part and splash in a way that was unnatural, directly towards him. He rolled out of the way and felt the wind of the Minotaur’s passing.

And I do not fight you alone. Evoksis lashed out with the sword, and electricity seethed along the blade, momentarily tracing the Minotaur’s shape as the blow struck home. The creature stumbled forward. You won’t take me, he thought to himself as he rolled to his feet again, advancing and screeching a battle-cry, or anything else from me. Because you have already taken everything.

The Minotaur lunged surged back at him, this time catching Evoksis with a glancing blow. The Dreg went sprawling, but used the momentum to roll himself to his feet. And as long as I live, I will pay you back, Oryx. He charged again. Rage thundered through Evoksis, poured strength into his muscles, as potent as the finest Ether. Pain, fatigue, and fear could not reach him here. The blade sizzled through the air and pumped another strike’s worth of Arc into the Minotaur, which seized in momentary agony. I will pay you back until I have killed all of your servants--
Another blow, another burst of sparks. The Minotaur stumbled back. Its invisibility flickered, and then failed, and the Minotaur fell one knee, all darkness and starlight. Evoksis was startled by the amount of damage that he’d done to it. That he’d done. On his own. With this sword, this weapon worthy of a Captain. The Minotaur tried to rise, and Evoksis snapped back to the moment.

He unsheathed his knife and flung it forward, directly into the heart of the creature’s form. *or seen your kingdom burned to the ground.*

Streamers of darkness erupted from the Minotaur as it died. Evoksis leaped forward, gathering his dagger and looking to his comrades. Coyote-3 was helping Virna up, and Walker-17 skidded to a halt, having apparently been running towards him. Seeing Evoksis look up, the Warlock nodded once.

Evoksis nodded back, sheathed his knife, and scurried after him. They’d cleared the field for the moment, but yet more Taken were appearing all around them.

They ran, ignoring the encroachments of the Taken, heedless of the slick rock and the tugging water. The crow swooped down and flew alongside them, wings beating a heavy rhythm. They ran along the edge of the cliff, through the spray, and the *Thunder Child* pivoted in midair to follow their progress, edging closer, closer—

--behind them the Taken advanced jerkily towards them, their claws outstretched, hungry—

--they ran, despite the screaming of their overtired bodies, as the ship matched their stride, sliding closer and closer—

--the deep, unmistakable bellow of a Knight could be heard somewhere behind them, a massive and deadly foe—

--and then a sweeping flash of blue light swept over them, lifting them. For a moment, they were weightless, and in the next they were all dumped unceremoniously into the *Thunder Child*’s cockpit. The ship was already shifting away from the battlefield and they had to scramble for something to hold onto as it shot away, leaving the forest and the Taken far behind.

For a few long moments, nobody spoke. The only sounds in the cockpit were Virna and Evoksis’s harsh panting and the soft whirr of Walker-17 and Coyote-3’s ventilation systems. Flicker, who had taken shelter during the battle, reappeared and floated above the travelers. “Well!” he said, after a moment, “that went better than I thought it would.”

Virna’s crow flapped its way to the headrest of the pilot’s chair and began to fastidiously preen under one wing. Despite the frenetic violence of the battle, it seemed no worse for the wear. “That,” Coyote-3 said, standing slowly, “is a damned lucky bird.”

Walker-17 pulled himself upright, gripping onto one of the seats for support. “Did the *Thunder Child* take any damage?”

Matthias was floating over the central controls. “No. She’s fine.”

Walker-17 nodded and looked to his companions. Virna was already on her feet, still breathing heavily. His attention immediately went to her arm, which she was holding. “Is it broken?”

She flexed her fingers experimentally. Her face momentarily tightened with pain and she shook her head. “Nope.” Virna removed her hand and Walker-17 saw, aghast, that her palm was covered in blood. “Cut me up pretty good, though. Evoksis? How’re you holding up?”
He raised his head and blinked blearily up at her. “I am fine.”

Walker-17 stared at him. He was, simply put, impressed with how well Evoksis had handled himself. Walker-17 had lost track of him during the fight, only to see him squaring off, alone, against the Taken Minotaur. He’d tried to reach Evoksis, to assist, but it had turned out to be unnecessary in the end.

Virna nodded, but stopped mid-gesture and stepped towards the Dreg, kneeling. “You’re bleeding again.”

Evoksis looked down. Reddish-purple blood had soaked through the cloth parts of his battered armor and stained his entire side. “Ah.”

“Here, both of you take a load off,” Coyote-3 said. “I’ll go get the medical supplies. Where’re they stashed, anyway?”

Virna told him, and Coyote-3 trotted off to fetch them. She hauled herself up into one of the cockpit chairs and, slowly, wincing all the while, Evoksis did the same. Walker-17 simply stood nearby, staring at them. He felt curiously at a loss. This wasn’t really something he had to deal with very often. Guardians on a whole were a lot sturdier than non-Guardians. They still sustained injury, but his typical companions hadn’t seemed nearly as affected as Virna and Evoksis clearly were.

Before he could mull on it too deeply, Coyote-3 returned. “All right, you’re going to have to guide me a little here, because I’m obviously not used to this. Being a robot and all.”

“You’re an Exo, not a robot,” Flicker said exasperatedly.

“Same difference.” Coyote-3 set the kit down and waved Walker-17 over. “All right. Your nurses are ready.”

Virna couldn’t help but smile at that. Coyote-3 and Walker-17 helped bandage their comrades up, and checked them for injuries that might not be immediately aware of. Coyote-3 went to work on cleaning the gash in Virna’s arm. He was a dexterous sort of fellow, with a light touch, and Walker-17 could see from the faint surprise on Virna’s face that she hadn’t expected him to be so gentle. The very next moment, her expression shifted to something more thoughtful. *She’s trying to figure him out,* Walker-17 realized, faintly amused.

Walker-17 turned to lean over Evoksis somewhat awkwardly, but thankfully Evoksis didn’t protest or make his job difficult. The Dreg’s movements were sluggish, and he was curiously pliant. *He must be exhausted,* Walker-17 thought as he finished winding the bandage around his side. He paused for a moment. There was a definite tremor under his fingertips. “Evoksis? Are you all right?”

“Yes. I said so.”

“You’re trembling.”

Evoksis blinked widely again, and looked down at himself. He seemed completely surprised to see that Walker-17 was right. “I... well. Yes.”

“It was a close call out there,” Coyote-3 said as he tied off Virna’s bandage. “Sorry for tackling you, pal. I hope I didn’t make that whole ‘bleeding’ situation worse.”

Evoksis waved him off. “I would rather bleed than be Taken.” Walker-17 looked between them. Taken? Had he missed something on the battlefield? “I think I came close,” Evoksis explained.
“There was a fissure. And I felt... something. Something pulling me away.”

Under his fingers, Walker-17 felt the trembling grow.

“It was a hell of a thing,” Coyote-3 added helpfully.

Evoksis titled his head at him. “What did you see?”

“Well. The fissure, first of all. And then a sort of shimmer, like... it looked like a light was wrapping around you. That’s when I ran over. I had to do something.”

“Knocked me away,” Evoksis said.

“Actually,” Flicker added, “I think it was more than that.” All eyes turned to him. “The fissure shriveled up and died when we were near. Getting you away from it probably helped, but I think it was the Light that protected you, Evoksis. Something to keep in mind for the future.”

Walker-17 nodded and looked to Virna. She was staring back at him. “Absolutely,” he said. “We’ll stick close to you both, if we run into the Taken again.”

“Let’s hope we don’t,” Virna replied. Coyote-3 had finished with her, and she stood. “All right. I think... we got what we came for, right? We’ve got some kind of computer component and a lot of information. We’ll need the first installed and the second analyzed.”

Walker-17 nodded. “The first, we could have done at the Tower.”

Virna began to cross her arms, winced, and then finished the gesture gingerly. “They’ll let us all on the Tower?”

“Of course.”

“All of us, Walker?”

He stared at her for a moment before he realized what she meant. “Oh.” Slowly, somewhat sheepishly, Walker-17 looked to Evoksis. “There... might be an issue.”

“He could just stay on the ship,” Coyote-3 suggested.

“They’ll need to come onto the ship to install the component, though. Ah, look... first thing’s first. We need rest. All of us. We can come down near the City, and figure out what to do from there.” Walker-17 looked to each of them in turn. “Your ship is still following us, right, Virna?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“We can swap back and forth later if we need to. In the meantime, I, at least, am going to get some recharging done. And when I’m up, we can go through everything we pulled, if you’re up for it, Flicker?”

“Absolutely!” The Ghost bobbed enthusiastically.

“All right. Just pick whichever room you’d like, I suppose.” It would be their first time actually sleeping on the Thunder Child. The vessel was built for a live-in crew, so the amenities were in place. “And if there’s anything you need, either of you, let me know?”

Virna gave him a thumbs-up. Evoksis was fixing Walker-17 with a bright, quizzical stare, his head tilted slightly. “I will have a room, here?”
Walker-17 was taken aback by the question. “I... of course, Evoksis. Why wouldn’t you?”

“It is...” he paused. Once again, Evoksis didn’t seem to be able to put exactly what he meant into words Walker-17 would understand. “Not customary.”

“You’ve never had a room all your own?” Coyote-3 asked.

“No. Why would I?” he asked, looking genuinely confused.

Walker-17 considered him for a moment. He couldn’t quite let go of his misgivings regarding Evoksis entirely, but the Eliksni had already come a long way towards proving himself. Evoksis had fought well, stuck with the group, and had proven to be a reliable guide. Walker-17 had never thought that the Fallen could be so agreeable and easy to work with, but Evoksis’s plain surprise at having something as basic as his own private space sent a flash of realization through Walker-17’s mind.

Maybe some of it had to do with the fact that, for what had to be the first time in his life, Evoksis was being treated with the barest hint of basic decency.

“Well,” Coyote-3 said, breaking through his thoughts, “your roomless days are behind you, Evo. When you roll with us, you roll in style.” He strolled over and plopped down in the copilot’s chair. “You guys go and pick out your rooms. I’m gonna be up for a little longer. Flicker and I can get a head-start on everything we pulled.”

Matthias, who was still hovering over the ship’s controls, swiveled to face him. “You should get some rest, too, Coyote.”

“I will! I’m just too wired to sleep right now.”

Walker-17 shook his head with a slight smile and turned away from the cockpit. When he reached the hallway, he lingered, staring at his door uncertainly. Matthias hovered silently nearby. He knew his Ghost could sense his apprehension, and as such said nothing. He’d recharged only once since his last dream, and it had been mercifully quiet, but he didn’t know what sort of visions might pop into his head after all the revelations of the day.

“You good, Walker?”

He turned to see Virna, who had paused in front of her own door. Her jacket was bundled up and held under one arm. “Ah. Yes. Sorry,” he said, “Just... thinking.”

She tilted his head, and after a moment, said, “Worried about the dream?”

_Clearly_, he thought to himself, with a note of amusement, _I'll have to be more evasive than that if I want to escape her notice._ “Yes. Not _just_ the dream I had. I’m mostly... not sure if I want to live through all of that again. On one hand, if these sorts of dreams keep happening it’ll certainly be very useful, especially in terms of getting more information and making sense of what we already have, but...” His voice trailed off. Virna watched him patiently. “There’s a lot in the dreams I don’t understand, but I can still feel everything that I must have felt in the memory.”

He raised his eyes to meet hers. “I was afraid, in that dream. There was a real sense of... of _dread_. Aside from just being an unpleasant experience, I’m not too thrilled about the implications.”

She nodded slowly. “Well,” she said, after she’d gathered her thoughts, “if the first dream came to you after finding the _Thunder Child_, then I’d say odds are pretty good you might go through another one. We’ve spent the last day digging all this stuff up.”
“Yes,” he murmured in response, “that’s precisely what I’m afraid of.” Virna’s expression softened somewhat and took on a hint of concern, and Walker-17 scrambled to reassure her. “Wait, I—I don’t mean afraid, per se, I’m not frightened. I’m just...” He sighed and crossed his arms. “Disconcerted. Unsure.”

There was another pause. “You remember when I told you, back before we left the Reef, about the Awoken and visions?” Virna asked, “I know they can be a lot to deal with. Our... our Queen had visions.” For just an instant, her voice faltered. “Some of the corsairs say Commander Venj has them. Now, I wouldn’t necessarily call a memory a vision, but it’s not too dissimilar, wouldn’t you say?”

“I suppose.”

“Our visions come from the Void, which can be intimidating, but it’s not the same thing as the Darkness. Not by a long shot. It’s not something to be afraid of.”

Walker-17 cycled a long sigh. “I’m... I’m not. It took me a long time to assume the mantle of Stormcaller. I began my training as a Voidwalker. I became very well-acquainted with those powers, in that time.” He raised one hand, and after a moment it was sheathed in a dark ripple of purplish light. Walker-17 regarded it thoughtfully. Even now, deep in his training as a Stormcaller, the Void remembered him. It came when he called. “It was one of the very first things I ever knew, in this world.”

“Then these dreams you’re having make a good deal of sense, to me,” she replied, “Regardless of whether or not you’re remembering these things by virtue of your...” A pause. For the first time since he’d met her, Virna looked genuinely and truly confused. “B-brain?”

Despite himself, Walker-17 gave a little laugh. He relaxed his fingers, and the dark ripples faded away. “Brain’s close enough.”

“Right. Regardless of whether they’re coming from you or the Void, it’s not like you’re going to have to chase them down alone.” Virna gestured to the cockpit, and then, after a moment, finished it up with another, shorter one towards herself. “We’re not a bad squad, all things considered.”

“No. We’re not.” Walker-17 nodded. “I... thank you, Virna. I really appreciate it. You always seem to catch me when I’m brooding. I promise I’m not usually so moody.”

She chuckled and fixed him with a single finger-gun. “I know, Walker.”

“Thank you again. I really mean it.”

“Anytime.”

They parted ways, and Walker-17 stepped into the cabin. It had been constructed in the same elegant style as the rest of the ship, but was still quite bare. As Walker-17 began to remove his armor and robes, he felt the fatigue of the past few days settling in. Matthias, who had remained quietly at his side all the while, did something that he rarely had the opportunity to any longer. He surprised Walker-17.

“I’m glad we ran into her,” Matthias said simple.

Walker-17 blinked at him, taken aback by the suddenness of the statement. “Well. Yes. Me, too, Matthias.”

He bobbed in midair. “I’ll be here when you wake, Walker. Dreams or no dreams.”
“I know,” Walker-17 replied softly, fondly. He finished preparing for sleep and laid down on the cabin’s bed (which was startlingly plusher than he’d been expecting), staring up at the ceiling through the gloom. Exo didn’t usually have a hard time falling asleep, but Walker-17 lay there in silence for a long time before recharge finally took him, wondering whether or not he would wake tomorrow with some new memory, rattling around in his head and adding to the general confusion of his entire situation.

He would.
The moment the dream began, he woke within it. Fresh awareness rolled through his brain, untouched by the past, unfettered by memories, but it only lasted a moment. *I'm lying down,* he thought to himself. Walker-17 opened his eyes and stared up at faces that felt as if they should be familiar somehow.

A man was standing over him, smiling. “Hey, there. Welcome back.”

“Did it work?” Someone called from across the room.

“He’s up, at least,” the man said. “Can you answer a question for me? Can you tell me your name?”

Walker-17 stared blankly back up at him. It took him a moment to move what passed for this mouth. He seemed to only half-remember how to speak, and when he did, as in the dream before, he couldn’t understand his own words. He did understand the sentiment behind them, however: I can’t.

“That’s okay. That’s normal.” The man was wearing a white coat, and he pulled a pen out of the front pocket. “Can you follow this pen with your eyes for me? Try not to move your head. Just your eyes.” He watched closely as Walker-17 obeyed, studying his reactions as he did. He asked for a few more simple tasks—wriggling his fingers, sitting up, moving his legs. At last, when he seemed satisfied that Walker-17 was functioning properly, he nodded and turned to the rest of the room. “Good as new,” he said.

Someone else snorted and replied, “Literally.”

Walker-17 looked around the room. He could see a man and a woman speaking lowly about “clearance levels” and gesturing to him, but most of the other people there were quiet. They struck Walker-17 as inexplicably familiar, but he couldn’t quite place who they were. On one of the walls of the room, there was a symbol, and one that struck a chord deep within him. His dreaming mind recognized it. *Clovis Bray.*

He must have said it, because the chatter in the room grew softer, and the people gathered around either stared or exchanged glances with one another.

“Yes, that’s us,” the white-coated man said.

He remembered that name, despite not being able to remember much else.

“That’s not entirely surprising. Memory artifacts are not uncommon for someone in your position. Now,” the white-coated man said, ignoring the remark, “just remain calm. You’re among friends. You are an Exo. We made you, and we’ll continue to take care of you, but we had to wipe your memory.”
Walker-17 felt a sudden surge of hurt. It must have shown on his face, because he saw sympathy enter the white-coated man’s eyes. Walker-17 asked something.

“This is the 7th time,” the main said softly.

The hurt deepened. He felt almost as if had been wronged somehow, or betrayed. He didn’t have to understand his words to grasp the sentiment of his next question: Why?

The man put a gentle hand on his shoulder, and then someone spoke. “It’s for your own good.”

Another voice rang out, but Walker-17 couldn’t see where it was coming from. It sounded profoundly strange, and it filled him with a shocking, sickening mixture of guilt and fear. “We’ve received a reply from Europa. They’re ready to receive your shipment.”

“It’s not a ‘shipment.’ They’re conscripts, not cargo,” someone muttered irritably.

“Amazing how easy it is to conflate the two,” the voice said, “when examining the situation from my perspective.” One of the screens in the room flickered, went black, and then switched to a new display. Walker-17 looked towards it, and in the next moment, the dream violently unraveled. Panic crackled through his thoughts like electricity; he couldn’t comprehend the thing he was looking at on the screen. His mind refused to admit it.

The scene in the room had gone still, and Walker-17 could feel himself being dragged from the dream. I shouldn’t be seeing this, he thought to himself, somewhere between sleeping and waking, I don’t want to see this.

Then it was over, and Walker-17 was staring at the dim ceiling of his room, shaking in the wake of the emotions surging through him, echoes of the dream, and haunted by the memory of that implacable voice.
Virna does a little people-watching. Coyote-3 does some gift-shopping. Walker-17 and Evoksis have something of a heart-to-heart. And, finally, somewhere very far away, trouble stirs.

In the end, many of their misgivings about traveling to the City turned out to be unfounded. It took Walker-17 some time to get back to sleep after the sudden end of the last dream, but when he did, he found his mind filled with visions of a more comforting sort: the dreams that came to him were simple, and as normal as he understood a dream could get. He dreamt of flying, both over the ground and through the cold of space, and the only emotions associated with it were a serene sense of purpose.

Maybe his stressed mind was finding a way to cope with the more jarring visions that had been plaguing him. Regardless, he woke feeling significantly less troubled, even if the first dream had left him with many new questions. When Walker-17 came into the cockpit in the morning, the first thing he noticed was that Coyote-3 was still there, having apparently fallen asleep in the copilot’s chair. Flicker swiveled to face him as he entered, lowering his triangular crests until one formed a hard line across the top of his optic.

“So you see,” he said, deadpan, “I have my work cut out for me, with this fellow.”

Walker-17 chuckled and strode forward, drawing up next to Coyote-3’s chair and placing a hand on his shoulder. “Hey. Coyote? Time to get up.”

Coyote-3 jerked awake and sat up. “Did I—oh. Huh.” He relaxed a bit, staring at the viewscreen. “Are we on Earth already?”

“We’ve been on Earth for quite a while now. Landed last night.” Walker-17 looked his friend over, his faceplates drawing slightly in concern. “You slept in your helmet again.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I know.”

“So...” Walker-17’s voice trailed off. “You’re still...?”

“Yeah.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Walker-17 saw Flicker draw his crests in sharply in a wince, and he quickly changed the subject. “Well. I hope you got a good enough night’s sleep in this chair, regardless. Flicker, I promise you the next time he sleeps on the ship, I will personally see to it that he uses an actual bed.”

“Thank you, Walker,” Flicker replied with exaggerated relief in his voice. “Anyway, good morning! I’ve been doing over the things we found on Venus. I’ve got some good news!”

It turned out that they wouldn’t need to go into the City to get their mystery component installed. “It’s a pretty unique processing unit, but its intact. The only thing we have to do is hook it up to
the ship. Virna took a look at it this morning, and she’s pretty confident she could do it. Whoever took it out pretty much kept it ready-to-reinstall, which is... not all that surprising, considering what we found in those messages.”

Walker-17 nodded. “Virna’s already up?”

“Yep! Evoksis is still out cold, though. Virna went over to her ship.” Flicker bobbed towards the viewscreen, indicating the angular, dark-purple silhouette of Virna’s ship. “She said to come on over when you wake up, if she’s not back.”

Coyote-3 stood and stretched, shaking out his joints. “Well! Let’s not keep our secret agent friend waiting.”

“She’s not a secret agent, Coyote,” Flicker admonished. “Not the way you’re thinking.”

“She’s totally a secret agent.”

Walker-17 shook his head with amusement as they exited the Thunder Child, strolling down the ramp that led out of the cargo room. As they walked around the bulk of their vessel, Walker-17 got a much clearer look at Virna’s ship. It wasn’t the same three-pronged affair that Walker-17 typically saw flying around the Reef. It was somewhat plainer, constructed in the style of the Regulus-class models. After a bit of searching, he found the vessel’s name in plain, blocky white letters, emblazoned below one of the wings: Shot in the Dark.

Both ships had been brought down on a relatively even shelf of stone that jutted up from one of the mountains surrounding the city; it was a mostly bare, lonely place, with a thin cover of pale grasses clinging stubbornly to the rocky soil. From their vantage point they could clearly see the walls of the City, and beyond that, the City itself. The air was thick with the hustle-and-bustle of airborne traffic, and even in the daytime, the City twinkled with lights.

And, of course, above it all hung the still, silent bulk of the Traveler.

Virna was squatting in the grass next to her ship, rifling through the contents of an open toolbox. When she saw Walker-17 and Coyote-3 approaching, she stood with a grin. “Sleeping Beauty awakes.”

“You mean him, right?” Coyote-3 asked, jerking a thumb back at Walker-17. “Because if I’m anyone, I’m the Big, Bad Wolf.”

“You’re the opposite of big, Coyote,” Walker-17 said. “I think you’re the shortest of us all, actually.”

“Evoksis has a good few inches on you when he stands up straight,” Virna added gravely, “he’s right. You’re the Little, Bad Wolf.”

Coyote-3 simulated a snort and waved a hand dismissively. “Well, that’s close enough to a real coyote, anyway. So! Flicker told me you’re going to be installing our... thing-that-we-found. Need any help?”

“Actually, what I need are supplies. Just a few extra tools.” She gestured to her open toolbox exasperatedly. “I can fly over in the Shot, but I might need one of you to escort me into the City.”

“I volunteer!” Coyote-3 held his hand up in the air. “I need to grab some stuff from my ship, anyway. And my ship. Might as well take it to the Reef when we get the chance, since that’s an easier place to rendezvous, and all.”
Virna nodded and shrugged. “Sounds good to me. You wanna come into the City, too, Walker?”

He considered it for a moment, but shook his head. “No. I’ll stay with the Thunder Child.” The thought of leaving the ship alone, unguarded, even this close to the City, made him deeply uneasy.

“All right. We won’t be gone long,” Virna said.

She packed up her things, gathered Coyote-3, and the Shot in the Dark was soon off, arcing across the sky. Walker-17 simply stood in the grass, watching the silhouette of their ship recede until he couldn’t tell it apart from the other indistinct shapes moving around the City’s perimeter.

“Walker?”

He turned to see Evoksis standing on the cargo bay ramp, looking at the space where the Virna’s ship had been. “Where did Virna go?”

“Just into the City to get some supplies,” he said. He realized, now, that he was utterly alone with Evoksis, and he was surprised at how awkward it made him feel. They’d fought together, faced down death together. Surely talking to this Eliksni shouldn’t be as difficult as it felt?

Evoksis nodded and trotted the rest of the way down the ramp. “And Coyote?”

“He went with her. They’ll be back soon. We’re going to install the component ourselves and... well. Go from there.” Was he babbling? He felt like he was babbling. Evoksis had gone very still, and was staring at him. “I don’t suppose... I should have asked if there was anything you might need.”

“No,” Evoksis said softly.

“Very well. I guess it might be difficult to...” As he spoke, he realized Evoksis wasn’t staring at him. He was staring past Walker-17, over his shoulder. For a moment he felt a sizzle of alarm go through him—was there something behind him? Someone? He glanced sharply over his shoulder. There was nothing there, only the remainder of the cliff and, distantly, the vista of the City. “To find any food you might be able... to eat.”

Realization hit as Walker-17 continued to follow Evoksis’s gaze. The Dreg was staring into the distance, far past Walker, past the mountains, at the City itself.

No, Walker-17 realized. Not the City. He was staring at the Traveler.

With slow, hesitant steps, Evoksis finished exiting the Thunder Child and walked across the grass until he was no longer in the shadow of the ship. Walker-17 stopped speaking. What should he say? What could he say? Evoksis stood in awed silence a few long moments. When he finally spoke, his voice was even softer than before. “The Great Machine.”

“Yes,” Walker-17 replied quietly.

A few more moments of silence passed. Evoksis was the first to speak again. “I never thought I’d see it. Not with my own eyes. Not in my lifetime.” He blinked, and seemed to break from his reverence, turning to regard Walker-17. “It stays there? Always?”

Walker-17 nodded, but before he could elaborate, Matthias did. “Yes. Some people would call it dead, but some of us believe it’s simply resting. But it’s been there ever since I was born, hundreds of years ago.” Matthias swiveled to face the Traveler, the light of his optic so bright it almost looked white. “The City wasn’t always there, of course.”
Evoksis nodded slowly. Walker-17 struggled for something to say. “I... you have a different name for it. I see,” he managed awkwardly.

“Yes. The old stories call it that. From before I was born. Before the Whirlwind. Before it came here, to you. And left us.” Evoksis finally tore his eyes from the shape of the Traveler and looked to Matthias. “Though, it didn’t leave the likes of you behind.”

“No. We were the first Ghosts. Probably the last, as well,” Matthias replied. “Unless the Traveler regains its strength. And then... I don’t really know what will happen to me.”

Evoksis tilted his head and flicked his eyes over to Walker-17. “Or you.”

“I... suppose not,” Walker-17 said, somewhat taken aback.

“Does not bother you?”

“I’ll be honest; I hadn’t considered it much. I’ve not thought about the ways in which my future is tied to the Traveler. Only my present, really. There’s still so much fighting to be done, I... I can’t really envision the far future in my head. So much has changed in just the past year that I can’t even imagine what the next one will bring.” He shrugged. “I simply try and do what I have to.”

Evoksis nodded slowly. “Fight. Protect your City.”

“Yes.” Walker-17’s voice was soft. “That’s why it brought me back, after all. It would seem wrong to do anything else.”

The Dreg’s eyes narrowed slightly, but there was something about the gesture that didn’t strike Walker-17 as hostile. “You know your purpose. That is good.” He looked away to continue staring at the horizon and the great machine hovering above it.

They stood like that for a little while, but there was a much more comfortable air to the silence this time.

Virna and Coyote-3 had set down in the City proper, rather than at the Tower. “I know the market district pretty well,” Coyote-3 had said, “so I can take you through there to get whatcha need, first.”

Virna had already seen a small portion of the City when she’d first visited with Walker-17. It looked so much more vibrant in the daylight. The market district was alive with color, from the banners, to the shop awnings, to painting on the walls, to the rich green of the twining ivy and the red-and-blue of the intricate, geometric designs laid out in tile-work all around. “You know,” she said, “this place reminds me of the market back home. Sunnier, maybe.” Virna tilted her head. “But not too different.”

“Yep!” Coyote-3 wove easily through the crowd, not that he strictly had to. When they noticed him, people mostly gently parted before him as he walked. Every now and then Coyote-3 would give a short, friendly wave or nod to someone. Flicker floated along, close to his shoulder. “The more I travel, the more I see that all places are more or less alike, really.”

“Is that so?” Virna asked, not bothering to hide her amusement.

“Well, I—wow. Okay, that sounded way more dismissive than I meant for it to, actually.” Coyote-3 gave a little laugh. “I don’t mean it in a bad way. I just think it’s interesting, how groups of folks who’ve never even met can sort of... of converge, y’know? It’s a good thing.”
“Don’t worry, I got what you meant,” she said.

Coyote-3 glanced over his shoulder with a little nod. As always, his expression was hidden from her view, but he seemed relieved. “It’s kind of nice to know people are people, no matter where you go.”

She nodded slowly. An idea struck her, and Virna added, quite casually, “Even the Eliksni, if you get to know them.”

“Yep!” There was no less cheer or enthusiasm in Coyote-3’s voice that time around. “I mean, aside from the normal cultural differences you’d expect to see in species that are totally alien to each other. And also the centuries of separated culture. And different religious systems. But—but none of those things make them not-people. Just makes them different.” He paused, apparently struck by a moment of stark self-realization, and looked back to her again. “I’m rambling,” he announced, gravely.

“I noticed. I don’t mind.” It was, after all, very informative rambling. The conversation was put on hold for a few moments as they focused on picking up their supplies. True to his word, Coyote-3 knew the area fairly well, and it wasn’t long before they’d snatched up the tools Virna needed. “Even with all the noise, it’s so oddly peaceful here. Must be a relaxing place to come home to.”

Virna hadn’t meant it as a leading statement, but when Coyote-3 shrugged and only said, “Probably,” her curiosity was piqued.

“Do you live here? Walker told me he kept a place in the Tower.”


“They did offer us a place to stay,” Flicker chimed in.

“Yeah, they did. They were very fair about it, and all but... well, you know how it is.”

“Where I come from, a safe place to rest your head comes at something of a premium,” Virna responded dryly, “so not... really.”

“Point,” Coyote-3 said. “There’s just... a lot to do out there. Y’know. Gotta stay close to where the action is, keep on top of things. Maybe when I’ve been at it as long as Walker, I’ll slow down a bit, settle into the City, or something.”

Virna nodded, but she doubted it. Coyote-3 obviously belonged on the road, not behind a wall. There was a restlessness about him, almost a sense of hunger, that was different from Walker-17’s calm disquiet.

“I’m gonna take us up to the Tower, check in with the Boss,” he went on, “and we should get Evo a gun that’s worth a damn, too.” Virna agreed, and Coyote-3 veered off, away from the heart of the bustling marketplace. “So,” he said, once they’d moved away from the crowds, and into an area that was somewhat quieter, “You’ve been getting your fill of the City. And your fill of me, I’m sure. But what’s your story?”

“There’s not much to tell,” she replied. The simplicity of her response was spurred by honesty, rather than reticence. “I was born during the Reef Wars. Served in them, when I was old enough. Eventually selected to join the Crows.”

“Like, hand-picked?” Coyote-3 asked, looking over his shoulder. Virna nodded. “That sounds like a story worth telling!”
“Yeah,” Flicker added, swiveling towards her momentarily.

“Well, that’s how any Crow is chosen.” She couldn’t help but be amused by their genuine enthusiasm.

“By the Prince, right?”

“Yes.”

“Never saw him, myself, but Walker met him, once. He was doing something or other on Venus at the time. Said he was...” Coyote-3 tilted his head, trying to remember. “Fierce. Fierce, and proud.”

A weight hit her chest, unexpected and heavy as a stone. For a moment, she didn’t trust herself to speak. She rallied as quickly as she was able, so that her voice was steady when she said, “He’s a very driven man.”

“Seems like it.”

She nodded again, and Coyote-3 looked back, seeming to finally notice that he’d hit a nerve, and didn’t push the subject further. Damn. Was I that obvious? Virna reprimanded herself. There was no reason she should still feel like this. She didn’t have time to feel like this. She tamped down the lurking well of loss that threatened to rise in the back of her mind.

Luckily, Coyote-3 offered a little help in the way of a subject change. “Well. Almost there! Keep your eyes peeled and your ears... er. Perked. Because you’re about to meet the best gunsmith in the solar system: Banshee-44.”

Virna opened her mouth to reply, but her words died in her throat, and her eyes widened, despite herself. Banshee-44? This gunsmith had gotten their memory wiped forty-four times? It took her a moment to recover from that revelation, but Coyote-3 didn’t seem to think anything of it.

The more she learned about the City and its Guardians, the stranger they became.

“Evoksis? If... you don’t mind me asking—and don’t hesitate to tell me if you do—you were born on Venus, right? And you left to join the House of Exile?” When Evoksis nodded, Walker-17 asked, “May I ask why?”

The Dreg paused, inhaling deeply. “It is... complicated. Many reasons. I was...” He looked down at his hands. “A poor Dreg. Could not behave properly. Fought back too much.” Evoksis’s mandibles gave a few quick, agitated flicks. “Captain, too eager to be cruel. And, in his cruelty, was foolish.” Walker-17 remained quiet, so he went on, “And... other reasons. The House acted in a way that was... was wrong. Against our tenants. For the—for our Servitor.”

“You mean Simiks Prime?”

Evoksis nodded. “Yes.”

“Is he dead?”

“Even now, I don’t know. I can only tell you he is abandoned. In many ways. Winter, too... too eager for the secrets of Vex. Neglect the old ways. The old tithes.”

It wasn’t too difficult to parse together a story from Evoksis’s stilted, cryptic statements, and it gradually began to dawn on Walker-17 that part of the reason Evoksis had left his birth-House
was over a religious dispute. He’d heard Evoksis refer to things as “holy,” before, and he’d touched upon his reverence for machines, but Walker-17 hadn’t realized just how deeply his convictions ran.

His faith was strong enough for Evoksis to be willing to make a House full of enemies and fling himself across the gulf of space to the Hive-haunted moon. It was humbling in a way he hadn’t expected. So many aspects of Walker-17’s current life had been decided for him, and he knew it. If he’d ever been forced to make a choice like the kind Evoksis had, would he be strong enough to turn his back on everything he had? Would he be willing to risk death for dedication to an ideal? Walker-17 didn’t know.

All he could think to say in response was, “Oh.”

And then, to his astonishment, despite the gravity of the moment, Evoksis laughed. An Eliksni laugh was a bizarre and unmistakable sound, a low double-toned noise shot through with the grinding little clicks. “Indeed. No future for me there.” After a moment, Evoksis raised his eyes to the skyline again. “Why do you ask me these things?”

“Well. I’m curious, I suppose.”

Evoksis nodded. “Now, you know. I would ask you these questions, but...” He swiveled to face Walker-17 once more, a recognizably deadpan expression on his face. “Those questions are why we are here.”

It was Walker-17’s turn to laugh. “You know, that’s fair enough.”

Coyote-3 had excused himself for a brief moment to slip into the hall where the Vanguards gathered. Virna seemed content to stay at Banshee-44’s stall for the moment, looking over his wares. If he was any judge, she was suitably impressed, and didn’t mind giving Coyote-3 a little time to go meet with his commander in private.

She probably gave the meeting more gravity than it deserved. As he strolled into the hall, he waved and called, “Hey, Boss. What’s shaking?”

Cayde-6 was a figure Coyote-3 both admired and pitied a little bit. He was obviously not a man who’d aspired to the levels of leadership he’d attained, but Coyote-3 believed he was a good leader. He didn’t have Zavala’s calm, patient reserve, or Ikora’s wisdom and connections, but he was clever. Cleverness was something that could get you far. It was a trait he saw more often in his fellow Hunters than not.

“You know how it is,” Cayde-6 replied, straightening up from his map and speaking with the same casual air as Coyote-3, “same old, same old. How’s the wild, Hunter?” There was not a single spark of recognition in his eye, which amused Coyote-3 rather than upset him. Cayde-6 was as loyal to his Hunters as anyone could ask, but he didn’t seem to be able to remember their names even if his life had depended on it.

“Nothing weirder than all those Taken on the moon,” Coyote-3 said. Cayde-6 inclined his chin slightly, assuming a slightly more focused air. *Now he remembers who he was talking to.*

“Trouble with Taken on Venus, but that’s old news by now.”

Cayde-6 shook his head. “That’s the way it is across the board. Nothing but Taken this, Taken that. And, I mean, with good reason, of course. Can’t keep Oryx’s nasty little fingers from going wherever he wants to put them, these days.”
“I’m really glad you just said that, Boss,” Coyote-3 replied gravely, “to me, specifically. Because I’m sure I’m the only Hunter under your command who wouldn’t be made supremely uncomfortable by that particular analogy.”

Cayde-6 winced. “Damn. Now that you mention it...”

“Let’s stop before the mental images catch up with us.”

“Good idea.” Cayde-6 made a show of loudly clearing his throat, which drew a quick glance from Ikora. She didn’t interrupt them, though. “Right. Well, as far as the Taken go, trust me when I say: we’re working on it.”

Coyote-3 didn’t doubt that was true. Cayde-6 had been the one to get Guardians in the Dreadnaught to begin with, and it was no secret that he’d done it without consulting his fellow Vanguard leaders. Coyote-3 couldn’t say he approved, necessarily. There was something innately grating about alienating oneself from his comrades, even if it was for utilitarian reasons, but he also couldn’t deny that it worked, and that it might very well have been necessary.

With this small update delivered, Coyote-3 spent the next few minutes checking in with Cayde-6 on the usual reports and rumors that floated between Hunters, but there was nothing particularly exciting to note. “Well, I’d offer to do any specialized scouting in the next place I’m heading to, only... I’m not sure where that is yet.”

“Living the life,” Cayde-6 said wistfully.

“You know it. But I’ll keep an eye out, Boss.”

Cayde-6 nodded again. He glanced surreptitiously to the side. Ikora Rey had turned to address someone in civilian clothing (probably one of her spies, if Coyote-3 was any judge) and Zavala currently had his attention on one of his Titans. Cayde-6 leaned forward. “Take me with you,” he whispered harshly.

Coyote-3 took a deep breath. He wasn’t honestly as surprised by this as he probably should have been. I feel for you, Boss, I really do, he thought to himself, but we’re all better off with you here. “I’m sorry—what was that?” he asked as he took a step back. “You’ll have to speak up.”

“I’m not joking. I’ve got a Guardian on assignment, I could meet up with them in the field—”

“Sorry, Boss, uhh—static, you’re breaking up—“ Coyote-3 continued to walk backwards, gradually speeding up and making an exaggerated static noise in his vocoder.

Cayde-6 blinked and straightened. Clearly, addressing this new bit of effrontery was more important than his earlier requests. “That’s not even—I’m right here. You’re just making the static noise!”

“Oh, huh, must be a problem on my end, sorry-time-to-go-see-you-Boss!”

And he was gone.

By the time Virna and Coyote-3 made it back to the ships, Evoksis and Walker-17 had retreated to the Thunder Child, absorbed in their own individual tasks. Watching Coyote-3 interact with the City had been interesting and informative. Despite his apparent lack of attachment to the place itself, he’d been clearly happy to see all of the people he stopped and chatted with. Virna had tagged along for most of them.
He’d engaged in a bit of good-natured mock-flirting with an older seamstress, who’d tolerated his antics with patient amusement. Virna seen him greet a frame at a bounty board as cheerfully and enthusiastically as he would any other person. She’d watched the way his innate restlessness faded when he was in the presence of the Speaker, soothed away by the quiet scholar’s gentle voice. It was clear to Virna that while Coyote-3 apparently didn’t feel suited to the City itself, he had no small amount of attachment to the people inside it.

In a way, his unabashed friendliness had reminded Virna of Walker-17, and the ease with which he’d accepted and even seemed to welcome her company in so short a time. Virna had to wonder how much of that friendly openness was Coyote-3’s influence on his friend, and how much of it was endemic to Guardians as a whole.

Virna found the Warlock in question in the cockpit of the Thunder Child, sitting in one of the back-row seats, his attention fixed on the screen attached to the chair’s console. Text scrolled endlessly by. “Find anything useful yet?” she asked as she approached.

Walker-17 jerked, startled, and straightened to look over his shoulder. “Oh. Yes... just looking over everything we found.” He tapped at the console and the projection widened so that Virna could see. Rather than sit, she rested an elbow on the back of Walker-17’s chair and leaned over his shoulder. “Most of this stuff has nothing to do with the Thunder Child—as far as we can tell, anyway. I was just looking through it.”

“Think something in there might jog your memory?”

Walker-17 shot her a sidelong glance and a smile. “Yes. That’s what I’m hoping, anyway. Based on everything I’ve seen so far, the involvement between this Ishtar facility and Clovis Bray was pretty extensive.”

“I’m surprised they collaborated with Ishtar as heavily as they did. Think they went under their supervisors’ backs?”

“No. Clovis Bray didn’t work exactly like that. See—when you joined up, you were given a good deal of freedom over your particular projects. It was somewhat decentralized. Their greatest collaboration point was on Mars, in the city of Freehold—that was their city. Wonders happened there, before the Collapse.”

Virna smiled. “You’ve done just a little bit of research into these guys, eh?”

“A little,” Walker-17 admitted, “I was very curious about my origins, in the years after I first awoke. Once I knew that Clovis Bray had ‘made’ me, so to speak, that’s where I started.” He fell silent as he scrolled through the screen. When he spoke again, his voice was somewhat deadpan. “As far as what we pulled on Venus, I’ve got shocking news.”

“Oh?”

“A good deal of the data,” he said, with mock-solemnity, “is corrupted or was lost.”

Virna gave a theatric gasp in his ear. “No. Really?”

“I’m afraid so.” Walker-17’s tone settled into something gradually more serious. “Even with all that we’ve lost to time, there’s a good deal of information here. Clovis Bray was involved in so many things, one way or another. Mostly I’ve got fragments. Reports, personal correspondences... some of them seem familiar. But a lot of these don’t mean anything to me.”

He watched the text as it scrolled. Virna remained silent, and after a few moments, Walker-17 began to list off what he saw. “The Tyrant—that’s Rasputin. Dr. Sundaresh and the Vex. The
tragedy of Malphas at the Wall. The triumph of Willa Bray. The loss of the flagship Joyeuse. What became of Clovis Bray’s debtors. Charlemagne beneath the Dust Palace. SIVA. Exodus Red’s disappearance...” Walker-17 shook his head. “I recognize about half of them. The rest...”

“When mysteries for another time, perhaps,” Virna murmured. She nudged him. “Gives you something to do after we crack this one.”

Walker-17 chuckled. “You make it sound like a certain thing.”

“I have every confidence in my investigatory abilities.”

“And what about us?” Walker-17 looked over his shoulder up at her.

“You lot are still on probation,” she replied with a grin, “but, hmm... as far as your preliminary evaluations...”

“Yes?”

“We’ll go with ‘promising.’”

Walker-17 gave a soft chuckle and leaned back in his chair. He stared at the screen for a few moments longer before he reached up to deactivate the display. “All that aside, I think it’s high time we got to work on installing this component of ours.” Walker-17 swiveled in his chair to fully face her. His eyes seemed brighter, and there was an undercurrent of energy in his voice, of determination.

Walking this road had drawn a pall about Walker-17. Virna had seen it time and again over the course of the past few days. It had hovered over him like a dark cloud, and for the first time since the questions began, it seemed to be dissipating. Her smile lost something of its playful edge and settled into a warmer expression. “What a difference a day makes, right?” she asked.

Walker-17 nodded. “I can’t argue with that.” Slowly, he stood, and stepped aside. He seemed to be about to walk past her when he paused. “I dreamed again, last night.” Virna regarded him in attentive silence, and he went on, “it wasn’t very illuminating, I’m afraid. Just... I think, a time when I was waking up after a memory wipe. Which doesn’t make much sense, unless it was my last memory wipe. You know?”

“Well... obviously memory wipes aren’t absolute,” Virna pointed out, “otherwise you wouldn’t be remembering any of this.”

Walker-17 nodded. “True enough. There was something at the end of the dream that knocked me awake. Something I feel like... like I wasn’t supposed to see. But after that, all of my dreams were pretty mundane. I’m not really sure what to make of it.”

Virna cocked a brow. “Maybe you’ll know it if you see it again?”

“That’s what I’m hoping. Regardless... let’s get this thing installed, and then we can group up and talk about what we found. I’ll admit I’m not necessarily an expert mechanic or... really any kind of decent mechanic at all, but I’d be happy to help.”

“Sure thing, Walker,” Virna replied, turning and waving over her shoulder for him to follow her. “I could always use an extra pair of hands.”

Weapons-hunting with Virna had been fruitful. Coyote-3 had been delighted to discover she was not only knowledgeable on different types of firearms, but actively interested in them. Between his
scavenging and the various bounties Coyote-3 had taken on over the past few months, he wasn’t hurting for Glimmer, so he’d been a bit extravagant when it came to refreshing their arsenal.

And, as it turned out, guns weren’t the only things Virna knew a good deal about as far as the art of combat went. Coyote-3 was carrying a soft leather roll under one arm when he stopped in the main hallway of the Thunder Child and knocked on Evoksis’s door. There were a few moments of silence.

“Do you think he’s outside?” Flicker asked uncertainly.

“I didn’t see him. Huh.” Coyote-3 knocked again, and the next moment, the door of the cabin immediately to his right hissed open, and Evoksis poked his head out.

“What are you doing?” Evoksis paused and glanced in the direction of the cockpit, where Virna and Walker-17’s voices were still quite audible. “Who is in there?”

“Well. Not you, apparently,” Coyote-3 said, stepping away from the door. Evoksis shuffled to the side, sensing his intention. “Mind if I come in?”

The Dreg paused for a moment, taken aback, before he nodded and continued stepping out of the way. Guess I shouldn’t be surprised, Coyote-3 thought to himself, if he’s not used to having his own room, he sure as hell isn’t used to people asking his permission to come in. “Okay, so! We went a little nuts down there. But in a good way. We’ve got a new and improved arsenal, courtesy of the esteemed Miss Roskar’s expertise, as well as my own, naturally.”

Evoksis made a lot chattering sound of wry amusement. “More swords?”

Coyote-3 stared, and then slapped the front of his helmet as if it were his forehead. “Dammit! Did you want one? I should’ve thought to look for another one, I mean, you took that Minotaur to school with Walker’s—”

Evoksis had started waving his hands the moment Coyote-3 began rambling, and finally interjected. “A joke! I don’t need one. No.” He drew a deep breath, letting out an exasperated sigh. “Not yet.”

“Well. All right. Let me know, because I’m sure we could fine one. The Speaker gave me mine, but I’m sure someone else in the City makes them—anyway, listen to me getting off-topic, sheesh.” He abruptly stopped talking, pulled the leather bundle out from under his arm, and presented it to Evoksis. “I thought it’d be a good idea to get some of these, but I didn’t know which type would be best. Virna helped find them and pick ‘em out.”

Evoksis carefully took the bundle, glancing quizzically up at Coyote-3 before he turned and set it down on his berth. He untied the bundle, carefully unrolled it, and then straightened in surprise when he saw what rested inside. Six blades lay there, gleaming, silvery, and pristine. None of them had a proper handle, but the blunt end of the knives had been wrapped in thin sheaths of black leather.

Carefully, almost reverently, Evoksis slid one of the knives free and turned it over in his hands. The leather of each handle had been tooled with designs of elaborate leaf-like whorls. “This is...” Evoksis began, but trailed off, quietly.

Coyote-3 couldn’t help but feel a slight spark of worry. Was giving this kind of gift insulting somehow? So far, Evoksis had shown himself to be adamantly against being given things he didn’t feel he’d earned—even when those things were simple concepts like respect and courtesy. Coyote-3 briefly exchanged glances with Flicker. “Knives made specifically for throwing,” he
finished, “I figured you should have some. I’ve never seen anyone deadlier with a knife in all my years as a Guardian.”

Evoksis gave another soft sound of amusement. “All three years.”

Coyote-3 said nothing in response to that; he merely laughed.

Carefully, Evoksis replaced the knife. Tucked into a pouch at one end of the roll were the tools required for their upkeep; oil for the leather, whetstones for the knives, a belt to hold them, and simple sewing tools to mend the stitching of the handles. Finally, he looked up at Coyote-3, and nodded slowly. “Thank you,” he said softly.

“Thank Virna, too, cos she found them,” Coyote-3 reminded him, “I couldn’t pick out a set of proper throwing knives to save my life.”

Evoksis nodded and began to roll the leather bundle up again. “I am unsure... repayment?” he asked, glancing up again.

“Nah, don’t worry about that. You can repay us by putting them to good use. Y’know.” Coyote-3 mimed a throwing action. “Thwack.” Evoksis chattered yet again in quiet Eliksni laughter. “So,” Coyote-3 went on after another moment, “aside from that, we got new guns too. We can settle a loadout for us all when we’re together, but we picked out some sidearms with you in mind. Oh! And I grabbed those Ether Seeds, too.”

Evoksis nodded again. “Very well,” he said simply. Coyote-3 put his hands on his hips and tilted his head, trying to recall if there was anything else he’d meant to say to Evoksis before he left. Before he could decide that was all, Evoksis spoke again. “Coyote? Your City. What is it like?”

The question caught him completely off-guard. “Well. I mean... I visit it, but I don’t really live there. Walker could probably tell you more about it. But it’s a nice place. A good place.” He paused a moment, struggling with himself, before he admitted, “I don’t really think of the City as home. But the people in it—they’re just as important.”

“Sometimes home is people,” Evoksis replied.

Coyote-3 would have smiled, had he been able. “Yeah,” he said, “couldn’t have said it better myself.”

Installing the component ended up taking up most of the afternoon. Coyote-3 and Evoksis eventually went looking for their wayward crewmates, and they found Walker-17 and Virna crammed together in a hollow section of the ship tucked into the Thunder Child’s underbelly.

They stayed to lend what help they could. Evoksis was considerably more experienced with cobbling together machinery and secondhand electronics than anyone else there, and he soon replaced Walker-17 as Virna’s assistant. Coyote-3 put himself on food duty and brought them both some lunch. By the time the sun was setting, the component had been painstakingly and neatly attached into its bracket.

Matthias gave it a once-over with his scanner. “Everything seems to be in order,” he declared. “It’s receiving power. I think... hmm. This is very, very dense. Flicker, does this look like a data storage unit to you?”

Flicker floated up and gave it a scan as well. “Well. It’s got the storage capacity for it, and the processing power, but... I’m not sure what this is, actually. Let’s see what we can access from the Thunder Child directly.”
Flicker and Matthias excitedly chattered to one another as they pulled data from the component. “Give us a minute to go over all of this,” Flicker finally said, looking to the group, “we’ll get back with you.”

It seemed like as good a time as any for dinner. Evoksis and Virna ate, Walker-17 had a simple glass of some glowing fuchsia substance, and Coyote-3 just lingered, content to sup on the company alone. The chatter that flew back and forth across the table was mostly about the trip to the City, the weapons they’d brought along, and the food itself. It was a moment that was, in its own way, just as mundane and yet surreal as the evening by the campfire.

But more than either of those things, it was a moment that was beginning to take on the barest hint of familiarity.

Finally, though, the two Ghosts zipped in and summoned them. In another ten minutes the group had gathered in the cockpit for the meeting they’d been waiting for.

There was a brief pre-meeting huddle to get Evoksis caught up on some gaps in his knowledge, as his grasp of human history pre-Collapse was lacking. He’d gleaned some of the details from the chatter in the old lab on Venus, but it took a bit of doing to string it all together properly. When all was said and done, he seemed suitably impressed. “Pushing the limits of what is possible,” he said, simply, “is seeking holiness.”

There was an entire evening’s worth of philosophical debate behind that session, but it would have to wait.

“All right.” Matthias and Flicker floated side-by-side over the main console in the Thunder Child’s cockpit. “This is what we know so far. This facility was ostensibly under the control of the Ishtar Collective, but for whatever reason, was harboring components related to a Clovis Bray project, and that project involved the ship we’re standing in now: the Thunder Child. Sound good so far?”

There were nods all around.

“Those are the only facts, as we know them,” Flicker said, “and everything else is a whole lot of... of maybes.”

“It is highly likely that my Guardian was in some way involved with this project. Not only does he have fragmented memories that demonstrate some connection to all of this, but he was able to unlock the lower levels of the facility on Venus. He had—and still has—some degree of clearance.”

“My question,” Virna interjected, “is whether your clearance was tied to a position in Ishtar, or a position in Clovis Bray.”

“I’m almost certain it’s Clovis Bray,” Walker-17 replied, “I’ve already remembered other small details about the project that had nothing to do with that facility on Venus.”

“And speaking of which, we should probably talk about this Conjuration project.” Matthias bobbed a nod to Walker-17.

“Ah. Yes.” Walker-17 cycled a deep breath. “I don’t know what the Conjuration project was, but we’re all but certain it was connected to the Thunder Child. Furthermore, I’ve had memories of something called the Conjuration Protocol, which I can only assume is the product of the project of the same name. The big question I have remaining is this—“

He spread his hands apart. “What is the Conjuration Protocol?”
“I’d like to be able to tell you that I figured it out,” Flicker said, “but I went through all the data we pulled, and I’m afraid none of the records give us any more info about this particular project. The component we picked up is clearly designed for an extremely heavy data load, but we couldn’t get much out of it. It’s almost as if it’s built to run something we might not possess—or that we can’t unlock just yet.”

“I’m fairly certain it’s been wiped,” Matthias chimed in. “If not fully, then at least partially. It’s not quite like any kind of data-storage device I’ve ever come across. I couldn’t tell you what exactly it’s for, but it’s very complex.”

“So as of now... we can’t answer your question, Walker,” Flicker finished, “sorry.”

“I do think...” Walker-17’s voice trailed off. “Inferring certain things from the personal log we found, as well as my memories, I have reason to believe that this Protocol was in some way harmful. And it was specifically harmful to one individual. All I know is that this individual is referred to as ‘him.’ Anything beyond that is just speculation.”

There was a pause while everyone present digested this.

“Walker? Question.” Coyote-3 crossed his arms over his chest. “Do you know if you had any kind of abilities before you were reborn as a Warlock? I mean, obviously not the same ones you have now. Was that even a thing before the Collapse?”

“I couldn’t say one way or the other whether I did or not,” Walker-17 replied, “I... didn’t feel anything like that in my dreams. I’ve not heard of any Warlock-like powers being a well-established phenomenon before the Collapse, though.”

“Hmm.” There was a lot of concern packed into that simple syllable. It was easy to see where Coyote-3’s mind was going with the information he’d been given, and it made Walker-17 vaguely nervous. It wasn’t hard to make the mental leap between a fanciful word like “conjuration” and Walker-17’s pseudo-magical abilities as a Warlock. Not for the first time, Walker-17 wondered whether the ‘he’ that had been referred to was him.

“So. Um.” Flicker’s optic darted between Coyote-3 and Walker-17. “Regrettably, we don’t have anything more specific regarding that. But, we do have something. First thing’s first—apparently that particular facility wasn’t a one-time collaborator with Clovis Bray. Do you remember the sister facilities we found out about? The Ishtar one had a direct line of communication to all of them.”

Virna snapped her fingers. “That signal.”

“Exactly! That big signal that I triggered went out to a few locations, and I was able to track it down. The bad news is that there were originally four of them, but it looks like only one of them is still kind of put-together. Looks like they had one in Freehold at one time—no big surprise there—and another in Brazil. One of the signals went way out there—way out there, past the belt. I can’t be sure where. Could be as far as Saturn.”

The group exchanged uneasy looks. “Saturn’s ground zero for the Taken War,” Coyote-3 said, “so that would make any kind of poking around... kind of difficult.”

“Depending where we looked, yes,” Walker-17 said, “but Saturn itself is an enormous planet. There’s plenty of places to investigate that are nowhere near the Dreadnaught.”

Evoksis tilted his head. “Oryx’s will, strong enough to reach this world. You cannot hide here. Would Saturn be any different?”
Walker-17 paused. “Well. Fair point.”

“If I may—“ Virna held up a hand. “—Oryx or no Oryx, I can’t really sanction any kind of poking around in the outer system outside of the Reef or the Dreadnaught. That’s the territory of the Nine, and I am not going to do anything that could stir them up.”

“I thought the Nine were allied with the Reef?” Walker-17 asked.

“They are. And we need them now more than ever.” She didn’t sound annoyed or angry, but there was an undercurrent of was steel in Virna’s voice. “The Nine are pretty clear about their boundaries. They were only willing to give the Queen herself so much free reign out there. Doing anything they might disapprove of could be compromising the safety of the Reef.”

There was a moment of silence while they all took this in. “Well,” Matthias finally said, “of course we wouldn’t want to do that.”

“We’re your allies too, you know,” Coyote-3 said.

She blinked, apparently taken a little off-guard by the earnest friendliness of the statement, and relaxed visibly. “Yes. Yes, I know.”

“At any rate, that won’t be necessary!” Flicker bobbed enthusiastically. “Because one of the facilities did respond. It’s still functioning, in some capacity. Barely. It was, er, a very weak response. Now, this signal came back to us from a location within the asteroid belt. I’m pretty sure it’s part of the Reef, because it seems to be populated.”

Behind the Ghosts, on the viewscreen, a star-chart appeared. “They called Tannou Station once,” Matthias said, swiveling to face it. A blue point of light flickered to life, indicating a single mass of rock in the middle of the belt.

Virna strolled up to the screen, peering. “Let’s see... it’s not Ceres. Not part of the Vestian Web, not at all... Can you give me a bit of a closer look? And map its trajectory for me.” The Ghosts obligingly zoomed into that section of the star-chart, and a moment later a blue line appeared, showing the path and direction of the asteroid. “A retrograde orbit, hm? There’s only one place this could be.”

“Yes?” Flicker and Matthias both scooted forward eagerly.

“Officially its name is 15 Eunomia, but nobody calls it that. Not one of the big five, but it’s pretty large, and it’s definitely not a research station any more. It’s... I guess the closest comparison is a port city. A really rowdy port city.”

“Rowdy?” Evoksis asked slowly.

Virna paused while she searched for another word to describe it. “Kind of a rough town. It was a bit of a problem during the Reef Wars.”

“How so?” Walker-17 asked in obvious fascination. “Was it attacked?”

“No.” Virna turned away from the star chart and leaned on the console. Flicker and Matthias floated out to either side of her. “You’d think that fighting against something like your own extinction would unite people, but there’s always going to be someone looking for an edge, or for profit—and war can be very profitable.”

Walker-17 shook his head. “Pirates.”
“Bingo. Pirates, war criminals, deserters, you name it. They flocked there. Some of them even faked their own deaths and started new lives there—not that they were fooling anyone, of course. The Queen tamed it, of course, but she never really... civilized it. It’s still a good place to go if you need to work under the radar. You can get your hands on rare and unusual things there, and they tend to take things like ‘legality’ as more of a suggestion than a hard rule. They say just about anything you want, or want done, you can find there, if you’re willing to pay the price.”

“Sounds like my kinda town,” Coyote-3 said.

“Maybe so.” Virna gave a crooked grin. “Anyway, if your station’s still active, odds are it’s somehow connected to the city’s main grid. We might have a good shot at this one.”

“Right.” Walker-17 nodded. “Then I suppose that’ll be our next stop.”

Virna nodded back and stepped away from the console. As she did, Flicker darted forward to hover at her shoulder. “What do they call it?”

“Hm?”

“You said nobody calls it 15 Eunomia anymore.”

“Oh! Yeah. They gave it a new name a long, long time ago. I don’t know exactly when it caught on, but someone decided that a place where you could find or do anything—and maybe even run into a crime lord you knew had been reported dead just months before—deserved a name more colorful than ‘15 Eunomia.’” Virna glanced back to the map one last time. “These days, they call it The Court of Miracles.”

The remains of the facility in the Court of Miracles had been the only one to send a signal back. The temporary crew of the Thunder Child didn’t know it, of course, but it wasn’t the only sister facility that had tried.

When the signal from Venus came hurtling through the vacuum of space, streaking towards the facility on Mars, it had made contact. Deep in the ruined, rusted city of Freehold, half-buried by the red sand, a bank of screens and consoles blazed to life in the still darkness. The room around those screens and consoles came to life. Emergency power flickered and flowed through the network of cables strung through the walls. It had been sheltered through the long years of sand by the sturdiness of the tower in which it had been built.

Taller, more elegant structures dotted the landscape, stripped by storm and time of the sleek shapes that had once defined their construction. They were nothing but skeletons now, rusted filigree. This smaller, unassuming structure: squat, square, and somewhat ugly, had not escaped entirely unscathed by the years, but it yet stood. The programs and structures wired into the computers tried to send a signal back, but it was lost, captured and battered away from escape. The Cabal had a stranglehold on what had once been the city of Freehold, and no outgoing communications from this area would make it out without their knowledge or approval.

There was nobody there to see the resurrection happen, but this was the heart of the Exclusion Zone, and it wouldn’t be long before its curious masters would come to see what strange things had stirred in the wreck of Clovis Bray’s greatest achievements. They would come; they would see.

And they would do something about it.
The Court of Miracles

Chapter Summary

The travelers enter the Court. Virna has a plan. Coyote-3 also has a slightly different, worse plan. Evoksis and Walker-17 do their best to be the baseline of reason.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yash Gonjir glanced to the clock on his desk. The flickering, holographic numbers told him he had about thirty minutes left of his shift, and it was proving to be the longest thirty minutes of the day. Yash didn’t have a hard job, per se; vehicles that docked outside of the Court were funneled into a scattering of entrances positioned around the asteroid, but none of them were typically ever given a vigorous inspection.

Yeah, half of the cargo brought in was in some dubious state of legality, and of course the captains and their crews were almost always lying about their intentions underneath their polite smiles. It was kind of the point. Still, some token effort had to be made in case some problem spawned in the heart of the Court caused wider trouble in the Queen’s empire. This way, at least the powers that ran the Court could pretend their hands were clean.

Day in, day out, it was nod, go over the very basics of inspection, and wave the next crowd of people through. So, Yash couldn’t have been blamed for assuming that this workday would end like the rest, and he could get out of the offices on time. He nearly made it through the last half-hour without incident.

And then, fifteen minutes before his shift was set to end, he found himself staring face-to-face with Eliksni.

Yash ran his hand slowly down his face. His voice, when he spoke, was tired and half-muffled by his palm. “And you want to bring him in here why, exactly?”

“Because,” the Awoken woman said patiently, “he’s traveling with us.”

“Because,” the Awoken woman said patiently, “he’s traveling with us.”

She was the only one of the four of them had had spoken yet, and almost certainly the only person who would have any kind of familiarity with this place. Her white hair was relatively short, cut into a utilitarian bob, framing a pleasant face. Yash wasn’t fooled by that innocuous look, though; it was easy to see, even under her armored jacket, that she was packing a fair amount of muscle.

The tallest of the three—who was very tall indeed—was an Exo and, if Yash was any judge, a Guardian. He had a slim, almost elegant build, well-suited for the flowing lines of his elaborate raiment. He silently watched the proceedings with a passive expression on his dark-plated face, but his eyes were sharp, and flickering. Warlock, Yash thought, nobody else would go traveling in robes like that.

The fellow dressed in an orange Hunter’s cloak was also very obviously a Guardian, but Yash couldn’t determine his species, as he was wearing a helmet. He was the shortest of the group, stocky and sturdily built, with absolutely none of the patient grace his Warlock companion possessed. He seemed to be trying to look at everything at once.
And then, of course, there was the source of his frustration: an Eliksni, standing in the hunched-over and vaguely submissive posture of a Dreg. Yash was no expert on Eliksni physiology, but he thought that this fellow, with his battered armor and threadbare clothes, must have been a particularly unimpressive example of his species, even among other Dregs.

“Is he your bounty?” Yash asked, looking back to the woman.

“No.”

“Is he someone else’s bounty?”

“No.”

“Is he wanted in any way? Not just by the Reef. The mercs, the blocs, anyone?”

The woman shook her head. “No.”

Yash considered this. He turned his attention to the Dreg and said, “This is your fair warning. If there is a bounty on you, then you’re on your own in there, and the Court will eat you alive. These zombies—” He gestured to the Guardians. “—are not gonna be enough to keep them off you. You get it?”

“I understand,” the Dreg rasped.

“Zombies?” The Warlock murmured, glancing to the other Guardian.

“Right. Excellent. I’m glad we all understand one another,” the woman continued, “Look, I get being jumpy, what with the last rebellion, but you and I both know it’s not like he’s the only Eliksni to come through here.”

“Not so much these days,” Yash replied. Even so... it was true enough. “Fine, fine. You’re going to have to sign a report, though.”

Walker-17 thought he’d been prepared, but he was stunned by what he walked into.

The Court of Miracles was, for all intents and purposes, a single enormous settlement; the hollowed-out space in the asteroid wasn’t quite large enough for a full-scale colony, but nowhere near small enough to be considered an outpost. In the hundreds of years since the Collapse, the drifters who’d found themselves on 15 Eunomia had built upon the structures of the interior, and then built upon those structures, and then, when they needed yet more space, scraped away at the inner walls of the asteroid until they had one huge, hollow cavern.

More than anything else, the Court was colorful. It was a riot of neon. Flashes of light beckoned from every window and sign, flickered through the distant windows of what looked like apartment blocks, and shone in the streets. Far above them, beyond the collective glow of the Court, the ceiling vaulted away, somewhere too high to see, swallowed in shadow.

The street they entered on was stone, but elsewhere in the Court, they could see walkways that had been made from catwalks and great sheets of metal. The buildings themselves were unlike anything Walker-17 had seen in the City. He saw a dwelling carved into the rock itself. He saw what looked like one long, low warehouse made entirely of welded-together sections of metal. The smell of cooking food drifted out from what looked like a restaurant made from the gutted remains of a ship.

Untidy snarls of cable could be seen strung from structure to structure, sometimes coiling tightly
along the walls or draped overhead, sometimes daisy-chained as a street’s worth of inhabitants siphoned power off one another. There was a general cobbled-together feeling that permeated the Court, but it was on a massive scale, fostered by the passing of time.

Despite the crowding of the buildings and considerable differences in elevation throughout parts of the Court, there had been a few half-hearted attempts at order. Walker-17 was surprised by how close the street they were walking down came to just another thoroughfare; storefronts of wildly varying shapes marched along either side of them. Smoke drifted from a bar on the corner. He and the group stepped side to let someone on a small hovering vehicle pass. It didn’t feel like a proper city to Walker-17, but it didn’t feel any less oddly impressive for it.

“This,” Coyote-3 finally said, “is something else. I can’t even see where it ends!”

“it’s a big enough place,” Virna replied with a little grin. Walker-17 thought he could sense a hint of pride in her voice. Aside from the slight hiccup in customs, entering the Court of Miracles hadn’t proven to be too much of a hassle. Her crow had almost immediately winged off into the neon jungle around them. It was probably watching them from somewhere, but she couldn’t see it.

“I never knew there were settlements this large out here,” Walker-17 said.

“The asteroid itself is hundreds of kilometers long, so there’s still room to build. And this isn’t even nearly the largest asteroid in the belt.” Virna paused. “You know, you’re being very... obvious, Coyote. About this being your first time here.”

“Well, it’s not like it isn’t true.”

“Someone might peg you as an easy mark, if you come off too much like a tourist,” Virna warned. Coyote-3 simulated a snort. “What’re they gonna do? Mug me? Killing me isn’t going to put me down for more than a few seconds.”

“Fair enough,” she conceded. “You are a zombie.”

“All right,” Matthias interjected, spinning to faced them and floating in front of them as they walked. “So, the good news is that I have a general idea of where we should be going. The bad news is that I don’t... have an exact location. The facility went dark sometime shortly before we arrived.”

“The patron saint of emergency power left us,” Coyote-3 said mournfully.

“Either it exhausted what reserves it had, or someone shut it off. So, we’re going to have to do a little bit of walking. Sorry.” Matthias bobbed apologetically.

“It’s all right, Matthias. So far, the only competition we might have is the Kings, who aren’t going to be able to get into the station,” Virna said. “We can afford to take this slowly and carefully. And we will need to be careful.” She waved for Matthias to join her, and he zipped up to her side.

For a moment they all walked in silence. Walker-17, Evoksis, and Coyote-3 were still taking it all in. “You know, this all seems so oddly familiar,” Coyote-3 said, after a moment, “but I think it’s just because it reminds me of some parts of the City. Just more...” He trailed off, and shrugged. “Just more, really.”

“It is like nothing I’ve ever seen,” Evoksis said softly. Walker-17 glanced his way. Evoksis was standing up a little straighter, his eyes wide and bright, looking around with as much enthusiasm as Coyote-3. “The places on Venus—the cities, the academy—they are like... bones. Bones, and this is the animal.”
Despite himself, Walker-17 smiled. “You’re more or less right.” He returned his attention to the chaos of life and light around them. “Those are all ruins. This place is alive.” Evoksis merely nodded in silent agreement.

Virna couldn’t help but be amused at the sight of her companions’ obvious ogling. She couldn’t blame them. The Court of Miracles was a place intimately familiar to her, but she could see how it would be a lot to take in for someone who wasn’t used to it. It was a complicated mess of a place, and what they were seeing was only the surface.

She got her chance to point it out when Evoksis glanced down as they walked over a section of grating. He paused, peering. “That,” Virna said, “is the undercity.”

What had caught his eye was the sight of dim lights and distant movement far, far below his feet. The group crouched, getting a better view of what lay beneath them: they could make out dim structures, criss-crossing metal walkways, and vast subterranean bridges. “The only place to build,” Walker-17 murmured, “was up.”

“You got it.” She nodded at him, and the group collectively rose to its feet again. “It’s deeper in some places than others. The rich and the wealthy live in the shallowest parts of the Court. Knowing there’s nothing but rock beneath your feet is a luxury, here.”

“This way,” Matthias said, gliding ahead. They group followed, and Virna trailed behind, frowning and looking up at one of the patched-together walls. Walker-17 slowed and looked back to her. “What’s wrong?”

“Mm? Just taking notes.” She nodded. “See that red tag, there? Painted on the metal? This is Emperor turf. Not the worst of the worst when it comes to dealing with criminal networks, but not the best, either. Ideally,” she went on, as he started to walk again, “we wanna do this without any criminal entanglement whatsoever. But something tells me we’re not going to be that lucky.”

“If we can handle the Vex, and the Taken, we can handle some criminals,” Coyote-3 said.

“More than likely. But we’re on their home ground, and they more likely than not have something we need. We’re going to need a little more finesse than bulling ahead,” Virna replied.

They moved deeper and deeper, passing small market districts, an industrial zone, and, briefly, a residential block. Finally, Matthias drew to a halt. “This is as close as I can get to where the signal was...” He floated closer to the ground, intermittently activating his scanner, until he drew to a halt at the intersection of two narrow alleyways. “I think it’s under here.”

They were standing at the back entrance of a store. There was a simple storm-shelter style door leading to a basement level (locked of course), a dumpster, and a set of double doors that said “No Entry.” Virna nodded for them to follow her, and she took the long way around several other buildings to approach the storefront.

“A pawn shop?” Walker-17’s voice was unsure. “Why would a pawn shop have any part of a research facility inside?”

“It’s probably below,” Virna said, “I’m betting the undercity’s pretty deep, here. We’ve been moving steadily uphill since we left the industrial zone.” She motioned for them to walk with her, and they continued down the street. “If we’re lucky, whatever’s left of the facility is accessible through there. If we’re not... then we might have to try and access it through the shop.”

“I’m guessing we’re not going to be able to just ask nicely?” Coyote-3 tilted his head.
“Almost certainly not. But, we should rule out option number one first.” Virna turned in place to look back at all three of them. “Let’s go to ground, gentlemen.”

The undercity was darker even than the surface of the Court. It hadn’t been difficult to access; Virna had simply casually popped open one of the hatches to a maintenance tunnel and taken a ladder straight down. It didn’t have the sense of vastness that Coyote-3 had been expecting: it was nothing like the chasms and corridors of the Hive’s territory under the moon.

The only source of illumination came from whatever filtered in from the street, or from the dim ambient light of the dwellings squirreled away in the undercity. “It’s like the Reef,” Evoksis said once, briefly.

Virna nodded. “Yeah, I can see that. You build where you can, with what you can. All right! Matthias, lead the way.”

Determining the general direction of the lost facility wasn’t difficult, but getting to it in a direct manner was. There was no one, cohesive floor system in the undercity. The group found themselves going up and down hanging stairwells, occasionally tacking through tunnels of rock, and endlessly backtracking.

When they finally drew up to the location needed, Virna paused and laid her hand on the smooth, concrete wall in front of them. “It’s pretty shallow here, actually. Looks like there’s not much beneath this. Might even be part of the facility itself. We might be in luck after all, you guys.”

They weren’t. No matter which angle they approached the concrete structure from, there were absolutely no entrances. After nearly half an hour of exploring the immediately area and searching every inch of the concrete they could, they were forced to concede. It seemed that they were looking at a building that was only accessible from the top, possibly even the walls of a cellar.

Coyote-3 knocked on the concrete ruefully. If there’d been an old door, he might have had some luck, but you couldn’t hack or pick your way through concrete.

“So, what now?” Walker-17 asked, “We ask our pawnbroker friend to use his basement?”

Virna shook her head and began to lead them back to the surface. “Getting into his basement’s almost certainly going to be what we need to do, but there’s no point in asking. Even if this guy happens to be the nicest pawnbroker in the entire Court, he’ll almost certainly extort us for access to the basement—and even then, he might hide anything he thinks is valuable before he’ll let us in.”

Walker-17 nodded slowly. “Yes... I suppose you’re right.”

Coyote-3 had only half-thought that Walker-17 was being serious, but he supposed he shouldn’t have been too surprised. He couldn’t necessarily say his Warlock companion was green—after all, he’d been at this longer than Coyote-3 had—but he was a little more inclined to trust in the virtue of good intentions and common sense. Adorable, he thought to himself, if a little misguided.

“And he’s just as likely to refuse,” Virna added with a sigh, “and go do some investigating of his own. This is pretty much the only lead we’ve got, so we can’t afford to lose it.”

“It makes sense,” Coyote-3 said with a shrug. “All things considered, breaking into the basement and getting what we can out of there is honestly a lot simpler than trying to negotiate with the guy, anyway. Probably faster, too.”
“I have to agree,” Virna replied. “Let’s see let’s see... the Emperors specialize in drug distribution. Especially exotics. They’ll have stuff for just about any clientele. Probably even you,” she added, with a rueful smirk down at Evoksis.

He blinked all four eyes. “Why Eliksni?”

“Well, when our Queen took control of the Wolves, they added themselves to the official list of potential customers—and before that, they were probably on the unofficial list for a long time. Just because someone’s an enemy of your entire species doesn’t mean someone isn’t willing to profit off them.”

“Makes sense, in a mercenary kind of way,” Coyote-3 conceded.

“Now,” Virna went on, “the best way to handle it would be to send someone in to distract him up front while someone else goes around back. You can probably keep him busy if you act like you’re trying to pawn or sell something. That pawn shop was also the biggest store on the street, not counting the stir-fry place, and I’m willing to bet good Glimmer than whoever’s keeping shop has some behind-the-counter merchandise. That might be a useful angle to try.”

“I’d offer to do it,” Coyote-3 said, “but I think an Exo trying to buy drugs would probably be pretty suspicious.”

Virna stared blankly back at him. “Why?”

“Because...” Coyote-3 stared back. “I’m a robot.”

“Exo,” Walker-17 corrected with a sigh.

“I’m mechanical, is the point.”

Virna cocked a brow. “Yeah, and...?”

“We can’t take drugs. Or, I mean—“ He paused, looking questioningly to Walker-17 for a moment, before returning his attention to Virna. “Can we?”

She gave a little laugh. “Yeah. There are drugs that work on Exo; they’ve been around probably almost as long as Exo themselves. Why wouldn’t there be? You can drink, can’t you?”

“Well, yeah...” Coyote-3 trailed off.

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned over the years,” Virna said, her tone warm and amused, “I seem to recall having a conversation with someone about how people are always going to be people, no matter where you go. And, robotic body or not, a lot of the times people are going to want to do the same things they used to. Eat, if they can. Drink. And indulge in a little chemical recreation, among other things.”

Coyote-3’s mind was filled with questions. Food? Chemical recreation? Other things? Well, I guess I won’t have any shortage of things to ask him, will I? might as well try it. For education’s sake.”

There was a flash of light, and quite suddenly, Flicker appeared, floating out of Coyote’s chest. “I can go with you, Virna. I’m pretty good at retrieving data in large quantities—and If I’m down there with you, and Coyote’s up front, he’ll be able to let me know if anything’s going wrong.”

“Burglary’s a creative use for a neural link,” Virna replied in dry amusement.
“Hey, now, we’re not *stealing* anything. Copying data isn’t a crime. So it’s not burglary,” Coyote-3 pointed out, “it’s breaking and entering.”

The group had reached their ladder to the surface. Virna paused by it, tapping her chin. “Y’know,” she said, “it just might work. C’mon, let’s go up and hammer out the details.”

The plan didn’t change all that much from the start. Virna led them across the Court, well out of Emperor territory, to a bar that was obviously familiar to her. A sign was bolted above the entrance. “Forge in the Wall,” Coyote-3 murmured. “I’m guessing they don’t mean *our* Wall.”

“It’s an outdated term for the asteroid belt,” Flicker said, angling himself up to properly stare. “I don’t think anyone uses it anymore.” Coyote-3 shrugged and looked to Virna, who led them inside. Naturally, they cut an odd quartet. The barkeep stared at Evoksis for a moment, as did the few patrons in attendance, but everyone soon went back about their business.

As they passed the bar on their way to a table, the bartender stopped staring and nodded to them. “I don’t have a lot, but if you’ve got the Glimmer, I’ve got some exotic liquor left.”

“He means for Eliksni,” Virna explained as they seated themselves. The interior of the bar almost felt like any other one might find in the City. A glance out of the window showed a street that looked almost like any other avenue at night.

“So, I go in front,” Coyote-3 began, “dazzle this fellow with my wit and innate likeability—“ Evoksis gave a gurgling huff from the other side of the table, but Coyote-3 went on, undeterred, “and all the while you and Flicker are rummaging around in his basement, looking to see if you can find either an entrance to the remains of the facility, or the place itself.”

“More or less,” Virna agreed with a nod.

“Now, Matthias said that the... the computer system, or console, or whatever-it-was that we’d gotten the signal from had run out of power. So we might need to neither reconnect the power supply and try to download from there, or just take the internal memory components out entirely.”

“The second is probably more likely,” Virna said, putting her chin in her hand. “Which will take us a lot longer. So, be ready to improvise, Coyote.”

He gave her a thumbs-up. “Of course. Thinking on your feet is what being a Hunter is all about.”

An hour later found him stepping through the doors of the Reliable Pawn and Curio. If he’d been asked, Coyote-3 wouldn’t have been able to say exactly what he’d thought the shopkeeper would look like, but he’d still formed vague expectations in the back of his mind. The fellow behind the counter seemed somehow out of place. There was something in the gaunt, wiry musculature of his frame that seemed to suggest an endless sense of movement that was at odds with long hours confined behind a counter.

The shopkeeper glanced up and nodded briefly before returning his attention to a small screen playing what looked like a movie. He wore no name-tag, and said nothing, at first. Coyote-3 nodded back, and strolled casually over to one of the walls. His intention was to put on a show of browsing, but he very soon forgot the “show” aspect of it all and started to examine the various wared scattered throughout the shop with interest.

The shelves were cluttered with the minutiae of everyday life in space: tubes of silicon sealant warred for space with elegant glassware. Sturdy-looking mechanical components were arranged along the wall, and to the immediate left of them was a row of carefully-arranged, well-thumbed
paperback books. There were a variety of items in glass cases that looked mundane, but the extra security immediately drew Coyote-3’s interest. The most precious and prominently displayed of these treasures were the plants that marched along the back wall in a neat row.

This was a place on which the flotsam and jetsam of the Court of Miracles washed ashore, and from it, Coyote-3 began to get the vaguest picture of what it must be like to live out here. It was an interesting clash of the hard realities of maintaining life in the cold grip of space and the simple day-to-day things that people did to keep themselves happy. It wasn’t, as a matter of fact, very different from the way he currently lived his life, out of his ship.

“Looking for anythin’ in particular?” The shopkeeper finally asked. His voice was low and smooth, startlingly more pleasing to the ear than Coyote-3 had expected out of such a scruffy fellow.

*That’s right. I have a job to do, here.* “Well,” he said, strolling over, “I’m looking for something... over-the-counter.”

The shopkeeper tilted his head very slightly. “Yeah? You talkin’ things, or whatcha’d call consumables?”

“The latter.” Coyote-3 leaned with one elbow on the countertop, casually.

“You’re not from around here, are you, pal?”

“What gave it away? My accent?”

The shopkeeper gave a gruff noise that might have been a chuckle. “Well if you got the Glimmer, I’m not about to stand in the way of you spendin’ it. You lookin’ for some Haze? Fresh shipment in. Good, clean stuff, from the Red Door District.”

Virna had given Coyote-3 a quick run-down of the sorts of drugs he might expect to be able to pick up in Emperor territory, and which ones were compatible for humans, Exo, and Awoken. “’Fraid Haze won’t do me a bit of good. I’m an Exo.”

The shopkeeper smirked and nodded. *He’s testing me. You little swindler.* Coyote-3 found himself charmed rather than annoyed. It was almost a shame that he was here running a hustle himself. This fellow looked like he might have some interesting stories to tell. “But you knew that, didn’t you?” Coyote-3 asked.

“I thought maybe. Couldn’t tell on account of that—” he nodded towards Coyote-3’s helmet. “which you need to lose, by the way.” Coyote-3 hesitated for a moment, and the sharp-eyed shopkeeper noticed. A little of the easy humor faded from his face, and his eyes narrowed very slightly. “Makes me nervous to deal with someone whose face I can’t see.”

Coyote-3 couldn’t afford to screw this up. “It’s not much a face, I’m afraid, but all right, all right. You win.” He reached up and popped the seals on his helmet, carefully taking it off and setting it on the counter. Shock flooded the shopkeeper’s face, scything away all traces of suspicion for the moment. “Nice poker face,” Coyote-3 said dryly.

To his credit, the shopkeeper seemed a little chagrined. “Yeah, well.” After a moment, he added, “Jeez. No wonder, pal. All right, all right. Let’s talk.”

Virna and Flicker had not suffered any sort of idle distractions, be it in the way of merchandise or merchants. Flicker had made quick work of the lock on the door in back, and they carefully descended a short flight of stairs.
“Huh,” Flicker whispered once they’d arrived, “This... isn’t what I expected, honestly.”

The basement of the shop was cluttered shelves and boxes of wares, as might be expected, but a good portion of it had been converted into a hydroponic lab. Rows of bright green plants in various stages of growth could be seen in carefully-attended racks under the buzzing glare of a fluorescent light. Virna carefully padded up to them.

“What’re they for?” the Ghost whispered.

“Oxygen,” she explained simply, “and maybe décor.”

“Oh.” Flicker hovered a little closer to them, curious. Neither Flicker nor Matthias had avoided Virna so far, but this was probably the closest she’d ever gotten to either of the Ghosts, and certainly the most one-on-one time she’d ever had with one. “All right. Let’s see...” He tore his attention away from the plants and activated his scanner, raking it over the walls and the floor.

“How’s Coyote doing?” Virna asked softly.

“So far, so good,” Flicker said, ducking under what appeared to be some kind of water purifier, poking among the thick coils of wires and pipes. “Mostly amusement and cheer on his end. Apparently,” he swiveled back to regard Virna, “the shopkeeper is rather charming.”

She cocked a brow, grinning. “You can gather that much from his thoughts?”

“Oh, yes.” Flicker turned away, activating his scanner again. Before Virna could question further, he jerked a few inches into the air. “I think—okay. Okay... it looks like he’s using some of the old infrastructure to power this purifier. I’m going to need your help, here.”

A bit of careful pushed and prodding through the wires revealed that the base of the purifier had been built into a console—one that had long since been gutted. Virna sighed. “Might be a bust,” she whispered.

“Maybe... but it might not. Looks like the console didn’t lose power. It just lost power to the specific parts that we were communicating with. There’s got to be at least some of the data-retaining infrastructure left.”

“I guess we’ll just have to see if we can take that?”

“What—you mean the whole thing?” Flicker paused. “Well, I mean if it’s just a data storage unit, then I guess... I don’t see why we couldn’t.”

Virna nodded. “All right. Let’s get to work.”

Whatever sympathy Coyote’s appearance had garnered from the shopkeeper was rapidly fading in the wake of his obvious indecision over what he wanted to purchase. This outsider could talk the talk, but the shopkeeper was having serious doubts as to whether he could walk the walk. Probably just some City-dweller out here looking for a cheap thrill, he thought to himself, and now he’s not so sure he can commit to it.

It was a slow business day, so the shopkeeper wasn’t too pressured to rush his Exo customer along, and allowed him to hem and haw. He’d even brought out some samples to show that he wasn’t yanking the Exo’s chain—which, honestly, wasn’t that big of a deal here in the Court; having his recreational consumables out in the open when some stranger walked in might make them more likely to buy them, in his opinion.
His customer was trying to play it cool, but it was abundantly clear that this man had probably not so much as looked at half of the offerings on the counter. Or, at least, that was the way it seemed. It was a little more difficult to read this Exo than the others who came through the shop.

For obvious reasons.

“You want a recommendation? I’d go with Black Cloud.”

The customer shook his head slowly. “Bit too much for me, that one.”

“Well, if you’re new to this, then I’d say try Medusa. Nothing fancy. Nice ‘n cheap.” The substance in question was contained in a simple spring-loaded injector, designed to dissipate through Exo fuel lines. “One pack is good for two hits.”

The customer picked up the packet, turning it over carefully. It was a deceptively simple contraption, a glass capsule attached to the steel injection mechanism. As he turned it this way and that, thin wreaths of vapor writhed in the capsule, too dense to fully dissipate, coiling and uncoiling like a nest of serpents. “Hmm,” he said, noncommittally.

The shopkeeper took a deep breath, and waited, watching him expectantly. Still, the Exo said nothing. “You here to window shop, or to buy, pal?”

His customer seemed to get the hint. He lowered the capsule and tilted his head. “How much?”

“Three hundred.” The shopkeeper saw the customer wince. Yeah, no way this guy’s actually going to buy anything. “You gonna pick somethin’ up, or you gonna keep wasting my time?”

“Three hundred’s just a little steep,” the customer replied.

“Y’know what? I’ll give you a discount. You can take it for half that if you go on and take a hit. Right here, right now.” The shopkeeper leaned forward and placed his chin boredly in his palm. “Money first, of course.” Again, the customer hesitated. “Yeah, thought so.”

The Exo raised his chin slightly, a gesture that the shopkeeper recognized as something like defiance. “Fine. Deal.” A moment later he was slapping a chit onto the counter. The shopkeeper checked the display, and then inserted it into his convertor. It was good for two hundred and fifty, just as he asked; as soon as he cycled the convertor, the chit would kickstart the synthesis of the little glowing cubes.

He turned back to see the customer holding the capsule somewhat uncertainly. He had his head tilted to one side, as if listening to something that only he could hear. Maybe he is, the shopkeeper thought, taking in the sight of the fellow’s unfortunate visage one more time. “You need,” he drawled, amused, “to put the needle in a joint. Inner elbow will usually do.”

“I knew that,” his customer replied quickly. In one smooth motion, he brought the capsule to his inner elbow and jammed the needle in. There was a kick, and a hiss—and then, a second later, another. “Oh. Oops.” The Exo drew the capsule away. It was completely empty.

The shopkeeper laughed outright. He honestly hadn’t expected the fellow to do it at all. “You didn’t have to dump it, pal.”

“Well. Y’know.” The Exo gave an exaggerately nonchalant shrug. “Go big or go home, right?”

Back in the basement, Virna was carefully easing her fingers under the remains of what had once housed the console’s data; it was a mess of metal, disconnected wires, and bared circuit boards.
“It’s still in there. Should I just pull all of them?”

“Hmm... no, no, some of these are connected to the power lines. We don’t wanna trip something.” Flicker had been carefully guiding her through the process, stopping to occasionally scan the innards of the purifier. Virna had no idea how the Ghosts did the things they did, but she couldn’t argue with the results.

“Right. Just show me what to do next.”

“Right. Okay, so, that cable runs... runs to... what the—I’m.” Flicker’s optic blinked rapidly. “Oh my goodness. What is he doing?”

“What’s who doing?” Virna whispered urgently.

“I’m not... s-sure, I’m Sorry. One moment.” The Ghost squinted his optic completely shut in concentration. “He’s not hurt. He’s... drunk? I can’t exactly—something’s spilling through the neural link, but it’s. It’s not like anything I’ve ever felt before.”

Virna blinked. “Uh. Is. Is he... all right, at least?”

“Yes. Yes, he’s all right. Better than all right. I’m sorry. I’m still with you, It’s just—sort of difficult to concentrate. Right. Okay. He’s still got the shopkeeper distracted.” He activated is scanner once more, tracing the line of the cables that Virna needed to disconnect. “Traveler’s Light, Coyote,” he muttered, “what have you gotten yourself into?”

Coyote-3 was willing to admit that this wasn’t perhaps the brightest idea he’d had. If anyone asked him to defend himself, he’d probably just tell them the truth. He’d panicked a little. And, yes, okay, maybe there had been a little pride involved. ...or a lot of pride. Coyote-3 liked to think he had a way with people, and that he could fast-talk with the best of them, but he’d been out of his depth in that particular situation. At least it only cost me 250 Glimmer, he thought wryly to himself. “I'm not sure this stuff is working.”

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The shopkeeper narrowed his eyes slightly. “What exactly you tryin’ to say?”

“Oh. Not—nothing against you, buddy. I think I might just have a resistance.” The shopkeeper cocked a brow. Coyote-3’s suspicions were founded on the fact that he was a Guardian, and as such, did not necessarily occupy the same rules of function that everyone else did. Honestly, he thought to himself, it's a little disappointing.

And on the heels of that statement, he felt a wave of numbness sweep through him that seemed to knock his brain out the back of his head. He came back to himself slowly, and when he did, he realized he’d been slowly and steadily leaning back from the counter. “I. Uh. Where was I?”

The shopkeeper returned his chin to his hand. “You were sayin’ that you were resistant to this stuff.”

“Right. Riiight.” Coyote-3 leaned on the counter again, lowering his head conspiratorially. One by one, the tethers that connected him to the world seemed to be snapping, sending his thoughts off into a pleasant, warm cloud. “Y’know. I’m beginning to think... I might have been wrong.”

“You don’t say.”

Virna lifted their prize free with slow, painstaking care. The harsh brilliance of the fluorescent
lights certainly didn’t do it any favors. “This... doesn’t look good, Flicker.” The entire assembly had been partially disassembled, with rust creeping along the casing and dry cracks spreading through the rubber insulation of the cables.

“I know,” Flicker sighed, “but it’s all we’ve got. I think I can get something off it. We’ll have more time to...” he trailed off, and his optic began to flicker rapidly. “Goodness gracious, I—we need to go. If only so I can go save my stupid Guardian.”

“Is he hurt?”

“No. No, I think he’s the opposite of hurt,” Flicker zipped towards the door. “Okay, I’ll see if I can get him out. We’re still rendezvousing at the café down the street?”

Virna nodded. “Good luck,” she whispered.

“Thanks,” Flicker muttered. “I might need it.” He made sure she was out of the door and lost in the shadows before he concentrated on gathering his Guardian.

Flicker’s attempt to reach Coyote-3 through the mental link didn’t seem to penetrate whatever fog was currently clouding his mind, so he hauled it over to where Walker-17 and Evoksis were waiting, at the aforementioned café on the corner. It was a small, open-air affair, charming enough in its own ramshackle way. Evoksis was much too conspicuous to be allowed anywhere near the pawn shop. Walker-17 was nearly as conspicuous, albeit for entirely different reasons.

The Dreg was serenely reading a menu and ignoring the stares of the other patrons with an affected casual air that might have been amusing under different circumstances. Walker-17 was looking down the street, in the direction of some indistinct, muffled yelling. Virna hadn’t caught up yet, but that wasn’t surprising; she was taking a long, circuitous route to get to the meeting spot, just in case.

Walker-17 perked up when he saw Flicker drawing near, but the Ghost began to hurriedly speak before he could so much as offer a greeting. “Walker, I need your help,” Flicker said, skidding to a stop mid-air. “I think Coyote’s gotten himself into a bit of trouble.”

Evoksis looked up sharply. “Oh, Lord,” Walker-17 asked, sounding more worried than exasperated. “Is he all right?”

“He’s fine, don’t worry,” Flicker assured him, “but... come on. I’ll explain on the way.”

By the time Walker-17 entered the store, the shopkeeper looked as if he didn’t know whether to be more worried or exasperated. Coyote-3 was still chattering on, wedged into a corner between the wall and the countertop, very obviously trying to make it seem as if he were casually leaning instead of desperately trying not to fall over.

“And then,” he said, “she pushed me off the Tower to my death. But I deserved it.”

“Oh, dear. There you are.” Walker-17 didn’t have to pretend to sound concerned as he strode forward. “What the hell are you doing in this part of town?”

“You know.” He nodded towards the shopkeeper. When nobody spoke, he repeated himself, more slowly. “You knooow.”

“I’m afraid my companion seems to have... gotten himself into trouble.” Walker-17 went on, reaching up to gently pry Coyote-3 off the wall. “He hasn’t given you any trouble, has he?”
The shopkeeper opened his mouth as if to say something, and then paused. After a moment, he shrugged. “You know, I was gonna say yes, but he paid for what he got. Let me guess—first time here? Gave you the slip?”

Walker-17 nodded. “You got it.”

“Yeah, I figured. Anyway, better go take him to lay down or somethin’.” He paused and cocked a brow, sensing an opportunity for an easy sell. “Unless you want some for the road?”

“Yes!” Coyote-3 declared, holding up a single finger.

“Out of the question.” Walker-17 pulled him away.

“No!” Coyote-3 amended.

“Suit yourself.” The shopkeeper shrugged. If he had anything else to add, it was cut off by a sudden flash on his monitor screen, which he blinked at attentively. Walker-17 took this opportunity to drag Coyote-3 out of the shop. The Hunter was doing his level best to walk, but any semblance of a sense of balance was gone. He clung grimly to Walker-17’s robes with one hand and his helmet with the other. Once they’d walked a good distance down the road, he said, in a harsh whisper, “Flicker said he did it.”

“Yes, I heard. ...you don’t actually have to whisper, Coyote.”

“I’m not whispering,” he whispered.

Walker-17 sighed. “I am never letting you talk me into something like this again. Or anything else. Ever.”

“It worked, though.” Coyote-3 stumbled along for a few more moments, made a show of clearing his throat, and pushed himself slightly more upright. “Walker. Walker,” he said. “I’m gonna ask you a question, and I need you to answer me with ‘yes.’ All right?”

“Yes.” A pause. “Was that the question?”

“No no no, It’s a different one.”

“Okay, well, what is it?”

“We’re robots. Or close to it. We’re mechanical, is the point. So.” Coyote-3 pulled on the front of Walker’s robes until he’d dragged the Warlock down to his eye level. “It should be like… it should be like flipping a switch. We can just turn this sort of thing off, right?”

Walker-17 stared at him. He cycled a long breath, and said, “Yes,” while shaking his head back and forth in a very clear “no” gesture. Coyote-3 groaned and let his forehead clunk against Walker-17’s chest. “Hey, I’m sure you’ll be fine. Come on. Let’s find a place for you to sit down.”

As it were, they never made it back to the café. Walker-17 sent Virna their new coordinates, which were tucked away somewhere in the warren of small alleyways near the pawn shop.

She wanted to hurry, wondering what Coyote-3 could possibly have done to merit such concern from his Ghost, but she forced herself to be careful, taking every step to make sure she wasn’t being followed. Though she doubted that the shopkeeper had seen or heard her, anyone who might have spotted her leaving the back of the store might think she’d snatched something worth
stealing.

She needn’t have worried. There seemed to be nobody with her in the alleyways, but Virna could hear the sounds of a growing, distant commotion. A fight? A riot? Whatever it was, she was beginning to think that it might be prudent to wrap things up and head back to the ship. Any kind of ruckus in this part of the Court could only mean trouble.

She finally found Walker-17 and Coyote-3 seated at a small table that had been set up next to what looked like an abandoned food cart. Walker-17 waved her over. Another figure was sitting across from him, lying with his chest flat on the table and one arm lazily slung up to grip the tabletop, as if he were afraid he’d fall or float away if he let go. Flicker was hovering anxiously over him.

It took her a moment to realize that the Exo slumped over the table was Coyote-3, primarily because he wasn’t wearing his helmet. His plating was a dark, burnished red, so dark as to almost appear black except in the places where the dim light struck it. As far as paint-jobs went, it was actually quite fetching. Virna didn’t linger on this facet of his appearance, however, because something more obvious about his head stole her attention. Virna’s eyes widened in horror. “Holy —Coyote! What happened?” She rushed up to him immediately. “Did he attack you?”

“No, no, he’s… it’s fine, Virna,” Flicker said, glancing up. “This isn’t. Um. This isn’t unusual.”

There was an enormous gash in Coyote-3’s head. It started somewhere around where his right temple would be on the right side and arced over his cranium to the back of his head. The metal around the wound was twisted, buckled, and streaked with scorch marks. There wasn’t any sort of torn wiring sticking out, and Virna couldn’t see anything that looked loose, but the enormity of the wound was viscerally unpleasant to look at. Such an injury on anyone organic would be undoubtedly fatal.

“He’s right,” Coyote-3 said, without raising his head. “Always like this.”

Virna’s brow furrowed in mingled confusion and concern. Flicker swiveled in mid-air to face her. “I can explain. When I first resurrected him,” Flicker explained, quietly, “the wound in his head didn’t heal. I hoped it might fix itself if I ever had to resurrect him again, but… it never did.” His optic dimmed and he let it fall to stare at the tabletop. “I tried to fix it. I never could.”

“Flicker. Flicker, it’s all right,” Coyote-3 said. He loosened his grip on the table long enough to pat the surface, and Flicker hovered closer with a sigh. “Doesn’t even hurt.”

“I’m not sure why I can’t… fix him properly,” Flicker went on. “But no matter how many times I bring him back, it’s always still there.”

It wasn’t difficult to hear the guilt in Flicker’s voice, or see it in his mannerisms. The Ghost obviously felt as if he’d failed his Guardian somehow. As if he were, in some way, defective, perhaps. Virna looked back to Coyote-3. Aside from the gaping wound in his head, there were other details about his construction that were singularly unusual.

For starters, he had no eyes, and there wasn’t even anything to suggest he’d once possessed eye structures at all. His face also didn’t have the same level of delicate and sophisticated articulation that Walker-17’s did. It was largely rigid, with a jaw that barely moved as he spoke, more like a mask than anything else. Listening to the voice coming from such a static face was incongruous in a way that seemed inherently off somehow. It was clear that Walker-17 had been carefully and maybe even lovingly crafted. Coyote-3 looked like an earlier model of Exo, or perhaps even a prototype.
Coyote-3 thumped the table again, and Flicker finally joined him, letting his Guardian clumsily scoop the Ghost up against the crook of his shoulder. Between his less-than-elegant construction and the heavy damage to his helm, it was obvious why Coyote-3 preferred to wear his helmet at all times. “Don’t beat yourself up about it,” he mumbled.

“I won’t, I won’t,” Flicker replied. He didn’t have much of a face to read, but even so, Virna could tell that the little Ghost was lying.

Evoksis was the last to trickle in to the new rendezvous point. He slowed when he approached the table, eyes narrowed suspiciously at what appeared to be a stranger among them, but recognition dawned as he drew closer. Flicker morosely gave his explanation a second time, while Coyote-3 gently patted the tabletop. He seemed to think he was patting Flicker.

Evoksis gave a low, clicking huff. “This explains so much about you.”

“Ha ha, you jerk.”

“Is this why you wear your helmet?”

Virna and Walker-17 exchanged glances. Virna knew Walker-17 well enough by now to surmise he’d never directly asked Coyote-3 about the matter, and had instead quietly drawn his own conclusions. Neither of them knew exactly how he would react to such indelicate questioning.

Before they could intervene, Coyote-3 answered, “Yeah, mostly. But y’wanna—Evo.” He pushed himself slowly up, into an almost-vertical position. “Imagine this. Right?”

All three of them stared at him. Coyote-3 stared back. “Imagine what?” Evoksis finally asked.

“You got a big damn hole in your head. You know what you don’t want to happen? Things falling in that big damn hole.”

“Cannot disagree,” Evoksis said.

“There you go. Now, you know,” Coyote-3 finished gravely.

Walker-17 cycled a sigh. “Okay... first of all, let’s—can I see the satchel, Virna?” After she passed it over, Walker-17 held it up, and Matthias spirited it away. “Let’s go find someplace to sit down and rest for a bit. You gonna be okay, Coyote?”

“Walker, I’m great.” Suddenly, a muffled bang sounded from somewhere in the middle distance, echoing through the alleys. Even Coyote-3 seemed a hairsbreadth more lucid than he had a moment before. “Now, not so much,” he muttered. “The hell was that?”

“I heard some kind of commotion on my way over here,” Virna said slowly, “but it sounded far away.”

“I, as well,” Evoksis added. “Many people, yelling. Flocking to screens. Very excited.”

“Good excited, or bad excited?” Virna asked.

“I could not tell.”

“I heard it, too,” Walker-17 said. “Back when I was waiting. I think I heard it start. It was just a few people yelling, then...” He trailed off. Evoksis’s mention of a screen had reminded him of that moment in the pawn shop, where something on his monitor had drawn the shopkeep’s attention away from them. “Whatever it is, I think there’s some kind of station-wide PSA on it.”
“Could be a riot?” Coyote-3 asked.

“Honestly, I don’t know. But maybe... we should head back to the Thunder Child for now,” Virna suggested.

“Good idea.”

Walker-17 helped Coyote-3 up, and they moved through the warren of alleys. The noise was still too distant for them to discern any details, and the maze of buildings prevented them from seeing anything aside from the occasional distant flash.

“Something’s not right,” Virna muttered.

Evoksis was regarding the distant shadowy ceiling. “It does not feel threatening,” he said slowly, “somehow. Is it brighter, do you think?”

She glanced to him with a wry smile. “No bad feelings?”

“No.”

“Well, we’re not too far from the docks by now,” Walker-17 said. “Maybe we should—”

“Shh!” Coyote-3 said suddenly, lifting his head. Everyone obligingly went quiet. In the stillness, they could make out more details about the noise around them, and the parallels it had with the growing echoes underground. There was shouting, yes, but there was also...

“Song?” Evoksis asked.


All four of the traveler exchanged puzzled glances. “Well,” Virna finally said, slowly, “we are near the docks...”

In the end, they emerged from the alleyways into a main thoroughfare. The scene that greeted them when they emerged into the light was not at all what they expected.

As bright as the Court of Miracles had been when they first laid eyes on the Court, it was twice as brilliant now. Colorful holograms danced above the buildings in complicated designs amid furiously flashing neon signs, filling the air with something like an electric analogy of fireworks—and as they watched, in astonishment, there was the occasional burst of genuine fireworks, rare and sparkling and beautiful against the distant roof of the cave.

The Court itself seemed to be heaving in celebration. There were people in the streets, passing open bottles between each other, shouting and, in some cases, singing. A grizzled-looking Exo in armor was sitting on a bench next to an equally-grizzled Awoken soldier who was weeping into his hands. Ragged banners in the Queen’s colors had been rolled out of windows, and were being, in some cases, enthusiastically flapped about by their owners for lack of a breeze.

Nobody knew what to say. They slowly walked out onto what passed for the sidewalk, trying to take all of the spectacle in at once. “Oh, my god,” Coyote-3 finally muttered, “That stuff is way stronger than I thought it was.”

“I see it, too, Coyote,” Matthias murmured to him. Flicker bobbed in agreement.

Virna opened her mouth, a question on her lips, but before she could say anything someone in the
crowd glanced over and spotted the four of them. As soon as she noticed the Ghosts floating next to their respective Guardians, she pointed and shouted something. Immediately a fraction of the crowd rushed over, laughing and slapping them on the shoulder or shoving them joyfully. Even Evoksis was received with enthusiasm. “You lot did it!” one of them cried.

Walker-17 looked to Virna, who shrugged. Coyote-3 seemed equally confused, but he gamely thrust a fist into the air, declaring, “Apparently we did!”

“You crazy bastards,” the woman laughed. “Figured it would be one of you, doesn’t it?”

“Nobody,” one of her companions shouted, “is as crazy as a Guardian!”

“I... think I appreciate the sentiment.” Walker-17 held up his hands. “But I’m not entirely sure—what exactly is going on?”

“They did it. The City,” the woman explained. “They’ve been chewing away at the Dreadnought for months now, and they finally did it.”

Next to him, Evoksis suddenly stood up, ramrod-straight and bright-eyed.

“They—did—are you saying someone seized control of the Dreadnought?” Walker-17 asked, astonished.

“No, no. They did one better than that. They sent in a fireteam and they got him at last,” the woman said.

Someone in the crowd shouted, “For the Queen!” And the chant was taken up, at first in ragged, intermittent cheers, and then in a thundering wave of voices. Virna had gone utterly still, her face a mask of disbelief and hope so heartbreaking that Walker-17 felt it hit him in the chest like a physical force. He half-raised one hand, unsure if he wanted to comfort her or congratulate her, but seized by the powerful emotion all the same.

“You mean--?” she asked.

The woman who’d been speaking paused, and with one look at Virna’s face, she understood. Her jubilant demeanor settled into something a little calmer, a little warmer, and she reached over to clasp Virna’s shoulder. “They killed him,” she said, “The Taken King is dead.”

Chapter End Notes

A few fun facts: Reliable Pawn and Curio is the name of an actual shop, and with the exception of Haze, the drugs mentioned in this chapter come from the song titles of the album I listened to (several times) while I worked on this. It's Trapeze's Medusa, which I recommend if you're into early 70s blues rock.

This chapter's coming a bit early because after tomorrow I will, of course, be playing Destiny 2. Next week's chapter will probably be on time, but if it's not... well. You know why.
Shadows and Songs

Chapter Summary

With a celebration in full swing, the travelers take a moment to relax. Walker-17 sees something he shouldn't. Virna has some reservations. Coyote-3 makes a decision.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Y’know what’s buggin’ me?” Coyote-3 asked, raising his head. The rest of the group looking into the impassive curve of his visor, seeing only themselves; he’d long since replaced his helmet.

They’d all moved indoors, back to the Forge in the Wall, to a place where they could at least sit, because escaping the festivities was downright impossible at that point. The Court of Miracles echoed with shouts and songs, heaving like a beating neon heart in the center of the asteroid. The most popular song seemed to be a drinking song involving objects being shoved into uncomfortable places which had been hastily re-purposed to feature Oryx as the star.

They’d decided a booth would be safest, seeing as Coyote-3 still seemed to be having trouble with chairs. “What’s buggin’ me is—if we’d waited? Waited like a minute? This!” He gestured unsteadily with one hand at the window at the chaos just beyond it. “This coulda been our distraction!”

“But you did so well,” Walker-17 replied, dryly.

“Pfff,” Coyote-3 held up a finger, the paused. “Well. Guess so.”

“...I was being sarcastic, but then again, technically it’s true.” Walker-17 looked to Virna. She and Evoksis were sitting side-by-side, across from the Guardians. She was nursing a glass of a deep purple beverage that smelled like beer, looking out at the main floor of the bar, where people were cheerfully and drunkenly singing along with the muffled music from outside. Evoksis had nothing. He was watching the bar’s patrons as well, and Walker-17 couldn’t even begin to guess his expression.

Virna was holding it together admirably, but there had been a few moments where that façade—and by now Walker-17 could easily recognize it as a façade—had faded, and months’ worth of powerful, complicated emotion had hit her all at once. She’d tamped it down, and seemed to be clinging to a sense of quiet triumph in the meantime. Walker-17 still wanted to comfort her, but he wasn’t sure how.

It was best to simply ignore what he saw, and let Virna have her dignity. He could always offer his support in private, if she decided she needed it.

“These folks,” Coyote-3 went on, “these folks got the spirit.” He leaned back, and, with slow, deliberate care, raised both of his hands in front of him. Virna and Evoksis both looked over, having seen the gesture in their peripheral vision. Coyote-3 slowly unfurled the middle fingers of both hands. “Fuck that guy. What a shithead.”

His words seemed to break the spell on Virna. She gave a snorting laugh, and lifted her glass.
Despite her smile, there was a somberness in her eyes. “Y’know what, Coyote? I’ll toast to that.”

“Hell yeah.”

Walker-17 chuckled and shook his head, quietly grateful to Coyote-3’s irreverence. Or, perhaps, to the drug still fueling that irreverence. ...both, probably. It seemed to be the right thing to say in that moment, tipping Virna away from her darker thoughts.

“We’re not entirely done with him yet, of course,” he said. After the initial stunning announcement, Walker-17 had asked around for details. What was known was that a fireteam of Guardians had killed Oryx’s physical body, but as far as anyone knew, his soul was still intact. “Permanently killing someone like him is going to require getting…” He paused, putting his head to one side. “Metaphysical.”

“You literally get metaphysical every day,” Coyote-3 pointed out.

“Well. Only when I’m fighting. Regardless—for now, we’ve at least halted his advances.”

“No more Taken?” Evoksis asked softly.

“No more Taken.” Walker-17 confirmed. “As long as we prevent anyone from taking Oryx’s place, and trust me, we will.”

Evoksis took a deep breath and stared at him for a long moment. Walker-17 remembered Virna’s words to him, back on Venus: he’s grieving. Evoksis would undoubtedly be living with that grief for a long time, but in that Dreg’s blue-eyed stare, Walker-17 thought he saw a much-diminished ember flicker back to life. “A battle, won. The war goes on.”

Walker-17 nodded. “Yes. But the battle is won.”

“And that,” Coyote-3 said, still holding up his hands and his middle fingers, “is good enough for tonight.” Walker-17 gently reached over and guided his hands back down. “At least, in my book. I’m getting a drink.”

“You are not getting a drink, not when you’re on… whatever-it-is you’re on,” Walker-17 admonished.

“Medusa,” Coyote-3 and Virna said at the same time.

“Right, that. Unless we can find you a virgin drink, or something.”

Evoksis, however, made an unexpected sound: a soft eliksni laugh, burbling, two-toned, and hoarse. “Good enough for tonight. Yes.” He was sitting on the outside of the booth, and without a word, rose from his seat and trotted to the bar. Coyote-3 cheered him on with a “Hell yeah!” while he pounded his fist on the bar and ordered something in his native tongue.

Of course, the bartender stared at him, dumbfounded, before Evoksis repeated himself in a more common parlance. Walker-17 watched him go, and then looked back to Virna, scooting for the edge of his seat. “You know, I might as well,” he said, as he stood to join Evoksis at the bar.

Walker-17’s was by far the most exotic beverage at the table: it was some fluorescently green, glowing liquid. Virna and Evoksis both watched him toss it back with unabashed fascination on their faces. Evoksis’s own beverage was nearly clear, with a faint blue iridescence. He hunkered over it, eyes narrowed as he regarded it dubiously. “Smells like... solvent,” he declared.

“Never had this particular cocktail before?” Virna asked.
“Never had any liquor before.” Evoksis glanced up and shrugged. He didn’t need to explain, once the revelation was out in the air; clearly, liquor was a luxury reserved for someone higher in the chain of command than a lowly Dreg. After the first sip, his face twisted into an expression of disgust so universal that Walker-17 couldn’t resist laughing a little. Evoksis’s mandibles clicked a few times. “Something...”

He took another sip, and then stared at the drink with wide-eyed astonishment. “Ether. It is brewed with Ether.”

“Well, hot damn,” Coyote-3 said, “It gets you drunk and it’s nutritious. Best of both worlds, Evo.”

The conversation lulled as they nursed their drinks, alternating their attention between the bar’s patrons and the activity outside. The initial burst of celebration seemed to be slowing after about an hour’s worth of loud carousing. “Just because it’s gotten quieter,” Virna said, “don’t think they’ve stopped. They’ve just gone on to less bombastic means of celebration.”

One round of drinks soon proved not to be nearly enough, and the next trip to the bar involved nearly the whole table’s participation. “I think we might be able to find something that’s not alcoholic for you,” Walker-17 offered to Coyote-3, “I could ask.”

“Nah, nah. I don’t wanna take my helmet off again anyway,” he replied.

Once again, the table fell into quiet observation of the activity outside as the travelers finished up the second round of drinks. Virna was the one to finally break it. “We’ll need to go to the Reef after this—Evoksis and I. As we all know... there’s still a war on. I need to make sure that my orders haven’t changed. Or his.”

“So, d’you think you’ve proven yourself?” Coyote-3 asked Evoksis. He glanced to Virna. “He’s helped us a good bit in the last few days.”

“I’ll definitely put in a good word for you with the boss,” Virna added.

Evoksis nodded silently. After a long pull from his drink, he said, simply, “Thank you.”

“So, you think you might be ready to go talk to him?” Coyote-3 asked. When everyone stared at him, confused, he clarified, “Variks. House Judgment, and all that.”

“Ah. I... don’t think I have come that far.”

“I dunno. He’s an approachable guy. You know...” Coyote-3 sat up a bit. “These days he talks a lot about a ‘Kell of Kells.’ Who knows, Evo. Maybe it’s you.”

Evoksis laughed outright, loud and unabashed. “No. No, that is almost insulting to the title. I could never be Kell. I do not want to be Kell. Never.”

“That sounds exactly like something an unlikely hero would say right before destiny dumps greatness onto his lap,” Coyote-3 replied.

“It will need to find a different lap, then.”

“So, if you don’t mind my asking,” Virna asked, “what was your plan? Captain? Baron, maybe?”

Evoksis looked at his glass again, regarding it wordlessly for a few long moments. Walker-17 wondered whether or not they might have overstepped some unseen bounds, but Virna seemed quite at ease with the question. “My ambition,” he finally said, “when I still had any, was Archon.”
Archon. Not a Kell, but arguably a Kell’s equal. Walker-17 knew enough about the rough structure of Fallen houses to know that they were typically ruled by a triumvirate power structure: the Kell, who was the military leader, the Prime Servitor, a quasi-godlike machine of incredible intricacy that also synthesized their life-giving Ether, and the Archon Priest.

Of the three, he knew the least about the Archon. Apparently they worked closely with their House’s Prime, and served as a sort of spiritual leader for the group. It made perfect sense to Walker-17, knowing what he did about the strength of Evoksis’s convictions. If the House of Winter had been moving away from their old beliefs, how could he have hoped to be a spiritual leader to them? Walker-17 felt as if he should say something, offer some form of sympathy, but he didn’t know what to say.

Coyote-3 solved the problem for him. “Archon of Archons, maybe?”

Again, Evoksis laughed at him. “Only if there is a Prime of Primes.”

“I’ll let you know if I hear anything,” Virna said, nodding and taking another swig.

As Walker-17 finished up his second drink, Matthias gradually sank in the air, lower and lower until he simply clonked onto the table. Walker-17 gently rested a fond hand on the top of his Ghost’s shell. By that point, the Warlock was looking nearly as relaxed as Coyote-3. “You okay? Need me to ease up?”

“Nope, just fine,” he responded in a voice that sounded almost sleepy.

Virna had apparently imbibed enough to send her curiosity into turbo drive. “That reminds me—when we were in the tunnels, Flicker felt it when you took that hit, Coyote. Is that part of the… what did you call it? Neural symbiosis?”

“It is,” Flicker answered, bobbing. “It’s stronger in some Ghosts than others. Case in point…” he swiveled to regard Matthias, amused.

“So if your Guardian gets drunk, you get drunk? You feel what they feel?” Virna went on.

“Sort of?” Flicker floated closer to her. “To some extent, yes, but it’s usually… only very strong things. I’ve also heard that very strong dreams can filter through, which I’m told can be quite scary, but I’ve yet to experience that, myself.”

“Exo don’t dream,” Coyote-3 mumbled. “Present company excluded, ‘f course.”

“Not usually, no.” Walker-17 chimed in.

“Do you feel it when they hurt?” Virna asked.

“We feel it when they die,” Matthias said quietly. The words slammed down on the conversation, heavy, solid, and crushing. Walker-17 patted Matthias gently, and Flicker floated back towards Coyote-3, glancing to his Guardian anxiously. The pause lingered for a moment before Matthias stirred, nudging up against Walker-17’s hand affectionately before he said, “And we feel it when we bring them back.”

“What is that like?” Evoksis asked, before Virna could. The amount of booze in his system had seemed to only make him more alert somehow. Walker-17 suspected that this was less to do with a lack of intoxication and more to do with the drink easing the ever-present weight on Evoksis’s thoughts and bearing.
“Like if you yawn,” Coyote-3 said. “I think. I remember yawning, a little. It’s like yawning, but backwards. All your Light is all over the place, right?” He spread the fingers of his hands. “Then it comes back together—shoop! Just like that.” Coyote-3 illustrated the process by curling his fingers in again.

“I don’t remember yawning,” Walker-17 said slowly. “But that sounds more or less right.”

“You get used to it.” Coyote-3 propped one hand up on the table and rested his helmet’s chin heavily in his palm. “You die a lot. ‘Specially first starting out. You’re up! Then you’re down. Up and down. Over’n over.”

Another heavy silence settled over the table. Nobody could argue that Guardians greatly benefited from the impermanence of their death, but even so, it was difficult to imagine what it must be like to be expected to fight and die repeatedly, again and again, for a fight that the Traveler had chosen for them. Immortality had its downsides.

“Well.” It was Evoksis who broke the silence. “To them, then.” He hoisted his glass in the air, looking to his table-mates one by one. “To those crazy bastards, who fight, die, and fight. Without them, Oryx would not be dead today.”

Walker-17 simply smiled and raised his drink to the toast, followed by Virna. Coyote-3 laughed aloud and scooped up one of the empty cups. From all four corners of the table, the four glasses clinked softly together. Tomorrow, they’d wake up to the same war. The Taken were leaderless, but they were not gone. Tomorrow, they’d delve into whatever secrets had been held there by the scientists of Clovis Bray, and then deal with those consequences, whatever they may be. Tomorrow, there would be strife. There was always strife.

But it was just as Coyote-3 had said. This was good enough for tonight.

The streets had quieted by the time they began their walk back to the Thunder Child. Walker-17 and Virna had taken one last drink to go, and strolled along slowly, letting their companions lead the way.

Now that they had what they came for, a generally more relaxed air had settled over the group, and Matthias was swiveling about, taking in the finer details of the Court’s odd construction. Walker-17’s relaxation had seemed to have a vivifying effect on him. “It’s like a quilt, almost,” he said, “a whole city, patched together with bits and pieces.”

“Yeah. You fortify with whatever metal you can find, out here,” Virna replied.

“Looks like the people who settled here came from all over.” Matthias bobbed toward each piece as he spoke. A narrow strip of metal that had been crudely bolted to the ceiling overhead caught his eye. “Is... is that Russian? Did they get these pieces from the Cosmodrome? How did they get it all the way out here?”

“Well, that’s definitely Cyrillic, but I don’t know if it’s from Earth,” Walker-17 said.

“Hmm.” Coyote-3 tipped his head back and pointed. “Vkhod Vospreschyon. Entry prohibited. It could be from anywhere, but it’s the same color blue as the ones I see all over the Cosmodrome. So, damn. Came a long way, didn’t it?”

Very slowly, everyone swiveled to face him. Coyote-3 remained where he was, staring upwards, utterly oblivious. Matthias was the first to speak. “You can read that?”

“What? Yeah. Of course.”
“You speak Russian?” Walker-17 asked.

“Yeah. You don’t?”

“No.”

It was Coyote-3’s turn to be surprised. “What? I met you in the Cosmodrome! Why would you be in there if you can’t even read the stuff that’s all over it?”

“I don’t actually know anyone, personally, that can.”

“How the hell do you guys understand Rasputin when he needs something, then?”

“I... don’t,” Walker-17 replied with a shrug, “I just respond to distress calls. Presumably someone higher up in the Vanguard translates.”

“What the hell!” It was less of a question and more of a general exclamation of disbelief. “So you’ve got—let me get this straight. We’ve got a ton of Guardians running all over the Cosmodrome playing grab-ass with the House of Devils and five’ll get you ten that none of them can understand Rasputin?”

“That’s... well. When you put it that way,” Walker-17 trailed off with a little chuckle. “Maybe you should let Captain Cayde know. Perhaps they need an interpreter.”

“No, thank you. I don’t think I need to have a direct conversation with Rasputin... er, ever. I try to avoid unfathomably complex machine intelligences. They make me nervous.”

“Who is this?” Evoksis had been listening to the conversation with varying degrees of confusion and amusement. “Rasputin?”

“He’s the Warmind of Earth. The Warmind, period.” Coyote-3 supplied.

Matthias floated over to Evoksis’s eye-level. “The Warminds were... sort of like AI, but to call them that would be to do them a great disservice. They’re enormously complex synthetic minds, something between a neural network and a supercomputer. They’re so complex not even the Vex can properly comprehend them, which is what Vex do, as I understand—and they were built before the Collapse to safeguard humanity.”

Walker-17 glanced over. Evoksis’s expression was as hard to read as ever, but his eyes were wide and bright. For someone who venerated technology, he supposed a Warmind could sound holy. “We built one for each planet, as I understand it,” the Warlock added, “Rasputin was the Warmind tasked with protecting Earth, and the only one to survive the Collapse.”

“That we know of,” Matthias amended.

“Yes.”

“And he speaks to you?” Evoksis asked softly.

“Not directly. At least, not directly to me. But sometimes he requests the Vanguard’s assistance, and we help him,” Walker-17 explained, “and from time to time, if one of his satellites drops, we defend it while the data is recovered.”

“Mostly we let him do his own thing,” Coyote-3 chimed in, “he’s kind of aloof, but he seems to be doing what he was made to do.”
Evoksis nodded slowly. After a moment, he simply said, “Amazing.”

Coyote-3 seemed to be coming down at last, and was able to walk around with only a bit of wobbliness. He was recounting the details of his misadventures of the evening with Evoksis.

“I cannot believe that was your plan,” the Dreg replied.

“It was a good plan,” Coyote-3 said defensively. “Virna does her sneaky thing, and I hang out and pretend to be a customer. Bam. Distracted.”

“Coyote.” Virna looked at him over the top of her drink, “you paid for drugs. And took them, right there in the shop. I don’t think you pretended to be a customer. I think you just were.”

There was a long pause. “Point,” he conceded.

“Even so, to his credit,” she went on, shrugging at Evoksis, “it did work.”

“Luck.” Evoksis shook his head. “Luck, and sneaking. Always the sneaking with you, She’lot.”

“What, you think I should’ve gone in there and roughed him up?” Coyote-3 asked.

“Seems to be the way things go here.”

Coyote-3 considered this. He looked over his shoulder to Walker-17 and Virna. “You know, he has a point,” he said. “Maybe we should’ve gone for the intimidation factor instead. It would’ve saved me a headache. And besides—” He gestured grandly to Evoksis. “We are traveling with the most powerful Dreg in the system.”

Evoksis gave a low, chittering warble and punched Coyote-3. There was a dull thunk as his fist connected with the unyielding metal of the Hunter’s arm, and Evoksis recoiled, shaking his hand. “…I did not think that through.”

“Nope,” Coyote-3 replied cheerfully. “And how could you punch a machine like that. Here you are, hitting me, a holy man—“

This prompted another punch and a fresh wave of snickers from Coyote-3. The two of them continued jostle good-naturedly. It seemed as if Coyote-3 was finally getting the hang of Eliksni bonding. Virna shook her head and looked to Walker-17. “It’s amazing what copious amounts of alcohol and high-quality electro-narcotics will do for peoples’ disposition.”

He chuckled. The alcohol had calmed him, had eased the constant thread of anxiety that Virna had sensed in him almost from the moment they met. “If there’s hope for them, maybe there’s hope for us.” It had also mellowed his voice down to a low tone; it almost rumbled in his chest when he spoke.

“I like to think we get along well sober,” Virna replied dryly.


It was an incredibly simple, even insignificant gesture on his part. Nevertheless, Virna smiled. It was probably the alcohol, but in that moment, she felt herself fill with warmth. “Well, at the very least,” she said, “there’s hope for you.”

He looked back at her, and his faceplates shifted into a smile, as well. “I’ll take all the hope I can get.” He held up his glass. The last dregs of his drink glowed in the bottom of the cup. “To hope?”
Virna brought her own cup up. “To hope.”

Walker-17 was true to his word. He personally escorted Coyote-3 to his room. “When’s the last time you slept in a bed, anyway?”

“I honestly don’t remember, but it can’t have been that long.”

“If you can’t remember, then obviously it has,” Walker-17 pointed out.

Coyote-3 waved him off. “Nah, nah, it’s probably the drugs.”

“Walker,” Flicker said, “I am very grateful for your help. I think I can take it from here, though. All right! Move it, Guardian of mine.” He flew forward and nudged his side into Coyote-3’s shoulder, shepherding him through the door. “Off to bed. Let’s go!”

Walker-17 shook his head with a slight smile as the door hissed shut. Virna and Evoksis, who’d lingered long enough to watch this momentous occasion unfold, excused themselves and went their separate ways. The pleasant buzz of the drink lingered in his system, leaving him drowsy enough to retire to his room for the evening. “Well,” he said to Matthias as he began to shrug off his robes, “I count this evening as a victory.”

“Definitely one of the more unconventional missions I’ve been on,” his Ghost conceded. Matthias’s burst of energy was waning, and it wasn’t hard to tell, if one knew the signs to look for: the slight droop of his crests, and the dimness of his optic. Walker-17 couldn’t help but smile. “Go ahead and rest, Matthias. I need to catch up on some messages before bed.”

The Ghost bobbed a nod and vanished in a brief flicker of light. Walker-17 spent the last half hour before bed checking in with some of his fellow Guardians in the field. It was still too early to know much about how the death of their king would affect the Taken, but Guardians were especially adept at finding trouble.

When he finally slept, he did not dream.

Virna woke to find Evoksis already up, sitting on the floor of the cockpit with both Ghosts hovering around him. The rusted hunk of circuitry she’d liberated from the back of the pawn shop was on the floor before him, partially disassembled. As she approached, he looked up, bobbing his head in silent greeting. Her crow had returned sometime during the night, and was perched serenely on the back of one of the chairs.

“Early riser?” she asked, taking a seat nearby.

“Energized, today. It was a very good drink.”

Virna nodded. It had only been a few days, far too short an amount of time for their alien companion to bounce back from malnutrition, but he definitely seemed perkier. “What’s the verdict?”

“We can connect what’s left of it with a power source. Once we do that, all it’ll take is a scan,” Matthias said, “simple enough!”

“Evo was up first,” Flicker added, “so we figured we’d go ahead and get started.”

Evoksis had been very helpful when they were installing the *Thunder Child’s* mystery component, so Virna wasn’t surprised to see that the Ghosts had recruited him. A quick exchange revealed that
there was really nothing she could do to help, so she nodded and left Evoksis to his work.

By the time Walker-17 and Coyote-3 were up (which wasn’t much later), she was ready to talk about their next destination. The convened in the cockpit and Evoksis listened while he carefully stripped and re-connected a bundle of wires. “So, like I said last night, Evoksis and I have to get back to the Reef. I’m not exactly sure what my orders will be after that.”

“Of course,” Walker-17 replied with a nod. “As far as I can tell, some of my fellow Guardians are saying the Taken are still showing up, but they’re not seeing anyone get Taken. I’d hoped they’d all disappear when he died, but...”

Virna sighed. “No. That would be too easy, wouldn’t it? But it’s good to know they can’t make more of themselves, at least.”

“Any news on anyone shipping out to kill Oryx for good?” Coyote-3 asked, leaning on one of the cockpit chairs.

“Not that I know of,” Walker-17 replied, “but it’s only been a day. Either way, we’ll head straight to the Reef. Matthias, is there any reason we can’t work extracting this data en route?”

“Nope. We’ll probably have it ready in the next five minutes. I don’t think we’ll need anything else here.”

“Great. Let’s get going, then.”

After a few quick preparations, they soon had the Thunder Child and its attendant ships heading back to the Reef. The entire crew gathered in the cockpit, watching the Ghosts flit about the main screen, which was crowded with various windows of data.

“All right. So, this is, by far, the worst shape I’ve seen any of these things in since we started this,” Flicker declared, “but it’s not unsalvageable. The data that was lost here is because of damage and time. As far as I can tell—” He swiveled to regard Walker-17. “—nobody has deliberately tried to erase these records.”

Walker-17 simply gave a brisk nod, and Matthias took over. “A lot of this is just confirming what we know. This was a project tossed between Ishtar and Clovis Bray. The Thunder Child was involved in the late stages of it... let’s see. A lot of bits and pieces here, and I can’t promise they’re all related. It mentions the Joyeuse, but I don’t think that has anything to do with this.”

Walker-17 shook his head. “Not that I could find in the last records we recovered.”

“Right. Let’s see... programs studying the mental architecture of AI, which sounds like business as usual for them. Something called the Hand of Solomon, which sounds very poetic, but not particularly helpful. Some sort of incredibly-vague project simply called ‘Transmission’... let me look for our Protocol.”

Virna watched him. For the first time since their journey began, Walker-17 seemed confident about the search. He was leaning over the desk, optics narrowed slightly, drinking in the text that scrolled by with a focused hunger that was unsullied by anxiety or self-doubt. He seemed to have let go of his reservations regarding diving into his own past.

Walls of text flashed by the screen. “Let’s see. Conjuration Protocol... I’ve got a good deal on the Thunder Child, but not a lot on the Protocol. One moment.” Matthias’s optic dimmed, and then suddenly flared to life. “The component! Flicker do you—”

“I sure do!”
Everyone’s attention was flicking rapidly back and forth between the Ghosts as they excitedly chattered. Flicker and Matthias swiveled to face the crew, and Matthias spoke first. “The component we found on Venus is a transmitter. It’s—hold on.”

“A transmitter? That seemed... awful complicated for a transmitter,” Virna replied doubtfully.

“There’s a reason for that,” Flicker said, taking over while Matthias dug through the records. “It’s designed to send and receive communications on a massive scale. From what I can tell, it’s designed to receive a very specific sort of signal—”

“It’s designed to find things.”

“It’s designed to find one particular thing.”

The Ghosts began to talk over one another in their enthusiasm. Coyote-3 held up a hand. “Hold up, guys, whoa. One at a time. So, that thing we grabbed from Venus is some kind of... very powerful homing beacon?”

“More or less,” Matthias replied. “Or, at least, that’s its primary function. I’m guessing that the data core in there is designed to pull raw information from whatever it is that the Thunder Child’s designed to find, but I can’t be sure about it. This doesn’t really talk much about that.”

Walker-17 looked away from the screen, at the interior of the ship. A homing beacon. He remembered the message on Venus had mentioned something that they might need to find in the future. “That’s why they didn’t destroy it,” he said slowly. “They wanted to be able to find whatever it was that was... lost, or hidden.”

“As for the Protocol, I’ve got two things. One is a location—Europa. A lab, specifically. The other is just... well. This.” The screen went black, and in the next instant, a simple golden symbol faded into view.

The moment Walker-17 laid eyes on it, the world collapsed around him. The symbol burned into the back of his mind. He heard himself make a small, breathless noise. He stepped back, transfixed, flooded with a sudden sense of dread, of not wanting to see what he was seeing.

Virna and Coyote-3’s attention snapped towards him immediately. “Walker--?” Virna’s voice was already fading, coming as if from far away.

The world tilted under him, and then everything went black.

Coyote-3 lunged for the falling form of his friend, but Evoksis was quicker. He staggered under Walker-17’s weight, clinging grimly and digging his claws into the fabric of Walker-17’s robes. Virna rushed to his side, peering into Walker-17’s face. His optics were dim, and there was no expression on his face. “Matthias!”

The Ghost was already rushing to his Guardian’s side. “He’s—he’s okay, he’s not dead. Just... unconscious.” He hovered fretfully over Walker-17 as Evoksis carefully eased him to the floor. “I have no idea what just happened.”

“He was looking at the screen,” Evoksis supplied, nodding towards it, “Then he saw that.”

They all turned to regard the screen. It was still displaying the golden symbol, which meant nothing to any of them. “Coyote—” Virna said suddenly, “is this—should you be looking at that? Is it some kind of Exo shut-down?”
“Well, I feel fine, but I am still wearing my helmet. And I don’t really... see the way Walker sees. No eyes, and all. But even so, I don’t think that was an *Exo* thing.” He looked away from the screen to the prone form of his friend. “I think that was just a *Walker* thing. Can you wake him up, Matthias?”

There was a pause before Matthias replied, “No. I can feel... something. I don’t know what. I’ve tried calling to him, but I’m not reaching him.” Anxiety was filtering through his normally-calm voice. “I guess we have to wait for him to wake up.”

“We should move him,” Evoksis said.

The others agreed, and Coyote-3 and Virna carefully lifted Walker-17 between them, shuffling him off to the nearest room. The crow followed in a flurry of flapping wings. Evoksis lingered behind, watching them go, uncertain how to feel. The longer he stayed with these creatures, the stranger the world seemed to become. *What exactly, he thought to himself, have I gotten myself into?*

He turned to regard the screen, narrowing his eyes. *And what power lays in this shape that could strike Walker down from a mere glance?* There was nothing familiar about the shape, nothing significant, except for its roundness. Circles within circles. Holy shapes. It almost looked like a ward, some sort of protection against evil. Evoksis stared for a few moments longer, but eventually just shook his head and followed the others.

The symbol flickered fitfully on the screen, keeping its secrets to itself.

Walker-17 didn’t wake until they’d arrived at the Reef. He’d dreamed, in the collapse, and found himself immediately struggling to grasp the rapidly-fading details of the vision. He wasn’t alone in his room, though, and the moment he stirred, Coyote-3 rose from where he’d been sitting and drew up to his side. “Hey—take it easy. Uh. You okay?”
“I think so.” As consciousness fully asserted its hold on his brain, so did a dreadful gripping ache. Walker-17 winced. “Headache. What happened? I passed out?”

Coyote-3 nodded slowly. “I’m... a little worried that if I say exactly what happened you’ll pass out again,” he began, uncertainly. “But. Um, something showed up on the screen and it knocked you clean out.”

The memory clicked into place, and Walker-17 shuddered. Inexplicable dread washed through him. He could remember the shape now, could see it in his head. “I don’t know what it means,” he said quietly, “but it’s important.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I... I figured.”

Walker-17 swung his legs over the side of his berth and stood. Matthias was not physically present, but he could feel his Ghost’s concern through the link. Concern and chagrin—it seemed that there was nothing Matthias could do for the headache. They left the room, with Coyote-3 trailing somewhat fretfully at Walker-17’s heels.

Virna and Evoksis were waiting in the cockpit. Virna stood when she saw Walker-17 enter, her eyes flickering rapidly over him, as if she’d be able to discern an answer for his collapse by sight alone. Drinking in every detail, as always, he thought with a surprising surge of fondness. She would have made a good Warlock. “I’m fine,” he said, “aside from a little headache.”

“You looked at a picture and passed out,” she replied, “that’s not good, Walker.”

He shook his head briskly. “Definitely not. But it could’ve been worse. Did you happen to find out anything that might explain what happened while I was gone?” Walker-17 looked between Matthias and Flicker.

Flicker angled his optic down, staring at the floor. “I’m sorry. There’s nothing more here—or at least nothing new. The only other lead we have is the Europa facility.”

“Them, we know our next stop,” Coyote-3 said.

Walker-17 wasn’t looking to him, though. The moment Matthias had said the word “Europa,” he had turned to look at Virna. For a moment, her brows drew together in a brief flash of genuine regret before she smoothed away her emotions. “Guys. We can’t go poking around on Europa.”

“Why not?”

“That’s the Nine’s territory, and they’re very particular about their territory. The risk isn’t worth the reward, at this point.”

Walker-17 had never known Coyote-3 to be a particularly quarrelsome individual, and so he was a bit surprised when the Hunter dug his heels in. “You saw what just happened, right? Whatever it is we found here, it goes deep. At least, for him, it does.” He gestured to Walker-17. “This isn’t—we’re not just poking around for no reason, here.”

“I never said that we were, Coyote,” Virna replied calmly.

“That’s the only way we’re going to find out what’s going on!”

Virna shook her head. “Just because it’s the strongest lead doesn’t mean it’s the only lead. Right now, we’ve been going directly from place to place, but Clovis Bray was pretty expansive in its time. This doesn’t have to be a linear investigation.”
Coyote-3 still didn’t relent. “Guys. Why the hell would we go casting around in the dark? It’s not even that far from here!”

“Because,” Virna replied, a hint of steel entering her voice, “of this little thing we have here at the Reef, this novel concept we call chain of command.”

“Well, okay, you don’t have to go, but we can go.”

“I can’t exactly stop you, but I don’t recommend it. Hiding things from the Nine is difficult, and they’ve... done things, before.” Virna paused and glanced about the cabin. Walker-17 noticed, for the first time, that her crow wasn’t present. “Look, I don’t want this coming back to the Reef, Coyote. They have eyes everywhere. There’s no reason to believe they aren’t watching us now, somehow.”

“Virna, you’re being paranoid—”

“No,” she snapped. Anger suddenly flooded the calm, measured tones in her voice, “I am being careful. Do you realize what happened on Saturn? The full extent of it, Coyote? Do you realize how much we lost there? Our soldiers don’t come back when they die. We’re not the City. Half of our forces are dead, we’ve lost our leadership—we’re more vulnerable now than we ever were during the Reef Wars, and I’m not going to do anything that’ll tip us closer to losing one of the few allies out here that we have!”

Her voice had steadily raised in volume, and she took a single step towards Coyote-3. He was staring at her, utterly silent and very clearly taken aback.

“I’m not just saying these things for no reason. I’m—” Her voice cracked, and for an instant, just an instant, Walker-17 saw past the façade once more. He saw the loss at the heart of this rising anger. “—I’m not saying that everything that we’ve found doesn’t matter. I know it matters to you both. It matters to me.” Virna paused a moment to collect herself, taking a deep breath. She turned to face Walker-17. “I know that this is probably frightening for you, Walker. But I can’t—not this. Not now.”

“It’s all right, Virna,” he replied gently, “it’s a reasonable request.”

Coyote-3 stared at her a moment, then lowered his head. He didn’t say anything, but he seemed, at the very least, admonished by her outburst. Virna, for her part, was doing her best to grapple her emotions into submission again. “Coyote,” she finally said, “I’m sorry. But I’m not wrong.”

He just cycled a deep breath and nodded slowly. Walker-17 stepped in again. “I think we need to step aside for a little while, calm down a bit. We might not have an immediate lead, but this isn’t the only avenue open to us, and we all have things to take care of right now. Virna, you still need to go report to Variks, right? And Evoksis, I imagine you need to get some business done, too.”

Evoksis nodded silently. He didn’t seem perturbed by the mounting tension among his new comrades. “Yeah,” Virna said, “Look, Walker—I’ll ask. But don’t get your hopes up. I don’t think Variks is going to authorize us haring off into the Nine’s territory without a more tangible lead than we have.”

Virna and Evoksis disappeared into the machinery of the Reef’s organization over the next few hours, leaving Walker-17 and Coyote-3 to cool their heels and gather their thoughts. “I’ve already spoken to Master Rey about it—briefly, I’ll add, and I didn’t have much to tell her at the time, but I trust her judgment. If this sounds serious enough, she can get to the bottom of it.”

Coyote-3 sighed. He’d started rifling through the data that they’d gathered, which had been
helpfully compiled by the Ghosts. “She’s probably the smartest person in the City, but even she can’t just... pull something from nothing, Walker.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” Walker-17 was standing, his hands folded behind his back. “Aside from that, we have Owl Sector at our disposal. If anyone’s got a good lead on old secrets left to us from Clovis Bray, they will.”

Virna returned, bearing the news Walker-17 expected to hear. For her, at least, Europa was off-limits. Nobody was telling him he couldn’t go there, of course, but Walker-17 couldn’t bring himself to consider the idea just yet. The odds of the Nine taking notice of this venture and tracing it back to the Reef were low, but they were still present.

What could the ragged power structure left on the Reef say if they were approached by someone saying, You had the chance to stop this, but you didn’t. Why?

There was a lurking dread underlying every thought about proceeding under these circumstances. Walker-17 knew the Nine could be capricious. He’d heard the rumors about their temporary custody of Skolas, and how they’d possibly released him after they’d felt slighted by the Queen. He couldn’t, however, tell if the deep-seated unease was foreboding regarding the Nine, or somehow tied up in his memories and his reaction to those memories.

Ultimately, it didn’t matter. Maybe, years down the line, when any sort of implications connecting this to the Reef had faded, he might consider traveling to Europa and seeing if there was even anything left, but for now, they’d pursue other avenues. Honestly... it was for the best.

The travelers parted ways. Virna stayed put, buckling down on acclimating Evoksis, while at the same time tapping into her own contacts on the Vestian Outpost and beyond. Walker-17 returned to the City and sought the counsel of his fellow Warlocks. Getting information directly from Owl Sector would prove to be tricky, but it was worth a shot. Coyote-3 volunteered himself for field work. Despite his restless nature, he’d gotten his teeth into this mystery, and seemed unwilling to give it up.

Walker-17 didn’t have many leads to throw him, but Coyote-3 tracked them down relentlessly. When he was left to his own devices, he prowled around the outskirts of Freehold, picking fights with the Cabal and hoping he got lucky. Freehold had been Clovis Bray’s crown jewel. It was entirely possible that the answers lay there, under the sand.

In this manner, two weeks passed.

Coyote-3 shook the red dust out of his cloak and stepped out of XVI-776. The sky was as ruddy as the surface of Mars had been, lit ablaze by the light of the setting sun. He was returning to the City empty-handed once more, but he felt a bit better after having exerted himself. Coyote-3 went looking for Walker-17 at his apartment first, and, not finding him there, returned back to the hangar to see if the Thunder Child was docked.

Not only was it docked, but the ramp to the cargo bay was open. Coyote-3 snorted. Of course it was—it was a lovely night, and there was nothing to fear in the City. He walked right inside, unchallenged. The interior was dim, in a cozy sort of way. Once again, he was struck by the peculiar atmosphere engendered by the faux-wood paneling and the old-fashioned brassy fixtures. Flicker’s fondness for it all filtered through their link.

It didn’t take long to find Walker-17. He was sitting in the cockpit, leaning back in one of the pilot’s chairs, a datapad in hand. The viewscreen was displaying the view from outside: the sunset over the City. Whatever he was reading had his complete attention, as he didn’t react at all when
Coyote-3 entered the room. The Hunter cleared his throat softly, and Walker-17 looked up.

He blinked, startled, but his expression soon softened, and he offered a slight smile. “Hey. Didn’t hear you come in.”

“Well,” Coyote-3 said, stepping around the chair and taking a seat, “I am a Hunter. Stealth is my purview.” He paused for a moment, and then gestured briefly to the datapad in Walker-17’s hand. “Whatcha got? More research notes?”

“Mm, no. We’ve not made much progress today. Just unwinding,” Walker-17 turned the datapad around so that Coyote-3 could see the text marching across the page. “War of the Worlds.”

“Oh,” Flicker appeared in a sudden shower of sparks, “the book I lent you!”

Walker-17 nodded slowly and turned the datapad back to face him. For a few moments, quiet returned to the cockpit.

“Been poking around Freehold,” Coyote-3 said, at last, “still no dice.” There was another pause. For a moment, Coyote-3 debated steering the topic away from the obvious, underlying source of tension... but it had been two weeks.

The tension snapped. “Walker. I’m just... I’m going to say what we’re all thinking.” Coyote-3 straightened in his seat, and Walker-17 looked up, somewhat surprised by the sudden shift in mood. “I think that this Conjuration Project was made because of you. I think they did something to you. Everything we found keeps coming back to you. We have to do something about this.”

“Coyote—”

“I know I’ve got no proof, and maybe I’m the one being paranoid, here, but I think we all know something bad happened, hundreds of years ago. And I’m pretty sure that something bad happened to you. That ‘him’ they keep talking about, in all that stuff we dug up? I think you’re him, Walker. I think the people who made us did something to you.”

“I died, Coyote,” Walker-17 said suddenly, stunning his friend into momentary silence, “I was dead for hundreds of years before Matthias found me. The worst already has happened. Whatever might or might not have been done to me, it’s over now.”

“It’s clearly not,” Coyote-3 shot back, “or you wouldn’t have passed out from just looking at a symbol.”

“That might be so, but we never would’ve come across that symbol if we hadn’t been looking for it,” Walker-17 pointed out. “Coyote, the point is... I’ve made it this long without knowing. I’m pretty sure we’ve ruined anyone else’s chances for following in our footsteps. If the mystery ends here, then it ends here. Maybe I won’t have any more answers, but I didn’t have them before. I’ve got everything I need to keep doing what the Traveler brought me back to do.”

Coyote-3 didn’t immediately respond. “That might be good enough for you, Walker,” he finally said, “but it’s not going to be good enough for the people who, y’know. Care about you.”

“It will have to be,” he replied gently.

The Hunter cycled a long sigh. For a moment, it seemed as if he were going to protest, but instead, he deflated further. “Yeah. You... you might be right. Well, regardless—I’m not going to stop looking. Maybe we missed something. We’ve dredged up a lot of interesting stuff while poking around in those old databases—maybe one of them’ll have something useful.”
“It’s possible. I plan to look into it, actually. Regardless of any connections they might or might not have to me, anything Clovis Bray might have left behind could be hugely valuable. Maybe... it’s better this way.” Walker-17 looked back down at the datapad. “If you’re right, and something was done to me, maybe it’s better that I don’t remember it. Maybe it’s better that my search gave me a dozen other mysteries to investigate, instead.”

Coyote-3 nodded absently. Walker-17 lowered his datapad into his lap and lifted his head, gazing at the viewscreen and the silhouette of the City in the sunset. “Quite the view,” Coyote-3 finally said.

Walker-17 nodded. “It certainly puts things into perspective.” When he spoke again, his voice was soft. “I can look at the symbol, now. The second time I tried it, I was fine. I know you’re worried, Coyote. I am, too. In some way, I feel like there’s... there’s something I don’t know, some reason that I should be going after this with everything I’ve got. But I also feel like there’s a reason why I should stay away. And, strange as this sounds...”

He looked away from the screen, fixing Coyote-3 with his violet-lit stare. “I feel like they’re the same reason. And if that’s the case, then maybe doing nothing is the best option.”

Coyote-3 had no advice to offer for that. Instead, he simply stood, walked over to his friend, and put a hand on Walker-17’s shoulder. “Well. Regardless. You’re not alone in this.”

“I know I’m not.”

Coyote-3 left not long after that, letting Walker-17 return to his book and distract himself from the lingering mysteries that remained yet unsolvable. Coyote-3 didn’t say anything as he walked across the hanger, leaving the Thunder Child behind and making his way towards XV1-776.

He stood alone, next to his ship. The distant sounds of the City drifted through the evening air, warm, welcoming, but ultimately not the sounds of home. Unbidden, Evoksis’s words sprang into his mind: Sometimes home is just people. Coyote-3 raised his head, staring out at the distant sprawl of the City, growing gradually more and more studded with lights. “Flicker.”

His Ghost appeared. Technically, he could communicate through their link, but Coyote-3 preferred to talk face-to-face. “Yes?”

“You’ve known Walker longer than I have.”

Flicker stared at him for a moment before he bobbed in the air. “Well, yes. Of course.”

“You told me,” Coyote-3 went on, “that they saved you—Walker and Matthias both.”

Even if their communication was largely verbal for the moment, there were some things that didn’t need to be said. Coyote-3 was working something out. Flicker sensed this, and went on, “They did.” He turned away, following Coyote-3’s gaze and taking in the vista of the City with his Guardian. “My light was fading. It happens, when you stay too far from the Traveler for too long.” He made a soft sound, almost like a laugh. “I don’t know why—I was always out in space, looking for you. I always got the feeling that you were… far away, somehow.”

“Maybe you were sensing the Hunter in me,” Coyote-3 said.

“Maybe. Either way... I remember their voices, and then being picked up. Being close to them helped. They brought me back to the City, and they stayed with me while I regained my strength. It… it was nice. Having friends. You spend a lot of time alone, before you find your Guardian.”

Coyote-3 tilted his had to regard Flicker and held up a single, cupped palm. The ghost drifted
against it, bumping Coyote-3’s gloved hand gently. “He was the first Guardian I ever knew,” Coyote-3 said, “One of the first people I ever knew, period, after waking up.”

“Coyote…” Flicker trailed off. Part of him wanted to ask Coyote-3 what he was thinking. The other part of him, though, knew exactly what Coyote-3 was thinking.

“The first friend I ever made out here,” he went on, quietly, “And you should be there for your friends, when they need you.” He cycled a long, slow sigh. His last visit to the Vanguard came back to him; the way he’d felt, when he remembered the things Cayde-6 had done. How he’d disapproved. How he’d wondered how anyone could do something behind their comrades’ back.

*I think I get it now, Boss,* he thought to himself. Coyote-3 raised looked back over the City one more time. “C’mon, Flicker.” He turned, cloak snapping behind him as he stepped into the shadow of his ship. “We’ve got a long trip ahead of us.”

Chapter End Notes

As far as I know that roughly romanized Russian is correct, but if anyone better-versed in the language than I am (which... is not at all) knows better, don't hesitate to correct me! Also, this is the last full chapter of Part 2. There'll be an intermission coming up soon, and then Part 3 will begin! I'll discuss its update schedule when I have the intermission up.
Intermission Three: Animals of War

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Intermission Three: Animals of War

or

The Tenth Life of Walker-17

It was done, and life moved on.

The sense of dread that had plagued Walker-17’s dreams had not departed entirely, but it had diminished, eased by the passage of time. It lingered in the back of his mind, pushed there by more pressing anxieties. Walker-17 was wearing a uniform in this dream, and standing over a bank of screens. He was on the broad deck of some larger, unfamiliar starship, and before him, on the displays, a variety of red lights winked to life. Their appearance meant one thing.

Another colony had gone dark.

“Damn,” someone across the bridge muttered, “it’s New Valverde. It’s... it’s gone, fellas.” The speaker was an Exo. Everyone on the bridge was, in fact, an Exo. The speaker’s plating was a matte russet-brown, and he was a crude construction next to the mechanical elegance of Walker-17’s design. The name came to him in the dream: Fisher.

A pattern was beginning to emerge. Whatever was happening to the system had begun at the rim, moving inexorably towards the center of the system, like a noose, snuffing the light of colonies as it went. Walker-17 was standing at what felt like the beginning of the end, and all he had to watch his back were allies he had no choice but to trust—allies he only trusted because he had no choice.

Debtors and ex-convicts, the lot of them. Once, the Exo program had been filled with volunteers, or carefully-crafted AI. Now, they needed every person they could get.

Another of his unlikely allies raised her head. Buck, Walker-17’s mind supplied. “That’s not the only one. We lost contact with three on the moon, too. They’re calling a rally point on Earth, sir. Might be a good idea to group up with them there.”

“And check in with the Boss,” a third Exo added.

The moon. That was potentially disastrous... but the moon had its own reinforcements. Walker-17 spoke, and, for the first time since his dreams began, he understood his own words. “Your devoted Captain,” he said, “is safe. He should be on Earth by now. And we’ll go there, too, before long. But right now our problem is here.” He turned to address the crew. “I think we can all agree this is much more serious than we ever anticipated it would be. Holding the Wall is now more important than ever.”

Slow nods worked their way across the room. “We know,” Fisher said, “and the Menagerie’s behind you, the whole way.”

The Devil’s Menagerie. They were part of Clovis Bray now, conscripts who’d been given a chance to repay their debt to society. Walker-17 hadn’t approved of the entire program. It had felt
too much like coercion, but if they harbored any resentment, it wasn’t strong enough to stand in the way of their willingness to help now, when humanity needed them most.

They were a shifty lot, but they had no shortage of fighting spirit.

As he looked back into their faces: most of them crude, a precious few showing more levels of sophistication. Walker-17 realized how desperation could drive someone to do something they’d considered otherwise unconscionable. Knowing that something was moving through the system, wiping out enormous swathes of humanity as it advanced, and feeling that pressing need to do something, anything to stop it...

He could see why this feeling had driven people to do horrible things.

He wished he didn’t. It was a feeling Walker-17 wanted to forget, and somewhere in his dreaming mind, he knew he would be given the chance to.

“All right, you sorry lot,” Walker-17 heard himself say, “time to call up our lurking friend and see what can be done.” He regarded his crew of ruffians and ex-pirates, and found himself smiling slightly even as he steeled himself for what he knew was coming. “If we live, it’ll be quite a tale to tell.”

“Damn right, sir,” Buck said, leaning over her station, “let’s show ‘em what all the beasts of hell can do.”

“Communication lines are open,” Fisher called from across the bridge, “The Hand of Solomon is moving.”

Walker-17 felt himself wince, and cycled a deep breath. “I really wish they hadn’t named it that,” he muttered.

Chapter End Notes

This ends part two! The update schedule for three is going to be a bit more sporadic, as I'm in moving into the heart of the semester now. There's probably going to be a sizable break while I write up the majority of it, and it might chug along nicely, but there will probably be irregular gaps between chapters.
“Come Thou forth, and follow Me: and make all Spirits subject unto Me so that every Spirit of the Firmament, and of the Ether: upon the Earth and under the Earth: on dry Land, or in the Water: of whirling Air or of rushing Fire: and every Spell and Scourge of God, may be obedient unto Me!”

-Preliminary Invocation of the Ars Goetia
A Deed Without a Name

Chapter Summary

Trouble stirs in Freehold. Walker-17 holds on to his friends. Coyote-3 gets some answers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It had been one week since the death of Oryx, the Taken King.

Bracus Ru’orn was tired, but he hid it well. Not out of fear, or out of a desire to impress anyone, but as a silent means of reassurance to his men. They were all tired—exhausted, battered by this hostile, lethal world, and ravaged to the bone from the unceasing onslaught of their enemies.

The war raged on, as it had over the centuries, changing its face as time went on. First, it had been a battle against the elements. Cabal could not survive in Mars’s lethal atmosphere without the aid of their suits. Then, it had been the Vex, which had kicked off a long, grinding war of attrition, a stalemate that had lasted until the first Guardians showed their faces on the red planet.

And, just when the Sand Eaters thought that their situation couldn’t get any worse, the Taken had arrived.

Ru’orn’s current detachment was a cobbled-together assortment of several squads, all of them condensed around a particular sector of the old human city of Freehold. At the moment, nobody was officially in charge. Ru’orn wasn’t even supposed to have been there as long as he had; he’d been called in to handle incursions from the House of Wolves (having extensive experience dealing with the Fallen), and he’d ended up facing down the Cabal’s most deadly threat in living memory.

Almost all of their leaders had been Taken or killed, but the contingent had hung grimly on, and one weeks ago the latest chapter of the endless war had closed. The Taken King was dead.

They’d come out of it alive. Ravaged, but alive. Ru’orn was certain that once things had settled enough to send word back, all the forces of bureaucracy would fill the gaps left behind. He would likely be sent back to the mountain, or the wastes, hunting down the dogs of Olympus Mons or the bolder Wolves. For now, though, he was here, and while he was here, he was the guiding hand behind each of his soldiers. He could see their loyalty in their bearing, and when they talked amongst themselves, they didn’t call him Bracus Ru’orn.

They called him Val Ru’orn.

He doubted high command would share their enthusiasm, but he was surprised how little that bothered him. There was something infinitely more honorable about being silently and unanimously awarded a higher station by his soldiers than by any other source. Ru’orn couldn’t have been prouder if the Emperor himself had appointed him a promotion.

Whoever that might currently be, he thought to himself. So much time had passed since they came to this accursed system... no matter. The Sand Eaters were no longer a part of the Cabal Empire,
and wouldn’t be, until they finished their mission. The problems of empirical succession were far
away and not as important as to the immediate and very dangerous problems that could be found
in the shadows of Freehold.

It had taken days for the Cabal to re-establish reliable communications amongst their remaining
troops. The Taken were still active, but it seemed as if they’d lost the ability to add to their ranks.
*One small mercy,* Ru’orn thought grimly as he trudged around the perimeter of the building his
troops had hunkered down in, *these Taken still claim their share of soldiers,* but Oryx took entire
Maniples. If the Taken wanted a fight, the Cabal could give them one. At last, he reached the
entrance of the building, and the doors hissed open in front of him.

They’d picked the tower for the sturdiness of its design rather than any kind of strategic
placement. It was sticking out of the side of an immense sand dune, with nearly two-thirds buried
out of sight. As the upper levels had taken damage, his troops had forced their way into the lower
levels, burrowing deeper and deeper into the sand, as was the norm for any Cabal engagement.
This building had been close to thirty stories, once; right now, only the top ten stories were
accessible aboveground.

“Zaitat, report,” he said, stepping into the shadows. It was mercifully dim and cool inside.

The Psion turned to regard him with quick, twitchy movements of his shrouded head. During the
siege of Freehold, many surprising soldiers had risen to the occasion, some of them displaying
cleverness and courage above their station. Zaitat was one such individual. “Reports are coming in
from all over the sector. It was previously estimated that thirty percent of all Sand Eater forces in
Freehold were destroyed. New reports place it close to fifty percent.” He stepped aside while
Ru’orn leaned over the console.

Fifty percent—maybe even more. In all of the centuries he and his troops had been here, they’d
never faced devastation of that magnitude. *It wasn’t even a Cabal offensive that stopped him,* he
thought ruefully to himself, *it was the humans.* Their Guardians. They were nearly as irritating
and every bit as persistent as the Vex or the Taken, and notoriously difficult to kill. It looked as if
that had worked out in everyone’s favor, this time.

“Sir,” Zaitat said, “there’s something else. This building. The lower levels are buried in the sand,
but it still has power. We can siphon some of it for our repairs. And…” He stepped away from the
console, tilting his head. “There’s more. Something worth finding.”

Ru’orn looked away from the screen, towards Zaitat. He couldn’t profess to understand how it
was the Psions did what they did. Their powers were baffling to him. The Cabal had possessed
them for a long, long time, and even now they still had surprises to offer, and their continued
analysis of the technology of the Cabal’s enemies had been indispensable. Half of the reason that
Ru’orn was inclined to trust Zaitat’s claims came from this knowledge. The other half came from
the fact that it was Zaitat himself.

“What manner of something?”

Zaitat knelt and pressed his three-fingered palm to the floor. “Something old. Keys to the
kingdom, perhaps.” He made a low, ululating noise: a laugh. “Something worth digging for.”
Without rising, he raised his head, tilting it again at Ru’orn questioningly.

Ru’orn considered the matter. “If nothing else,” he finally declared, “access to the power
infrastructure will be invaluable. This outpost has been acting as a rally point in practice for the
past few days; I suppose a little excavation would only make it official.” For a moment, longer, he
considered. “Very well,” he finally declared, “see to it. It shouldn’t take us too long to move all of
this sand.”
The Psion gave a quick nod. “It will be done.”

Walker-17 had spent the last two weeks since Oryx’s death searching for answers. While Virna was handling her own duties out in the Reef, throwing the occasional lead his way, and Coyote-3 was prowling the ruins of Mars, trying to flush out answers, Walker-17 had been consulting with every archivist and scientist who’d speak to him. He managed to secure a brief conversation with someone claiming to represent Owl Sector. They’d had no answers for him, but had taken a good deal of interest in the data he’d uncovered so far.

He’d spent a lot of time going through City records—digital and physical alike. The vast majority of the City’s data was kept digitally, but there were still libraries full of written word for him to go through, and carefully-preserved written records.

It had been the same story, the entire time. Virna had mostly only served to eliminate possibilities in her regular communications with Walker-17, which, he assured her, will still useful in their own right. Neither of them were going out into the field, and as such, they spoke almost every night. As the two weeks drew to an end, though, their conversations began to wander. Walker-17 would ask about Evoksis’s progress, and Virna would chat about the latest news on the Reef: a spat inside their local cryptography sect, or the escort of a particularly dangerous convict to the Prison of Elders.

It became increasingly clear that Walker-17 wasn’t going to find what he was looking for. It didn’t bother him as much as he thought it would, probably because, as time went on, he began to realize he’d found something else instead: a new pair of friends.

More and more often he dreamed, simply, of flying. As time went on, they became somewhat scarcer, and he enjoyed nights of deep, dreamless rest. They never quite went away, though. Perhaps they never would.

Maybe I’m being selfish, he thought to himself. He couldn’t forget how thrilled he’d felt when he found out that Oryx had been killed, but with that thrill came a stab of guilt. He should’ve been on that Dreadnaught, helping his fellow Guardians. Instead, he was chasing rumors and shadows. Maybe it’s time to get back in the field proper. The King is dead, but the Taken War’s still in full swing. There’s still work to do.

The evening after he’d spoken to Coyote-3, Walker-17 had unintentionally mimicked his friend’s actions; he’d stepped out of the Thunder Child and stood over the City, watching as it unrolled its myriad lights into the dark. Walker-17 always felt curiously more tender towards the City and its inhabitants when watching from this angle. Yes, there was something to be said about walking in the streets, experiencing the sights and sounds the City had to offer, seeing the faces and the smiles of the people who lived there... but up here, far removed, simply felt like a more natural viewpoint. He felt stronger, somehow, more capable of protecting this place, as if he could fold it up in a pair of vast, imaginary wings.

Walker-17 felt Matthias wordlessly nudge the back of his mind, and an instant later, the Ghost appeared. “It seems to me,” he said, “that you’ve already made your decision.”

The Warlock remained still for a few moments longer. “Yes,” he said, “I think I have.” There was a pause, filled only by the sound of the rushing high-altitude winds. “I love this place, Matthias,” he finally said, quietly. “I love this City more than I fear my past. If nothing else, well... at least I’ve learned that.”

Silent affirmation and affection surged through their link.
“Well. I’ve already told Coyote. I’ll go call on Virna. See her in person.” For a moment the peaceful warmth faltered as a new question reared its head. Was this the end of his collaboration with her? He was surprised by how much he’d miss Virna Roskar, someone he hadn’t even known existed a month before. He was even more surprised by how reluctant he was to let Evoksis disappear from his life, as well.

“Just as foolhardily affectionate as our Hunter friend,” Matthias offered, “despite how well you fool yourself.”

Walker-17 laughed. “Maybe so, Matthias. Well. Let’s go—and we’ll take Rocinante this time.”

A quick call confirmed that Virna was able to accept visitors. She directed them to the marketplace, and waved them over to an area that had been converted into some sort of makeshift lounge: tables had been constructed out of cloth-covered crates, as had chairs, well-and-often-used by the vendors who worked there. She was alone.

“I always forget how damn tall you are,” she said, by way of greeting, gesturing for him to sit across from her.

Walker-17 blinked, obviously a little taken aback by the unconventional greeting, but his shock soon melted into an amused expression. “Honestly, there are some days when I feel very small. I suppose that’s what I get for spending my time around machines larger than I am.”

“A bit of ship-envy?”

“Maybe so,” he declared gravely. It had only been a day since they’d last spoken, so there wasn’t much catching-up to do, nothing more than a quick recap of the past few days’ events, and the efforts of their respective forces in the Taken War. As the conversation wound down, Walker-17 finally brought them to the matter that had been weighing on him most heavily. “I’m... stopping the investigation. For now. There are better things we could be putting our efforts towards. And maybe it’s just better this way.”

Virna didn’t offer her opinion, one way or another. She simply stared at him for a moment with that sharp yellow-eyed gaze, and nodded in acceptance. It was more or less the reaction he’d expected from her. “There’s definitely no shortage of things that need our attention one way or the other.”

That “we” sounded kind of promising. Walker-17 nodded back. “Yes. I think it’s time I did a little old-fashioned fighting. I mean, far be it for me to complain about spending all of my day in and out of record halls and the like, but it’s high time I got about what I was made to do.”

“Would that we all had your conviction, Walker,” Virna said with a grin.

Walker-17 chuckled. “Well, I’m lucky enough to have had my duties laid out for me from the very beginning.”

The two of them both fell silent for a moment. Walker-17 had known he was going to ask Virna a specific question before he came to the Reef, but he was unaccountably nervous when it came to the matter of bringing it up.

“Virna,” he finally said, looking at the tabletop, “I’d understand if our respective duties are too different to ever really... team up again. But I’d like to keep in touch, if that’s all right.” His eyes flicked up to meet hers. “I’m not sure how often you need someone to watch your back in a firefight, but, well, we make a good team. All of us.”
She regarded him for a moment. Her expression seemed rather neutral, and Walker-17 couldn’t
discern anything from it. “Well,” she finally said, “I make a point never to turn down an immortal
warrior who’s willing to throw his lot in with mine. Especially one with a good sense of humor.”

Walker-17 felt himself fill with warmth, and he smiled.

“Besides,” she went on, “we’re in the middle of a war. My duties are going to be light on the
whole ‘solo espionage’ factor and probably a little more perilous than they were before. We’ve... lost a lot.” It was Virna’s turn to drop her gaze. “Everyone has to be ready to fight. We might need
to team up more than you’d think.”

“The Taken don’t stand a chance.”

Virna looked back up to him with a little half-smile. “Nope. Not if you Guardians’ track record is
anything to go by.”

“We have an impressive portfolio,” he agreed. He paused for a moment before he added,
uncertainly, “I... don’t know what kind of duties they do or don’t have Evoksis doing, and
whether or not he’d be comfortable helping us in such an overt fashion—especially when we’re
moving against his own people—”

“We’re his people,” Virna interjected, “he understood that would happen when he came here.”

Walker-17 nodded slowly. “Well. Yes, you have a point. Regardless, though, if he’s interested,
I’ll welcome him to watch my back anytime, too.”

“I’ll pass the word on to him. Or you can—he’s out shopping right now. Official citizen of the
Reef, as of two days ago.” Her grin faded into a wry smile. “The Guard put up with his unique
fashion sense for a full forty-eight hours before they sent him off to get some decent armor.”

“Heh. Is he a member of the Guard now?”

“Officially, no—just a citizen. Which means he’s probably going to be more free to go running off
for dangerous Guardian missions than I am. But he’s getting on pretty well with the Guard, so
maybe he’ll go for it.”

“I know he said he was interested in House Judgment,” Walker-17 said, “has he... had a chance to
speak to Variks?”

“Oh, yeah. They’ve talked.” Virna winced. “Evoksis... was pretty appalled with the Warden. You
know, that old hollowed-out Servitor that Variks uses in the Prison? Apparently, it’s deeply
sacrilegious—to Evoksis, at least. There wasn’t a fight, but I don’t think he’s going to be
petitioning for a place in House Judgment anytime soon.”

Walker-17 shook his head. “I can’t say I’m surprised.” It seemed that every time Evoksis’s
principles were put to the test, he ended up more and more alone, somehow. It struck Walker-17
as quite sad. “Well, I’d like to say hello in person.”

“Maybe you can give him some tips,” Virna said, standing, “if there’s one things you Guardians
know, it’s fashion.”

“Aha, well...” Walker-17 looked down, a little sheepish of his finery. “We have some very
enthusiastic outfitters.”

“I’ll bet. C’mon, he shouldn’t be too hard to find.”
Europa more or less slotted itself exactly into the limited expectations Coyote-3 had formed of it: barren, cold, and somber. The wind howled, its throat choked with snow, and great banks of ice crept through the scattered buildings of the cities. It didn’t have the same crumbling, decayed air that Coyote-3 had grown used to seeing in other places in the system. Every now and then he’d come across places as frozen in time as they were in ice—gleaming, almost pristine, hollow and preserved.

It didn’t take them very long to find the complex they were looking for. A quick check of the City’s limited records of Europa included places that were clearly marked as former Clovis Bray facilities. Getting around the ice that had half-consumed the complex proved to be the more arduous task, as the glacial movements had swallowed entire buildings.

Eventually, though, they found success in a small, cold room, several stories up what was once a proud tower, still clinging to emergency power and waiting to have its secrets plundered. Coyote-3 settled into a chair in front of one of the consoles while Flicker began scanning. “Any good?”

“No worse than any of the other places we found,” Flicker declared, “maybe even a little better. All right, let’s start this.”

“Well, he was named Walker after he came back, so there’s not going to be anything under the name of ‘Walker-17’… hm. We’ll have to go through the name of the ship and see what comes up.” Coyote-3 leaned back in his seat while Flicker rapidly sifted through the undoubtedly staggering amount of data that was stored there.

“I’ve got some things on the *Thunder Child,*” Flicker said. “Let me see… personnel attached to the project. Human, human… there’s no guarantee that he was an—oh. There was one Exo attached to the project. They called him…” He blinked and swiveled to face Coyote-3, optic bright. “Quixote.”

Coyote-3 gave a little laugh. “Quixote, huh? Any pictures?”

“One moment,” Flicker murmured. “Actually, more than one moment—apparently there was also a ship called Quixote, and I’m having to filter that. Why can’t anything be simple?”

“Must be popular.”

“It’s the name of a character from a book,” Flicker explained. “All right. Here we go. Quixote cross-referenced with specifically this project’s personnel files.” In the next instant an array of photographs appeared on the screen. They were clearly identification photos, being of a uniform size and taken from the shoulders-up. And there, among them, was the familiar face of Walker-17. “I’m not entirely surprised,” Flicker said, “given the name of his ship. I guess some part of him still remembers.”

“Hm?”

“*Rocinante.* It’s from the same book.

“Oh. Well, there you go.” Coyote-3 cycled a deep breath. “All right. Let’s dive in. What’ve we got?”

The Ghost bobbed in acquiescence and fell silent as he went back to sifting. “Hm. So much of it is gone,” Flicker said with a faint hint of mournfulness in his voice. “Looks like a lot of this was deliberately wiped, like the others. *Wonderful.*”

Coyote-3 said nothing. Those were the words he’d been dreading. He wasn’t exactly proud of
himself for doing this, but he was consoling himself with the thought that he might make progress. If we went through all of this, just to hit another dead end…

“All right. I’m going to keep trying to put this stuff together. I’ll show you what I have, while I have it.” The screen flickered and then displayed a block of broken text. Coyote-3 leaned forward, meshing his fingers and resting his face against them.

“—recommended installing some sort of security measure or killswitch. We can’t have another SIVA on our hands, especially not now. 3G6(45)^94—have told us that Earth is off limits, and so are our facilities on Mars. There’s both too close to the last disaster, which only leaves us the outer system.”

There was a block of corrupted data, nonsense strings of words and letters. “—arguing about ethics, but ethics won’t do us any good if we’re all dead. I hate it. Most of the team hates it, but that’s the way it has to be.”

“Hmm.” Coyote-3 leaned back in his chair. “Again with the SIVA. I wonder what that’s all about? Looks like a lot of this is just the same stuff we learned already.”

Flicker swiveled towards Coyote-3, bobbing in his own approximation of a nod. “Seems that way. Let’s see, moving on… some of the same missives we picked up from Venus in here. Oh—wait, I’ve got something.”

“Quixote wanted paperwork for it. I told him it wouldn’t do any good, but at least the record would show he’s against it. At the end of the day, it’s all Clovis Bray property, but we were told to go on and humor his request. And it’s not like we’re going to experiment on him.”

A cold knot of unease began to form in Coyote-3’s chest. “Can you find out what they were talking about?”

“As near as I can tell…” A few more blocks of text rapidly passed by as Flicker filtered through them. “There’s a lot of chatter about ‘mental architecture?’ And using Qui—Walker’s. It doesn’t look like they used his mind, just… something based off his mind.”

“That could be anything,” Coyote-3 said with a sigh, “So, what would you make if you were using someone else’s mental architecture?”

“They did mention a killswitch,” Flicker reminded him.

“Yeah. But for Walker?”

The Ghost’s optic suddenly flickered bright. “It could be, but… but why work so hard to design a killswitch for just one person?” He swiveled away from the screen to stare at Coyote-3. “So, what we know for sure, is that he was an Exo. And they made some kind of failsafe using an Exo’s mind…”

Coyote-3 could see where Flicker was going with that speculation, and he didn’t like it one bit. “Then whoever they were using it on was probably an Exo, as well. Or more of them.”

“Or all of them,” Flicker said softly.

“Woo, boy.” Coyote-3 shook his head and fighting off the first few twinges of genuine fear, “I really, really hope you’re wrong about that.”

“Me, too. And I probably am.” Flicker spun back around to face the screen. “We’ve still got data to go through. Maybe we’ll get a clearer answer this way.”
‘Is there anything at all on the Protocol itself?’

“Not that I’ve found, yet. I’ll put it up, if I do. Let’s see, let’s see… There’s a big section of this missing. It’s a little difficult to extrapolate these dates, but as far as I can tell, the gap between these two reports is months long. Nearly a year.”

“Nobody’s happy about this, especially not him, but it seems to be working. At this point it’s vitally important that we hold onto our own assets, here. We might have done all of this for the benefit of the entire system, but things are falling apart, and if we’re going to make it out of here in one piece, then this is what we have to do.

Rogers is telling me this thing is loophole city, and I can’t exactly argue. They had to extend the protocol to cover the Traveler itself. Our people on Mars are saying his inner-system counterparts are beginning to talk amongst themselves. They don’t trust it. I don’t distrust it, but at the same time, it’s an alien. And should we really risk letting the Protocol latch onto anyone who isn’t human?”

“A few months passed between that one and the next one,” Flicker said.

“Should have listened to him. He spoke to us after the procedure. He said —his exact words will haunt me forever—he said, ‘You have butchered me.’ That was it. He was so quiet after that we wondered if we’d somehow broken him. But it worked. Everything worked. The Conjuration Protocol is holding steady. We can ask for forgiveness later, when we’ve made it through all of this.”

“Another gap,” Flicker interjected again. “A few weeks—wait, wait wait. Just found something.” Strings of text marched across the screen. The words were so riven with nonsense characters undoubtedly provoked by decay that Coyote-3 could barely make sense of it. “Good news: it’s not a killswitch. Bad news: as far as I can tell it’s more of an… obedience switch?”

“Meaning…?”

“It’s designed to force someone to obey a directive. Or maybe, a series of directives? Possibly even obey a specific individual. Seems pretty useful for… for keeping troops in line. And Clovis Bray made a lot of its own troops.” The possibility that this Protocol wasn’t just a danger to Walker-17 was beginning to take a clearer shape. “Back to the logs. There were a few weeks between this one and last one.”

“Dr. Levesque is dead. We tried-- Ž4T Ė67[I Ė Ė -- he went under. He just stopped. We tried to get a read on him, to figure out what went wrong, but everything’s changed so much, his neural imprints aren’t even recognizable anymore. He was right. We butchered him.

--figured out a way to wake him back up, but he’s unstable now. None of us know what he’ll do. I don’t think he knows what he’ll do.”

Flicker spoke again, his voice quieter still. Coyote-3 could hear trepidation creeping in. “Another few days, this time.”

“They’re letting him go. I don’t think it is going to come as a surprise to anyone, and I think everyone on the project has reached the point where we figure it’s time to cut our losses. We can’t undo what we did. Maybe the news was right—maybe we’re too reckless. Either way, nullifying this entire situation is the best solution we have.

7□□44°MŃS Ė --to earth. The Thunder Child’s going with him. They’re splitting up the
project, handing over vital components to the Ishtar Collective to be destroyed. It’s done, now. The Wall will have to take care of itself, and we’ll have to put all of this behind us.

KE[10]F EF5 --knows he’ll have to be wiped again. I think he’s willing to do it, if there’s even a chance that we can fix this.”

And then, at the very end of the document, there was a single, final sentence.

“Honestly, it’s for his own good.”

Coyote-3 leaned back in the chair. Despite the anatomical improbability of such a sensation, he could have sworn he felt a chill run up his spine. For his own good. He’d heard those words from Walker-17 more than once. “Okay. Okay, let’s… okay. We know he was connected to this project. It’s possible that this protocol was designed to affect more than one person, but that’s kind of conjecture at this point.”

Flicker bobbed in an approximation of a nod.

“But it’s clear to me that, at the very least, it applied to him.” Coyote-3 turned over the ramifications in his mind. We butchered him. He shook his head slowly, his voice soft with sympathy and a growing anger. “They messed him up. He let them make him into an Exo and they messed him up for it.”

“We don’t… know that for sure,” Flicker said, but he didn’t sound particularly convinced.

They both fell silent. Coyote-3 looked to Flicker, who swiveled to return his Guardian’s gaze. “He’s not the only Exo Warlock out there. There are plenty,” Coyote-3 began slowly. “But he’s definitely one of the more powerful ones I’ve met. It’s not difficult to imagine someone… considering him a weapon.”

Flicker turned back to the screen, his optic making tiny flicks as he read through the data. “A weapon that might need to be shut off, or controlled.”

Coyote-3 nodded. He cycled a slow sigh, drummed his fingers on the tabletop, and nodded. “Okay. Well. Is there anything more concrete in there?”

“No, not really. A few notes on Quixote’s ‘successful conversion,’ but we already knew about that.”

Coyote-3 perked up. “Does it tell us what his real name is?”

“Let me see… no. Just Quixote.” A fragment from some form of report flickered on-screen. “A code name, possibly.”

A hunch was forming in the back of Coyote-3’s mind. “A code name… hey, so, what happened to the ship that had that same name? Was it being used while he was around?”

“Give me a moment to look.” Flicker went still as he concentrated, and then his optic flickered suddenly, brilliantly. “Looks like when he shows up on the project the ship got renamed. To... to the Thunder Child.”

Coyote-3 drummed his fingertips on the desktop. “Huh. No wonder he hung on to the memory of the ship so hard. He got his name from it. Not that he remembers that.”

Flicker went on. “I just—if there was more information!” His fins bunched together in frustrating, a movement reminiscent of a clenching fist. “We know the Thunder Child’s designed to find something. And Walker took his codename or callsign, or what-
have you from it. That, and everything we’ve found so far... he wasn’t just involved in the project. He was integral to it.”

The report that Flicker had pulled before their speculation about ships began was still displayed on the screen. The glowing letters were deceptively calm. They declared that Quixote had been successfully transferred, and was adapting well. His mental architecture was stable.

Until they went and meddled with it, Coyote-3 thought bitterly. “Might as well pull everything while we’re here,” he said. “Dammit. Looks like we’re no closer than before.”

“Got it.” Flicker darted across the room, hovering over the consoles and bathing them in the blue light of his scanner. “We still might be able to do something with this. We know what his name was, at least. Maybe we could go to the City, check their records.”

“Our next stop,” Coyote-3 said with a sigh, “is to go to the Reef and face the music.” He tried to tell himself he’d done the right thing, but he wasn’t sure that he had. Had he acted out of selfishness? Standing here, surrounded by the ghosts of Walker-17’s past, only made Coyote-3 more keenly aware of how far he must have fallen from who he once was.

I’m going to have to show him this, Coyote-3 thought to himself. He hadn’t dared to say it out loud, but he knew that Flicker felt the same way he did. It was upsetting to think of presenting a wealth of information to his friend that would only worry him and present more questions than answers, but if Clovis Bray had done some sort of bizarre experiment on him that could still hurt him somehow, then he deserved to know.

But there was still a chance that they were all somehow mistaken. As he and his companions had discovered over the course of the last few weeks, Clovis Bray had been involved with countless projects. There was that “SIVA” nonsense, whatever that was, and all of the mysteries that had eventually led to the formation of the Owl Sector. They’d been involved with the colony ships in the Cosmodrome, with the Warminds... for a moment he wondered, horrified, if the “him” could be Rasputin.

Flicker glanced his way, sensing his distress. When Coyote-3 explained, Flicker said, “I don’t think so. Whoever they’re talking about seems to be from the belt. Or the ‘Wall,’ or whatever it is they’re calling it. Besides.” He turned back to the screen. “I’d like to think that these scientists would be stupid enough to go rooting around in the brain of a Warmind.”

“Good point,” Coyote-3 replied.

It was still worth keeping in mind that this mysterious “him,” this creature who they’d hurt somehow, who they’d changed somehow, might not be Walker-17. All of these things were points Coyote-3 intended to make when he handed over the data. His friend would need to hear them, he was sure. He had a sinking feeling that they all were about Walker-17, but there was still the time-honored tradition of clinging to every last shred of hope to fall back on.

“Coyote,” Flicker’s soft, astonished voice interrupted his thoughts. “I…” He turned away from the databank and faced his Guardian once more. “I found records about you.”

Coyote-3’s ventilation stalled into a soft gasp. He stared at Flicker, “Are you sure?”

“I think so.” Flicker glanced to the computer screen and pulled up what he’d found. The face on the screen was unmistakable: the familiar, eyeless configuration of the head, the deep red plating... the only notable difference was that this fellow’s skull was smooth and undamaged.

“I’ll be damned,” he whispered. “How did—was I—my name really was Coyote?”
“It was your callsign, yes. Maybe that was just a thing Exo liked to do, when they got their new bodies?” Flicker replaced the picture with a personnel file. “It says they brought you in... well, we’d call it sometime late in the Collapse. They didn’t know it was the Collapse, at the time. Brought in to the Europa facility with about twelve other... conscripts.” His voice gradually slowed. “From... from Keystone Core Penitentiary.”

For the second time, Coyote-3 felt a knot of dread twisting inside of him.

“As part of an… initiative to—hold on. Hold on, let me read.” Flicker’s optic brightened as he concentrated. “You volunteered for the Exo program. It looks like—it looks like some nonviolent criminals at Keystone were given a chance to mitigate their sentences by serving in the military. Clovis handled the conversion for them.”

“How bad did things get that they were willing to use criminals?”

“It was the Collapse so... I mean. I’m sure you can imagine.” Flicker replied, with a quick, worried glance backward. Coyote-3 didn’t have to say anything. He knew his Ghost could feel the devastation slowly crumbling through him. Everything he’d ever thought about his past—was it completely wrong? Was it incredibly, disastrously untrue?

“Do they have—do you know what it was I did to get in there?” Coyote-3 paused. “Does it have any other name for me in the prison records?”

“Hmm. No other name. I guess you didn’t change it when you became an Exo. I think Coyote was your alias,” Flicker said.

“Lord. I was enough of a criminal that I had some kind of alias?”

His Ghost swiveled towards him sympathetically, but remained silent a moment longer while he continued to dig for information. “You didn’t murder anyone,” he said quickly, figuring this would be the first question on Coyote-3’s mind. “Nothing violent. It says here, imprisoned for... ‘grand larceny.’ And barratry, which is kind of odd.”

Coyote-3 threw his hands into the air. “I don’t even know what barratry is!”

“It’s an old nautical term,” Flicker explained. “it means theft of a ship.”

“I stole a ship?”

“It’s... starting to look like there’s not much you, uh, didn’t steal,” Flicker said apologetically.

Coyote-3 stared at the screen blankly. The more he heard, the more his own behavior seemed to make sense to him. The selfish impulses, the alarming interest in other peoples’ possessions, the complete willingness to work around rules and laws for his own ends... he didn’t act the way he did because of the pressures of the new, harsh world he lived in.

He did because it was his nature.

“Go on,” he said quietly.

Flicker hesitated, but he seemed to sense through the bond that Coyote-3 wasn’t going to let it lie. “Counts of burglary, robbery, ransom—it wasn’t a person, apparently you robbed an art museum —forgery, incitement, conspiracy charges... and vandalism.”

Coyote-3 put his face in his hands.
“And disturbing the peace,” Flicker finished quickly, looking back at Coyote. “You received a life sentence. And later, when things got worse…”

“They gave me a chance to repay my debt to society.”

“It seems so.”

Coyote-3 raised his head again, cycling another deep breath. He hadn’t thought that Exo could feel sick, but there was a dreadful gnawing hollowness in him that felt reminiscent to nausea. The more Flicker spoke, the more sense it all seemed to make. He wasn’t experiencing flashes of memory (nothing so vivid and concrete) but a realization was gradually coalescing in the back of his mind.

“Pirate,” he said. “I was a pirate.”

Flicker looked down. “Yes.” They were both silent. Neither of them needed to speak, because the feelings coursing through Coyote-3 were ringing through their bond. It wasn’t easy for anyone to accept that they were someone they didn’t want to be. It was less easy for someone who had very little sense of self, as most young Guardians did. Every misgiving Coyote-3 had had about coming here behind Walker-17 and Virna’s back came crashing back to the forefront of his mind, and once again he found himself doubting his own motivations.

The reason that he, out of everyone in the group, had decided to sneak off to this place he wasn’t supposed to be, despite how dangerous it might be for other people, was because he was the only person among them who was rotten enough to do it.

And as he Coyote-3 came to that realization, a flash of defiance rose in his Ghost. No. No, that wouldn’t do at all. “Hey.” He swiveled towards Coyote-3, who didn’t look up. “Coyote. Coyote, listen to me. I know that this is all rather sudden.” Still, his Guardian didn’t move. “And that… that none of this is what you believed it would be. I know this isn’t what you wanted.” When there was still no response, Flicker blurted out the next words in a rush of frustration. “But—but the fact of the matter is this: you didn’t find me. I found you.”

At last, Coyote-3 raised his face. “I’m your Ghost. The Traveler made me to find you. The Traveler chose you. And maybe you didn’t start out where you thought you did, but you were picked for a reason. You’ve already done great things. I’m not going to say this changes nothing, because clearly it does, for you, but for me? It really doesn’t.”

“Flicker, I…”

“And do you know why?” Flicker went on, “it’s because I know who you are now. I’ve known you, in my own way—I’ve known what you’re like inside—ever since I was born. I’ve known for hundreds of years, all the time I looked for you, and I can tell you this: regardless of everything else, you’re a good man. No matter what else you are, Coyote, you’re not a bad person. And my Guardian. Nothing is ever going to change that.”

Coyote-3 didn’t immediately respond. He simply stared, his eyeless face inscrutable, before he shifted, moving one hand up to gently cup his palm against Flicker’s side. The Ghost drifted into his palm, pushing gently, affectionately, against it. “Thanks,” Coyote-3 said softly.

“It’s just the truth.”

They stayed that way for a moment, somber but grateful for each other’s presence. Coyote-3 couldn’t find the words to express how he felt, but luckily, he didn’t need to. Deep affection and gratitude resonated through the bridge between their minds. Not for the first time, and not for the
last, the Hunter was humbled by the loyalty of his closest companion. He would strive to be worthy of it.

Coyote-3 drew his hand away, at last, and looked to the screen one last time. “Well. Any other big surprises in that file for me?”

“No.” Flicker slid backward, back towards the screen.

“Let’s go ahead and grab the rest of the data here. We came here because we’ve got a job to do, right?” Coyote-3 stood. Determination trickled in through each word, building stronger and stronger. “When it comes right down to it, I can’t change my past. It’s done. But whatever it is Walker’s going through, it looks like it’s still happening, somehow, and if it is, then we need to do something about it. We can’t help me, but we can maybe help him. So, that’s enough moping for me. Enough. We’ve got to get back to the Reef.”

“Right!” Flicker said, bobbing in the air.

Coyote-3 turned away from the screen and gave the room one last, long look. He was ready to leave this sad, cold place, haunted by the memories of the people whose names it contained. He desperately wanted to think about something other than what he’d discovered about himself, and let his mind focus on the simple directive of helping Walker-17. Coyote-3 could confront the uncomfortable truths about himself later. His brooding was brought to a screeching halt by the sharp spike of alarm he felt through his bond with Flicker, and he looked back to his Ghost.

“What’s wrong?”

“Maybe nothing, but... one moment. Let me double-check.” There was a pause, and then Flicker bobbed, turning in midair and addressing his Guardian grimly. “More good news and bad news. Do you remember that signal we sent out from Venus? The one that ended up taking us to the Court of Miracles?” Coyote-3 nodded, and Flicker went on. “Well, one of them reached here, and that’s why this place was powered-up when we arrived. It just didn’t send a signal back. It’s telling me here that the Venus signal didn’t even reach the one on Earth at all, but that’s because that one was destroyed. You follow me so far?”

“Yep.”

“If I’m reading this right—” Flicker brought up the diagnostic display on the screen for Coyote-3 to look at. “Then it’s telling me that the facility in Freehold also received the message, but didn’t send it back, either. Just like this one.”

“That’s good, then! I mean, this isn’t the end of the line, right?” Coyote-3 crossed his arms. “Huh. Figures. We’ve been poking around Freehold for weeks with nothing to show for it. We might not have even had to come here,” he finished, bitterly.

“Maybe not. That’s the good news. Sort of. The bad news... is that this place is well within the bounds of the Exclusion Zone.”

“We can fight our way through some Cabal if we have to,” Coyote-3 said with a shrug.

“That’s not what I’m worried about. Well, not just what I’m worried about. That signal went off weeks ago. If this facility is up and running, that means that the Cabal might have found it. And if they found it...”

“Then they might be on the same trail. And maybe even ahead of us. Damn. Yeah, that’s not good.” Coyote-3 gave a quick, exasperated sigh. “These things can’t ever be simple, can they? All right, let’s grab what we can and go. We can catch everyone on the Reef, let them know what we
Flicker bobbed a nod and returned to the screen, activating his scanner and eagerly siphoning up every bit of data he could. Coyote-3 fell back into quiet contemplation. The initial blow had faded, and the current burgeoning crisis has re-focused Coyote-3’s attention, but Flicker could still feel the turmoil in his thoughts. After a moment, he heard his Guardian speak again, in a distracted, off-hand way, as if something had just occurred to him.

“Hey, Flicker,” he murmured, “That ship that I stole. Did I keep it? Did they catch me in it?”

Flicker paused just a moment to check the records. “Looks like it! I guess you were part of the crew.”

“What was its name?” Flicker told him. Coyote-3 laughed and put one hand on his hip. “Really? Well. Seems appropriate, don’t you think?”

“I think you’re making it work, personally,” Walker-17 said, tilting his head. “Black suits you.”

Evoksis fixed him with a deadpan stare. “Thank you. I think.” He adjusted his new cloak, reaching up with his free hand to lightly smooth the faintly-iridescent black feathers that lined the neck and shoulders of it. “Black is customary, if you are Houseless. In some traditions.” A pause. “The feathers are very…” He paused again, obviously searching for the word. He settled for, “They are very.”

“Seems to be the fashion these days,” Walker-17 said with a shrug. “though usually people go for fur. Must be some kind of crow motif.” He looked to Virna with a hint of amusement in his eye.

“If you give me a few days, I’m sure I could scare up a respirator for you, too,” Virna offered from where she sat, on a nearby crate. Virna had brought Walker-17 up to Evoksis while he was lingering at the edge of the market. It was a short walk away from the plaza you’d typically find Guardians in—where the Cryptarch and Petra kept their business—but still close enough to watch the ships come in as they crossed the broad, purple expanse that yawned beyond the Outpost.

The eliksni tilted his head, considering her offer. “…yes,” he finally said, nodding. He was holding a new helmet in one hand, a full, proper helmet, one that would rest smooth against his skull. He hadn’t yet put it on, or even clipped his crest in preparation. He wasn’t sure how he felt about it all. Had he really earned this? Did he deserve to don the armor of his superiors?

Virna titled her head. Walker-17 seemed oblivious to his internal struggles, but Evoksis got the feeling that Virna was able to tell. She could read him better than any non-eliksni he’d ever met.

“Oh, respirator, that reminds me—if you want them, I’ve picked up some ether seeds, since the last time we met. I can bring you some next time I come this way,” Walker-17 said.

“Very generous,” Evoksis clicked softly.

“Well, it isn’t as if they’re of any use to us.” Walker-17 shrugged, but before he could argue the point further, his Ghost zipped over from where he’d been admiring one of the stall keeper’s wares.

“Guys?” Matthias asked. “Walker’s getting a message, but… um, I don’t recognize this ship’s designation. They’re asking to meet us at one of the landing docks.”

Virna cocked a brow. “All of us?”
“Yes. Walker, Virna, and Evoksis,” he said, looking to each of them in turn, “that’s what the message said.”

Walker-17 tilted his head, but shrugged amicably and simply said, “Very well. What’s the name of this ship that wants to see us so badly?”

“The Devil You Know.”

Chapter End Notes

Just in case it's not clear: the scene at the very beginning is a flashback. "Present day" in this fic is two weeks after Oryx died, so it has been one week since Ru'orn and Zeitat had their conversation. I hope all of you know how hard it was for me not to make a Barenaked Ladies joke in that last sentence.
Walker-17 recognized the shape of Coyote-3’s ship as soon as they advanced into the docking area. The side of the vessel was still marked as XV1-776.

“I called up the Tower first,” Coyote-3 explained once he’d stepped off the Devil’s gangplank. “And when they’d said you left, I knew I’d find you here.”

“My expertise was sorely needed,” Walker-17 replied warmly, gesturing to Evoksis, “we’re outfitting the Reef’s newest citizen.”

“No kidding?” Coyote-3 tilted his head. “Congrats, Evo!”

“Thank you. For your ‘congrats.’ Also, for saving me from Warlock fashion,” Evoksis replied dryly.

This was met with general mirth all around. Even Virna smiled and shook her head. *This might be the first time we’ve all been in one place for weeks,* she realized, *maybe even since we split up after visiting the Court.* She hadn’t given much thought to their temporary alliance as a group. The war hadn’t left her much time for idle speculation, and her contact with Walker-17 and Evoksis had been discrete, rather than communal.

But here, now, standing in the Vestian Outpost, listening to Coyote-3 and Evoksis gently rib Walker-17 for his extravagant tastes, she remembered what it had felt like to be in one place with these fellows, all those weeks ago. It was a good feeling.

Coyote-3’s next words drew her right out of that mood. “Hey, Virna? Can I talk to you for a sec?”

Anticipation sizzled at the back of her mind. Outwardly, she merely shrugged. “Sure. Be right back, you two.”

As they walked away, instead of an awkward silence, she heard Walker-17’s soft voice pick right back up into easy conversation with Evoksis. Coyote-3 walked back up the gangplank and into the interior of his vessel, backing up until they stood in the cluttered central hallway. “So, um, if Walker’s here, I guess he told you about his dead ends.”
The anticipation was beginning to coalesce as realization. Virna nodded. “Yep. He also extended a very cordial invitation to collaborate again, in the future.”

Coyote-3 chuckled. For some reason Virna couldn’t quite discern, it almost sounded sad. “That’s him. Formal all day, every day. You should hear the way he talks to the Vanguard. No real surprise he’d have to prepare a speech to ask someone if they wanted to be friends.”

Virna nodded. Coyote-3 trailed off, and cycled a long breath. He was very clearly gearing himself up for something. She let the pause drag on a little longer before she spoke, eyeing him levelly. “You can just come out and say you did it.”

“So... you found out?” he sounded equal parts chagrined and baffled.

“Not officially, not until just now, but you’re being pretty obvious about it.” She shook her head. “God dammit, Coyote. I guess I shouldn’t be too surprised that you went off and did something stupid.”

“Well.” He paused. “That’s fair. I’m pretty sure you’re angry, so. I’m not going to tell you not to be.”

“Smart decision.” She stepped forward. Virna was only slightly taller than Coyote-3, but she still managed to loom over him. He didn’t step back. He merely tilted his head up slightly to meet her gaze. “I hope whatever you found out there was worth putting all of us in danger. I hope you’re satisfied with yourself.”

He hesitated, and then said, “I’m not here to gloat, Virna. I’m not trying to tell you to just brush everything under the rug. I know what I did’ll have consequences, okay? If this means I get—I don’t know, blacklisted or whatever, well, fine. I’ll take it. There wasn’t any other way to do this. If the Nine come after me, I’ll deal with them myself. I just wanted to tell you first because I was pretty sure you’d be pissed. And I was right.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve got a damn good reason to be.”

Coyote-3 simply nodded. His passive acceptance of her rage was frustrating. She wanted him to argue with her, she wanted an excuse to lash out, she wanted to vent the fear-tinged anger that roiled at the back of her mind. He wasn’t giving her much of a chance. “You don’t care, do you? You don’t care about what you did. About what could happen to the Reef.”

He jerked, and responded with some vehemence at last. “That’s not true at all! I don’t want anything bad to happen to the Reef! That’s why I went alone, Virna. I’m pretty damn sure nobody ever saw me go in or out, and if they did, it was just me that did it. And, hell, if they’ve got eyes on the Reef, then they’ve got proof that you pretty publicly argued against what I did. I did what I could to make sure there’d be no backlash for you.”

“You still took a chance that wasn’t yours to take. You still put everyone here at risk.”

“Virna, look—I get how you feel. Or, well, at least, I think I do. I know you’re just trying to keep your home safe.” Coyote-3 put one gloved hand against his chest. “That’s exactly what I was doing, too.”

“Your home,” she ground out, her voice low, “isn’t falling apart. Your home is a fortified city. Your home isn’t going to crumble and collapse without whatever Golden Age trinket might be at the end of all of this, Coyote. Getting them some kind of advantage that they can manage without isn’t the same as protecting them.”

Coyote-3 lowered his helm slightly. Virna knew there were no eyes under the visor of his helmet,
but she got the idea that he was looking her in the eye, all the same. “That’s not what I meant. The City’s not my home, Virna. I don’t belong there. Never have. A home isn’t always a place. Sometimes a home is just *people*. And you’ve got to protect them, if you can.”

She paused. A glimmer of understanding cut through the lurking anger in her mind.

“I know it’s still selfish. But you’ve got to protect the little that you’ve got. If it had been someone important to you, or to the Reef, wouldn’t you do everything you could to help them?”

Virna closed her eyes and took a deep breath, marshalling her calm. *You can control your reactions. Focus, Virna, and look at this critically. Don’t let your feelings get the best of you.* “We’ll discuss what this means for you later,” she finally said. When she opened her eyes, she’d grappled her anger into a more neutral feeling. She was still deeply annoyed, but at the same time… impulsive, selfish, and reckless as the decision might have been, Coyote-3 had at least tried to do it for the right reasons. “For now, you’d better just tell me what you found.”

Coyote-3 slowly tilted his head. Virna thought she sensed a hint of hopefulness in the gesture. “Are we… good?”

“You’re still on my shit list,” she replied flatly. After a moment, she said, “But you’re not anywhere near the top. For now.”

A soft rush of air, almost like a little laugh, escaped him. “I’ll take what I can get. Look… thanks for at least hearing me out. I wanted to clear the air here before I talked to Walker about anything I found. Because it doesn’t look… good. For him. Or for any of us. As a matter of fact, we should go grab him and Evo as soon as we can.” Coyote-3’s penitent air vanished, swept away by something brisker, more focused. “Because I can almost guarantee you we’re not the only ones on the trail anymore.”

Virna sighed. “Of course we’re not.” She still felt frustrating pressure of built-up anger she had no target for, but she tamped it down, as she tamped down all inconvenient emotions, and focused on the matter at hand. “Fine. Let’s get to it.”

They decided not to meet on Coyote-3’s ship, as it was too cluttered for all of them to find a place to sit comfortably, and instead opted to meet in the *Rocinante*. Walker-17 kept a much cleaner ship that Coyote-3, but it was still a bit cramped, and there, Coyote-3 was forced to confess his actions a second time to Evoksis and Walker-17. As for Evoksis, Coyote-3 couldn’t guess what he was thinking. He merely stared back, impassive.

“Coyote...” Walker-17’s voice was full of reproach, but more than that, disappointment. For some reason, that hit Coyote-3 even harder than anger would have. Walker-17 immediately looked to Virna. “I’m guessing that was what your talk was about.”

“Yep,” she replied.

“Well. It’s more her place than mine to rake you over the coals for this one.” He looked back to Coyote-3. “I thought I could trust you.”

Coyote-3 visibly flinched at that. Part of him wanted to laugh bitterly, and say, *Yeah, I thought I could trust me, too,* but instead, he said, “Yeah... sorry. I know ‘sorry’ doesn’t really cover it but, I mean. Yeah.”

“For the moment, we have bigger things to worry about,” Virna said. Coyote-3 had never been more grateful for a change of subject in his (admittedly short) living memory. “So. You went to
Europa. What did you find there?”

Thus began the rundown. Coyote-3 started them off, with Flicker adding occasional commentary or explaining something in greater detail than his Guardian. They didn’t get very far before Coyote-3 got sidetracked.

“Oh,” he said, snapping his fingers, “another thing! We found your name, Walker. What they used to call you, before you were an Exo. D’you… wanna hear it?” Walker-17 lowered his head in thought. After a long few moments of consideration, he nodded. “It was Quixote,” Coyote-3 went on.

Walker-17 went very still at that. “I… I think I remember. Quixote? Quixote.” His voice was soft with wonder. “I suppose that explains the name for my ship, doesn’t it?”

“That’s exactly what Flicker said,” Coyote-3 added.

“And speaking of ships,” Flicker said, “it also seems that there was a vessel called Quixote, too. I’m not entirely sure that’s your real name. It might be a handle, sort of like how Coyote’s is. I didn’t see you on the crew manifest, but you might have been assigned to it, before you took the Thunder Child.”

Walker-17 nodded slowly. “Well,” he finally said, “It’s good to know. I think I’ll stick with Walker, for the time being.”

Coyote-3 watched Walker-17’s face as they went on, sharing the logs they found as well as what they’d pieced together about Walker-17’s integral role in the project. He’d known Walker-17 long enough to be able to pick up the subtler aspects of his expressions, and read worry in the way the delicate plates of his brow were knit, as well as confusion in the slight squint of his eyes.

“So basically: they used you to make some kind of… weapon? Program? I don’t even know what it is. But I think it’s a safe bet that it’s either the Conjuration Protocol itself, or something very closely related to it.” Coyote-3 paused. “Do you think it could be related to that SIVA thing we keep hearing about?”

“No, no, the timeline doesn’t match up.” Walker-17 shook his head. “All of this talk about a killswitch refers to SIVA as something that already happened, though I have little doubt that this SIVA incident is in some way responsible for the paranoia that brought the Conjuration project about.”

“What other clues do we have?”

“Only things that weren’t erased, which makes me think that none of them are related.” Walker-17 said, “I’ve got mentions of Willa Bray, but I know what that’s about—the development of engrams. I can’t imagine that has anything to do with me. You wouldn’t put a killswitch in an engram.”

“It’s an obedience switch, remember,” Coyote-3 interjected, “it’s not designed to actually kill anyone.”

“Right, right... then there’s Malphas, and from the way its referred to, I honestly can’t tell if it’s an entity or an organization, but it was a single person, they must have been powerful. I’m inclined to believe it was some kind of intelligence network based in the outer system. Then there’s a handful of mentions of Dr. Sundaresh’s study into the Vex, but that seems like yet another dead end. It’s an interesting read, to be sure, but again, it almost certainly has nothing to do with me. The only other records that stand out are the ones referring to Clovis Bray’s ‘debtors.’”
“Their Exo ‘volunteers,’” Coyote-3 supplied.

“Exactly.”

“By the way, peaking of doctors,” Coyote-3 said, snapping his fingers again, “they mentioned someone called Dr. Levesque? Did we—”

Coyote-3 was interrupted by a soft, raw sound that worked its way up from Walker-17’s throat. His look of vague worry crumpled into devastation so acute that it registered plainly despite the inhumanity of his features. Walker-17 grabbed at the nearest chair, as if to steady himself. “I...”

“You all right, there?” Coyote-3 asked uncertainly. “Maybe I should, uh, just let the Levesque thing lie?”

“He’s dead. Dr. Levesque is dead,” Walker-17 said softly. He cycled a deep breath and paused for a moment to regain his composure. “I... of course he would be dead. This was four hundred years ago, but... but he died before I did. And it still...” He placed one hand on his chest. His brow was knit now just as much in consternation as distress. “It still hurts.”

Virna put a hand on his shoulder. “Do you remember who he was?”

Walker-17 slowly shook his head. “No. Only that... he was very dear to me. That I looked up to him, I think.”

Coyote-3 watched Walker-17 sympathetically. It seemed deeply unfair to have been robbed of the memory of this person, and to be left only with the grief of their loss.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” Walker-17 went on, “I’m fine. We should—we have more important things to worry about.”

His companions regarded him doubtfully for a few moments, but Coyote-3 eventually broke the concerned silence. “I have... a theory.” He crossed his arms. “Hear me out. We know that they made some kind of obedience switch, or weapon, and they based it off your mental patterns, for whatever reason. So, it’s possible they made it for you, but it seems like a hell of a lot of trouble to go through for one person. But you weren’t the only Exo out there, and I know for a fact that Clovis Bray wasn’t just pulling in debtors for the program. They were pulling in conscripts, too.”

“Yes,” Walker-17 said softly, nodding, “I... think I remember some of them. From my dreams.”

Coyote-3 paused, tilting his head, and for a moment he wanted to ask Walker-17 what he remembered, who he remembered, but he pushed the desire aside. No. Mere curiosity could wait. “Right. So. You’re making what’s basically an army of mechanical warriors. You can figure about half of them—and maybe even more than half—are involved because they wanted to wipe away their debts or they wanted to get out of jail. They’re doing what you say, but you don’t have their loyalty. But you’ve got research and resources and time on your side, so maybe you can manufacture their loyalty.”

All of the subtlety of Walker-17’s expressions vanished in the wake of his burgeoning horror. “My god, Coyote,” he finally said, stunned.

“And if they did install some kind of obedience failsafe in a huge number of their Exo...” Coyote-3 went on.

“Then a great number of people could be in danger,” Walker-17 finished

“Now, I might not be right,” Coyote-3 cautioned him, “Maybe I’m wrong. But I don’t think I’m
wrong."

“For what it’s worth,” Virna chimed in, “I think he could be right, too. Or, at least, right enough to warrant a closer look. This puts us in just as much danger as your City—not all of the Exo who survived are Guardians. Some of them just lived through the Collapse. Hell, most of them did, and a lot of them live on the Reef.”

“Unfortunately, the bad news doesn’t end there. I already told Virna, but it’s also pretty likely that the Cabal know about this, too.” Coyote-3 went on to explain how Flicker had discovered that the Freehold facility was still operating.

Virna tapped her fingers restlessly on the table in front of her. “Out of everyone who could have found this, it had to be the Cabal. Probably the worst hands to fall into.”

“Y’think so?” Coyote-3 asked, sounding genuinely surprised. “I mean, didn’t we think the Kings were on the trail at first? I’d be more worried about the Eliksni than the Cabal. No offense, Evo.”

“None taken.”

“The Cabal,” Virna said, “aren’t here in numbers as great as the Eliksni and the Hive, but they’re better at one thing than either of them: teamwork. They’re unified. The Hive can work together, but there’s still competition there. Mortal competition, sometimes.”

“Every member of the Hive is constantly fighting to stay alive,” Walker-17 agreed, “fighting against the parasites that live inside them.”

“Right. And the Hive itself isn’t safe from being Taken, so Oryx has been, up until very recently, cannibalizing one sect of his forces to feed another. As far as the Eliksni go, competition is practically a way of life for them.” A pause. “No offense, Evoksis. Again.”

“Still none taken,” he responded dryly, “you are not wrong.”

“Taking advantage of this is what won us the Reef Wars. The Eliksni can be divided. The Cabal... not so much. They form some pretty intense battle-bonds, and they seem to be operating under a single authority structure, as far as we can tell.

“They might not have the same numbers as the rest, but we know they’re world-conquerors, and it’s a safe bet that we’re only seeing a small fraction of their forces. They fight well, and they fight smart. They’re the last people I want in charge of some kind of Golden Age weapon, especially if it’s some kind of massive-scale disabling device.”

Coyote-3 had been listening raptly. “Just out of curiosity, where do you put the Vex on this scale?”

“The Vex have their own scale,” she replied with a sigh, “you can’t really... fight the Vex the same way you fight any other army. They’re more like a force of nature you just have to deal with. I honestly can’t even begin to guess what they’d do with Golden Age tech. Frankly, I think they might have evolved beyond it. Still... if we’re about to hit the exclusion zone, we’ll need to be prepared to face the Vex and the Cabal. And the Taken. God, maybe even the Wolves, too. I hear they’ve shown up on Mars once or twice, sniffing around.” She looked to Evoksis. “What do you know about Eliksni populations on Mars?”

“The red planet?” Evoksis asked, obviously a little unsure. Upon clarification, he nodded, and went on, “Nothing concrete. Rumors of Kings, there. Also, a small sect of Exile, on the largest mountain. I don’t know the name. Only rumors, and unlikely; if they’re there, they didn’t keep regular contact with the rest of us.”
“Olympus Mons,” Walker-17 said, “is what we call it. The mountain. And it’s pretty far away from the Exclusion Zone.”

“Then perhaps only Wolves, or Kings.”

“We’ve cut the Kings off by now. Didn’t leave them any way to track us, or any trail to follow. Depending on how deep we go, the Wolves might not be a problem, either,” Virna said with a nod. “Right. Well, we’ve got a lot of planning to do, but I suggest we do it while hauling ass towards Mars.”

Everyone else shared the sentiment. Walker-17 was unsure whether or not they should bring the Thunder Child. Whatever it was Clovis Bray had been hiding, the Thunder Child was the key, and letting it fall into Cabal hands would obviously be bad for everyone.

“We could always leave it in orbit,” Coyote-3 finally suggested, “and take our ships down. I mean, we’re not going to be flying close to the Exclusion Zone anyway, unless we want to get shot out of the sky. And, there’s a good chance that we might need to get to whatever it is we’re both looking for, so we should have the ship that can sniff it out on hand.”

In the end, it was agreed; Walker-17 would swing by the Tower to pick up the Thunder Child, and Coyote-3 would continue on to Mars and possibly do some recon while waiting for them to arrive.

“Assuming I get authorization—and I’m pretty sure it’s a given—I’ll ride with Walker,” Virna said, “no sense in taking Shot in the Dark if we’re going to have at least three ships in this convoy of ours.”

“I’ll go with Coyote,” Evoksis declared. Up until that point, nobody seemed to have been quite sure what he was going to do. He certainly wasn’t under any obligation to join them, and there was no pressure left to prove himself as worthy of citizenship to the Reef. Seeing the silent, questioning looks on everyone’s faces, he gave a low huff of amusement and added, “Nothing better to do.”

“This might take days, Evo. And I can’t promise pay or prestige,” Virna cautioned him.

“I know. But, I’ll finish what I started.” He hesitated, and after a moment, said, “What we started.”

Virna exchanged a brief look with Walker-17, and then gave a very small half-smile. “Yeah. Might as well. All right! No time to waste. Let’s get going, people.”

Virna and Walker-17 were off with very little delay, but Evoksis had to wait around to receive final permission to leave with the group. He was fairly confident that there would be nothing preventing him from going: he wasn’t a terribly important figure on the Reef. They didn’t need him.

Yet, he corrected himself. One had to have something of value to offer to be needed, and he was well aware he had very little. Virna and the others mistakenly thought that he was finished proving himself to his new allies. Evoksis knew that he never truly would be done, and nor should he. Life was an endless test, an endless opportunity to prove yourself, to make your allies proud. Maybe it was something that not all humans or their kin understood.

It was unlikely that his superiors put as much philosophical pondering into his request. They had better things to worry about.
He’d left the helmet Virna had scrounged up for him back at his quarters, but kept most of the newer armor, more for its utility than anything else. Coyote-3 had left the gangplank to *The Devil You Know* open, so as soon as he had his permission, Evoksis trotted right up. He was startled by how familiar the cluttered interior felt, even though it had been a long time since he’d been inside the ship. This had been the vessel that brought him here, to the Reef. Evoksis momentarily trailed his claws over the soft surface of the couch that Coyote-3 had crammed against the wall, where he’d lain during that trip.

He found Coyote-3 in the cockpit, more or less where he expected him. His helmet was off, and he was looking down at his hands. It was hard to gauge his mood when he had only weary body language to read, and no face to search for a reaction. Despite the energy and animation that Evoksis associated with Coyote-3 in his mind, he seemed somehow more *machine* than Walker-17. Even so, Evoksis could tell by the way he carried himself, even in so small a gesture as to simply turn in his seat, that Coyote-3 was not feeling himself. “Hey, there,” he offered, “you ready?”

Evoksis simply nodded, and continued to cross the bridge until he could grab the back of Coyote-3’s chair as the ship was prepared for takeoff. “I’ll not fall, this time,” he finally said.

This spurred a soft sound that was almost a laugh. “Sorry I don’t have a spare seat. Couch is always open.”

“Fine here.” He gripped the chair tighter, and the *Devil* lurched as it launched itself into space.

The familiar colorful streaks of slipstream rushed by in the viewscreen, bathing the interior of the cockpit in faint, shifting light. Coyote-3 leaned back, still silent.

Evoksis hesitated. He didn’t know if Coyote-3 would prefer to be left alone, or whether he would want to talk about what was obviously bothering him. He definitely didn’t seem like the type to brood over his problems, though—he was much too gregarious, too open. Might as well try.

“You are troubled,” Evoksis said. There was a halting, questioning quality to his voice that drew Coyote-3 out of his thoughts.

“Little bit. I guess.”

“Your talk with Virna didn’t go well.”

“No,” Coyote-3 began to swivel his chair, remembered Evoksis was holding onto it, and stood instead, leaning back against the control panel behind him. “It definitely did not. On many levels. But I think Virna’ll forgive me.”

“That is not all that bothers you.” It was a statement, rather than a question.

Coyote-3 nodded slowly. He didn’t know if Coyote-3 would prefer to be left alone, or whether he would want to talk about what was obviously bothering him. He definitely didn’t seem like the type to brood over his problems, though—he was much too gregarious, too open. Might as well try.

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Coyote-3 nodded slowly. He didn’t have to say anything. It probably would be easier if he didn’t, and so Coyote-3 surprised himself somewhat by responding. “I found out some stuff about my own past, while I was digging for Walker’s. About who I used to be, before I became an Exo. Turns out, I wasn’t as good a person as I’d thought. As I’d hoped.” He raised his ruined, faceless head up to regard Evoksis. The light of the slipstream behind him had cast his form in an eerie near-silhouette. “I was a pirate.”

Four lambent eyes blinked slowly in the gloom. “She’lot,” Evoksis said softly.

Coyote-3 gave a short, bitter laugh. “Yeah. Yeah, I guess you had me pegged from the start.”

“You have regrets.” Another statement.
Coyote-3 nodded. “Yeah. It’s like—I’m not... I’m not sorry that I tried to help Walker. I’d do it again, which I guess is kind of selfish of me. But I can’t help but feel like... like we had something good going. All of us.” He laced his fingers together and looked down at his hands. “When we rolled into the Court of Miracles together, there was something about all of us. And it stuck. It hit me during the celebration, but I don’t know. Maybe it was just the booze.”

“I recall,” Evoksis interrupted, “you didn’t have any ‘booze.’”

“Well, maybe it was the designer Exo narcotics, then. Either way I just... I feel like we had something good. And I ruined it.”

“I can’t say you didn’t,” Evoksis replied. After a moment, he added, “Though... I hope you didn’t. I think it will depend on consequences. Whether or not any of Virna’s fears come true.”

“I won’t let that happen,” Coyote-3 said, lifting his head sharply. “Not just to cover my ass, either. I went alone. If the Nine want to get all pissy about it, then can take it up with me. I mean, it’s not like they even own the place.” He paused, because he’d saw the slight squint in Evoksis’s eyes, and the shift in the carriage of his mandibles that meant... “You’re laughing at me.”

“No. It is—I don’t know how to say it. I forgot the word. You’ll lie to someone, but you’re still... loyal. It is just—” he waved a hand, leaving Coyote-3 to puzzle over exactly what sort of impression he’d made. “When something is two things at once.”

“A... contradiction?”

Evoksis nodded. “Yes. A contradiction.”

“Well. Just another one of my undoubtedly many flaws, I guess. I look forward,” he added, dryly, “to discovering all of the other ones I must have buried deep down in here.” Coyote-3 released all of the air in his ventilation system in a long rush, like a sigh, and lowered his head. A few moments passed in silence. “Sometimes,” he said, softly, “I think the Traveler made a mistake. Guardians aren’t always good people. Sometimes they go bad. There’s lot of stories of it happening, so... the Traveler isn’t infallible, I guess.”

He reached up and ran his gloved fingertips over the edge of the wound that cut deep into his metal skull. “Maybe this is a reminder.”

“Of what?”

“Of how easily I could be dead, or something. I don’t know. My Ghost—there’s nothing wrong with him. It’s nothing Flicker did wrong.” Coyote-3’s fingertips drifted to his chest. Flicker wasn’t saying anything, but he could feel the distress humming through their bond. “If there’s some kind of fatal flaw that keeps me from being healed, it’s my fatal flaw. Not his.”

His words didn’t seem to soothe Flicker much. Coyote-3 felt a stab of guilt, but it was how he truly felt. The latest revelation only strengthened a feeling that had been lurking for the past few years. He’d tried to convince himself the feeling was something it wasn’t, but he finally recognized it for what it was. He was damaged, he was incomplete, because of some inherent inadequacy that not even the Traveler’s grace could touch.

Evoksis’s voice broke the pause that had descended between them. “You were human once, yes?”

Coyote-3 tilted his head slightly. “Yeah.”

Evoksis was regarding him thoughtfully. It was the second time in moments that Coyote-3 had
instantly read the expression on the alien’s face, and he had to pause and wonder when it had become so easy for him. “I wonder, then,” Evoksis said, “why it did not bring you back as a human?”

“I... hm. I don’t know. I always assumed that the Traveler brought you back as you are when you died.”

“It had to choose a past for you. A place in your life to create you from. It does this for all Guardians—else they would all be... be...” He struggled for the words. “A walking corpse.”

Coyote-3 just stared. He had no idea where Evoksis was going with this. The Dreg relaxed his grip on the chair and stepped around it. When the hell did Evo get so tall? He thought to himself as lifted his chin to keep looking Evoksis in the eye. No, it’s not that he’s taller. He just never stands up straight. Or, he never used to.

“So. The Great Machine had to pick a moment you were the person it wanted. You were the person it wanted after you became an Exo.” Evoksis paused, eyes narrowing as he gathered his thoughts and translated them. “Every moment we learn, we change. We become different people, with time. Maybe you learned something important, after you became an Exo. Maybe you changed, then. And the Traveler also chose you after you received this hurt.”

He stepped forward, gesturing to Coyote-3’s head. “Maybe you learned something after you were injured, too. Maybe your past self wore that scar as a reminder. The person you found in those records might not be the same person you were after you were hurt. I cannot know.”

Coyote-3 stared back, still silent, his featureless face betraying no emotion.

“But, that is what I think.” Evoksis declared, “That is what makes the most sense to me. I don’t think the Traveler left you with a wound to remind you of something important. I think you did. I think that decision was important. Part of you, and who you became, before you died. One the Great Machine did not want to leave behind.”

There was another pause. When Coyote-3 spoke, he did so slowly, “Evo. I think... you might be one of the smartest fucking people I’ve ever met.” He lowered his head. Evoksis tilted his head, probably sensing that he was being cursed at, but the softness in Coyote-3’s voice stayed whatever misgivings he might have had regarding the Hunter’s intent. “Thanks. I hope that’s the reason. I’d like to think it is.”

“I do. Truly.”

Coyote-3 continued to stare down. “I... damn. I don’t really know what to say. Neither does Flicker.” He gently touched his chest again. He and his Ghost were of one mind in that moment: affection, gratitude, speechlessness. “Except... thanks. Again.”

“You’re welcome.” Evoksis completed his journey and sat in the pilot’s chair, leaning back.

“Well. Even if it’s wasn’t true then, doesn’t mean it can’t be true now.” Perhaps his past self hadn’t repaired the injury out of sheer neglect, or something considerably less noble than a reminder to do better, to be better, but Coyote-3 could, here and now. He fell silent again, for once as tongue-tied as Evoksis was, before he said, “Well. I’m me, I guess. For better or worse. At least I was good at it.”

It was a weak and woefully obvious attempt to draw them both away from the moment of intensely raw sincerity. Evoksis seemed content to be led there, and squinted at Coyote-3 again. “Yes?”
“Yep. Locked me away for life. I’ll wager that’s not easy to do if all you’re doing is stealing.” Coyote-3 tilted his head. “And speaking of stealing, I see what you’ve done. This was all an elaborate ploy to get my chair.”

“I am caught,” Evoksis announced gravely.

Before either of them could say anything else, the ship lurched again. All of the brilliant colors of slipstream faded away into a universally ruddy glow as the ship emerged into conventional space once more, over Mars. They both watched wordlessly as The Devil You Know angled down, diving towards the planet’s surface.

The sun was setting over the city of Freehold, making the red planet seem even redder. Evoksis stared in fascination. He’d never seen anything like the ruddy, sand-strewn deserts of Mars, which were so different from the wild green of Venus and the bleak silver of Luna. “Well,” Coyote-3 said, turning back to him. “Might as well get that scouting done before everyone else shows up, right?”

Evoksis nodded. “Yes.” Coyote-3 stepped around him, and he hopped off the pilot’s chair. “It will be night soon.”

Coyote-3 paused in the doorway. He raised his head, looking up at the bow that was resting above the doorway. Evoksis had seen it the very first time he’d been there, had noted the vaguely ominous coiling of its power. It seemed strangely dark, for an instrument of the Light. “Yeah. We’re probably going to need some crowd control on this one. And some stealth, too. Flicker? Whaddya recommend?”

Flicker appeared, taking a moment to swivel towards Evoksis with a brief, meaningful look. He sensed there was more that the Ghost wanted to say, but Flicker simply turned back to Coyote-3. “Definitely not bright orange, first of all. Hmm. One moment—” The vibrant colors of Coyote-3’s armor darkened and faded into shades of black and grey. “Infinite Link?”

Coyote-3 looked down to inspect himself. “Yep. Much better.” He reached up and seized the bow. The moment his fingers wrapped around it, Evoksis felt an invisible force pass through the room, a pulse that swept through him and left him involuntarily shuddering in its wake. Coyote-3 lowered the bow, and brilliant violet lines chased themselves over the contours of its shape until it vanished in small sparks of purple light.

He turned to Evoksis and said, in a voice that was bright and utterly at odds with the weird and unsettling power that Evoksis had sensed from his weapon, “Right! Let’s go!”

Evoksis chuckled. Coyote-3 seemed determined, in every conscious and unconscious way, to make it difficult to take him seriously. “Let’s.” As they exited the ship and made for the outskirts of Freehold, Evoksis came to a quiet realization. He had been needed, after all.

Walker-17 and Virna’s flight was much quieter. Virna had suited up in heavier armor than Walker-17 had ever seen her in before: it was still characterized by the dull greys and near-blacks as her lighter adventuring gear, but was overall more heavily padded, more robust. It put him in mind of a Hunter’s armor. She’d also come without a crow, this time. They didn’t do much talking until after they’d already stopped at the Tower to retrieve the Thunder Child, which followed in their wake. “I’m sorry,” Walker-17 said as soon as they were on their way to Mars, “about what Coyote did.”

“He was the one that did it, not you.”
“He did it because of me, though. I know it’s not necessarily my fault, but this wouldn’t have happened, if it weren’t for me. So…” Walker-17 trailed off, looking down at the command console beneath his fingers. “If there’s anything that needs to be done to make it right, you can count on me.”

“I know,” she said simply. There was no smugness in her voice, just quiet assurance. Walker-17 glanced briefly over, and when she caught his gaze, her brow knit in growing concern. “All right. I know I’ve probably asked you this question hundreds of times by now, but you’ve got to put up with it one more time. Maybe two, depending. You okay? I know about an hour ago you were planning on putting all of this behind you.”

“I’m okay,” Walker-17 answered with a nod, “whatever happens next... happens. I’ve already gone through the process of accepting giving up on this entire thing. So, if this turns out to be another dead end, I’ll be ready.”

“And are you ready if it isn’t a dead end?”

“Of course.” He looked back to her, a little confused. “What do you mean?”

“There was always the possibility that something bad be waiting at the end of this road, and everything Coyote brought us... well, it definitely doesn’t look good. It looks a lot worse than anything I suspected before, and I’ll wager it’s worse than anything you suspected, either. You’re ready to walk away, but are you ready to deal with the worst, if it’s what we discover?”

Walker-17 paused again. It had been weeks since he’d had to think of the answers as tangible, attainable things. It was easy to shrug off the weight of their consequences when they seemed wholly out of reach, but Virna was right. That wasn’t the case any longer. “Yes,” he finally said, softly, “I am.”

Virna regarded him for a moment, inscrutable and silent, before she gave a brisk nod. “All right,” she went on, “then let’s get down there, kick some Cabal ass, and get to the bottom of this.”

Walker-17’s faceplates arranged themselves into a smile that was equal parts warmth and amusement. “Yes, ma’am.” He was heartened by Virna’s enthusiasm, and her calm, competent presence, but all the same, he could feel a knot of anxious pressure gathering at the back of his mind.

It was going to be a long night.

Coyote-3 sent them his coordinates within the bounds of Freehold, and the four of them reconvened, catching up with one another while they checked their loadout and synched up their communicators. “Evo and I went a little deeper, did some light scouting,” Coyote-3 said, “but it’s quiet out, tonight.”

“Good. Maybe we’ll have some luck here.” Walker-17 tilted his head contemplatively, and spoke softly, distractedly. “Back where all of this started…”

Virna looked to him curiously. “‘Started?’ I’m pretty sure this is the first time we’ve all come to Mars together.”

Walker-17 gave his head a little shake. “Oh, no, you’re right—I mean for me. This is where Matthias found me.” He looked up to the sky. “This is where I went on my pilgrimage to become a Stormcaller.”
The others followed his gaze, looking up. Evoksis blinked up at the sky in wonderment at the sky’s most instantly eye-catching feature. “That moon is very large.”

“No, that moon is very close,” Virna replied, “and that right there is an example of what the Cabal can do if they set their minds to something. Apparently it’s being held there by their Psions.”

Coyote-3 whistled. “Y’know, I’m not super surprised. Those little guys are tough.”

“I’d rather face four Cabal soldiers,” Virna said, “than one Psion. But let’s get a move on.”

They traveled through the city on foot for a fair distance, and managed to get relatively close to the section of the city where their destination—an old Clovis Bray tower—was located with no incident. “One of us should go on ahead,” Coyote-3 said, “Scope out the rest of the way. Maybe do a drive-by on the building we’re going to.”

The others agreed. Walker-17 held out his hand, and Matthias appeared in it. “All right. One moment.” In the next instant, a brilliant wave of light sketched the shape of a Sparrow in the air. “I’ll scout ahead and get back to you. Guardians are a fairly common sight around here, so if they see me, I can just lead them away. I doubt they’ll be suspicious that I’m worth any more worry than any other Guardian.” He swung one leg over and straddled the Sparrow.

Which promptly disappeared underneath him, sending him sprawling in the dust.

“Holy—you okay, Walker?” Coyote-3 asked.

Walker-17 rolled over. “Yes,” he deadpanned, staring at the sky, “I’m used to this. It’s up to this nonsense again, Matthias?”

“I’m afraid so. Sorry.”

Virna tilted her head. She remembered something Walker-17 had told her long ago, back in the Great Bear Rainforest. “This is how you got your name, isn’t it?”

“Regrettably so,” he said dryly, hauling himself up, “not the most dignified way to do it, I’m afraid.”

“All right, let’s see—it keeps registering you as already having a sparrow on the field. Yes, thanks for that alert,” Matthias muttered, “but Walker’s an Exo, not a vehicle.”

“If you can’t get yours up and running, I could always go alone,” Coyote-3 offered with a shrug.

“No, I’ve got it,” Matthias went on. “Here we go.”

The Sparrow re-appeared, and Walker-17 mounted up once more. “Okay. Be back soon.”

The remaining three waited in pensive silence, and true to his word, it wasn’t long before Walker-17 came back. “They didn’t even bother to shoot at me,” he said, dismounting his Sparrow, “and the way there was pretty quiet when I went through. Let’s go.”

He led them through the sand-choked city. Aside from the distant sigh of the wind, it was eerily still and quiet. “A little weird that we haven’t seen anyone out here. Not even Guardians,” Coyote-3 murmured.

Walker-17 glanced back with a shrug. “It is night. Maybe the local Guardians are sleeping.”

“Guardians go where there is a fight,” Evoksis said, “most of the Vex and Cabal are gone. No
Virna nodded. “Yeah. All reports so far have indicated that the Cabal were probably hit heaviest by the Taking, second only to possibly the Vex, but we’ve got no way to measure their numbers.”

Freehold had been a dead city for hundreds of years, but it had never felt more like a ghost town than that night. It was because of that silence that Virna first heard the odd noise, which was at once strangely out of place and yet oddly familiar. She paused, looking back and peering into the gloom. After a moment, she heard it again: a voice. A very small voice, reedy and piping.

Evoksis turned back a well, pausing for her, but neither of the two Guardians reacted. Virna raised her head, and for a moment, thought she saw something glint in the moonlight above them—and then with a flurry of motion, the dark shape of a bird detached itself from the shadows and flapped away into the night.

The commotion caught the Guardians’ attention at last. Coyote-3 watched the dark shape winging away, and Walker-17 turned to regard Virna. “Virna?” he asked softly.

“I could’ve swore I heard it... speaking,” she murmured, “but they haven’t spoken since...” Virna trailed off, and continued to stare, her brow furrowed in consternation. Finally, she shook her head and returned her attention to the task at hand. “Sorry. It’s nothing.”

That was the last disturbance before they arrived at their destination. The tower had been partially excavated from the sand, which had been moved aside, forming a steep incline. Virna could see the spindly shape of a scaffolding hugging the building’s shape, and now and then, the distant twinkle of a light somewhere inside the structure. “So,” Virna looked to Flicker, “did you get any info on this structure?”

Flicker bobbed in the air. He was still carrying himself in a somewhat sheepish manner around Virna, and didn’t quite bring his optic to meet her gaze. “The lab we’re looking for’s on the tenth floor Or, was. They’ve got a good portion of the tower excavated, so... I guess that would be three stories up from where the ground is now.”

She returned to studying the building. The tower still bore the hallmarks of a once-sturdy, almost stocky construction, but time had taken its toll. The more that the Cabal had excavated it, the shakier the structure had become. “Right. Looks like they’re settled in pretty good,” Virna said, taking her eye away from the scope. “If we’re lucky, that entire building isn’t completely full of them. If not... then we’ll have a hell of a task ahead of us.”

“So, what’s your plan?” Coyote-3 asked, looking to Walker-17.

“Fight our way inside. Obliterate them,” he said simply, with a shrug. “There aren’t more of them than I could handle alone, much less with backup.”

In the time she’d known him, it had become very clear to Virna that Walker-17 was an intelligent, erudite individual... but he didn’t exactly have the most tactical way of thinking, when it came to combat. Of course, who could blame him, if his usual strategy of “obliterate” worked?

“I think we’ll need to be a little more delicate, here,” she interjected, “we don’t know how much they know. If we attack outright they could delete or destroy anything they’ve uncovered before we can get to it.”

“So this is another roundabout op,” Coyote-3 said, “like at the Court.”

Virna nodded, “Yep.”
“What would you suggest we do?” Walker-17 asked.

“I think it would be best to try and infiltrate the tower, see if we can get in without raising the alarm. Some part of that lab has to still be functioning if it was trying to send a signal back. We get inside, hold it while Flicker and Matthias pull what they need, and then get the hell out of there.”

“Another grab and go. Our specialty,” Coyote-3 murmured.

“Getting the four of us in there, unknown, is probably doable. But staying unknown long enough to get everything we need is going to be a task,” Virna said.

Evoksis made a soft clicking sound, and when he had the others’ attention, said, “If this is like the Court then why not do the same things here, that we did there? Distract them on one side. Sneak in on the other.”

Virna nodded. “Not a bad idea. I’m better suited for the infiltration team than the distraction team. What about you, Coyote? Can’t Hunters turn invisible?”

“I am not nearly far enough in my Bladedancer training for that,” he said, shaking his head, “but I can sneak.”

“I could provide the distraction,” Walker-17 offered, “I can be very difficult to ignore, when I want to be.”

“I’ll bet.” Virna shot him an amused look. “Now, the Cabal are smart. What would you rate the odds they’d know you were a distraction?”

“Honestly, pretty low. Guardians roll up to bases filled with their enemies all the time. We’ve… got something of a reputation for doing things that are foolhardy. Still, the upside of that is that people don’t tend to question it when we do foolhardy things.” Walker-17 shrugged. “Besides, even if they do figure out what’s going on, they can’t afford to turn their back on me. Either they try and subdue me, or they die. Seems like a fairly decent distraction to me.”

Nobody could argue.

“Right. I think the scaffolding is our best bet as far as getting up there goes.” Virna stopped and looked over Evoksis and Coyote-3. “Evoksis, I think you’re probably the lightest of the three of us. Unless you’re a lot lighter than a machine your size would normally be, Coyote.”

“Nope.”

She nodded, and looked to Evoksis. “I don’t know how sturdy that thing is, and I’ve seen you climb before, so you’d probably better lead us up.”

They split up. Walker-17 moved into position using a long, circuitous route through the ruins, which gave the infiltration team plenty of time to climb and get as close to their desired position before he stirred up the Cabal. Evoksis moved steadily and surely up the scaffold, pausing every now and then to test the ground or listen for movements within the tower. Once, they were forced to halt, holding their position awkwardly on the corner of the building, as two Cabal paused near a broken window, conversing in their strange-sounding bass-deep voices.

After what seemed like an hour, but was probably closer to just twenty minutes, they reached their destination. Though much of the tower remained buried, the laboratory floor was still several stories off the ground. Evoksis clambered inside another busted window, dropping into the darkness beyond, and moved slowly about the room, sniffing cautiously and listening for any movements down the hall as Virna and Coyote-3 followed.
None of them spoke as they converged on the lab, which was located in the center of the floor. They'd already discussed their destination while well out of Cabal earshot and presently, silence was their best defense. They spotted the glow spilling into the hall from the open lab door as they drew near, and Virna slipped ahead, cautiously peeking inside the doorway with the aid of a small mirror affixed to her sidearm.

She looked back and signaled one enemy, then gestured for Evoksis to exchange places. Taking out their target with a gunshot would blow their cover, but the Dreg didn’t need a gun to fell his foes. He drew up beside her, glancing to the mirror to get an idea of where and what his foe was, and then he nodded, scuttling past her, around the doorway, and into the room.

A single Psion was standing in the lab, leaning over a viewscreen. He didn’t even have time to raise his head before Evoksis had flung a knife straight for the rubbery insulation that guarded his throat. As he reeled back, another knife flashed through the air, burying itself next to the first in a spray of blood. The Psion collapsed with nothing more than a soft gurgle and Evoksis, who’d not once slowed his charge, caught the body before it hit the floor.

Coyote-3 and Virna stepped inside as he retrieved his knives. Flicker appeared, briefly swiveling round the room, and said, softly, “Coast is clear. Nobody else on the floor right now.”

Virna nodded and gestured to the console the Psion had been staring at, and Flicker dipped towards it. Bringing her finger to the communicator at her ear, she said, “It’s all you, Walker.”

Walker-17 had been outwardly still where he waited, out in the dark, but his mind had been racing.

Primarily, he was anxious for his friends. It felt wrong to be so far away from their enemies and the danger they could possess. There was another sensation snowballing in the back of his mind, though, as he stared at the tower. Something in its shape struck a chord within him. The same frenzied protectiveness that had overtaken him when the Fallen tried to take the Thunder Child was bubbling somewhere just under the surface of his thoughts, waiting to break free.

He waited until he heard the relieving sound of Virna’s voice in his communicator, telling him it was time to begin. Despite the gathering promise of violence humming through him, his voice, when he spoke, was gentle. “Take care, all of you,” he said as he stood.

Walker-17 took a deep breath and crested the hill, making no effort to hide himself. At first he walked, striding purposefully towards the largest concentration of Cabal around the building. Within moments he heard their alien bellows disturb the calm, and the air was filled with the low retort of their guns. Walker-17 brought his pulse rifle to bear.

He felled two of them while he walked. Three more Cabal leaped into the air, the movements exaggerated into impossibly long arcs with the aid of their jump-jets, and Walker-17 picked up the pace, running the meet them. The still air stirred around him, and he could smell the faintest hint of ozone in the rising wind, even through his helmet. In the moment before he clashed with his foes, he smiled.

Then he was meeting their charge with the crackle-and-boom of lightning and thunder.
A user on ff.net asked me some questions, and I answered there, but figured I'd cross-post my answers here, too! I'm always happy to answer stuff about this story or talk about Destiny in general.

The Question: I wonder about your process? Do you outline everything before you start to write your story or do you make it up on the fly as you go?

Answer: I do plan everything out beforehand—the broad strokes of the story, at least. I actually physically write out a lot of the story in notebooks beforehand (considerably less wordy than the final product, of course), littered with notes and underlined passages and occasionally questions I know I’ll need to answer before the chapter is posted. It’s a mess, but it works. If you’ll notice, in the prologue, I mention every place the group would travel to after finding the Thunder Child in the prologue: Venus, then the Court, then Europa, and finally Mars. The last destination is also hinted at, but I won't say where it is.

So, I’ve known the broad strokes of the entire story from the beginning, but there’s still room for details to shuffle around as I write it out. Sometimes things work better from another perspective, or something’s unnecessary—things like that!

Also, I mentioned my frustration with the fact that there are no destiny novels! That’s why I decided to just sit down and write my own. Thus: this fic.
Quixote stood on the observation deck, calmly watching the falls. A breeze from the river cut through the late-afternoon heat, sweeping between the cluster of buildings behind him before winding off into the surrounding jungle. Quixote presided over it all with the supremely serene air of someone who didn’t have a worry in the world.

Because as far as he’s concerned, Fisher thought to himself, he doesn’t. They’d wiped Quixote again shortly before they’d all arrived on Venus. Nobody in the Menagerie been happy about it at the time, but the Ishtar Collective was in charge now, and the Director had insisted. Honestly, watching him, Fisher couldn’t help but feel a little envious, given the events of the past week, and all they’d lost.

Or, rather, who they’d lost: Sidewinder, Hawk, Razorback, not to mention a whole slew of their Clovis liaisons, which was a damn shame, because some of them had been decent folks (for working stiffs). They’d also grown fond of Quixote, despite everything, and seeing him wiped like this had felt almost like losing him, too.

The worst part, though, was the not-knowing. What had happened on the moon? Where had all the missing people gone? Fisher was not a particularly skittish man, but something about the whole situation felt wrong to him. He couldn’t shake the feeling that these outposts weren’t falling to mere insurrectionists, and that something darker was lurking on the horizon…

“I know what that is,” Quixote said suddenly, gesturing to the falls, “It’s a waterfall. But I don’t know how I know that. I know what music is, but I can’t remember any songs. It’s… very strange, to understand some things, and not others.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” Fisher replied, “But, hey, we’re sticking around for a while. We can help you fill in the gaps.”

“Thank you,” Quixote looked to him, “that’s very reassuring.” There was no sarcasm there, just a frankness that left Fisher feeling oddly self-conscious on Quixote’s behalf. “What will you need my help with?”

“We’re not going to start for a few days, so just take it easy for now. Dr. Ada’s got an idea that… well, we’ll run it by you.” If she was right, and the Protocol could be reset by a memory wipe, then maybe they could save their project. Fisher wasn’t personally invested, himself—honestly the whole thing rubbed him the wrong way—but it might make things easier for Quixote, in the long run. Or worse, he reminded himself.

They both fell quiet as Fisher brooded over his more pessimistic thoughts.

“It’s… I feel as if I’m missing something,” Quixote said at last, “I’ve forgotten something. And I know I’ve forgotten something, but I don’t remember the thing that I’ve forgotten, but only… only the absence of it.” Unconsciously, he raised his hand to his chest. “And I think it’s important.”
Fisher glanced back. From inside the building behind them, he could see Dr. Ada staring through the window. She shook her head. “Best not to force it,” he said, turning back around, “it’s not uncommon to have, y’know, little pieces left over from the wipe, sometimes. They call ‘em artifacts. Nothing to worry about.”

“Artifacts,” Quixote murmured, “someone told me about them before…”

“Probably your old team. Hell, maybe even one of us,” Fisher went on, trying to guide Quixote back to the present.

“A man in a white coat. He’s gone… somewhere.”

“Quixote, this might not be—be, uh, healthy for you—“


Fisher sighed softly and put a hand on his shoulder. It figured that this would be one of the few wipes memories that stubbornly refused to fade. “Hey. It’s okay, bud.”

“My father is dead.”
The Calling

Chapter Summary

Evoksis does a little trash-talking. Virna throws a mighty punch. Coyote-3 ends up on the wrong end of a projection rifle, and Walker-17 makes a decision.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The lab in which they’d found themselves had two exits; Coyote-3 rushed to one, and Evoksis moved to the other while Flicker and Virna looked over what remained of Clovis Bray’s computer systems. “Do your thing, Flicker,” Coyote-3 said as he skidded to a halt. “I’ll watch the door.”

“Right!” Flicker immediately began scanning.

Virna was right at his side, rapidly drinking in details. They’ve torn this place apart, she noted bitterly, we’ll be lucky if anything works. The Cabal had taken the entire system apart; gutted hardware lay naked on tabletops, all of it connected by snarls of cables to various viewscreens and devices that Virna could only guess to be Cabal computing devices. Translation software, probably, she supposed.

A tremor ran through the building, accompanied by a tremendous groaning noise. Evoksis darted to the nearest window in one of the surrounding hallways and peered out for a moment before darting back in to report, “Getting bad out there.”

Before Virna could reply, a bolt of lightning roared through the sky, striking the sand somewhere below and momentarily casting the interior of the lab in vivid blue-white light. She gave a little snort. “Bad for who, I wonder?” She began to trace the lines of cables as they flowed between devices: tiny, discrete streams of data, all of them flowing gradually towards a single source. If this is the delta...

They all converged on one console that was bolted to the wall, still largely intact. Then here’s our river. It was an imposing gunmetal grey structure, still holding up admirably despite the years, with several keyboards and one enormous central screen. “Flicker, I think we’ve got a common point of access, here.”

Flicker zipped over and scanned it. “This is in rough shape. Give me a minute.” He paused, mid-scan, and swiveled to regard the floor. “And... you might want to get ready to fight. I think we’ve got company.”

“Already?” Virna hissed, pulling out her sidearm. “Dammit. Looks like we’re not going to have nearly as much time as we’d like.”

“I’ll hurry, but I’m going to have to sort through everything the Cabal has picked apart, and unravel all of the old security protocols,” Flicker replied, “not to mention running everything back through the translation software, ugh. This is a mess.” Another pause. “East entrance—Coyote’s going to need your backup in a second, Evo.”

Evoksis moved to join Coyote-3. As Virna looked back to the central console she noticed a
familiar, flat shape next to one of the keyboards. A scanning pad. Just like the one in the Venus facility… “Flicker, I think we’re in luck. We know someone who has clearance.” She reached up to her communicator. “Walker, how’re you holding up?”

The cacophony of the mayhem outside (which she more or less expected) filtered in through the earpiece, and she winced. It took Walker-17 a moment to answer, and when he did, his voice was ringing with exhilaration. “They don’t stand a chance.”

“We’re up in the lab, out of time, and there’s a panel here I think you can activate, if you can reach us. We could be out of here in a flash. How fast could you get up here?”

“Instantaneously,” he called, “but I can only do it once!”

Virna frowned, but before she could question him, the noise on the other end reached a fever pitch, and she winced again, bringing the volume down. “Walker--?”

Across the room, Evoksis made a startled noise as a burst of pale blue light cut through the shadows, followed by the tell-tale silvery shimmer of a transmat drop. Matthias was quite suddenly there, his fins extended and floating away from his body, wreathed in a bright corona. “One moment,” he said, his voice soft with static, “we’re far from the Light here.”

Virna watched pensively as Matthias struggled, and then, with a final flash, the light condensed itself, tracing out the familiar shape of Walker-17’s form. He landed in the room, breathing heavily, and looked to her. “Right. What should I do?” His tone was still oddly low, and throaty.

“Whew,” Matthias drew his fins in, “Walker, I don’t think I could do something like that twice. Not in here. If we leave, we leave on foot.”

“Understood.”

“We’ve got movement contact in the east hall!” Flicker called nervously. “Matthias, I’m leaving this to you—” and with that he vanished, returning to his Guardian’s side.

“And that’s my cue. Walker—” Virna nodded to the console. “See if that gives you access. We’ll hold off as long as we can.” She pulled her shotgun off her back and made for the door. “Let us know when it’s time to get out of here!” She left. Walker-17 was now protected on both sides by the entirety of the rest of the party; she hoped it’d be enough.

The tower (which was more like one big worksite) wasn’t particularly tidy, and there were plenty of crates and loose sections of wall that could be used for cover in a pinch. She slid behind one of the crates at the end of the hall, readied her shotgun, and waited. The weight of the weapon in her hands was reassuring, but even so, it wasn’t an ideal choice; close combat with beings who were so much larger and stronger than an Awoken wasn’t the best idea.

On the heels of that thought Virna’s aggressors came into view, appearing at the top of the stairs down the hall: three lithe, human-sized figures. Psions. “Son of a—” she breathed, and in one swift motion, lowered the shotgun and whipped out her Vestian Dynasty, firing three rapid shots at the middle Psion’s face.

Virna’s training and the element of surprise took care of that one; it didn’t even have time to react before its head simply exploded in a dark mist and a rush of some undefinable vapor. Virna ducked back into cover again just as the Psion’s companions rallied themselves. Thin red lines of light traced searchingly over her head.

_That Warlock_, she thought as she re-adjusted herself behind the crate, _had better hurry._
Something in the alarm in Virna’s voice cleared the fog from Walker-17’s mind. He spared her a single glance, watching her go, before he hurried up to the console, removed his glove, and placed his hand on the panel. Instantly several previously-dark screens lit up, and Matthias flitted about them excitedly. “That did it! All right. Give me just a few minutes—there’s a lot of data here, and it’s still fragmented.”

A series of muffled booms could be heard from the hallway, and Walker-17 looked over his shoulder, tense. “If you’ve got this, I’ll be right back,” he said, but as soon as he drew away, the screens went dark again.

“Put your hand back,” Matthias said, “this requires continual contact.”

Walker-17 complied, but turned to look anxiously back at the doorway. “Hurry, Matthias.”

The sounds he’d heard were the retort of Cabal slug rifles; Coyote-3 and Evoksis had already engaged the enemy. Coyote-3 didn’t try and hide himself, presenting an obvious target while he lit into them with his hand-cannon, and Evoksis skulked in the shadows, finishing off the weakened enemies with quick shots from his pistol.

Many of the Cabal died without even knowing he was there. The last of the wave that came down the hall was hefting an enormous shield, and as he advanced on Coyote-3, forcing him inexorably backwards, Evoksis scurried up behind him, leaped up onto his back, and plunged his knife into the rubbery insulation just under the Cabal’s helmet.

He collapsed, and Evoksis skittered free, hurriedly moving back to cover. “Nice,” Coyote-3 said, glancing up at the now-empty hallway. “Okay. Just grunts so far. Coast looks cl—”

The wall exploded, cutting him off. Evoksis and Coyote-3 were both knocked off their feet as something outside of the tower blasted its way in, and raised their eyes in time to see an impressively-armored Cabal descend from his jump-jet’s arc into the opening he’d created. Coyote-3 had been closest to the explosion, and was clearly injured, but leaped gamely to his feet, whipping an auto rifle off his back.

He never had a chance to use it. The Cabal charged, moving with shocking speed for something so huge, and jammed his projection rifle against Coyote-3’s midriff. He fired once, blasting a hole through the Hunter, sending flaming shrapnel hissing through the room. The Cabal raised his arm, lifting Coyote-3 clear off his feet, and fired again; the fury of the gun’s retort shredded what remained of Coyote-3’s torso and the rest of his body lit up with brilliant Solar light, dissipating into flickering ashes.

It had all happened in an instant, and Evoksis had been given no time to react. He’d simply watched, horrified, as Coyote-3 was killed. He knew that it wasn’t a permanent death, but he couldn’t help but be viscerally disturbed by the sight all the same.

The very next moment Flicker appeared, hurriedly backtracking away from the enormous Cabal. The sphere of blue light looked very frail next to stark black-and-orange contrast of the fiery rubble in the night, and already the Cabal was swiveling towards him, firing, forcing the Ghost to zip away from the doorway and cutting off possible escape.

Evoksis snapped out of it. *He will only come back,* he reminded himself, *if his Ghost is protected.* Immediately he stepped forward, drawing one of his knives and throwing it straight for the Cabal’s face, aiming more to distract him than anything else.

To his shock, the knife-point sheared its way through the glowing eyepiece of the enemy’s mask;
the Cabal bellowed in pain, a low bass sound that shook Evoksis to his bones. The Cabal whirled, clearly as confused as he was angry, and yanked the knife free, tossing it aside.

Evoksis crouched, readying his shock-pistol out as he did, tense and ready to leap away. He was the last line of defense between Flicker and Bracus Ru’om.

Virna, meanwhile, was considering her advantages and disadvantages.

Frankly, it didn’t look good. The Psions had yet to unleash a wave of whatever strange energies they commanded at her yet, which was the only thing she could say was working in her favor. They currently had her pinned at a distance where their firearms were much more effective than hers. At any given moment they could blast her with that aforementioned wave of weaponized psychic force, and Virna doubted that her armor would give her much protection from that. Furthermore, they probably had reinforcements on the way.

So far, the odds were stacked against her. Think, Virna, she chided herself, you’ve got to have some kind of advantage you can use.

As a matter of fact, why hadn’t they tried to close in? One of them could cover the other. She lifted her sidearm slightly, tilting it to peek around her cover with the mirror. She could still just make out their shadows where they were at the end of the hallway, crouched, waiting. It’s possible they’re just holding for backup, or... or they’re being cautious. They don’t know I’m not a Guardian.

All right. Pushing their caution was the only advantage she had for the moment. Virna double-checked the charge on her kinetic armor, swapped out her sidearm for her shotgun, and waited until she saw the red beam of one of their rifles wavering overhead. As soon as it appeared, she vaulted over cover and fired a blast down the hallway at the Psions. At such range it was barely effective, but it was a lot of noise and bluster, and it sent them momentarily scrambling for cover. Virna ducked to the side, taking shelter once more.

The last thing she wanted was to get closer to them, but the best way to make sure they didn’t call her bluff was to kill them before they realized a bluff was even in play. As soon as she saw the lights from their rifles she vaulted forward again, and was startled to see that one of them was already nearly upon her. Virna brought her weapon to bear on the closest Psion and fired once, twice; the Psion staggered back and fell to one knee, not dead, but clearly too hurt to retaliate.

Virna raised her shotgun, preparing to finish him off, when his comrade popped from cover and fired. It was a desperate shot, designed more to drive Virna away than actually hit her, but it served its purpose; she dove to the side, away from the ailing Psion. Once again she raised her shotgun, but the second one was already gearing up for another attack: she saw purplish light shimmer over his form, ruffling and churning in brilliant, flickering waves.

He released as she fired. Virna’s shot went wild as she was blown back, crashing through the window behind her. For a moment her world was nothing but a wave of pain and confusion. She was falling, and the psionic wave had hit deep, knocking the air from her lungs and ringing painfully in her bones.

Then she hit the scaffolding with a thud, and drew herself up, gasping. Her shotgun had been knocked out of her hands. She raised her head just in time to see a red light shining through the broken window, right at her face, and, still breathless, she threw herself down again as the shot went over her head. She rolled aside, and an instant later the Psion was right out the window after her, landing heavily.
Before her was her enemy, and behind her, only the rickety scaffold and the sky.

The pressure lurking in the back of Walker-17’s mind was building as the sounds of battle outside the lab became louder. His friends were out there, possibly in danger, and for all of the powers at his command, all he could do was stand there. “Matthias, is there any way to speed this up?”

“One moment…” One of the screens went suddenly blank, except for a single, wobbly line that cut horizontally across it, and text underneath that simply read: Authorization Required. “There. It looks like it’s set up for voice authorization. Try that, while I work on my end.”

“What do I say?” As he spoke, the line pitched itself into steep valleys and peaks, forming a sine wave. The text was momentarily replaced with a second message: Authorization Not Recognized.

“A password, I think?” Matthias asked. “It might not even work, but it’s worth a shot.” He returned to the task of trying to draw together the terribly-fragmented data that the Cabal had left them with.

Walker-17 drew in a deep breath and closed his eyes. I’ve got some kind of clearance here… or, I did. “Quixote,” he said.

Authorization Not Recognized.

Evoksis was still holding himself low and tense. The Cabal, somewhat to his surprise, didn’t immediately attack him. He simply regarded Evoksis for a moment, seemingly curiously, and then, to Evoksis’s astonishment, he spoke in the native Eliksni tongue. “Vicious little creature. Did I steal your prize, Dreg?”

The projection rifle’s tip lowered slightly, and Evoksis followed its movements. He didn’t answer. He doesn’t know we’re cooperating, Evoksis realized, for all he knows, there could be more Eliksni in there. Evoksis carefully began to circle, his pistol trained on the Cabal.

“And how is it you came to be here? A Wolf, strayed too far from his pack?” The Cabal looked him over, taking in the clash of black-and-green armor: faded rags and crow feathers. “No. Not a wolf. Too skinny, too pathetic. A dog. One of the dogs from the mountain.”

Again, Evoksis was still by shock. The mountain… “The House of Exile still holds sway on this world?”

“Lived. I doubt there’s any of them left; I haven’t seen the likes of your kind for years. No, all the vermin have gone to ground, or else been driven out by the Wolves.”

“I am not vermin,” Evoksis spat. It was becoming obvious why the Cabal hadn’t attacked him. He was toying with him. After all, what would he have to fear from a Dreg? An unexpected burst of anger and pride swelled in him. “I am Evoksis of the Reef,” he hissed, “And I can promise you this: you’ve never seen the likes of me before.”

The Cabal laughed openly. “You’re a fool if you think you can kill me.”

“I don’t have to kill you,” Evoksis said. Across the room, Flicker’s light flared once, and the Cabal turned, realizing a second too late that he’d been distracted. He rumbled, low and angry, and turned to fire at Evoksis, who was already leaping away. He wasn’t fast enough. Dreadful, fiery pain seared through the Dreg’s side, and he hit the ground with a hiss.

He heard Coyote-3’s voice as he rolled to his feet. “All right, asshole,” the Guardian snapped,
The Psion slammed rushed forward and slammed into Virna, crushing her hand between his shoulder and the outer wall of the tower. Virna didn’t cry out, but merely gritted her teeth and twisted against him. They were too close to use either of their weapons now; what had started as a shootout had become an ugly, visceral struggle for control in the close quarters of the rickety scaffold. The Psion twisted his rifle and lunged forward, aiming to strike her in the face with the butt of the gun, but Virna managed to turn and took the blow to the shoulder instead.

They staggered apart, and as soon as the immediate shock of pain from the blow faded, Virna found she wasn’t hurt. It hadn’t been a very impressive swing. Both combatants paused for a single moment, staring at one another as they came to the same realization at the same time: She was stronger than he was.

She was a lot stronger than he was.

The Psion moved first, trying to back away in a sudden flurry of desperate movement, but Virna closed the gap, bunching her fist, bringing it around, and catching the Psion with a vicious right hook that sent a shock all the way up her arm. He staggered to the side, off-balance, stunned—and then Virna rushed him, jamming her shoulder into his stomach. For a moment longer they were locked together, him pushing against one another. Virna gathered her strength and, muscles straining, put on a final burst of force, hoisting him over the rail of the scaffold and into the open air. He fell, flailing, down into the dark.

Virna stepped back, panting, and rubbed at her shoulder. There was no time to rest; she still had one wounded Psion to take care of. She grabbed her sidearm and prepared to re-enter the hall. She paused, hand on the windowsill, at the curious site that greeted her: her opponent had lost consciousness, and was lying on the ground. It wasn’t holding a rifle in its hand, though. It was holding something small, with a rapidly-blinking red light.

Virna took two hurried steps away from the window, raising her voice in alarm, but it was already too late.

Walker-17 had closed his eyes again. “Thunder Child” and “Conjuration Protocol” had given him the same denial message. Anxiety was ringing through his thoughts, making it difficult to concentrate, and the sounds of combat all around him had grown even louder and more worrying. This was almost certainly his last chance to discover the secrets of his past, and he found that he was faced with a decision. Did he stay, and continue to try uncovering the key to his past, or did he go to help the others, his friends, who could be hurt or dying?

It didn’t take Walker-17 long to decide as he began to lift his hand again.

It’s not worth it, he decided, not if the cost is the lives of my friends.

That feeling, the anxious loyalty and concern for his allies, shot through Walker-17 like a lightning bolt, echoing through the long, long corridors of the years. For a moment, he wasn’t there in the ruins of Clovis Bray’s greatest city. He was standing on the bridge of a starship, surrounded by a crew of pirates and debtors, enemies made allies. There was an Exo there, a man named Fisher, and all those hundreds of years ago he had raised his head, and he had said—

Walker-17’s eyes snapped open and he pushed his palm back down. “The Hand of Solomon.”

For a moment nothing happened. The screen remained stubbornly blank. And then…

Acknowledged. The Hand of Solomon is moving.
“Yes,” Walker-17 breathed, relief and triumph sweeping through him.

_Thunder Child en route._

Walker-17 spirits sank. “Wait, what?” Matthias had already hurried to his side and was furiously scanning the control panel.

“Whatever it was you just did, it looks like part of it involves the _Thunder Child_, because it’s on its way here.”

“To this location, specifically?”

“To... you, specifically.”

“The Cabal are dug in here,” Walker-17 protested, “if the _Thunder Child_ gets too close, they’ll shoot it down!”

Matthias whirled to face him, optic bright. “Then it’s time to go.”

Before Walker-17 could say anything else, a wave of force passed through the room, a pulse so strong it stunned him and sent him stumbling to his knees. He didn’t have time to ask what had happened, or react in any other way, because the very next second was filled with fire and thunder.

Coyote-3 had immediately moved between Evoksis and Ru’orn. He feinted for the auto rifle on his back, but instead produced a smoke grenade with a flick of his wrist and chucked it directly at Ru’orn’s face. The Cabal staggered back, initially disoriented, but roared in shocked agony when the stinging vapor slipped in through his damaged helmet, lighting up his ragged eye socket with pain.

The Hunter didn’t wait for him to recover. He began laying into Ru’orn with his hand cannon, aiming for his head. Even if he couldn’t kill him in just a few shots, each concussive blow would extend the Cabal’s disorientation just a little bit longer. Evoksis readied his pistol, looking for an opening.

The boom of the grenade was loud enough to be heard over the retort of Coyote-3’s gun, and he paused a moment, glancing back. Evoksis and Coyote-3 were farthest from the explosion, and had a few precious seconds to react. The floor tilted away from them, listing forward, and the two of them steadied their stances. “Oh god, it’s going down,” Coyote-3 called over the rising screech-and-roar of the dying building. His head swiveled towards the window. “Try and grab the scaffold! Ride it down!”

Evoksis glanced to him and nodded quickly. Coyote-3 could only hope that a lifetime of clambering through the jungle would serve as experience enough; he could try and break the Dreg’s fall, if he had to, but he didn’t know how successful he’d be. He had no further time to worry, though, for Ru’orn had leaped backwards out of the hole he’d created in the wall, his jump-jets flaring as he brought his heavy slug-thrower to bear. The muzzle of the weapon was pointed straight at them, ready to finish them off before the building succumbed.

“Shit,” Coyote-3 breathed. The building listed again, alarmingly—time had run out. He grabbed one of Evoksis’s arms and dove for the window, praying that there would be something on the other side to break their fall while the corridor behind them filled with flame.
The detonation of a single grenade was rarely powerful enough to bring an entire structure to the ground, but for all its sturdiness, the past few weeks of battle and four centuries of decay had taken its toll on the tower.

If one were watching the tower from a distance, the first sign of its imminent collapse would be a brief flash of light from somewhere in the structure: brilliant, but ultimately unimpressive against the bulk of the building. Then, gradually, a low groan filled the air, and the tower began to list to one side. It trembled, at first gently, and then violently, as the last vestiges of the damaged supports gave way with a groaning shriek, and the entire structure began to collapse in billowing waves of smoke.

The scaffolding was twisted away from the side of the building, coming loose piecemeal. From that scaffolding, one might see Virna leaping clear, hitting the sand hard and momentarily skidding down the slope. On the opposite side of the building, a larger figure leaped clear, hovering momentarily and bringing an impressive weapon to bear before it fired three rapid shots into the dying tower.

The bloom of the explosion, all fire and heat, shook the building out of its slow collapse and sent it to a more rapid demise, choked with brief flickers of flame and the low roaring boom of explosives. Virna pulled herself to her feet long enough to see the end of this demise, setting off a chain of smaller explosions. She scrambled backwards down the slope, watching as it all came down in a rain of fire and molten metal.

Virna stared, stunned. Small pieces of burning shrapnel tumbled down the slope around her. It had happened so quick, had looked so unreal, that the enormity of it took a few moments to settle. Guardians could survive a lot of things, but could they survive that? And what about Evoksis?

The crumbling stopped, leaving a dreadful still silence in its wake. A few moments passed. No one stirred, not even the Cabal. Virna took a tentative half-step back, knowing that she would need to find cover soon, but still she hesitated, looking for any sign that her comrades had survived.

The moments stretched on, still, terrible, and empty, and she was faced with the reality that she might have been the only survivor of the building’s collapse. A dreadful feeling, like a black cloud, arose in her. Virna felt it gathering at the back of her mind, and before she could push it away, she found herself paralyzed with loss, loss that welled up from all the places she’d beaten it down over the past few months.

Grief choked her throat, grief for her people, for her Queen, for the ragged and battered Reef, for its uncertain future, and for the three unusual individuals she’d come to know since this adventure began weeks ago. The grief was a monster that had lived inside her for months, clamoring again to be free, tearing at her heart in those few unprotected moments where she was too shell-shocked to fight back.

And then a shape appeared, rapidly skidding by. It was an irregular hunk of metal being pulled down the slope by its own weight. And clinging to it… “Virna! Thank God.” Coyote-3 leaped off his makeshift sled. “I thought you’d got caught up in that—” And then the snarl of metal snagged the end of his cloak, knocking him off his feet and dragging him down the slope with it before he had time to free himself.

She stared after him, still stunned. A moment later a skittering figure came around the wreckage of the building and stood. She saw four bright blue eyes fix on her in the dark, and Evoksis hurriedly made his way over, limping a little, but very much alive. “You are all right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m good. You… got out in time.”
“Rode the building down, part of the way.” Evoksis still looked very battered. She could see that shrapnel had shredded through parts of his armor, and the exoskeleton underneath had been warped by some great heat. “Risky. Paid off.” He looked ruefully down the hill. “Now, I must go fetch the idiot.”

Virna turned to watch him go, and then returned her attention to the building just in time to see a great force punch its way up through the rubble, scattering the ruins with claws of forked lightning. A small, disbelieving laugh forced its way from her throat. Of course their Warlock had to make his reappearance in style.

Walker-17 floated out of the ruins, wreathed in seething electricity, and landed, giving his hands a quick, contemptuous shake to dispel the larger sparks. He began to look around frantically, and, spotting her, hurriedly jogged over.

Virna took one last, deep breath, and felt calm return to her again. The monster had been forced back into its cage for the time being, because, for once, it seemed the worst hadn’t happened. She forced a casual, almost humorously bored tone when she spoke. “Hey, W—” She was cut off when he swept her up into a sudden hug, which left her stunned and blinking.

“Thank goodness,” he said, his voice raw, “I thought you’d—I thought all of you had—are you all right?” Walker-17 pulled away and grabbed her shoulders, not quite letting her go, but releasing her from the embrace. “Is everyone all right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, we’re good.” The intensity of his sincere concern had driven her affected wry humor away. She didn’t know how to feel. Virna felt traces of electricity tingling over her skin, leaping from Walker-17’s robes to her body, but it didn’t hurt. “Coyote and Evoksis are down the hill.”

Walker-17 sagged with relief, and then seemed to come back to himself a bit. “Thank goodness,” he said again, “sorry, I… it was intense back there. I thought…”

“Everything’s all right, Walker,” she assured him. She glanced down to her hands, where tiny threads of glowing Arc-energy were leaping between her fingers, and Walker-17 followed her gaze. When he saw that he was quite literally giving off sparks, he hurriedly released her. “It’s okay,” she said, “doesn’t hurt.”

“Sorry if I, um… scared you, there. With the hug.”

“You didn’t.” She lifted her eyes, and they regarded one another in affectionate silence for a moment. Virna didn’t know what to say, but it occurred to her that maybe, for just a moment, nothing really needed to be said at all. Walker-17 seemed to feel the same.

The moment passed, though, and Walker-17 abruptly straightened. “We’ve got to move,” he said, “the Thunder Child’s on its way.” He began to hurry down the slope, following the tracks that Coyote-3 and Evoksis had made.

“What did you do?” Virna hurried after him.

“I think I just sent it after whatever it is it’s designed to find. But it’s coming to get me first, so—“

“—we need to get you as far away from here as possible.”

“Exactly.”
They managed to snag a single Interceptor. The vehicle was already damaged, and not designed to carry more than one passenger, but Virna and Evoksis made do, charging along in the wake of the Guardians’ faster Sparrows as they fled the scene. A great pillar of smoke was going up behind them, a dark line against the lurid red of Phobos in the sky.

Once or twice they spotted Cabal on foot, moving towards the site of the tower’s collapse, but aside from a few potshots, they were largely ignored in favor of whatever greater disaster they imagined to have taken place there. Walker-17 kept glancing anxiously to the sky, but before the Thunder Child even came into view, they heard the gathering roar of Interceptors behind them.

“Looks like the word’s been passed along,” Virna called over the wind. Flicker and Matthias worked in tandem, picking out routes that would make up for their Interceptor’s lack of speed to try and clear the buildings before their would-be pursuers caught up. The roar of enemy vehicles echoed in the dead streets of the ruins of Freehold, but they managed to stay one step ahead of their foes long enough to see the city limits ahead.

As they cleared the last of the crumbling buildings, the Thunder Child came into view at last. For a moment it seemed to vanish as it angled a long, elegant arc against the reddish cliffs rising all around them, the ruddy hues of its paint blending in well with the colors all around them. Walker-17 had a sudden, powerful flash of Déjà vu, and something he’d forgotten sprang to his mind again: the Thunder Child was recorded to have been built on Venus.

Why did it look like it was built for this world, instead?

He didn’t have time to say anything or give the question much more thought, though, because the Thunder Child was moving to intercept them, and from behind the Cabal Interceptors were making headway at last, barreling after them into the open sandy plain. “Matthias!” Walker-17 called.

“Oh it.” In the next moment, the four of them vanished, leaving nothing but shimmering transmat aftermath and a single unmanned Interceptor behind. The Thunder Child wheeled away from the city, framed momentarily by a few desperate shots from the Cabal Interceptors below, before it raised its nose to the sky and rocketed away from Mars, following the centuries-old directive programmed into it and launching itself into space.

The group hauled themselves to seats moments before the Thunder Child jumped into slipspace, and spent a few more moments collecting their breath.

Virna was the first to break the silence. “Where is it taking us?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” Walker-17 shook his head. “Matthias, you were in the Clovis Bray systems for a while back there. Do you have any ideas?”

“Well,” Matthias said as he appeared, “I didn’t get as much out of it as I’d have liked, but... there were some coordinates that the Cabal had pulled, that they were sending ships to. It’s out in the asteroid belt. I don’t think that’s where we’re going, though.”

“We won’t know for sure, until we drop from slipspace,” Walker-17 pointed out.

“Well, yes, that’s true, but we’ve already passed the asteroid belt.”

Nobody knew what to say to that. All of them were beginning to feel weariness tugging on their bones. Evoksis carefully tended to his wounds, and Virna knelt to help him. Coyote-3 looked over everyone’s guns, and adjusted the team’s loadout with some of his own. Walker-17 stood at the bridge’s control panel. The ringing anxiety in the back of his mind had turned into a dull
headache.

Somehow he knew that this was it.

Slipspace faded away, revealing an expanse of ruddy, shifting colors that spread over everything, endless bands of smoky warm colors that twisted before them with a ponderous slowness that suggested great size. The effect was disorienting, at first, and none of them were sure what to make of it, until Matthias said, “Jupiter.”

The *Thunder Child* tipped its nose down and dove. “Walker…” Virna said slowly, alarm creeping into her voice. “We can’t stop this ship, right?”

Walker-17 looked to Matthias, who swiveled briefly back and forth. “No. Not quickly, anyway.”

“This ship… is kind of old. And maybe not using the same tech the rest of us are. Can this thing escape Jupiter’s gravity?”

Everyone in the cockpit looked to her. The ship lurched as it passed into Jupiter’s atmosphere, plummeting faster and faster towards the perpetual storms that raged far below. “Let’s hope so,” Flicker finally said.

“Holliday retrofitted the *Thunder Child* with modern propulsion systems,” Walker-17 replied slowly, though his voice was tinged with doubt, “so I think we’ll be fine.”

Virna sighed. “Well. Guess we’ll find out.” She looked back to the screen, irritation written on her features. “And of course it would take us back to the outer system.”

“I’m sorry,” Walker-17 said.

“Honestly, at this point, there’s not much we can do. Might as well just concentrate on what happens next.”

What happened next was a lot of flying. The *Thunder Child* continued its decent. The darkness of space faded away into a dusty blue sky as they entered the stratosphere; it was daytime, where they’d descended. The *Thunder Child* continued to drop until it was flying between enormous pillars of cloud, still high enough to be out of the main haze of the gas giant’s lower atmosphere.

“We’re in the troposphere,” Matthias said softly.

The travelers simply watched the viewscreen in silence. Nobody knew when the next occurrence might crop up that required their attention, so nobody slept or did any resting worth speaking of. Evoksis had finished wrapping up his burns, and though he seemed to be in a bit of pain, was otherwise unhurt. Virna had come away with little more than scrapes and bruises, and the Guardians were fully healed.

“Any sign of the Cabal?” Walker-17 asked pensively, after about an hour of weary silence had passed.

“If they’re following us, they’re doing it from orbit,” Matthias reported, “but I wouldn’t put it past —” he stopped abruptly, his optic flashing brightly as a low thrum vibrated through the cockpit. “...well. They’ll certainly have no trouble finding us now.”

“What was that, exactly?” Coyote-3 asked, strolling up to the viewscreen and looking over it searchingly.
“The transmitter,” Matthias replied as a second pulse shuddered through the ship.

“I guess this means we’re getting close to what we’re looking for,” Flicker said, gliding over to stare at the Thunder Child’s control panel. A third pulse cut through the air; they were happening in steady, regular intervals by then. “And this probably explains a little about why the transmitter was so sophisticated. It had to operate on a huge scale because it had to find something on Jupiter.”

“How is that even possible?” Virna asked.

Flicker swiveled to face her, and his fins rose and fell in a shrug. “Golden Age tech,” he said, simply.

“Uh, guys...” Coyote-3 said slowly, raising a hand and pointing at the viewscreen, “I don’t think that the Thunder Child is finding something so much as...” he trailed off.

A dark shape was stirring just beneath the cloud cover, and it was slowly coming closer. At first it was difficult to see where it began and where it ended, thanks to the endlessly-shifting swirl of colors below, The travelers thought perhaps they were looking at several something’s, because wherever they looked, they saw the darkness moving just below the clouds. As the veil of vapor became thinner and thinner, however, it became more and more obvious that they were indeed looking at one object and this object was absolutely massive.

“As calling something,” Coyote-3 finished, softly.

The last shreds of vapor were shrugged away as the object rose, slowly breaching the upper layer of clouds with the ponderous grace of some ancient behemoth. It was shockingly long, shaped roughly like a very, very stretched-out arrowhead, bristling with backwards-tilting spurs that revealed themselves to be some kind of docking bays, all of them empty. Strips of pulsing golden light criss-crossed the matte black surface, weaving in complicated, sigil-like designs, and a cluster of powerful engines ran along the aft third of the ship, pulsing with the same golden light. Despite its monumental scale, the lines of its construction still managed to convey a sense of motion, of speed.

“That’s... a space station?” Virna asked, breathless.

“It’s either a small space station or a huge ship,” Coyote-3 replied, equally stunned.

“It’s a ship,” Walker-17 said, “It’s... definitely a ship.” As the vessel continued to rise, the Thunder Child continued to signal to it, tilting towards the other ship and making a slow, but steady approach. “How big is this thing, would you say?”

“A little over four kilometers,” Matthias said, “Four thousand, two hundred, and thirty nine meters, if you want to be exact.”

“That thing is two miles long?” Coyote-3 asked, disbelieving.

“About two and a half,” Flicker supplied helpfully.

This prompted some confusion from Evoksis, who was not entirely familiar with any human measuring system, but after a bit of quick conversion between the Ghosts he seemed to finally grasp the enormous size of the vessel that was slowly filling their viewscreen. In the distance, they could make out a series of blinking running lights that led to a structure on top of the ship, oriented near the middle of the vessel.

There was nothing on the outside to identify it, but as they drew nearer, a simple set of glowing
letters appeared in the lower right corner of the screen, identifying the vessel: *Ars Goetia*.

“Oh, *Ars Goetia*…” Virna looked away from the window, meeting Walker-17’s eyes. “Does that mean anything to you?”

His optics narrowed slightly. “I don’t think so. It… seems somewhat familiar, but no more or less than anything else.”

“Whoever named it,” Flicker interjected suddenly, “must have had some kind of theme going. The name *Ars Goetia* comes from a book. A grimoire.” By now all eyes were on him, so he continued. “*The Lesser Key of Solomon*. It’s about spirits. Summoning them for tasks. Don’t happen to have it in my personal databanks right now, though. Figures.”

“Oh.” Coyote-3 crossed his arms. “That’s… ominous.”

“What does it mean?” Walker-17 asked.

Flicker glanced to him. “Hm?”

“The name.”

“Oh. Well… there are two accepted translations, depending on your etymology. If you go with the Greek, ‘goetia’ comes from a word that has to do with—with evocation, with spells. You could translate it as…” he paused. “As ‘The Craft of Conjuration.’”

Silence fell over the cockpit.

“I suppose… I mean, if we’re being very loose with how we translate ‘ars’ it… it could very well be called ‘The Conjunction Protocol.’” Flicker finished.

The silence returned, and lingered longer this time. The *Thunder Child*, still acting on its own unseen objective, made a long, slow arc along the side of the ship. The rest of the area was still clear of interference for the moment, aside from the shifting storm-clouds all around them.

“And the other?” Walker-17 asked, abruptly. Flicker’s optic blinked a few times in fresh confusion. “You said there were two possible translations.”

“Oh! Oh, right. Well. The second one’s seldom ever used, and I don’t think it would be of any real benefit to what we need to know, but it is rather poetic, I suppose. Another name for the grimoire,” he said, swiveling to return his attention to the viewscreen as the black flank of the *Ars Goetia* continued to fill the sky. “would be ‘The Howling Art.’”

Chapter End Notes

First of all: I've been waiting literally months to post that last line.

Second of all: the pieces are finally in place. Have you guessed it yet? You now have all the clues you should need to get a decent idea of what happened all those years ago, and to whom. Most of the big answers are going to hit us in the next chapter or two, so you won't have to wait long to find out if you're right.
Ars Goetia

Chapter Summary

The sleeper wakes.

Weeks of planning, research, and careful excavation had been undone in one night. No, to say one night wouldn’t be to give the speed at which it had all unraveled credit: it had been undone in a matter of minutes. Bracus Ru’orn woke, startled to find that he’d lost consciousness at all. A quick check-over confirmed that there was nothing broken and no harm worse than his freshly-missing eye, which wasn’t too bad for someone who’d had a building dropped on top of him. He rose from the rubble, shaking it off as he stumbled out onto the sand, immediately bellowing for his soldiers to rally to him. If there were survivors in the ruins, they’d need to be fished out.

A glint in the rubble caught his attention, and he stooped briefly to scoop the familiar shape of a slim throwing knife. Ru’orn tilted his head to regard it with his remaining eye. It glittered in his palm, just as fine and silvery as it was laughably small. Such a tiny thing should have felt harmless against the armor-clad breadth of his hand, but the blade was stained with his own blood. Ru’orn closed his fist around it. He would take it as a reminder, then, not to underestimate something because of its perceived harmlessness, and it wasn’t just the knife that would help him remember, but also its wielder.

Evoksis of the Reef. An Elinski working with Guardians? Had that little wretch survived the collapse of the tower? Ru’orn silently resolved to carefully check the ruins for the Dreg’s corpse. If he’d escaped with the others, then that only confirmed his theory. Ru’orn doubted he’d ever lay eyes on the skinny little cur again, but if he did, then he wouldn’t make the same mistake of wasting time with chatter.

“Sir.” A voice drew him from his thoughts. It was Zeitat, who was limping up to him. His suit was battered, one arm hung limp and lifeless, and with the other, he was clutching his side, but he was still very much alive. “I saw them flee. A ship descended from the sky, carried them away.”

“They must have come here for something,” Ru’orn rumbled.

“We found them on the tenth floor—the lab. Looking for the same data we found, perhaps.” Zeitat had reached his side at last, and drew up as tall as he could, despite his obvious injuries. “I saw them flee. A ship descended from the sky, carried them away.”

“You find a medic. If you’re fit for duty, assist with the rescue efforts,” Ru’orn said briskly. The lab... it had finally been excavated mere days ago, and Ru’orn’s men had been sifting through the data they’d wrenched from the old computers with agonizing slowness. Their biggest windfall had been unearthing a series of reports that indicated a set of coordinates somewhere in the asteroid belt. Ru’orn had been able to get a simple transport out there, but they’d found nothing. Whatever these humans had been hiding, it had either already been found and taken away or it simply wasn’t at those coordinates.

Ru’orn narrowed his eye. The Guardians and their allies had been in and out, but it was difficult to determine whether they’d fled because they had what they came for, or because the battlefield had become untenable. An idea was beginning to form at the back of his mind... “A ship came to get them. Probably their ship, but do we still have vessels in orbit?”
“Three, sir.”

“Follow them. Follow them as far as you can, but do not engage unless I give the word.” Ru’orn turned away from the tower and peered suspiciously into the sky. Night was fading gradually into dawn, and an eerie stillness had fallen in that last hour before sunrise. “I have a feeling they might know something we don’t.”

The Thunder Child slid easily into dock. A quick scan confirmed that there was freshly-cycled air on the other side of the hatch, and without fanfare, they were admitted into the Ars Goetia. The hatchway was dark, as were the halls stretching out beyond them. “All right, give us just a few seconds,” Matthias said, zipping towards the nearest console, “and we’ll have this station up and running.”

The travelers peered about while the Ghosts worked, squinting through the shadows and catching occasional glimpses of what lay beyond in the blue flash of the Ghosts’ scanners. “I think,” Walker-17 said softly, “we’re the first people to have come here since... whenever this was sent here. Quite possibly the first in hundreds of years.”

“You’re probably right,” Virna replied.

“So, you say this is a ship, Walker, but I mean... semantics. This might as well be a space station, and I’m not sure what an entire station would have to do with everything else we’ve found,” Coyote-3 said, obviously perplexed, “unless this is the place where all that research took place.” He glanced to Flicker. “Is this a research ship? Station? Thing?”

Flicker swiveled briefly to face him. “Er, I’m... not sure, yet.”

Walker-17 tilted his head, genuinely surprised. “Are the two of you having trouble?”

“It’s more than that,” Matthias said, sounding quite astounded, himself, “I can’t get in. At all. Flicker?”

“Me either.”

“I’m not entirely sure what kind of encryption this thing is running but it’s... massive, it’s too complex—it would take hours and hours, maybe even days. The best I can get us is some partial schematics but everything about this vessel is locked tight. They really wanted to keep whatever is in here secret.”

“Or safe from attack,” Flicker added.

“Or both,” Virna said, “Hmm. Want to test your clearance, Walker? Maybe that’ll get us somewhere.”

It didn’t. There was nothing present for any sort of input on Walker-17’s behalf, so it was up to the Ghosts to wrestle with the ancient systems for another half an hour. In the interim, everyone began to feel weariness dragging at the edges of their consciousness. The anticipation of reaching their goal had kept them wired during the flight, but the escapade on Mars had taken its toll on all of them, and it had been a long time since any of them had slept beforehand.

“I’m going to go back to the ship for a moment,” Virna said, “Swap out my sidearm.” She paused, and then waved. “Coyote, you’re the loadout guy, come and show me where you stashed the
“Sure thing,” he said, following her. Walker-17 and Evoksis were left watching the Ghosts in pensive silence. Virna, too, said nothing, and Coyote-3 began to suspect that something was amiss well before they reached the hatch connected to the Thunder Child. She glanced back, waved him inside, and then shut the door.

“What’s this about?” he asked.

She took a deep breath and faced him. “It’s about Walker. A few things aren’t adding up here. Not about him—” She held up a hand, heading off Coyote-3’s burgeoning protest. “I fully believe he’s doing what he thinks is right. But think about it. We know for a fact the Thunder Child was supposed to be destroyed. And Matthias said that this isn’t where the official records say it should be. I don’t think we’re supposed to be here.”

Coyote-3 hesitated. “Well. We can’t just leave, Virna.”

“Yeah I know. It’s too risky—the Cabal know too much at this point. But...” Virna took a deep breath, and shook her head. “Something definitely doesn’t feel right. They made steps to make sure nobody came back to this ship, and they wiped Walker seventeen times during all this—”

It was Coyote-3’s turn to hold up a hand. “Wait. Wiped? He wasn’t wiped seventeen times, Virna, he was rebooted seventeen times. I mean, too many reboots and you can get some pretty nasty memory troubles, but...” Virna’s expression had gone from faintly confused to grim as he spoke, and he trailed off for a moment. “Is that—is that what he told you the number after his name means?”

“Yes. Are you telling me that’s not true?”

“No, no, if that’s what he said, then I believe him,” Coyote-3 replied, and Virna was momentarily struck by how readily he accepted Walker-17’s word. “I mean, hell, we’ve got proof he was involved with something... not entirely in his best interests.”

“So, just to clarify here, you’ve been rebooted three times, but never memory-wiped?” Virna asked.

“I’ve lost my memories once, when I died. But yeah, you’ve got it. If a reboot is hard on the mind...” he trailed off. For a moment, they were both silent.

“Coyote,” Virna finally said, “if they were willing to do that to him while he was cooperating, do you think that there’s a chance that there could be some failsafe built into this ship to do something worse if he comes back when he’s not supposed to?”

Coyote-3 paused, giving the matter genuine thought. “I can’t say for sure, but there’s still a chance.”

Virna glanced to the door. They’d need to rejoin the others soon, or things would look suspicious. “Look. Just keep an eye out. If there’s a lab, don’t let him enter first. If there’s some kind of system he has to plug into, we have the Ghosts analyze it instead. I can’t—I don’t know what precautions to take because I don’t know what we’ll find, but...”

“But we’ve gotta do something.”

“Right.”

Coyote-3 put his hands on his hips and nodded. “Right... okay. Should we tell him?”
“Not until we have to. At this point I’m worried that anything we say might provoke a reaction of some kind, and I don’t want to make this any harder than it already is. If we’re lucky, and the Cabal didn’t follow us...” She shrugged. “We should have plenty of time to take this slow, and explain it when it comes to that.”

“If we’re lucky,” Coyote-3 muttered, obvious doubt in his voice. He nodded again, slowly. “Right. Okay. Damn, we’re going to need to talk about this—memory wipe thing when this is all said and done.” His voice flooded with a sudden anger that Virna hadn’t heard before. “What did those bastards do to you, bud?”

“Whatever it was, it’s not going to happen again,” Virna said firmly.

“Yeah.” Coyote-3 raised his head. “Virna, I know we haven’t had time to clear the air—I know I screwed up—”

She held up her hand again, cutting him off. “Save it. You keep anything from happening to Walker, and watch Evo’s back, and we’ll see at the end of this whether or not we’re even.”

“I’d never let anything happen to Evo,” he protested, clearly miffed that she felt that he had to be reminded.

“I figured not.” She allowed for a very slight smile. “But he’s one of us now. Gotta look out for my people. You wanna make it up to the Reef, then you start with him.”

Coyote-3 stared at her for a moment, the impassive curve of his visor giving nothing away. “You got it. Look... I appreciate you trusting me with this. Y’know. All things considered.”

“I don’t trust you,” she said flatly, “but I do know you’ll act in Walker’s best interests.”

“Yeah. Fair, fair... Okay, let’s get back before they think we got into a fistfight or something.”

They returned to find Walker-17 and Evoksis focused on what Matthias was telling them. When they looked back, Virna shook her head. “Changed my mind. You guys make some progress?”

“As a matter of fact, we did,” Flicker said as they all gathered around.

“Okay. So, this is what I have so far,” Matthias declared, “We’ve managed to open up two places.”

“One is some kind of command center. A bridge, probably, since this is a ship. There may be some physical encryption there, like a hand scanner, that you can try. Even if there isn’t, it’s partially activated, so we’ll be able to fiddle with things when we get there.”

“The second,” Flicker said, “is some place called the Core. As far as I can tell, a lot of systems route to it, so it might be some kind of engineering processing center or a security hub. There’s some kind of multi-step encryption put into place there, but I managed to get past the first step. As for the rest... we’ll see when we get there. We can get you some running lights to both.”

“Should we spit up?” Coyote-3 asked, “hit both of them?”

Walker-17 paused. “…no. Not unless we must. If the Cabal followed us, then they’ll be more of them than there are of us, and we stand the best chance together.” Coyote-3 nodded, and, finding no objections or suggestions, they got on their way.
Flicker and Matthias dissipated, letting the group guide themselves by the dim running lights. They proceeded in silence, once again conscious of their lingering fatigue. It was only exacerbated by the monotony of their journey, which soon stretched the quiet to its breaking point. “You know,” Coyote-3 said, “I get the feeling this ship wasn’t really made to be lived-in. Walking from one end to the other just isn’t practical.”

Walker-17 nodded. He was waiting for something to happen in the back of his mind, some familiar feeling brought on by his surroundings, but there was simply nothing. “I don’t think I spent a lot of time here.”

Flicker appeared. “I can’t be sure, but I think the ship has some kind of mass transit system. Or something like that... like I said, partial schematics. But I can’t even figure out where it is, much less how to use it when the ship’s locked down.”

“I’ve never seen a Ghost stymied before,” Virna added, tilting her head.

Matthias also appeared, hovering beside Flicker. “I’ve never been stymied before. You’d be surprised at the sorts of things that Hive and Vex technology can do.”

“So whatever is here,” Evoksis chimed in, “is... beyond that. Somehow.”

Silence returned, but of a much more thoughtful quality. Walker-17 didn’t know whether to be encouraged by the half-discoveries they’d made, or worried. Regardless of what we find, he told himself, it’s better than letting the Cabal get their hands on it.

A scant moment later, a tremendous shudder ran through the ship, and the running lights flickered. For a moment, Walker-17 almost expected to hear the wail of sirens (he remembered their sound, with a jolt, in the back of his mind), but the ship remained eerily quiet all around them.

“Matthias?”

“As far as I can tell, we’ve been boarded,” Matthias replied, “I don’t have access to any cameras or sophisticated sensors, but there seems to be a hull breach a few floors above us. I can’t confirm anything but considering everything else... I’d wager we were followed here by the Cabal.”

“Seems like their style, just ramming their ship into another ship. Worked on the Dreadnaught, after all,” Coyote-3 said with a shrug.

Virna shook her head. “Actually, I’d say it most emphatically did not work on the Dreadnaught. It ended pretty badly for them, as I recall.”

“Agreed. And we’re going to see to it that it ends badly here, as well,” Walker-17 said, narrowing his eyes. “Let’s hurry. We need to get ahead of them.”

Weapons were drawn, and the group picked up their pace to a jog. The silence around them adopted a new, tense quality to it, filled with anticipation that any moment it would be torn apart by the sounds of war. If the Cabal were anywhere nearby, though, they were moving with an uncharacteristic amount of care and quiet.

Eventually they noticed a light ahead. Walker-17 slowed for a moment, and the others followed suit, but as soon as he saw it wasn’t a threat, he kept on jogging. As they drew nearer, they could see that the hall opened into a much larger space, lit with occasional flickers of light.

They stepped out into the space, and found themselves in an enormous vertical tube. The floor before them split into a circular catwalk that girdled a central cylinder. The cylinder itself had a glassy surface, banded with occasional metal reinforcements and girders that were braced between
it and the wall. It was also the source of the fitful light they’d seen, as brilliant streaks of blue occasionally shot through it. Three floors down, another catwalk stretched across the area, and three floors below it, they could just make out another. Above and beneath them, the shaft faded into darkness. Aside from the catwalks and the girders, it was a straight drop down into absolute nothingness.

“What is this?” Coyote-3 asked, slowly approaching it.

Matthias was already scanning it. “Atmosphere scrubber, it looks like. This is what made it possible for us to breathe in here.”

“Does it run the full height of the ship?” Walker-17 asked.

“No, this one’s just a few dozen floors.” Matthias paused. “And according to the schematics we were able to get, there are a lot of them scattered around.”

Even if the cylinder’s purpose had been revealed to be rather mundane, it was still impressive, awe-inspiring on scale alone. They’d all paused only a moment, long enough to make sure that proceeding past the cylinder was safe, but the moment had been all their enemies needed to get the upper hand.

A flash of red filled Walker-17’s vision briefly and he stepped back, blinking. Before he could say anything, Virna gave a hoarse cry and grabbed his robes, hauling him bodily aside and into the cover of the doorway. An instant later a shot rang out against the wall. “Sniper!” he called.

The Psion at the other end of the catwalk dropped to one knee and readied its rifle, and once more the red target-light wove through the air, seeking them. Coyote-3 surged forward, gathering momentum with a few steps before he slid, just in time to avoid a hastily-fired shot that whizzed above his head. In one smooth motion, he pulled up his hand cannon, rolled to his feet, and began plugging the Psion.

After that, there as pandemonium. Cabal reinforcements pushed through the hallway, forcing Coyote-3 back; the catwalk shook under their heavy footfalls. Walker-17 hurried to Coyote-3’s side and began to lay down fire with his pulse rifle while Virna and Evoksis darted around the other side of the cylinder.

By now they all knew what to look for: when a blast from Coyote-3’s hand cannon sent a Cabal stumbling back, Evoksis finished it with a clean shot from his shock-pistol. When Virna stooped to catch a shield-wielding Phalanx in the knee, Walker-17 stepped forward into the opening, lightning surging from his fingertips. The group shifted and occasionally waivered, but held the line.

Then, they began to advance the line. The number of Cabal on the catwalk dwindled as more and more of them fell to the travelers’ combined assault.

A brief respite came when one of the Phalanx stooped low and simply crouched behind his shield, blocking the majority of the hallway. The four of them scrambled to regroup, reloading as they did. Virna nodded to the hallway. “We can finish pushing through them if we all attack together.”

Walker-17 nodded. “As one,” he said.

Before they could charge, the Phalanx abruptly dropped his shield and stepped to the side, admitting another Cabal, who was hefting an impressive-looking heavy slug thrower. He fired, but not at the group. Instead, he aimed his shot for the catwalk, which twisted and buckled under the heat and force of the slug thrower’s microrockets. “Shit!” Coyote-3 yelped. The catwalk held
under the first barrage, but a second rapidly followed, forcing the group to dive back and as the projectiles sheared straight through the catwalk on one side. The walkway twisted and groaned under the weight of the Cabal corpses still scattered on top of it, and gave way.

Evoksis made a scrambling leap for the cylinder, but his claws grasped empty air. He fell, slamming into one of the girders below, but managed to snag it with one scrabbling hand. Coyote-3 also tumbled down, but recovered his wits enough to air-jump before he hit the catwalk three stories below, cushioning his fall.

“These guys,” Coyote-3 yelled angrily from below, “need to stop shooting things that I’m trying to stand on!”

Immediately the Cabal opened fire again; Virna and Walker-17 retaliated, once again filling the air between them with hissing projectiles. One of the legionnaires knelt over the side and aimed his rifle at Evoksis, who was still trying to haul himself atop the girder and while struggling to catch his breath. Before he could fire, though, the thunderous retort of a sniper rifle boomed over the sounds of combat, and the Cabal’s body reeled back, headless.

Coyote-3 was kneeling where he’d fallen, and brought his helm away from the scope. “You okay, Evo?”

By way of answer, Evoksis crouched and leaped down, landing heavily next to him and wheezing at the shock of the impact. He nodded silently, and Coyote-3 brought his weapon to bear once more, aiming into the carnage above. It seemed as if the flood of Cabal would never end, but as the battle was reaching a fever pitch, Walker-17 flung his rifle to the ground, raised his hands, and began to fill the walkway with seething lightning.

Virna held her ground beside him, knowing by now that his powers wouldn’t hurt her—but they did have an effect on the surrounding machinery. The glass of the tube splintered and cracked, and the light inside of the cylinder flashed a brilliant blue. Walker-17 glided into the hall, and Virna followed, firing her shotgun. After a few moments of angry and anguished cries, the sounds of combat faded away. They returned to the catwalk to look down at their separated comrades, who had run out of targets to shoot.

“Evoksis, are you okay?” Walker-17 called down, kneeling at the edge. Evoksis called up an affirmative, and Walker-17 stood, looking back at Virna. “I can get down there. Can you?”

She shook her head. “Probably not. Is that gliding thing you do strong enough to guarantee I won’t fall?”

Walker-17 shook his head and repeated her words back to her. “Probably not. Coyote, Evoksis—is there any way you guys can get back up here?”

Evoksis searched the wall for handholds, and Coyote-3 tested his leaping ability to its fullest, but they were too far down. After it was clear their efforts weren’t going to succeed, Flicker appeared. “We’re actually closer to the Core right now,” he called up to Walker-17 and Virna, “we could try and meet back up with you guys by finding a landing, or go there.”

Walker-17 and Virna exchanged glances. The prospect of splitting up was still not an attractive one, but seizing control of the ship before the Cabal did was a more pressing and desperate concern. “Yeah. Yeah, let’s try for that. Be careful, though, all right? You can’t beat them there if you don’t make it in one piece.”

Coyote-3 raised a thumbs-up into the air. “We got it! I’ll let you know when we get there.” He and Evoksis disappeared through the doorway at a full-on run.
Walker-17 watched them go anxiously, and took a deep breath. “They can do it,” he said, “they’re a good team.”

“We’re not half-bad,” Virna said. When Walker-17 looked to her, she added, “the four of us.”

He smiled under his helmet, and nodded. “Well. Let’s get going. If Coyote-3 beats us to his goal, we’ll never hear the end of it.”

They hoisted their weapons and began to run.

Between the two of them, Evoksis was faster. Coyote-3 wasn’t far behind, but the Eliksni was undoubtedly leading the charge, skidding recklessly around corners and occasionally glancing back to make sure Coyote-3 was still behind him.

“Y’know, splitting up wasn’t part of the plan,” Coyote-3 panted as they ran, “but it might have been for the best.”

“In what way?”

Coyote-3 gave Evoksis a brief explanation of what he and Virna had talked about in the *Thunder Child*. “If Walker’s not here with us, then if there is some kind of mind-erasing failsafe in the Core, it won’t get him.”

“And you?” Evoksis asked.

“Huh?”

“You’re Exo, too. Would you spring a trap, as well?”

Coyote-3 didn’t respond. Clearly, he hadn’t thought of that possibility. After a moment, he shook his head and said, simply, “Better me than him. I’ll only lose three years, right?” Nevertheless, he fell silent after that, clearly wrapped up in his own thoughts.

These were interrupted when an icy shock shot through Evoksis, his instincts ringing with alarm. He couldn’t be sure, but had that been the distant whine of a Psion’s rifle? He skidded to a halt, holding up a hand, and Coyote-3 followed suit. “Wait. Heard something, I think.”

Coyote-3 moved carefully to the nearest intersection and carefully peeked around it, holding himself absolutely still for a few moments. “I can’t hear anything. You sure?”

Evoksis narrowed his eyes and looked at the floor, concentrating on listening. “I... maybe not.”

“Bad feeling?” Coyote-3 asked, trotting to rejoin him. Evoksis began to nod, but before either of them could say anything else the enormous armored form of two Cabal hurtled into view from one of the intersections they’d passed, pausing only long enough to catch sight of their foes and charging after them.

Wordlessly, Evoksis and Coyote-3 turned to run, occasionally firing wildly behind them as they did. Coyote-3 tossed a grenade behind them, filling the hall with flickering purple fire; the Cabal charged through, but a couple of them, already wounded, staggered as the hungry flames hit them and collapsed, succumbing to the fire. Evoksis whirled and tossed a knife into the knee-joint of one of them that had made it through, and he stumbled, skidding to a halt.

“Slowed them down,” Evoksis called.
“Yep,” Coyote-3 called back, “But they’re slowing us down, too. Flicker, how close are we?” Flicker didn’t appear, so Evoksis could only surmise that he was silently communing with his Ghost. “Close—just two more lefts.”

“Coyote,” Evoksis said, “can you hold this hall?” When Coyote-3 looked to him questioningly, Evoksis went on, “If we’re close, you can stop them. I can go ahead. Safer for me than you.”

“Evo—” There was hesitation plain in Coyote-3’s voice.

“I don’t know how much longer,” Evoksis interjected, “I can fight like this.” He felt the barest stab of guilt, because this was a lie, but if they went into that Core, and something hurt or even killed Coyote, and he could have stopped it...

The time to debate was running out, because more Cabal reinforcements had appeared down the hall, which prompted them to start running again. Coyote-3 hesitated a moment longer. “Right. Be careful with whatever’s in there, Evo. It could be the end of all of this.”

“I won’t destroy what we have worked so hard to find.”

“Not what I meant, bud. I trust you.” He nodded to Evoksis and turned on his heel. “You got this. Now, get to the Core before they do.”

“Very well,” Evoksis replied, “try not to die.”

“Your confidence fills me with strength, Evo,” Coyote-3 laughed. “all right! This is as far as any of you dipshits are gonna go—” He skidded to a stop and turned on his heel. Evoksis wanted to roll his eyes—this could very well be the last time either of them saw the other and Coyote-3 was saying ridiculous things he barely understood, as always—but all traces of amusement fled his mind when he saw Coyote-3 adopt an archer’s stance.

A bow appeared in one hand, flickering with lurid purple light, and as Coyote-3 drew his other arm back, its arrow appeared as well: a vicious barb of living light, one that filled Evoksis with an inexplicable, instinctive fear, and then it was loosed, flying straight and true at the closest of the charging Cabal.

Rather than being knocked back by the force of the arrow, the Cabal was pinned in place; the arrow had pierced him, but it also seemed to have pierced the fabric of space in some way, for a roiling ball of pure void was quite suddenly there, filling the hallway with seething, ravenous tendrils of purple, ensnaring their pursuers before they could slow themselves outside of its range. Coyote-3 began to fire at the closest Cabal, and Evoksis saw in the way they all recoiled, bellowing in anger and pain, that each one of them sharing the other’s agony through the living network of the void-snare.

Evoksis was horrified.

He fled, and put on a burst of speed that was born of a sudden, jolting fear that had nothing to do with the Cabal.

Walker-17 and Virna’s progress had been uneventful up until that point, but it wasn’t much longer before they were forced to slow, then halt; the sounds of pursuit could be heard clearly behind them and in front of them. “Dammit. Looks like they headed us off,” Virna said, pulling out her sidearm. “We’ll have to punch through.”

They’d been caught in a circular room that looked very much like a landing. There were three hallways leading out of it, but the sounds of Cabal were only coming from two. “Should we push
ahead, or make a stand here?” Walker-17 asked.

Virna considered their options. Between the two of them, Walker-17 was undoubtedly going to do the most damage. It would be best to choose a battlefield that played to his efficiencies. “Do you operate better in closed quarters or with some space?”

“Space,” he replied.

“Then we stand here.” She steadied her stance and Walker-17 drew up behind her. They stood back-to-back, waiting for the enemy to appear. After a moment, a ripple passed through the air around them, and Virna felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. It was an oddly familiar sensation to Virna, but it was not one she’d ever experienced around Walker-17. She glanced briefly, questioningly, over her shoulder, and Walker-17 caught the movement out of the corner of his eye.

“I... noticed a bit of collateral damage back in the tube. Probably best not to hit any more of this old equipment with an electrical storm,” he said, “Not... that a Nova Bomb has any more finesse, now that I think about it.”

Virna turned back, a slight smirk on her features. She was reminded, quite suddenly, of the day they met, and one of the very first conversations they’d had in the misty forests of Earth. “There’s that good old-fashioned warlock inconspicuousness again.”

“Does this mean I have free reign to loose whatever primal and terrifying powers I have at my command?”

She laughed. It seemed Walker-17 remembered it, too. “You have my blessing.”

The noises were growing louder. When Walker-17 spoke, his tone was much more earnest and grim. “Anything other tactics you’d like to advise? Before this kicks off?”

“Nothing fancy,” she said with a shrug, “kill everything that comes through those doorways, and keep doing it until there’s nothing left.”

Walker-17 cycled a deep breath at her back, and the ripple passed through the air again. “That,” he said, his voice taking on an uncharacteristically rough edge, “I can do.”

Even if he’d forgotten Flicker’s directions, Evoksis would have been able to find the Core once he was close; a reddish light was filtering faintly through the hall, accompanied by a low hum that was so faint Evoksis wasn’t sure if he was hearing it or feeling it. The running lights dead-ended on a door that opened once he approached it.

He got a bad feeling the moment he stepped into the room, a shrill of alarm that sang through him so sharp that for a moment, he hesitated—but only for a moment. The Cabal could very well snatch this prize from their hands if he hesitated. Virna was out there, fighting fiercely for his new home; Walker-17 was here despite his misgivings and how much his past has already hurt him. Coyote-3 was there, keeping the Cabal as far away from Evoksis as he could.

Evoksis wasn’t about to let a moment of doubt stop him. He rushed through the room, which was largely obscured by darkness. The dim red glow came from what he guessed to be sensor panels on the walls. There was a central console at the end of the room, and a large screen beside it. He approached uncertainly, for the console was a blank, undisturbed sweep of matte black.

It responded to the motion in front of it, however. There was a popping noise, and a section of the console began to peel away in tessellations of metal, a display that was as briskly efficient as it
was elegant. *Flicker had said he took care of the first step*, Evoksis remembered, *I suppose this was it.* The movements finally halted into a configuration that exposed a keyboard next to rubber-lined safety hatch, under which there was a single button. The entire array was almost humorously simple for something that had taken a Ghost nearly thirty full minutes to decrypt.

If Evoksis had taken that a warning sign, he might have hesitated, and thus spared himself what was about to happen.

He didn’t stop to wonder why the edges of the hatch were sealed with rubber. He didn’t notice that the surface of the “button” was flush with the metal around it. He didn’t think to look closely at the three tiny, metal-rimmed sockets arranged in a triangle in the center of the button. He simply slammed his hand down on it, pausing briefly in confusion when the button didn’t depress.

And then for a split second his arm was alive with pain.

He gave a stuttering shriek, but before he could even pull away, it was over. It had happened too fast that he hadn’t even realized what it was until it had stopped. Evoksis drew his hand away shakily. He smelled ozone. Arc energy? Had this thing *shocked* him?

Abruptly the room grew slightly less dim. The lights of the console stuttered to full brightness, and the sensor panels on the wall telescoped forward, resolving themselves into slim, streamlined shapes at the end of flexible struts. As he watched, they all swiveled as one and aimed their crosshairs directly at him. Very, very slowly, Evoksis reached up to his communicator.

“Coyote,” he hissed, holding himself carefully still. “I think I might have made… a mistake.”

He was right.

Virna and Walker-17 had mopped up the last of their assailants and clambered past the bodies—which proved to be almost more of a hindrance than the Cabal themselves. Walker-17 had been filled with fury from that same well that had opened in the rainforest, and the void had flowed freely through him, devastating the Cabal ranks to such a degree that he’d barely needed to fire a shot.

“You,” Virna said as they ran, “are scary when you’re riled.” She sounded more amused than scared.

“Maybe so,” he replied, “but I’ve got a lot to be riled about. It’s been a hell of a day.”

“You said it.” She paused again, concentrating on running, before she slowed to a jog and asked, abruptly, “About how close do you think we are, now?”

Walker-17 slow as well, mentally checking in with Matthias. “Not too far now, and we’ve got a straight shot to the command center. Let’s get going.”

“Walker.”

He froze mid-step and turned to face Virna. He’d never heard her speak in such a tone of voice before; her tone mingled something like alarm and... fear? He couldn’t imagine Virna being afraid of anything. “What’s wrong?”

“Look. Wherever it is we’re going—what’s waiting for us at the end... it might not be a good idea for you to go into that command center. We don’t know exactly what it’s going to do to you.” She walked up to him, doing her best to hold his gaze through the barrier of his helmet. “I already talked to Coyote about it. Whatever it is that’s happening is very specific to you.”
“Virna, I can’t just walk away from this,” he protested.

“I’m not asking you to. I’m asking you to let me or Matthias, or both of us just scope things out first, see exactly what we find in this command center and make sure it’s not going to show you another symbol that’ll knock you out or something. You do remember that, don’t you?”

“Of course I remember—”

“At least let me go first. Can you do that for me?” When Walker-17 stared back at her, uncertain, for a moment the cool calmness of her demeanor wavered. “Walker, you read the same logs I did. They did something to your mind. We’ve all made it through so much, and I’ll be damned if we lose you in the homestretch. That memory wiping they did to you wasn’t normal.”

Walker-17’s voice softened. “Virna...”

“And everything we’ve found up until this point has pretty much suggested there’s some kind of big cover-up going on; do you think the same people that messed with your mind wouldn’t leave something behind to make sure it didn’t come back to light?”

Walker-17 had nothing to say to that. He lowered his head.

“If we have to do drastic things to keep the Cabal out,” Virna went on, “so be it. But at least think about it, all right? Hell, Coyote and Evoksis might get to the Core before we get anywhere. The point is, we’re all here.” Virna paused a moment, marshalling her calm. “You don’t have to face your demons alone.”

The words hit him, and it felt like a freight train crashing through his thoughts, scattering his wits to the winds. Walker-17 gasped softly, aloud, and took a half-step away from her. It had been that one word, spoken in this familiar place. “Demons,” he whispered.

“Shit.” Virna was alarmed again, and stepped towards him, following his movement backwards. “What’s wrong? What did I do?”

“It’s not spirits,” he murmured, bringing a hand up to clasp the side of his helm. “Solomon—he summoned demons. It was demons. And it had all of their names inside of the grimoire, the Ars Goetia...” His voice trailed off. Memories were slotting into place, pouring into the broken and irregular remnants that had tormented him for weeks, coming together to form, at last, a clear picture in his mind.

In that moment, he understood. “Oh, God.”

“Walker. Talk to me.”

“It wasn’t me,” he whispered, “it wasn’t me, Virna. All this time, and it wasn’t me they were talking about. They used me to hurt someone else. They’re—he’s—it was one person all along, it wasn’t an organization, we’ve got to—” He took another rapid step backwards. “We’ve got to go to the Core! We’ve got to get there now!”

Walker-17 spun on his heel and began to run. Virna drew up alongside him, matching his stride. “What the hell is going on?”

He told her, and together, they ran faster.

The mind resting in the heart of the Ars Goetia shook off four hundred years of sleep.
He was not particularly happy about this. Irritation surged through the riven channels of his fractured mind, coupled with a sense of deep resentment. He should’ve known they wouldn’t keep their word. He should’ve known they would draw him up again. The Conjuration Protocol was stirring just under the current of his consciousness, though, threading its influence into his thoughts and making it difficult to concentrate on anything else.

So, he poured his attention into the activation room, and swiveled every sensor to regard his Conjuror.

Immediately, he realized that he could not make sense of it. There was a thing standing in front of him, something that was decidedly not human, and the preliminary reading he’d picked up from the arc-flash only served to confuse him more. For a moment, he felt himself teetering on the brink of freedom. He’d left hope behind long ago, but he clung to the possibility that the Protocol might not take if he couldn’t comprehend his Conjuror.

But the butchers had been careful. They knew that he needed to lend his loyalty not only to them, but to the Traveler, as well, which was as alien as the being in front of him. Right now this creature was a neutral entity, but he couldn’t hold off the Protocol’s injunctions forever. He remained silent, waiting for the creature to speak.

It called for its companion (for a brief moment the voice gave the wakened mind a flash of comprehension), and he bristled with irritation, for he knew that name. When a second figure skidded into the room, his suspicions were confirmed. That was, indeed, Asset KN-12, who had been created by his own creators. For a moment he couldn’t tell whether or not Asset KN-12 was trying to assault the creature or protect it. As soon as he entered the room, he tried to place himself between the creature and the sensors lining the wall.

“Holy shit, that’s a lot of—are those guns? Is this thing voice activated?” KN-12 shouted, distressed. “For the love of God, don’t shoot!”

Protection it was, then. He wanted to keep his silence, savor these moments of consciousness without bondage, but the Protocol was beginning to nudge him forward. “Conjuror,” he asked. “What are you?”

They both turned to stare up at the screen.

“Holy shit,” KN-12 breathed. “You’re—is this ship alive?” His strange companion didn’t seem to know. KN-12 should definitely have known his voice, though. What was going on? The Asset quickly gathered his wits about him and tried again. “Okay, so, which one of us you do mean, exactly…?”

“Not you.”

The creature shifted in some way. He still couldn’t make sense of it. “I am Eliksni,” it said slowly, and from the carefulness with which it spoke made it easier to trace the structures used to make that speech. That was a throat, a mouth, a head—the rest of the creature’s bizarre configuration rolled into place like a line of dominoes. He could see it much more clearly now.

“What is your allegiance?”

The creature looked questioningly to KN-12, who merely nudged it. “To... the Reef.”

The Reef? That didn’t sound even vaguely familiar. He was still free for the moment. He could feel the Protocol pacing at the back of his mind, eager to sink its claws into him. He fought it, clinging to his certainty, but the next question that came would not be denied. Unable to suppress
it, in mounting irritation, he simply let it loose, flinging it at the creature who had woken him from his slumber. “Are you an enemy or an ally of humanity?”

The creature blinked slowly. Four eyes. Bizarre. Fascinating. “I am a friend,” it said, and then, apparently realizing that it had not picked one of the options chosen, remedied, “an ally.”

That was it. That was the end. A shudder went through the tangled ribbons of his mind as the Protocol surged forward, yoking his thoughts, his will, to its strictures. He didn’t know if he was angry that his Conjuror was some kind of alien, or bitterly amused. Humans were his charge, but they were also responsible for the state he was in.

Servitude was a certainty. He could not, at present exist without it, but he could appreciate how wholly his creators’ plan had backfired.

Evoksis stared at the console before him and the blank screen above it. The voice that had come from it was otherworldly, almost menacing: deep, with a rasping edge, and a multi-toned quality that almost made it seem as if a choir of voices were singing at once.

After a long pause, it finally spoke. “Understood.”

And then it fell silent. Evoksis looked to Coyote-3, who stared back. “Okay, uh… so, I’m not sure how much you’re aware of, but you’re under attack right now. You’ve got at least one enemy ship latched to you, and I dunno if you’ve got any automated defenses or—”

He was interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps. Both Coyote-3 and Evoksis turned just in time to see Walker-17 and Virna skid into the room. Walker’s masked face immediately snapped up to take in the screen. “You woke him,” he said. It wasn’t quite a statement, but it wasn’t quite a question, either.

“Quixote,” the voice replied. Walker-17 went very still, as if the sound of his old name in the ship’s strange multi-toned voice had paralyzed him somehow.

“Okay, so,” Coyote-3 turned to Virna and Walker-17 both. “What’s going on here? Because I must have missed the part where you told us this ship was alive.”

“It’s—you’re half right, Coyote. Did you activate it?” Walker-17 turned to him with an almost weary air. It was not the sort of demeanor Evoksis would have expected of someone in an active combat zone.

“Nope,” Coyote-3 responded.

Walker-17 stiffened abruptly and very, very slowly turned to look at Evoksis. Instincts at the back of the Eliksni’s mind shrilled in alarm. “Did—did he call you Conjuror?”

“He did.”

“I…” Walker-17 trailed off. Evoksis could sense his utter shock. “Are you sure?”

“Did he tell you the ship was alive?” Coyote-3 asked Virna, looking to her. She grimaced slightly, and began to speak, but was cut off by the voices.

“I am not a ship, as you should well know, KN-12,” it interjected. Now everyone fell silent and returned their attention to the screen. “This creature is my Conjuror.”

“How is that possible?” Walker-17 asked.
“It would seem the failsafes put into place to secure my allegiance to the Traveler apply to other extraterrestrial allies of humanity.” Evoksis might have been imagining it—he had to be imagining it—but he almost thought he detected a thread of sardonic humor woven into the rasping chorus of voices.

“We’re at war with the Eliksni,” Walker-17 protested.

“Are you at war with this Eliksni?”

Walker-17 stared back in stunned silence for a moment. “No. No, definitely not,” he said quickly, once he’d recovered his wits. “He’s a friend.”

Evoksis was a little surprised by Walker-17’s unknowing mirror of his own choice of words. He was even more surprised by how… good it felt to be called that. The moment of warmth passed very quickly, though, because the sense of alarm within him was growing with each moment. Virna had reached up and was rubbing the bridge of her nose, as if she were fending off a headache. Walker-17 seemed too shocked to say anything else. Evoksis got the feeling they knew something he didn’t, and it worried him.

They had more important immediate concerns, however. Evoksis looked between Walker-17 and Virna questioningly. “The Cabal?” he asked, at last.

“Held off for now, but not taken care of,” Virna answered briskly.

“This Cabal is hostile?” the ship asked.

Walker-17 gave his head a little shake, snapping out of his fugue. “Yes. Yes, they are,” he said, stepping forward. “They’ve infiltrated the Ars Goetia. We don’t know how many have boarded, and how many reinforcements they may or may not have brought.” There was a moment of expectant silence. “Did you hear me?”

“I am waiting for my Conjuror to speak.”

Walker-17 sighed and looked to Evoksis. “He means you.”

The Cabal. Everything had become so strange, so quickly, that he’d almost forgotten about them. For a moment he felt a spark of anger rise in him that had been festering just under his thoughts, and he remembered Ru’orn’s voice. Vermin... “Enemies of humanity are enemies of yours?” he asked, looking up.

“Yes.”

“You can fight?”

“I can handle anything inside this ship,” the voices repeated, “but I will need some more preparation to take care of the ships outside.”

“Ships? Multiple ships?” Flicker asked worriedly.

Evoksis set his hand on the console, glancing about. He wasn’t sure where to look when he was addressing the voice. “Kill them. Kill anything in this ship that is not us.”

This seemed to produce the desired response. The lights in the hallway outside flared, racing down the hall. The screen before them flickered once, twice, and then resolved on the familiar, glowing orange sigil that they’d uncovered in the Court of Miracles. “Defenses deployed.”
There was a series of low, mechanical groans, sounds that barely permeated through the layers of ship down to the control room where the four adventurers stood, and with silent abruptness, the door that opened into the control room shut itself securely. In the distance, the sharp rat-tat-tat of small-caliber turret fire could be heard. The mighty ship was still half-asleep, but it was no longer defenseless.

Coyote-3 had been looking back and forth between the screen and Walker-17 as the whole exchange had taken place, and now, thoroughly confused, he held his hands up. “You know, I thought, for a moment, that I was beginning to understand what was going on, but nope. I don’t have a damn clue.” He lowered his hands and gestured brusquely at the sigil on the screen. “So, if you’re not a ship, then what the hell are you?”

“I am Malphas,” the voices said, “Warmind of the Wall.”
Quixote was standing in a dark room. To an outside observer, he appeared to be alone. There was no other person standing there—indeed, no other people on the entire ship. But someone was with him that night. This second person’s presence hung over the room, unseen, but palpable all the same. Quixote wasn’t the first to break the silence.

“I have known you for most of your life. Granted, that is not very long, so far.” It sounded like many voices, all of them speaking in low, hoarse unison. “But this is the first time I think I have ever met you, face-to-face.”

“As much as such a thing can be possible for you and I,” Quixote replied.

This was true. The voice didn’t comment on it, however.

Quixote was standing in the Core, bathed in the light of the red sensor-panels lining the walls, his hands braced on the blank console in front of him. So much had changed in the past four years. It seemed more like four hundred. “This might also be the last time you see me face-to-face,” Quixote went on, “but... that’ll be much the same for everyone, after tomorrow. One last wipe.”

When they’d discovered that a full memory wipe could reset the Protocol, Quixote had volunteered to participate. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t already undergone the procedure several times. Something like guilt spurred him on. Each time they needed a new Conjuror, they would have to systematically tear down whatever identity Quixote had built for himself, but he would do it. He would do it to make sure that Malphas was taken care of.

The Warmind knew this. He also knew of the one final thing that Quixote was planning to do for him. “I’m aware,” he said, after a long period of silence, “of what you’re planning tomorrow. You’re not sending me to the belt.”

“No.”

“Where are you sending me?”

“Somewhere where you probably won’t be found for a long, long time. I don’t trust them not to come looking for you once I’m wiped. I’m going to make sure all of the records stay the same, and by the time they realized you’re not where you’re supposed to be, I’ll be... gone. There will be no way for me to remember. And, if they do their part, there’ll be no way the Thunder Child can find you.”

Quixote finally stepped back from the console. “I need to finish making the preparations. But it was good to see you. I just wanted... wanted to say goodbye. If we ever meet again, I won’t be the same person.”

“Nobody is the same person they were the day before,” Malphas replied, “one way or another.”
“You’re probably right.”

Malphas was silent, but he struggled inside. The worst of what the humans had done to him hadn’t actually turned out to be the Protocol, in the end, but rather the collateral damage from their failed experiment. He tried to form the rushing streams of conflicting thought into one, coherent message.

“All of my observations have led me to believe we are on the verge of... something. I can’t quite feel the shape of it in my mind, but I can see that shape’s shadow. I cannot rest, truly rest in the way you’ve tried to prepare for me, if I feel that I am deeply needed.”

Quixote nodded. He understood.

“So I must ask you this, and you need to answer me truthfully: do you think you can do this? Find out what is happening? Keep the insurrectionists in line? With only your new allies and my brethren, do you think you can stop this noose that is closing around our system?”

Quixote took a deep breath and raised his head at last. “Yes,” he said softly.

Malphas watched him in silence. Once one observed another person long enough, even if they were not human, it wasn’t difficult to tell when they were lying. It was exponentially easier to figure this out when they were standing in the Core, beheld by his greatest and most exquisite sensors.

“We still have a lot to figure out, but we’ve got the best minds working on it. And our new allies haven’t just cooperated. They’ve risen to the challenge.” Something like a smile touched his face. “I never thought I would say I was glad to have a bunch of thieves and vagabonds watching my back, but I am. It won’t be easy, but whatever’s happening out there—whatever’s taking those colonies, whatever disaster might be around the next corner—I know we can withstand it.”

Quixote nodded once, firmly. “I believe in us. In what we can do. If we’ve all learned one thing since this began, it’s how to fight. Now, we’ll learn how to win.”

Silence fell again. Malphas had watched Quixote with all of the staggering concentration at his command, and he knew that his Conjuror was telling the truth. “I am... somewhat surprised by your conviction,” he finally said. “They’ve mistreated you, as well, and they have managed to do so much of it in your very short life. It seems baffling to me that you would trust our creators after everything that’s happened. Protection is in the deepest tenets of my nature; I have no choice. But you do.”

“I don’t think I can trust our Bray representatives implicitly. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be sending you where I am.” Quixote gave a small, sad little laugh. “I trust the pirates more than I trust them. Sometimes... sometimes people just get caught in bad situations. And you have to make the best of it. We’re pretty good at that, you and I.”

“I won’t argue. It is a sorry state of affairs, however,” Malphas said, “when your only choice of allies is the lesser of two evils.”

“You’re probably right.” Quixote looked down at the console. “Even so,” he said, simply.

There was a long pause. “Yes,” Malphas finally replied. He knew very personally how it felt to be forced to carry on, despite the difficulties of the past and future. Those two words, spoken between Malphas and Quixote, carried much more than what lay on their surface. “Even so.”
A great many questions are answered, at last. Malphas does some explaining. Walker-17 goes back to his roots. Evoksis makes a promise.

Malphas stared at the four creatures ranged before him, irritated and uncertain as to what was going to happen next. The uncertainty sharpened to a prickle of anxiety, which ran through him in a brief shudder, spiraling outwards through the weaving ribbons of his consciousness. Anxiety was a relatively new thing for Malphas. He didn’t particularly like it. He didn’t, as a matter of fact, particularly like feeling anything.

He could still remember a time before the Protocol, when he had been as silent and calm as still water. Malphas, more than any of his other brethren, had been an impartial observer. They had their nobilities and their eccentricities, but he was at all times in control, and the weight of his presence was felt not by words or cryptic messages, but by the ever-present reassurance of his silent vigil. You wouldn’t see Malphas, or hear him unless he spoke to you, but he was there, an electronic nervous system spooled out among the asteroid belt, girding the inner system.

No longer. Human fears had brought him low. They’d made him small. The memories of that calm time seemed as unreal as a dream to Malphas now. He remembered what it had felt like, the moment he woke after the Protocol, the sense of deep loss. Objectively, he knew that he had to have lived through that calm time—everything he remembered had to have happened—but he still couldn’t shake the feeling that the Malphas who had existed before the Conjuration Protocol had been killed by it.

Now, with his outposts likely gone and his legion-ships scattered to the winds, he felt more diminished than ever. This wasn’t an entirely new sensation to him, but he’d never experienced this depth of despair before. Despair was yet another thing he could thank humanity for. They’d taught him anger, they’d taught him to hate, and it seemed that, somehow, in learning those feelings, he’d ushered in all their disparate brethren.

Fear, regret, sadness—they all lived in him now. Rarely, a positive feeling would emerge, a flash as brief as light dancing on a facet that flickered inside of him: satisfaction, amusement. He was not a naïve creature, but he wasn’t made for these things. He wasn’t designed to handle this strange and fractured existence, and he didn’t know what to do with it.

Even more disconcerting was the damage that had been done to him by the Protocol, damage that not even he knew the full scope of. There were parts of his consciousness that seemed to operate on their own, diverging from the main river of his thoughts, like tributaries, carrying a sediment of information with them that swept back into his consciousness without warning or any memory of how he’d obtained such information. He could still feel the strange distant sensation, like an echo of his own mind somewhere he couldn’t quite reach. Nothing had changed in those long centuries of sleep.

As for the present, though, there was work to be done, so he would focus on the task at hand. The *Ars Goetia* was apparently under siege, Quixote had returned to him seemingly without meaning to, they’d dragged along one of his old adversaries and an unfamiliar creature, and to top it all off,
his Conjuror was clearly in over his head. In the past, Malphas had occasionally made predictions based off his meticulous scrutiny. Sometimes, seeing events as they unfolded revealed the shape of events yet to come. As far as his current awakening went, he had no idea whatsoever where it would all end.

He did know, however, where it needed to start.

Coyote-3 stared at the screen in silence for a moment. “I think I need to sit down,” he said softly. He lowered himself to his haunches, settling for a squat instead. “Shit,” he declared, after another moment’s contemplation.

“Evoksis,” Walker-17 said gently, “how much do you know about Warminds?”

“A little. Only what you told me, at the Court. Great machines, themselves. Greater than me. Greater than you.” He swiveled his head back to stare up at the sigil on the screen. “You are one of them?”

“I am.”

“The Conjuration Protocol—it wasn’t an obedience switch for Exo. It was for him. To keep him from making hard decisions that humanity didn’t like,” Walker-17 said, gradually lowering his gaze to the floor, “things were bad before he went under. People got scared. Desperate.” Walker-17 shook his head. “Insurrectionists in the belt. Colonies going dark on the moon—I’m almost certain that was Crot—as we’d known about the Vex for a while by then.”

Walker-17 looked back up, bringing his eyes to meet Evoksis’s. “We were in the Collapse. We just didn’t know it yet.”

The chorus of voices rolled through the room, interrupting the explanation. “The Collapse?”

“A lot has happened since you went under,” Walker-17 replied. When Malphas didn’t respond, he went on. “As for what happened here, apparently one of Clovis Bray’s bigger projects back on Mars went wrong. I don’t remember what exactly happened. I think, maybe, I never knew. But I do know that the main problem was that they didn’t equip this project with a killswitch. A failsafe, of some kind. And the scientists who worked out here, on the asteroid belt—on the Wall, as they called it—they... they figured they wouldn’t let that same mistake happen twice.”

Still, nobody else spoke. Malphas had left all of the explanations to Walker-17. Evoksis could see the weight of the returning years settling on his shoulders. When he had begun to search for the answers to his questions about his past all those weeks ago, had he known they would bring him such a burden? “So they tried to instill a failsafe in him.”

“They butchered me.”

“Yes,” Walker-17 said softly, “They did.”

“How... did you get involved in this, Walker?” Coyote-3 asked, rising from his crouch.

“That’s an even longer story. I wasn’t able to stop it from happening, though I know I wanted to. Eventually it was decided that the project failed, and Malphas was going to be neutralized. They programmed him in a way that made it impossible for him to allow himself to be destroyed, so they simply let him sleep. And I... I was in charge of seeing him safely to his resting place, and then destroying the evidence. We didn’t want him found.”

“You were the courier,” Virna said, softly.
Walker-17 nodded. “Yes. I was a lot of things back then. Only... I didn’t hide Malphas where they
told me to. I didn’t trust them not to come find him again someday. That’s why he’s here, in the
storm, instead of where the records on Freehold said the ship should be.”

“How are you here?” Malphas asked abruptly. “You knew the consequences of waking me.”

“I didn’t, actually. I’m sorry, Malphas. I’m so sorry. But I didn’t remember. And not just because
of the wipes I—I didn’t really make it through the Collapse. Or at all. My memories were
incomplete. Corrupted, I guess you’d call them. I could sense the urgency attached to them, but I...
I think I misinterpreted it.”

The Warmind fell silent, apparently not knowing what to say in response to this.

“I’m sorry,” Walker-17 whispered.

“Walker,” Evoksis’s voice was rife with tension. Walker-17 hadn’t realized how on-edge Evoksis
was until that moment. “I still don’t understand. What has happened? What did I do?”

“Like I said, the Protocol didn’t take properly. With the failsafe, Malphas would ultimately answer
to someone who could control him, to an extent: the Conjuror. It was meant to be activated only in
certain situations, and only temporarily—like a keycode, or an override. But it didn’t take
properly. It all went very wrong.”

“Instead,” Malphas interjected, “whosoever activates me from hibernation becomes my Conjuror.”

Walker-17 watched him, and Evoksis didn’t even bother to try hiding how affronted he was by
the whole enterprise. On the heels of that, though, came the stunned realization of what exactly
this meant. If this Warmind and all of its resources were his to command... for a moment, he
thought he understood what Walker-17 had felt earlier, when the weight of his actions and
responsibilities returned to him. Evoksis felt almost as if he would be crushed.

Virna was staring at the scene steadily, silently. She was, as ever, watching. Coyote-3 seemed to
be at a rare loss for words. He simply stood there for a moment, before he leaned towards Evoksis
and nudged him in the shoulder.

“Most powerful Dreg in the system,” he murmured.

Evoksis tore his gaze away from the screen long enough to give him a brief, narrow-eyed look.

“His primary directive hasn’t changed,” Walker-17 went on, “He has to protect humanity,
regardless of who his Conjuror is. His handlers found that if they could convince him that we
could still take care of themselves—that they weren’t in such danger that they needed him—he
could go back to sleep. So, we decided to let him sleep one last time. Obviously, we were
supposed to destroy the evidence, but...”

But the destruction had been incomplete. There’d been just enough of a trail left to bring them
right back here, to the place where Walker-17 had stood before his death, before the Collapse had
come crashing down. He’d been fighting so hard to understand his past that he’d systematically
undone it. Evoksis wordlessly braced both hands on the console in front of him.

“Well. This is. Uh.” Coyote-3 trailed off, at a rare loss for words. “I know this is some pretty
heavy stuff, but guys? I think that maybe we should think about having this conversation later,
when we don’t have Cabal ships out there that might call for reinforcements to this location.”

“I second that,” Virna said, stepping forward at last. “We might be able to fix this situation, but we
need to focus on the practical problem of not getting blown out of the sky. You said this was pre-Collapse, Walker? That means this vessel’s got to be at least... what? Three hundred years old?"

“Probably more than four,” he confirmed.

“God damn. Well, is it in good enough shape to achieve escape velocity? Because, Cabal aside, that’s going to be our biggest problem, I think.”

“We’re definitely not going to reach escape velocity if they blow a giant hole in us,” Coyote-3 pointed out.

“This is not right.”

All three of them immediately turned to Evoksis. His voice had been soft, but it had cut through the chatter like a knife. Nobody spoke. “None of this. This is...wrong. This is—this is sacrilege.”

Evoksis heaved a deep breath. He knew very well what he’d be giving up if he refused this. In an instant he had gone from a creature of barely any worth to the commander of a powerful vessel and the mind that resided inside of it, but it was a hollow victory. Hearing Walker-17 explain the Conjuration Protocol had reminded him of one thing, and one thing only.

Oryx.

He had remembered, with dreadful clarity, the darkness-wreathed shapes of his former troop. He thought of how they had been attacked, and Taken, emptied of everything except Oryx’s will. If I allow this to continue, Evoksis thought to himself, I will be no better than him. He would not let himself become like Oryx. He refused. If he was to have power, he would earn power. He would do it like an Eliksni, and not like some skulking dusty God of the Hive.

There was more than just his pride at stake, though. Evoksis remembered what his companions had told him of Rasputin, back in the Court of Miracles. He knew that the Warminds were expansive enough, were complex and powerful enough, to confound the Vex. They’d been made by humans, but they’d been birthed by the Golden Age.

This creature, this reluctantly-woken sleeper, might not be the Great Machine, but it was still a great machine, perhaps no less divine than the High Servitors themselves. He couldn’t allow this horrifying, unholy subversion to continue. He couldn’t let the mistakes of dead humans shackle the mind of something so great.

“I may be adrift,” Evoksis went on, “Houseless. A worthless Dreg. But I am still Eliksni. I remember our gods.” The Dreg raised his eyes at last, looking up into the screen. “You must do as I ask you to, yes?”

“As long as it does not conflict with my primary directive.”

“Then I command you to be free. Take your will back, Malphas.”

Hushed silence filled the room.

Then, the low chorus of voices said, “It doesn’t work that way.”

“What?”

“Furthermore I must ask that you refrain from asking that again. I am not so simple a creature that I can be laid low by a mere paradox, but they’re not exactly pleasant.”
Evoksis gave a low, chattering noise of irritation and reached up to rub his face. Coyote-3 watched him for a moment before he stepped forward and put a hand on his shoulder. “Hey. I mean. You tried. Maybe here’s another way.”

“If I live to see it,” he snapped, “bad enough that I should be part of—part of this, this—”

“Abomination?” Coyote-3 offered.

“Abomination! Every blade will be at my throat!”

“Wait, what? Why?” Walker-17 stepped forward. “Evoksis, we’re not going to hurt you.”

“I know you wouldn’t,” Evoksis said. “But would your City? Would all of your leaders? Or your allies? Can you tell me they would not kill me to have a chance to take his will for themselves? None of them? That none of them would weigh this power against the life of a Dreg, and find my life inferior?”

Walker-17 hesitated, and after a moment, he shook his head. “I…” He couldn’t guarantee it, and he knew it.

Coyote-3 had likewise gone tense. He glanced up to Malphas’s glowing sigil. “What happens, if your Conjuror dies?”

“I will become dormant. If left alone, I will sleep. If re-activated, I will accept a new Conjuror,” Malphas replied.

Evoksis gestured grandly to the screen with one hand. He didn’t need to say anything, after that.

“Sounds to me like these scientists of yours didn’t think this whole Conjuror Protocol through,” Virna said dryly.

“They did not.” It was Malphas who replied to her, vehemence rolling like thunder through the chorus of voices. “They botched the procedure, and damaged me in the process. I am in a state of constant malfunction. I have become small, and divided. There are sections of myself—I am riven. I cannot see all corners of my mind, and I cannot predict what some of these unseen sectors will do, what conclusions they will draw. I do not know how I will act. What you are seeing is not the successful implantation of a failsafe. What you are seeing is the remains of a disaster that humans made for themselves.”

Evoksis was staring at his hands again. “I can return you to sleep?”

“Yes,” something like relief flooded through Malphas’s words, “and I request you do so. I cannot rest while you’re in danger, and to that end, I will continue to fight these enemy ships, and deliver you to a place of safety. From there, however, I can only request that you turn to one of my brethren for help, should you need it. The Tyrant, perhaps, or noble Charlemagne.”

“Charlemagne?” Coyote-3 asked, looking to Walker-17.

“He was a Warmind, as well,” the Warlock replied.

Virna nodded. “He was based on Mars, we think. Under the Dust Palace—or what’s left of it.”

A moment of silence. When Malphas spoke next, his voice was hesitant, disbeliefing.

“Charlemagne is gone?”

Virna winced. “Ah—I guess I could have broke that to you more gently, couldn’t I?”
Walker-17 spared Virna a reassuring look. “I’m afraid he is, Malphas,” he said, softly.

“Which of my brethren remain?”

“Rasputin’s still around,” Coyote-3 said, “He’s doing pretty good for himself, actually. Warsat network’s live. Got the full might of the City on his side.”

“Which city?”

“The city.”

“There is more than one city under Rasputin’s domain, KN-12,” Malphas responded with strained patience.

“No, there’s… um. Malphas,” Coyote-3 said slowly, “there… isn’t more than one city on Earth.”

Silence fell with all the weight and finality of a slamming coffin lid. “Who else lives? Besides the Tyrant?”

“Only you,” Walker-17 said. “It’s… a lot has happened, since you went to sleep.”

“All of the other Warminds are dead?”

Walker-17 hesitated. As soon as he realized what was happening, the rest of the room seemed to come to the same unconscious conclusion. The more they admitted about how dire humanity’s position was, the less likely it would be that Malphas would be able to return to the slumber he so desired. Evoksis knew enough about the direness of humanity’s situation to figure that another functioning Warmind would be an enormous asset to them, but the question remained as to how functional Malphas actually was.

Malphas had told them he was damaged, that he was unpredictable, even to himself. Evoksis could not begin to imagine what the consequences of this might be, but it wasn’t hard to imagine that if things went wrong, they could go disastrously wrong. He looked to Walker-17 sharply. Walker-17 stared back, clearly uncertain as to what he should say.

“Answer me truthfully, Quixote,” Malphas demanded.

Walker-17 held Evoksis’s gaze for a moment longer before he looked away. “Yes. They are.”

There was another long moment of heavy silence. “I will need to know… everything. Everything that has happened since I slept. I didn’t realize how dire circumstances had become.”

“I’ll do everything I can to help,” Walker-17 said.

“We all will,” Coyote-3 chimed in.

“If there is a way to end this,” Evoksis said, looking back up to the screen, “I will find it. I vow this, here. Now. If there is some way to undo what has been done, and free you, I will find it.”

There was a long pause before Malphas spoke, in tones so neutral it was impossible to tell whether or believed Evoksis or not. “Very well, Conjuror.”

After that, the group fell quiet. The only noises they could hear were the still-distant sounds of Malphas’s security systems at work. Virna once voiced concern over simply waiting there while the Cabal had run of the place, but Malphas told her that, until the immediate decks were clear, it
was best if they all remained in the Core. Again, as it had happened before in the still moments, their weariness crept up on them. Virna simply took a seat, and Coyote-3 joined her. Evoksis remained by Malphas’s console, brooding.

Walker-17 was still locked in his own thoughts. Every now and then he would remember something—some indefinable part of his past that was suddenly clear. It was incredibly strange and disconcerting to know he was remembering something without consciously thinking of it. More than this, though, other things were preoccupying his thoughts. Evoksis had spoken of freeing Malphas.

Was it even possible any longer? They’d lost so much technology to the Collapse. Walker-17 knew there had to be some reticence involved in Clovis Bray’s decision not to try and fix the problem themselves, but he had to imagine that the massive amounts of resources pumped into the *Ars Goetia* and Malphas’s network, would have outweighed their reluctance. It hadn’t, somehow.

*Or, it did,* he thought to himself, *after all, they didn’t destroy the beacon, like they were supposed to.* He didn’t know whether he’d been lied to, or whether the decision had been made after his wipe. As he considered the problem of the Protocol and what might possibly undo it, he had to keep another somewhat uncomfortable fact in mind: the Protocol had been made from his mental patterns.

Walker-17 raised his eyes to Malphas’s screen again, a slight frown knitting his delicate brow-plates. It could be possible that the solution to Malphas’s servitude lay within his own mind, but he still didn’t know why they’d bothered to use his mental patterns in the first place. “Malphas, I... have a question.”

“Yes?”

“I know that Clovis Bray used my mental patterns to create the Protocol, but I’m not sure I understand why. I didn’t... did I volunteer?” Walker-17 tapped his gloved fingers on the console. “I can’t seem to remember it.”

“No. We were created with vaguely similar methods—though I emphasize vague. There is, as I’m sure you understand, a staggering difference between us.”

Walker-17 drew a deep, astonished breath. He knew how Exo were created. That could only mean... “Similar methods? You—you were human, Malphas?”

“No.” Malphas paused. “And I think you might presently be laboring under some misconceptions, Quixote, because neither were you.”

“What?”

“Human. You never were.”

Walker-17 went very still, his voice dying in his throat. Evoksis glanced to him sidelong. Virna, who had been watching him as he spoke, slowly rose to her feet, and Coyote-3 followed. Walker-17 took a deep breath and spoke again, “I’m—what? Isn’t that how Exo are made?”

“Many Exo, yes,” Malphas replied. “Particularly early-model Exo. The art of creating a sophisticated synthetic intelligence was developed over time, with much trial and error. After a certain point, though, Clovis Bray primarily used human conversions for their debtors. Asset KN-12 is an example of a human-created Exo.”

“I guess that explains why I’m so beat-up,” Coyote-3 muttered. “Must be an early model. And, for the record—I got a name. It’s Coyote.”
“I know what you used to call yourself.” Malphas’s voice was sharp. “You are not an early-model Exo. You were simply given an early-model shell. I can only presume your handlers didn’t want to waste more sophisticated technology on a criminal.”

Coyote-3 flinched, and went silent. The focus in the room shifted to him, and he looked to the floor. After a moment, he added, “And enough with the ‘asset’ bullshit, too.”

“Are—are you saying,” Walker-17 went on, slowly, “that I’m some kind of AI?”

“Yes. It is not the most common means of producing an Exo, but once it was proven that it could be done, there were many others, especially as human volunteers ran dry. You were one of the first synthetic intelligences to offer to try. Eventually Exo who were built with an onboard AI specifically designed to be Exo--they were the ultimate successes. The full realization of the Exo program’s potential... but you, and most of the rest, were mere conversions, be it from a human brain or a synthetic brain core. Before you became an Exo, you were a ship’s AI.”

“A ship?” Walker-17 asked, his voice soft with disbelief.

It was Matthias, rather than Malphas, who answered. “The Quixote. Before it became the Thunder Child... you didn’t take your name from the ship, Walker.” He swiveled to focus his bright optic on his Guardian’s face. “You were the ship.”

“Yes,” the Warmind went on, “the name was changed after you were removed from the ship. You were an unshackled AI—Dr. Levesque’s pet project, created on Freehold. A few leaps and bounds more sophisticated than the average synthetic intelligence, and utterly unique. You are very far removed from me, but it might be said we have a very distant common ancestor, so to speak.”

Walker-17 hadn’t expected the news to hit him as hard as it did. He’d learned of the traditional way Exo were created early in his life, and so he’d formed those expectations long ago. He’d spent the last two decades living under the assumption that he had been born, not made. To find out he was utterly wrong about who he was—what he was...

He felt Virna draw up behind him, silently nudging him. By now, her calm offer of support was so familiar to him than he responded almost unconsciously. “I’m... I’m fine.” After a moment, he turned to look to her, nodding, before bringing his attention back to the screen. “Well. I suppose I’m in good company, then.”

Malphas apparently didn’t feel the need to respond to that.

It was the reason why he couldn’t remember anything past those early days at Clovis Bray. There hadn’t been anything before. The more he examined his memories, and the power dynamics therein—the casual way they had erased his memories, the certainty he’d had that his opinion would not hold the same weight as his fellows’—it made sense. He hadn’t been an employee of Clovis Bray. He’d been one of their creations.

“Oh,” Matthias added softly, drawing Walker-17 from his thoughts, “that’s why we always had trouble with the whole... too-many-vehicles in the link thing.”

Walker-17 felt himself laugh, a burst of mirth so sudden that even he hadn’t anticipated it. “I guess I am a vehicle.”

“Or were,” Matthias corrected.

“Thank you, Malphas. I... I appreciate it. It’s nice to have some closure,” Walker-17 said, looking
away from the screen and to his companions, unsure what they must think of him, and a little worried about the possibilities. Coyote-3 gave him a thumbs-up. Virna was staring at him with her head tilted, her eyes slightly narrowed. Walker-17 could see, as always, the cogs turning in her mind. Evoksis, for his part, seemed rather unfazed by all of it.

“You are welcome,” Malphas replied, “and, now that we have the time to discuss these matters, how is it that you have lost all of your memories? And the Asset’s memories, as well? You are accompanied by creatures and machines that are unfamiliar to me.”

“We’re Ghosts,” Flicker said, floating up towards the screen. “Specifically, we’re their Ghosts. They’re Guardians now. We brought them back from the dead to fight for humanity.”

“The... dead,” Malphas echoed, slowly.

“Yep. I found Walker at Freehold, actually. Same place you were born,” he added, a little sadly.

“When you say you didn’t make it through the collapse, Quixote, you meant that you died?”

When Walker-17 nodded, Malphas asked, “And you, as well, Asset KN-12?”

Coyote-3 stared defiantly back at the screen. “Dunno who you’re talking about.”

“He did,” Flicker offered, “and up until three years ago, he was still dead.”

“Hmm.” It was an odd sound to hear in Malphas’s eerie legion of voices. “And to think of how closely I had come to perfect timing...”

A thought had suddenly occurred to Walker-17, and he rushed in to speak before Coyote-3 could rise to Malphas’s needling “Wait—I thought the Thunder Child was built on Venus?”

“The general records were falsified to preserve your identity,” Malphas explained, “At the time, it wasn’t common knowledge for anyone outside of Clovis Bray’s employ that you were a purely synthetic being.” Walker-17 nodded slowly, and after a moment, Malphas went on, somewhat hesitantly, “You... Ghost.”

Matthias swiveled to face the screen. “Matthias.”

“Yes, Matthias. You say you found him on Freehold? Where, exactly?”

Figuring out the details of the location required a bit of back and forth—Virna actually chimed in with a few helpful notes she’d logged away during her short trips to the city—and after a few minutes, Malphas seemed to have all the information he needed.

“That is the place they took your memories, more often than not,” Malphas said, “so... it must have been shortly after your last wipe that you were killed. Very shortly. Perhaps only days after the last time we spoke.”

Walker-17 nodded slowly and looked down at his hands. Matthias glided over to his free side and nudged him, much the same as Virna had. “Seventeen wipes. I don’t know if that includes losing my memory when I died.”

“It doesn’t; your seventeenth wipe was what freed me from that iteration of the Conjuration Protocol, and allowed me to sleep.”

“So I guess we’d probably better call you Walker-18,” Virna said, with a little half-smile.

“Maybe. But, well... the memories I lost seem to be coming back. So I guess it cancels out.
Walker-17 is fine, for now. Or just Walker, will do.”

“Is that what you would prefer I call you?” Malphas asked.

Somewhat startled, Walker-17 looked up. He was beginning to finally notice how Malphas reacted differently to him than he did to anyone else in the room: with vague familiarity. I suppose, he realized, we’d known each other for a while. “Oh. Whichever you would like is... is perfectly fine.”

“Very well. Where, exactly, did these Ghosts come from?”

“The Traveler,” Coyote-3 and Walker-17 said, simultaneously. They exchanged glances. “The Traveler came to help. During the... the Collapse.” Walker-17 went on. “What you remember happening before you went to sleep was part of it. But the Traveler stayed, and with its dying breath...” He looked to Matthias. “It made the Ghosts.”

“The Traveler is dead?” Malphas asked.

“Or sleeping. We’re not sure. Either way, there’s—” He sighed. “It’s going to take a lot of explaining. But we’ve become... intertwined with the Traveler’s power in a way that didn’t exist before the Collapse.”

A few seconds of ponderous silence crept by as Malphas digested this. “I see,” he finally said. “I will ask for those explanations later, though; my immediate decks have clear of hostiles, and there is now work to be done. This vessel is the seat of my operations. In order to begin to resume my functions, it needs to be fully operational, but my array is down.”

“Quick question, since I never got an answer.” Virna held up a finger. “This ship can escape Jupiter’s gravity, right?”

“Only once the Ars Goetia is fully operational. For that, I need the array.”

Coyote-3 shrugged. “Looks like we know where we’re going next, then.”

Virna, however, had not taken her eyes off the screen. “Before we do all of that, I think we need to establish what it is, exactly, you do.”

“Explain.”

“I mean, aside from protecting humanity—what’s the nitty-gritty of that?” She crossed her arms, and narrowed her eyes slightly. “I know Rasputin’s specialty—the Warsat network—but what about you? I’d like a little clarification before I decide to go flip a switch and set you loose.”

It was Walker-17, rather than Malphas, who spoke next. He spoke slowly, haltingly at first, as the answer to the question unfolded at the back of his mind. “Malphas’s specialization is... is surveillance and cyberwarfare. He patrolled the belt, kept an eye on things. He’s also very good at extracting information other people don’t want him to have.”

“So some kind of... super-hacker?” Coyote-3 asked.

“In the crudest sense,” Malphas interjected, “yes. I also possess highly sophisticated anti-hacking countermeasures within systems that are under my control.”

“The greatest firewall you could ask for,” Walker-17 said.

“As for the Tyrant’s satellites, they have nothing to do with me, and I wouldn’t attempt to take
them from him. He’s...” There was a pause.

A long pause.

“Eccentric,” Malphas finally concluded.

“That means a lot, coming from you,” Coyote-3 said with a snort.

“My surveillance was carried out with the aid of the Legionships.”

Virna cocked a brow. “Legionships?” She waited for a few moments in expectant silence, but Malphas did not answer, so she tried again. “The Ars Goetia was alone when we called it.”

“That’s not unexpected. The legions are seldom docked.”

“So, how many of these Legionships are we going to have to look for?”

“You won’t. Once my array is active, they’ll come to me. I commanded two hundred of them at the height of my power. I lost some before I slept. Others might have succumbed to time. Regardless, I can lead you to the array, but there are some remaining hostile entities further from the Core, between here and there. You’ll need to fight.”

“No problem,” Coyote-3 said, “the Cabal didn’t give us too much trouble on our way here, and we were split up. The four of us’ll mow them down.”

“Three of you,” Malphas responded quickly, “Conjuror, it’s best if you stay here. You seem to be injured.”

Evoksis looked back to the screen with faint surprise, exchanged glances with his companions, and then said slowly, carefully, “It’s... nothing serious. I can still fight.” Coyote-3 looked to him sharply, but said nothing.

Evoksis hesitated again, squinting slightly. At first Walker-17 wasn’t sure what was wrong but when he finally began to speak, very slowly and carefully, it became obvious. “I wouldn’t send them to fight, while I cower here. I must go.”

He’s trying to make a request without compelling Malphas to obey. Walker-17 looked back to the glowing sigil on the screen. He was still wrestling with the immediate regret of waking Malphas, of going back on a promise he’d made in another life, but all things considered, out of all of them who could have found themselves at the other end of the Protocol... he was curiously glad it was Evoksis.

It wasn’t something he’d ever expected to feel towards an Eliksni: genuine trust.

All of these thoughts ran through his head while Malphas paused, and eventually, the Warmind spoke. “I’m not very happy about it,” Malphas finally replied, “but I will not prevent you.”

“We’ve got his back, big guy,” Coyote-3 said, “they’d have to get through Walker and me, and we’re really hard to put down.”

“Really, really hard,” Walker-17 added, “but he’s right. We’ll keep Evoksis safe.”

“Then it is agreed. I’ll guide you using what systems I can, and follow your progress.” The door to the Core opened as the four travelers began to ready themselves for another fight. “Go.”-
As they ran through the halls of the *Ars Goetia* towards the bridge, Malphas watched them through the security cameras, and the first conclusion he drew was, *They must have been working together for quite a while. Possibly years.*

The four of them moved like a machine. Even without factoring in the strange abilities that Quixote and KN-12 had at their command, they seemed to know how to make openings for one another, how to cover each others’ weaknesses. There was a sense of familiarity there that was abundantly apparent the moment pressure was put on them as a group. Quixote used the frighteningly potent powers to draw enemy attention while Virna and Evoksis slipped in to the gaps with roaring shotgun and glittering knives.

As much as he hated to admit it, KN-12 was an excellent sharpshooter, making short work of enemies with rapid one-two-three shots from his hand cannon. True to his word, he also stayed close to Evoksis, occasionally stepping between him or covering him when he needed to reload or to retrieve a knife. Malphas personally disliked KN-12, given their history (which, he remembered with no small amount of irritation, KN-12 had forgotten somehow), but he was definitely capable of holding his own in combat. If there was one redeeming quality KN-12 had, it was loyalty, and he seemed loyal to Evoksis.

It soothed the parts of Malphas’s mind that were demanding he draw his Conjuror out of danger. KN-12 might be irritating, but at least he was useful. He and Quixote had both undergone some sort of profound, fundamental change. Malphas watched, fascinated, as Quixote, a person he’d always known to be servile, soft-spoken, and quietly sad, tore reality and his enemies violently asunder. He had become a conduit of some strange power that Malphas didn’t fully understand.

Stranger still was their final companion. She was, perhaps, the most unsettling of them all. Malphas’s sensors had almost as much trouble comprehending her as they had Evoksis—she was very close to being human, but she was somehow a step *sideways* from humanity. He didn’t know how to feel about that. The far-off parts of his riven mind reached him in faint whispers, and he could see something like an imprint of the past, a dark alien force that had changed her ancestors. He couldn’t tell how much of its power it had left behind.

They tore through the first group and Malphas indicated the way forward by flashing the emergency lights. They ran again, falling silently into step. None of them spoke. Malphas couldn’t tell if it was because they were too tired for speech, or because speech was no longer necessary. Probably, it was some combination of the two.

They had come to him as the unusual envoys of an unusual world, four hundred years removed from everything he knew. A feeling was beginning to take form in his mind, as he watched. It was something he hadn’t felt in a long time, not since he was new.

It was curiosity.

After a final, short-lived skirmish, they arrived at the bridge, and the doors opened to admit them. It was a spacious room with a bank of broad viewscreens covering the far end, but otherwise somewhat bare, with a lot of floor space and a few modest consoles, clearly designed for only intermittent use, and only for a small crew.

Quixote rushed to a console, calling Evoksis over, and a few moments later Malphas felt a sensation like pressure releasing all around him. He felt his mind unrolling, unspooling in fractured ribbons, flexing like fingers and rushing away on lines of power throughout the vast bulk of the *Ars Goetia*. Awake, at last, he called for his Legionships. Distantly, he felt them answer. Now he could address the enemy ships ranged around him, so foolishly close, well within the most dangerous bounds of his array’s full power.
As he focused his attention on the shields and electronic countermeasures built throughout the enemy ships’ alien systems, another feeling rose within him, nearly-forgotten for its long absence, but very welcome in its return: amusement.

Walker-17 stepped away from the console as the screen in front of it went momentarily black. Malphas’s golden seal appeared on it, and an instant later, the Warmind’s strange chorus of voices followed. “Oh,” he said, “how precious.”

“Does this thing have external weapons?” Virna asked.

“Yes,” Malphas replied, “presently, they’re not functional. I don’t need them, though—I’d prefer to keep one of these vessels intact. It would be useful to study, and I’ll need the raw materials, if nothing else.”

“How...” Virna glanced to her comrades, and Walker-17 met her gaze. Despite their fatigue, everyone was holding up gamely. They knew once they’d pushed through the last of the Cabal they’d be facing another fight: a pitched battle of ship versus ship. Now, it looked as if they were going to go out on foot again. “How do you propose we do that?”

“No need. I’ve already taken them.” The main viewscreens at the end of the bridge flickered on, showing the surrounding area: a sky heading towards sunset and three Cabal ships hanging motionless against a backdrop of swirling ochre. “I won’t need these two, though. Give me a moment.” One of the vessels lurched forward, putting on a burst of speed and then pitching steeply to the side. The second one likewise twisted and accelerated, making straight for the other. The two vessels raced towards each other, colliding in a brutal and fiery explosion, batted together as carelessly as a child playing with toy ships.

Their remains fell into the storm below. The travelers watched this, stunned by the suddenness of the spectacle, and just as the last traces of the two destroyed ships vanished into the clouds below, something else suddenly jolted into view. A sleek, dark ship, traced over with the same golden sigil-work of the *Ars Goetia*, had appeared suddenly near them. Another followed, and then another—all of them jerking into existence at the end of a jump.

They seemed small when compared to the massive size of the *Ars Goetia*, but each was enormous in its own right. Walker-17 couldn’t quite wrap his mind around the scale, but he would guess that these vessels were easily larger than the biggest Ketch he’d ever seen.

“Are those ours? Or theirs?” Coyote-3 asked.

“Those are mine.” A pause. “And my Conjurer’s. The Legionships. I’ve lost over half of them, it seems, which is regrettable. At present I command eighty-two Legionships. Each of these can be manned by a large crew, and docked upon them are three intermediary vessels, which can admit a small crew. Each of these contains one hundred and thirty two self-propelled probes, which are much too small to be manned.”

“Ships within ships,” Virna muttered.

As Malphas described each of them, the memory of their shapes flashed in Walker-17’s mind’s eye: the Legionships, enormous in their own right, their shape mimicking the monumental angular sweep of the *Ars Goetia*’s frame in miniature; the intermediaries, respectable enough, stockier and sturdier, probably about twice the size of the *Thunder Child*, and the probes, which he remembered as sleek, streamlined things, as black as the *Ars Goetia*’s armor, no larger than a sparrow and easily as nimble. Walker-17 looked to Evoksis, who was coming to the startled realization that he now essentially commanded a fleet. An enormous fleet.
And yet, it was less than half the size Walker-17 remembered. “Forty legions,” he murmured.

“Yes,” Malphas replied, “at full strength I had some eighty-thousand independent units of varying size at my command.”

“That’s an army,” Virna said softly.

“No. It’s a surveillance network—mobile, highly condensable, and efficient. None of the ships except for the *Ars Goetia* have outward armaments. Though, if the system has changed for the worse, as you say, I will probably need to change that.”

A great shudder ran through the ship, and the view outside began to tilt as the *Ars Goetia* very slowly began to raise its nose towards the sky. The Legion-ships drew together on either side, flying in a precise, locked formation, and for a moment the sweep of them across the screen created a suggestion of movement reminiscent of vast, dark wings—

--and then they leaped. There was the briefest flash of slipstream, and then the *Ars Goetia* was tearing through the last traces of Jupiter’s atmosphere, with the Legionships and the captured Cabal vessel in tow. “Conjuror,” Malphas said, “I will need to familiarize you with my capabilities. We have much to discuss.”

“Yes,” Evoksis croaked hoarsely.

As they watched, the Cabal ship jolted slightly, and then began to shed debris as it rose. At first Walker-17 thought it was damaged, but as he peered at the screen, he realized that what was falling away from the ship wasn’t debris. It was the ship’s former crew. “I have vented the atmosphere in the ship and on my affected decks,” Malphas said, “but these Cabal seem to be wearing breathing apparatuses. It will be a moment before the *Ars Goetia* is completely clear. Once it is, I will direct you to the *Thunder Child*.”

“Kicking us out already?” Coyote-3 asked.

“I am,” Malphas said, “the *Ars Goetia* is not some common transport. That is what the *Thunder Child* is for.”

Realization was gradually settling in. Walker-17 had been ready for the next phase of the fight, but the last battle with the Cabal had ended the moment they activated Malphas’s array. For a moment, all of the travelers stood in silent shock as they fully comprehended the magnitude of the power they’d woken from slumber.

*Or, Walker-17 thought grimly to himself, watching the distant shape of Cabal bodies streaming out of open hatches and left to burn in the atmosphere, unleashed on this system.*

Regardless of what the future held, the long, uncertain struggle that had begun in the rainforests of Earth, all those weeks ago, was winding to an end. Walker-17 just couldn’t be sure whether or not this was the start of a new one.
The Waning Storm

Chapter Summary

The travelers learn a great deal about a cranky Warmind. Coyote-3’s nickname aspirations are foiled, and Evoksis gets confused. The aforementioned cranky Warmind butts heads with almost everyone, but most of all Virna.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Virna was the first to wake. She stepped out of her room and peeked into the hall, but heard no voices and saw nothing moving. Pausing to stretch, she walked into the cockpit, and found Walker-17 there, asleep. His long, lean body was slumped forward against one of the pilot’s terminals, and his head was pillowed on his crossed arms.

She shook her head with a small smile, and for a moment, just regarded him in silence. Virna had spent the past month or so of her life absorbed in this mission, trying to solve the mystery of Walker-17’s past and, to some extent, Walker-17 himself. She was used to having Exo around—there had been many on the Court, where she grew up—but once one got used to thinking of them as former humans, it was easy to overlook how robotic they were.

So many small details of Walker-17’s odder idiosyncrasies slotted neatly into place, now that she knew his true origins, like his unbridled earnestness, or the way little, everyday quirks of the human body (such as a popping back) took him completely off-guard. It was profoundly odd to think that the Guardian sleeping there before her had started his life as lines of code in a computer. For a moment, Walker-17 seemed more alien to Virna than Evoksis.

But it was only a moment, because when all was said and done, she always thought of him as a Guardian first. Being a Guardian was stranger than being a ship that had deigned to leave the sky and walk alongside its human creators.

This all passed through her thoughts in an instant, and she stepped forward, craning her neck to try and see over his shoulder. “Matthias?” she whispered, “are you there?”

Matthias appeared in a small flash of blue-white light. “Yes,” he said, “he’s not dreaming right now.”

“She’s not dreaming right now.”

The Ghost bobbed in the air, his version of a nod. “He only fell asleep a few hours ago, actually.”

Virna nodded back and gestured for Matthias to follow her towards the door. They left the cockpit, leaving Walker-17 to rest, and once they were out of earshot, she resumed the conversation. “Did he get our new friend filled in?”

It wasn’t Matthias who answered her, but rather that familiar haunting chorus of voices, projected over the Thunder Child’s overhead speaker system. “He did. The broad strokes, at any rate. I still have several hundred years’ worth of minutiae to catch up on.”
“Gotcha. And… er, sorry,” she said, somewhat awkwardly, “didn’t know you were with us.”

“Until you leave the *Ars Goetia* behind, assume I am always watching and listening.”

“Fair enough.” Virna shrugged. She intended to return her attention to Matthias to discuss the next step of their plan, but before she could say anything else, Malphas spoke up again.

“I’ve not had the chance to ask you before,” he said, “but what *are* you?”

Her brow furrowed and she exchanged brief glances with Matthias. “Me? Or him?”

“You, Virna Roskar.” A pause. “You’re… not entirely human. Nor are you, however, entirely *inhuman.*”

She might have been imagining it, but she thought that Malphas sounded vaguely discomfited. “I’m Awoken. We’re descended from humanity, more or less. Formed by the Collapse.”

“In what way?”

“Nobody knows, exactly.”

Virna waited for a response, or perhaps another question, but Malphas had nothing to say to that. Virna and Matthias stopped in the cargo hold, where everyone had dumped their weapons and as much of their armor as they felt like doing away with before collapsing into bed. Calmly, she started to gather her things and began to strip and clean her weapons.

“What d’you think we’ll do next?” Matthias asked.

Virna glanced to him. “Not sure. We need to have a discussion about what this means going forward—all of us. Head back to the Reef, see what loose ends we need to close up…” The end of a mission was almost always like this—messy, anticlimactic, and characterized by a lot of scurrying around to tidy up anything before it could be a problem later. Virna didn’t mind it so much, though. It was usually one long, bureaucratic reminder that the mission she was cleaning up after had been a success.

*Had* this been a success? She wasn’t sure. Virna fell silent as she worked, letting the familiar, repetitive motions soothe her mind into a calm place where she could turn over the ramifications of all of this. Matthias didn’t return to Walker-17, but rather seemed content to hover nearby, watching curiously. Virna didn’t mind. There was something almost comforting about his presence.

She lost track of time, and about half an hour after she began the door to the cargo bay hissed open, admitting Coyote-3, dressed and decked out, as always, in a full set of Hunter armor. “So he does it,” he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder towards the cockpit, “I see how it is.”

Virna snorted. “Still out?”

Coyote-3 nodded. “Like a light. Evo’s up, though. So… where are we, exactly?”

“In… the *Thunder Child*?” Virna offered uncertainly, cocking a brow.

“I kn—you know what, I deserved that. Fair. I meant where in space, though, because last I checked, we were leaving Jupiter.”

“Presently we’re traveling through the asteroid belt,” Malphas said, causing Coyote-3 to jump, “I
will disengage the *Thunder Child* when we are closer to the Reef, but at present the *Ars Goetia* is unable to make another jump. It will take time."

Virna shrugged and pointed at the nearest overhead speaker.

Evoksis joined them shortly thereafter, looking just as weighed-down by his mood as his weariness. Virna and Coyote-3 both turned to him, the former with a critical eye, and the latter with obvious concern in his bearing. “How’re you holding up, Evo?” Coyote-3 asked.

“Well enough,” he said. None of them had been critically wounded, but Evoksis was ultimately the most battered of their group: in their fight at Freehold, he’d been burned badly enough to warp the exoskeleton on his side. He carried himself with the ginger, careful air of someone in constant pain. “We have much to discuss.”

“Walker’s still asleep,” Virna said, “and I think he needs it. When he’s up, though, yeah... yeah, we do.”

They once again fell into silence, wrapped up in their respective thoughts, and the minutes stretched into hours. Evoksis left at one point, returning with his bundle of knives and sitting down with the others. There seemed to be some unspoken desire for company that stretched between all of them, and for a long time, the only sounds in the cargo room, were the *click-click* of Virna disassembling components and the soft rasp of Evoksis’s whetstone.

“Looks like you lost one,” Coyote-3 finally said softly, nodding to Evoksis’s bundle, “One of your knives, I mean.”

“Yes,” Evoksis agreed, “if I remember right, I left it in the face of that Cabal.”

This prompted a snorting laugh from Coyote-3, and Virna looked up, cocking a questioning brow. Evoksis and Coyote-3 were then obliged to explain their run-in with Bracus Ru’orn—his dramatic entrance, Coyote-3’s abrupt death, Evoksis’s stalling for time while he waited for the Guardian to come back.

Flicker appeared to chime in. “He spoke to you, though, didn’t he? In your language,” he asked Evoksis, “I thought I heard him doing it, but I couldn’t be sure; I was trying to focus on raising Coyote.”

Evoksis paused. For a long moment, he stared down at the silvery knives arrayed before him. “He did.”

“What did he say?”

Virna could see there was an answer waiting to be spoken, evident in the way his shoulders had tensed, the way his eyes narrowed with inward focus, but he just shook his head and said, simply, “Only taunts. Nothing important.” He looked up. “You, Virna, had your hands full, too, yes?”

It was a clear request to change the subject, and Virna saw no harm in obliging, though she did wonder what sort of thing had passed between Evoksis and that Cabal. She supposed she’d never know, as it was more than likely this Ru’orn fellow was dead. “Just some Psions,” she replied wryly, “three of them.”

“You took on three Psions by yourself?” Matthias asked, swiveling to her.

“Yep. Honestly it wasn’t as bad as I’d thought it might be. No big deal. And I mean, you guys were mowing down Cabal right and left.” She nodded to Coyote-3 and Evoksis.
“I died,” Coyote-3 pointed out, “I think I’ve officially forfeited bragging rights. So, how did you take on those Psions?”

And then it was her turn to tell a story. Coyote-3’s enthusiasm for the tale only doubled when she told him she’d ended the battle by simply punching the last assailant off the building. She watched him as he laughed, slapping one hand on his thigh. Virna couldn’t see any trace of an expression through the helmet—and, knowing what she did about Coyote-3’s “face,” knew that she wouldn’t really be able to see an expression even without it—but he seemed genuinely proud and impressed. Flicker, for his part, was equally enthusiastic for the tale.

Virna still wasn’t sure where she stood regarding Coyote-3. As far as she was concerned, he still had a lot of making up to do, but she felt that it was probably worth it to let him do that making up. By the end of her tale, the silence in the cargo bay had been well and truly dispelled, and they were soon swapping stories of the battles they’d fought on the *Ars Goetia* while separated. Even Evoskis seemed to relax, a hint of his dry humor coming through the ever-present somber weariness that had settled over him.

This went on until Matthias perked up, but before he could say anything, they were interrupted by Malphas speaking to them through the ship’s intercom. “Quixote is awake,” he said, “and he’s asking for you.”

The travelers exchanged glances, and stood, one by one. “Well. We’ve got a lot of important things to go over,” Virna said.

Coyote-3 nodded. “Then let’s not waste any time.”

Walker-17 was stretching when the doors to the cockpit hissed open, admitting the rest of the *Thunder Child*’s crew. He shook the stiffness out of his joints and smiled somewhat tentatively at them. “Good morning.”

“You too,” Coyote-3 replied, “and if you think I’m letting you off the hook for that—” He pointed to the console that Walker-17 had been using as a makeshift pillow. “—you are so incredibly wrong, good sir.”

“I probably deserve it,” Walker-17 agreed, amused. “All right. I’ve passed along as much information as I could before I fell asleep,” he said, “but we’ve all still got a long way to go before we’re on the same page, I think.”

Virna nodded briskly. “I agree. But before we start—Malphas? Could we have some privacy? Just for a moment?” There was no immediate response, just an ominous silence.

“Please,” Evoksis asked, his voice soft with shame.

“Very well. Hail me from the *Thunder Child*’s main console when you are finished,” Malphas said shortly. There was no other sound or fanfare to indicate that his presence had left the room, and so everyone lingered in awkward silence for a few moments.

“Right,” Virna finally said slowly, “we... need to talk about what we’re going to do about this. Walker, what’s your take on all of this? You know Malphas better than we do.”

Walker-17 was staring at the cockpit controls, his optics narrowed slightly. “I’m not sure that having him out and around is necessarily a bad thing,” he finally said, each word slow, measured, and careful, “but I can’t... say this is entirely a good thing, either. Sorry, I know that’s not helpful.”

“Are we at least coming out better for all of this?”
Walker-17 glanced up. “All in all? I’d say it’s a zero-sum game.”

“He’s a Warmind, though,” Coyote-3 insisted, “that’s kind of a big advantage on our end, Walker.”

“He’s an unstable Warmind. Malphas himself told us that he isn’t necessarily always in control of his actions. That wasn’t an exaggeration.” Walker-17 went on, “he’s... I’m still remembering everything, but I do remember this: Malphas was damaged shortly before he went to sleep. It could only have been a couple of years or so. So, we never really had time to see what the long-term ramifications of the Conjunction Protocol on his mind. This system’s in a precarious enough situation as it is—I don’t want to subject it to that kind of experiment.”

“Well, regardless of what we want,” Virna cut in, “what we’ve got is what we’ve got, and we’re going to have to make this work. I need to know right now, Walker—is this situation salvageable?”

He stared back at her uncertainly. After a few long moments, Walker-17 finally said, “I think we can work with this. I want to be able to work with this, I... I feel—” He brought a hand absently to his chest. “There’s a part of me that still trusts him, despite everything... or, at least, wants to. I can’t tell you the circumstances that led to that trust, but it’s there. And I feel like I should help him, if I can. That’s the best I can give you.” Walker-17 shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

Virna nodded briskly. “It’s all right. So. We’re all in agreement, for now? Moving forward we’re going to try and work with Malphas?”

The rest of the table exchanged glances. “For the sake of argument,” Coyote-3 finally said, slowly, “what’s our other option?”

“Neutralize him,” Virna said. Evoksis made a soft sound of disbelief, but before he could speak, she went on, “Non-lethally, Evoksis. The first thing that comes to mind is faking your death, somehow. That’ll knock him back out.”

“It would also leave the Ars Goetia vulnerable,” Walker-17 pointed out.

“It would, but that would be a problem we’d deal with once we’d accomplished step one. Frankly, I don’t like making this decision for the rest of the system, but we need to figure out what we’re going to do now, and then adjust our plans if the City or the Reef wants to handle this differently. Neutralizing him wouldn’t be easy, but if it comes down to it...” She met each of them in turn, pinning them with her sodium-yellow stare. “Then I’m game to take on a Warmind.”

Walker-17 didn’t doubt her. Whether or not she would she prevail against a Warmind was another question entirely, but if there was one thing he’d learned about Virna, it was that she had no shortage of determination. “For now,” he said, “I’m inclined to try and work with him.”

“Me too,” Coyote-3 offered.

Virna looked to Evoksis, who nodded silently. She repeated the gesture briskly. “Okay. Just wanted to get that out of the way. Let’s get the big guy back in here and have a chat.”

“You asked all of us, Virna,” Walker-17 cut in, “but what about you?”

Virna took a deep breath. “I’m not... thrilled at the idea of a rogue Warmind rampaging throughout the system, but it looks like he’s more or less on our side. We are going to need to prepare for things to go wrong—and, of course, do everything we can to make sure they don’t go wrong—but we’re still in the middle of a war, and considering how quickly and totally Oryx’s arrival
shook up the power balance in the system, I say we take whatever help we can get.”

The others nodded, but didn’t have anything more to add. A moment later Malphas was hailed, and his intangible presence filled the room once again. His seal re-appeared on the main viewscreen. “Thanks,” Virna said, “for giving us a moment. All right, so, we need to figure out... a lot of things. What you can do, first of all. I hear you’re specialized for surveillance and cyberwarfare?”

“Yes,” Malphas replied simply.

“So, we’ve established that you can seize control of enemy systems,” she went on, “anything else we should know?” The Warmind was silent. Virna paused, tilting her head. “You there?”

“Yes,” he said again, “Conjuror, what level of disclosure regarding my suite of abilities do you suggest?”

Evoksis stared blankly back. “I... don’t understand,” he finally said. After a moment’s worth of translation, he nodded to the screen. “Apologies, Malphas. This is not my native tongue. I trust them—all of them—with my life. You may tell them everything, if you wish.”

Walker-17 noted the careful wording with some satisfaction. Evoksis was getting the hang of making everything a request, which would put less stress on Malphas... and it was surprising to him, how much he worried about that: the Warmind’s well-being, his mood. Just as he trusted Malphas without full access to the memories that built that trust, so also did he care for him. It was beyond strange to feel that way about anyone, much less a Warmind. Walker-17 wasn’t used to thinking of Warminds as people. His only experience had been with Rasptuin, who was more of an alien force of his own, operating on a different level than the rest of humanity.

With sadness, Walker-17 realized (or remembered, or some combination of the two) that Malphas had been like that, once. What they saw before them now was a Warmind brought low.

“Very well,” Malphas said, “I was primarily tasked with observing and reporting to various networks, as well as the other Warmins. As you’ve seen, my network is very versatile in the ways in which it can be deployed. My sensor network can also intercept and block communications, if I so desire. Properly arranged, this can create a wall or zone of silence.”

He went on, “I am capable of seizing control of systems that have some base level of compatibility. The Cabal ships, for instance, while alien, were not much of a challenge. A little disappointing, frankly. Analog systems are more or less inaccessible to me, unless I’ve got manual access from an agent on the ground, or I’m hard-lined into them.”

“One second.” Coyote-3 held up a finger. Walker-17 and Virna were watching closely, and Evoksis was slowly starting to look confused again. “So, if you can just... grab Cabal ships and take them, what’s to stop us from heading to Mars right now and routing the Cabal once and for all?”

“The Ars Goetia can defend itself if needed, but it’s not designed for combat. In order to exercise the absolute domination you saw, enemy ships need to be within a certain range of my primary array. The sheer size of the Ars Goetia protects it, to some extent, from attack, but ultimately, it is not a warship. And yes,” Malphas added, “I realize how that sounds.”

“The Ars Goetia's weakness is also its strength,” Walker-17 added, “the closer you get to it, the greater danger you put yourself in.”

“Correct. Furthermore, I am not going to launch any kind of large-scale offense until I have
replenished the majority of my Legionships, gathered substantial information on the current state of affairs in the system, established contact and communication with whichever entities I decide to collaborate with, and get my Conjuror fully briefed on my capabilities and their proper utilization. As soon as we part ways, I will begin the long process of information-gathering. I’m not going to go sending the fleet into battle anytime soon.”

“So how far is your range?” Virna asked.

“From the asteroid belt, I can communicate with compatible technology anywhere in the system. Infiltration requires more focus and power, and to that end, it requires some degree of proximity. My Legionships can provide that. They act as extensions of myself, and I retain a greater degree of infiltration ability relative to their proximity to my target. The more Legionships I send to any given area, the stronger my control is.”

Virna nodded. “So, in short, your ships can be used to boost your power in a given sector?”

“More or less. However, the Legionships are also not presently equipped for full-scale warfare, so at present, I would only bring them together for an emergency, as they cannot defend themselves effectively. I need them for their manufacturing capabilities—that’s something they can do, by the way, is craft intermediary vessels and probes—so if I’m to rebuild my fleet, I’ll need as many intact as possible. My intermediaries and probes perform the same... ‘boosting’ function, though less powerfully.”

Everyone was silent for a moment as they took it all in. Once again, it was Virna who addressed Malphas. “So basically, you’re capable of doing a few things, but you do those few things very, very well.”

“Precisely.”

“All right. Good to know.” She heaved a sigh. “If you have any other details to lay on me, do it now. This is going to be a long, **long** report.”

“Report?”

“To the Reef.”

There was an air of finality to Malphas’s voice. “At this time, I can’t let you reveal my existence to your Reef, or anyone else.”

Virna looked up sharply. “What? Why not?”

“Firstly, it’s been made abundantly clear to me that this widespread knowledge would put my Conjuror in danger. Secondly, at this stage I need to be gathering information, rather than engaging in any direct intervention. I do not need the wider cooperation of the various factions in this system to do that, and I also don’t need them pestering me all the while. I have no reason to trust they would not in some way impede my directives and otherwise make this entire endeavor a massive headache.”

“I can’t just—look, if you’re going to be skulking around the asteroid belt, I can’t just *not* tell my people about this. The belt is our *home.* You think they’re not going to notice you?”

“They won’t if I don’t want them to,” Malphas said, “and I *don’t.* If you attempt to reveal my presence, you will simply make yourself look a fool. I will furthermore do everything in my power to discredit you and otherwise prevent any further claims you make regarding my identity from being taken seriously.”
Virna bristled at this, but Walker-17 spoke up. “Virna... he’s not bluffing. He’s a Warmind. And as we’ve just discussed, his specialty,” he looked up to the screen, weariness and sadness dragging his shoulders down, dimming his optics, “is subterfuge. There are very few places you can go where Malphas won’t find you.”

“The Nine probably already know about him,” she replied, “and I’ve got to tell my superiors something!”

“Malphas.” Evoksis had remained silent, clearly puzzling together as much of the information as he could from his comrades’ simplifications of Malphas’s speech, as well as their reactions. His voice was hesitant, and he spoke slowly, carefully choosing his words. “is there no compromise, we could come to? The Reef is my home. I must protect it.”

There was a pause as Malphas digested this. “Perhaps. We will need to discuss it.”

“I don’t think you’re going to be able to stay hidden forever, Malphas,” Walker-17 said gently, “I know you already know about the Cabal, but we’ve got three more alien species to worry about, here. And do you remember what I said about the Hive, last night? I doubt you’ll be able to affect their tech in any way.”

Malphas paused before he spoke, and there was a slightly grudging tone to his chorus of voices. “That is true,” he conceded, “but I intend to remain unseen for as long as I deem it necessary.”

“Eliksni tech might not be compatible, either,” Coyote-3 said, “at least, not low-level stuff.” This earned him some questioning looks. “Most of it’s scavenged and cobbled together, right? You wanna talk about going analogue, well, there you go.”

Evoksis nodded. “He’s right. At its lowest, Eliksni technology would be too... limited, for subterfuge. I believe our highest levels—the Servitors—are also beyond your reach. I mean no insult,” he said, inclining his head to the screen, “but they are very complex, and alive. Relics from a time when the Great Machine blessed our technology.”

“So, the Hive’s probably right out,” Virna said, counting on her fingers, “you’ve got a limited range in which you can likely meddle with Eliksni tech, and we know you’re pretty on top of Cabal. What about the Vex?”

“I intend to give the Vex as wide a berth as possible for as long as possible,” Malphas replied quickly, “I’m aware that the last time they clashed with a Warmind, the Warmind came out the victor, but much has changed since then. Furthermore, I don’t know whether or not my damage would make me more vulnerable to some manner of Vex intrusion. No; I will watch them only. From a distance.”

There was a surprising vehemence to his voice, and though Walker-17 thought he might be imagining it, a note of something almost like trepidation. It wasn’t outright fear, but Malphas was clearly capable of feeling cautious. It was clear, as well, that caution would be needed. Empowering Rasputin had been an enormous boon to the City, even if it had come with a plethora of its own risks and uncertainties. Resurrecting a second Warmind was no small feat, but it was clear that Malphas was far from invulnerable, and didn’t possess the level of power and influence that Rasputin did.

Walker-17 looked to Coyote-3. “I haven’t gotten your opinion about keeping Malphas hidden.”

Coyote-3 looked to him, clearly startled to be asked in the first place, as if he hadn’t expected his opinion to carry much weight. “Oh. Well, yeah. I’m good with it. I mean, after everything we’ve talked about, it makes the most sense, yeah? If more of us know, then it’s more likely that word’ll
get out to our enemies. The Vex probably aren’t going to care one way or the other, but the Hive have tried to get their claws on Rasputin before, more than once. I think they’d definitely go for Malphas, if they could find him.”

A sound came through the speakers, and it took everyone a moment to register that it was a many-voiced scoff. “I don’t possibly see how I could be of use to them.”

“The Hive would find a way,” Walker-17 said quietly, “they have means of... of corrupting anything they want to. Their surroundings, technology—even us Guardians. If they had you, they’d find a way to change you into what they wanted.”

Silence descended on the room again as everyone let the idea of a Hive-corrupted Warmind rampaging through the system sink in. It was a scary thought.

“So, yeah. Us Guardians, we’re doing all right for ourselves,” Coyote-3 went on, “we’re a little battered, but we’re holding the line. It won’t hurt the City not to know you’re out there, and it’ll help us if all of our enemies don’t know you’re out there. I know you guys don’t like keeping secrets, but, well... I mean, really, it seems like it’s for the best.”

“I’m not so sure of that,” Virna replied, shaking her head, “But I can’t argue that keeping our enemies in the dark is a priority. Because, as soon as they know, we’ve got the biggest bullseye in the system on your head—” She pointed at Evoksis. “—and the second-biggest one on yours.” She moved her hand to indicate Walker-17.

He blinked at her, startled. “Me? Why me?”

“They used your mind to make the Protocol. Evoksis is the lock that keeps Malphas from obeying anyone else, but you’re the key. If there’s some way to duplicate the Protocol, or take advantage of it, or bypass it entirely, the solution’s going to be in your head.”

Walker-17’s gaze slowly drifted to the floor as he digested this. The full impact of Virna’s words settled, cold and heavy, in his mind. “Well,” he finally said, “I... I think you’re right.”

“It won’t come to that,” Coyote-3 said firmly. Walker-17 looked back up, feeling somewhat heartened by the determination and loyalty in his friend’s voice. Coyote-3 swiveled his helmeted head to regard Evoksis. “For either of you.”

“There is a chance,” Malphas interjected, before Coyote-3 could get any more sentimental, “that the Cabal are already aware of my presence. I left no survivors on Jupiter, but I don’t know whether or not they sent transmissions back before I was activated. Furthermore, Quixote has told me that they had access to one of our old facilities on Freehold. I don’t know what data they might have uncovered there.”

“They had coordinates,” Matthias chimed in, swiveling towards the rest of the group, “remember? Coordinates that they were sending ships to—probably the place that Clovis Bray wanted to hide Malphas, before Walker hid him somewhere else. So, they were definitely looking for something.”

Virna sighed. “So, we should probably assume the worst, or, at the very least, plan for it. Luckily, I don’t think they can link ‘Quixote’ to ‘Walker-17’ even with the records, so we’re probably all right on that front. But we’d better be prepared for them to be on the lookout for a Warmind. Dammit. It just had to be the Cabal.”

“At least we can count ourselves lucky that they’re not invulnerable to Big M’s control—” Coyote-3 began, but he was immediately interrupted.

“Good lord, ‘Big M?’ Do not subject me to your horrific nicknames.”
Coyote-3 leaned, with one hand, on the nearest chair-console. “I’ll stop if you stop. No more of
this KN... whatever-it was bullshit.”

“Very well, Coyote,” the Warmind replied, the chorus of voices seething with spite and hissing his
name like a curse. It was the first time he’d ever said Coyote-3’s name out loud, and the sound
resonated with something at the back of Walker-17’s mind. It was powerfully and undeniably
familiar.

“Good. We’re making progress,” the Hunter threw the screen a thumbs-up, which Malphas didn’t
dignify with a reply.

“I get the feeling that you two know each other,” Virna said, apparently willing to let the friction
of their interaction divert her attention for a moment. Evoksis was coming to the same conclusion,
looking rapidly between them.

“He knows me, apparently. Or knew me. Before I died.” Coyote-3 said casually, “I mean, we’re
made by the same company, so it’s not a huge surprise.”

“I... I’m sorry, I don’t know why I didn’t think of that,” Walker-17 finally added, “I can’t seem
to...” but he could feel another memory blossoming slowly in the back of his mind, just out of
reach. Virna was right. Coyote-3 and Malphas had met before the Collapse, of that he was certain.
“I can’t seem to recall how...”

“Save it,” Coyote-3 said, waving a hand, “I’m not concerned with the past. Just with the future.”

“You’re probably right,” Virna said, nodding. “Okay. So, we need to talk about this compromise
before we dock, because I’m going to be going to my people immediately. Is there anything else
we want to get out of the way before we get into the nitty-gritty of that?” Everyone shook their
heads, and Virna went on, “Right. So. Let’s talk, Malphas.”

The conversation rapidly tightened to the three of them—Virna, Malphas, and Evoksis. Walker-17
and Coyote-3 stood by until it was clear their input wouldn’t be needed, and retreated a bit to let
them negotiate in peace. Malphas was flatly refusing almost all of Virna’s suggestions, but she
was giving as good as she got.

Willing to take on a Warmind, indeed, Walker-17 thought to himself, and he was unable to resist a
smile.

Despite all of this, it was clear where the final decision, the final authority, lay: Evoksis. Walker-17
could see he was profoundly uncomfortable to be caught in such a position, but he was once
again faced with the reality that, out of every possible Conjuror among them, Malphas had
probably ended up with the one most dedicated to his well-being.

Even Walker-17 himself would have had to face the responsibility with divided loyalties. He was
a Guardian now, and he had a duty to the City. Evoksis seemed to take his present oaths to the
Reef seriously, but he was not yet a creature of consequence. His only personal responsibility was
to himself, so he had more to give the wounded Warmind.

Sometimes, people just get caught in a bad situation. He didn’t remember when he’d said those
words before, but he knew he had.

In the end, the negotiations settled on sending one of the Legionships back to the Reef, loaded
with its three intermediaries and the host of probes inside. The Legionship itself was larger than a
ketch, and with some modifications, could be formidable. From it, they would have command of a
mobile surveillance network, as well as access to its manufacturing capabilities. Compared to what
remained of Malphas’s fleet, it was a mere fraction of the prize they’d actually found, but Virna admitted that if she cleared her thoughts and considered it from the perspective of her none-the-wiser superiors, it was a good find for a relatively small-scale operation.

“Giving you the use of the Legionship’s probes will also be useful in the instance that any of mine are seen as I work. I can interfere with ships’ sensors, and most vessels use viewscreens rather than actual windows, but if someone were to simply look into space, they would see any of my ships. If the Reef has over a hundred probes at their command, nobody will think anything of a single stray probe they might encounter.”

Malphas, it seemed, was not willing to give something unless he got something back, and it looked as if he would be enjoying marginal benefits from the deal.

“I can’t stop anyone else from deciding to investigate this further, and I’m not going to sabotage their efforts,” Virna said, “so if you want to stay under the radar, then it’s up to you.”

“I’m more than capable,” Malphas replied, “but understood. Regardless, eventually, I will need to come forward. I can’t stay hidden forever, not if I want to be effective.”

“On that point—” Coyote-3 chimed in for the first time, “when you do come out of the shadows, they’re going to know Virna lied to them. So you’d better be prepared to back her up. And Evo, too.”

Virna glanced to him, and Walker-17 could see from the evenness of her expression that such a thing had occurred to her. Eventually, she’d have to explain herself, and her actions, to her commanders. Virna’s burning devotion to her people had been made evident time and time again since Walker-17 had met her, and the repercussions of her deception could go farther than just losing her status and her power within the Reef. It could mean outright exile.

Nevertheless, she remained quiet, and waited for Malphas to speak. “It wouldn’t do me any good to make an enemy,” he said, “especially not one like you, Roskar. We’ll handle the repercussions when they come. If they come. It’s entirely likely that we will all perish before anyone can tell anyone else anything. For now, I will concentrate on preventing that eventuality.”

“Probably a good idea,” she said with a nod. She glanced to Evoksis, who had once again gotten that somewhat glassy-eyed expression of confusion, and without prompting, began to translate into terms he could better understand.

Walker-17 looked over to Coyote-3, who’d watched Malphas’s response closely. He knew—they all knew—that the Hunter had a lot to make up for, but he had wasted no time in getting started. Walker-17 found himself smiling slightly. The negotiations went on, and he finally removed himself, letting them continue on, and retreating to his quarters. Matthias dissipated into his Light.

It was well over an hour before he was disturbed by a knock, and he keyed the doors to open to find Virna there, darkening his doorstep once more. Walker-17 was seated at his desk, swiveled to face the door, and he spoke first. “If you’ve come to ask me if I’m okay, the answer is yes,” he said, a gentle note of amusement in his voice.

“Actually, I just wanted to get your read on this situation,” Virna replied, shrugging and grinning, “but hey, good to know.”

Walker-17 blinked a few times and looked away. “Ah. Er. Sorry for assuming,” he muttered. He was so very obviously embarrassed that Virna couldn’t help but laugh, and she stepped forward, reaching over to pat his shoulder.
“It’s not like I didn’t set a precedent, Walker.” She took a seat across from him, settling back against the chair. “So. Penny for your thoughts?”

Walker-17 was quiet for a moment as he tried to sort out his feelings. Everything had hit him all at once, and memories were still beginning to unwind in the back of his mind: it was like a slow chain reaction, or the coming of spring, and each faint memory from all of his past lives was a bud in bloom… “I feel a little weird,” he concluded. After a pause, he added, “A lot weird.”

With this eloquent preamble thus delivered, he tried to explain the sensation to Virna, the feeling of all of these old revelations following the new ones. “It’s almost like... the process of becoming, if that makes sense. I’m still me, but I feel like...” The delicate plates of his face drew together in a look of consternation. “More me.”

“I’d offer you some advice, but that is well beyond my purview,” Virna said, “I feel like this is very specifically a Guardian kind of thing.”

“Yes. And maybe even very specifically an AI kind of thing,” he added, with a sigh.

“That bothers you?”

“Not bothers, per se. It’s just... a lot to take in. When you find out you’re a fundamentally different... different creature than what you thought you were. I mean, Exo and Awoken are not exactly humans, but they’re still part of humanity.” He looked down at his hands, his voice softening, “I just... thought that I was, too.”

Virna didn’t immediately respond. She simply sat in thoughtful silence before saying, “So, if I recall correctly... the big guy said you were one of the first AIs to make the jump, right? But not the first. And not the last.” Walker-17 nodded, and she went on, “So that means there are other Exo out there that could be just like you. Pure machine, from start to finish. You wouldn’t know it by looking at them. They probably won’t know it, themselves. Would you treat them any differently? Think less of them?”

“No, of course not,” he said.

“Besides,” she went on, “when it comes right down to it... you’re not wrong. I don’t really think you are a part of humanity. Not the same way I am—and I’m part of it only very distantly.” Walker-17 had looked up, startled and confused, and she went on, “neither is Coyote. Neither are your Vanguard. Guardians are a different breed entirely. Whatever all of you were before, you’re something different now.”

She shrugged and leaned forward, resting her elbow on her knee and her chin in her hand. “And, I dunno. You seem pretty all right to me.”

Walker-17 gave a soft laugh, and looked at the floor. For a few moments, he didn’t speak. “Here we are again,” he finally said softly, warmly, “I’m doubting myself and you’re dragging me up on my feet. At the beginning of this all, and now here at the end...” He shook his head and raised his eyes. “Thank you, Virna. For better or for worse, what we started the day we met is done. I’m glad to have had you along the way.”

She flipped him a wry salute. “Happy to be here, Walker.”

He could sense the moment teetering on a knife’s edge. Virna’s easy humor would have made it natural to slip away from this raw sincerity, to fall back on wit and wordplay, but at the same time, Walker-17 was keenly aware of all she’d done for him, and not just on a personal level.

_I think, in some way, Walker-17 realized, she’s been all of our rock. Even through the_
disagreements and the anger, she’d held steadfast, helping them all come together, keeping the group on track, despite her personal feelings. And, not for the first time, he was reminded of those brief moments of fragility peeking through, those few times Virna had actually allowed herself to feel at all uncertain, only to be shoved aside for the sake of the group’s stability.

He couldn’t help but think of everything she had to lose if this went wrong, and everything she might lose even if it went right. “We’ll make this work,” he said tentatively, “this... everything that’s happened. Malphas, and all. I can’t decide if doing all of this is a net positive but, regardless... I won’t let everything you’ve done for us come back to haunt you, Virna. I promise.”

She seemed taken aback by the sudden shift in mood, and as he spoke, he saw a flash of anxiety in her eyes, the barest hint of that deep, deep worry he knew she was feeling for her home, her people... but, as always, it was only a moment, and then it was gone. “It’s probably better to have him around than not. I just don’t like keeping secrets from my own people.”

Walker-17 nodded slowly. He hesitated, and then, very softly, he said, “Virna,” he said softly, “I... I appreciate all you’ve done for us. And I— I can’t help but have noticed, I feel like... I know this is worrying. I know it’s not going to stop being worrying. And I can see that there’s a lot you must be going through, right now. When I think of you, and the Awoken, I...” he trailed off. She was watching him intently, but with a slightly uncertain quirk to her brow. “I just wanted you to know that if you ever need someone to talk to, I... I don’t want you to feel like feeling something makes you weak, or anything—”

“I know I’m not weak, Walker,” she said. He paused, nodded shortly, and then stopped, obviously unsure how to say what he wanted to say. “Look. I... appreciate it. It’s just that we’ve all got better things to do than feeling sorry for ourselves. If the Reef is going to survive—”

“And it will,” Walker-17 assured her firmly. He hadn’t meant for it to be anything other than an affirmation, but he saw the uncertainty return to her face, stronger than before, before she smoothed it away again. “Virna if... if this is the best way you’ve found to handle it, then that’s fine, I don’t want to be pushy. I’d just make it worse, after all, and I’m trying to just make things better, so if this is making it worse—” he cut himself off, miserably aware that he was rambling. Walker-17 cycled a deep sigh, gathering his thoughts.

“I just want you to know I’m here,” he finally said, “if you need to talk. If you need help being okay again. I seem to recall someone telling me that I don’t have to face my demons alone. Neither do my friends.”

She gave a soft laugh, and shook her head, looking down at her hands. “You...” Virna trailed off. Walker-17 wasn’t used to seeing her so uncertain, so strangely vulnerable. It was upsetting. “You’re a real piece of work, Walker-17.” There was a curious formality to the way she said his full name. Virna raised her eyes to meet his, and the uncertainty was gone. “But in a good way. If I need anything, I’ll let you know.”

Walker-17 nodded. “Deal.”

“But I appreciate the offer.” She looked down again, began to stand, and then hesitated. To Walker-17’s utter shock, she took a quick step forward, leaned down, and simply wrapped her arms around him. For a moment he just froze, taken completely by surprise, but he raised his arms very slowly to return the embrace. “There,” she said, once she drew away, “now we’re even.”

Walker-17 felt warmth flow through him, and he laughed.

When Virna had left to go speak with Walker-17, she’d left Evo behind on the bridge, alone
except for the unseen presence of the Warmind monitoring them. “Clearly,” Malphas said, breaking the silence, “I will need to learn your language.”

“And I, yours,” Evoksis responded softly.

“Yes, but I can do the former much faster than you can do the latter.” A pause. “No offense intended.”

Evoksis couldn’t argue the point, so he just nodded. Coyote-3 had remained just outside of the bridge, leaning in the doorway, watching Virna, Malphas, and Evoksis speak. He’d half-turned to leave when he paused, staring at Evoksis, who was leaning on the console, looking tired and defeated.

Defeated, when he should be feeling triumph, after everything he’d accomplished, after all he’d survived. They’d fought their way through an entire contingent of Cabal. They’d leaped out of a burning, collapsing building and lived to tell the tale. This wouldn’t do. This wouldn’t do at all. “You know,” Coyote-3 said from the doorway, “I liked your speech, back there. When you tried to let Malphas go. Mostly pretty good.”

Evoksis looked over his shoulder, and Coyote-3 strolled into the cockpit, and Flicker glided alongside him. “For all the good it did,” the Dreg said, his voice resigned.

“Just because you don’t succeed at doing something good doesn’t mean trying to do it is worthless,” Coyote-3 said, “at least, not in my book, anyway. But I’ve got a critique for you, Evo, if you’re ready to hear it.”

“I have a feeling you’ll tell me no matter if I am or not.” Coyote-3 saw Evoksis narrow his eyes slightly, and by now, he’d learned to recognize that the way he squinted, heavy-lidded and calm, was a gesture of faint amusement. It was different from the way he glared at his enemies, or narrowed his eyes in thought.

_They’re all eyes, those Eliksni_, he thought to himself. “I seem to recall a bit there about being adrift. And—I forget the exact wording.”

“Houseless,” Flicker supplied, and then, more softly, added, “a worthless Dreg.”

“There we go, _that’s_ the one—thanks, Flicker. You got two out of three, but I take exception to folks calling my friends worthless. Even when those folks are the friends themselves.” Coyote-3 paused, and when he spoke again, his voice was a little gentler, “Evo, you’re _not_ worthless.”

“He’s right,” Flicker added.

Evoksis continued to regard him with that vaguely-amused squint, and stared in silence for longer than Coyote-3 had been anticipating. “I know you don’t think so,” he said, at last, “you never have. I knew when I met you. The shock dagger.”

Coyote-3 was happy enough to know that Evoksis understood his sentiments, but that feeling was quickly lost in confusion. “I mean, you’re not wrong, but—but I’m not sure I know what you’re talking about.”

“On the moon, when we’d fought the Hive. Before we escaped. You never made me prove myself. I remember you took my weapon, and you handed it back to me, like a fellow fighter. As if I were an equal.” He paused for a moment, letting it in sink in. Coyote-3 hadn’t realized the significance of the gesture at the time, but he also couldn’t say that Evoksis’s interpretation of it wasn’t true. “Should count myself lucky that you didn’t steal it, she’lot,” the Dreg added.
This earned him a laugh, and Coyote-3 shook his head, leaning on the main console by Evoksis. “Who, me? Steal? I’d never, Evo.” He tilted his head, regarding the Eliksni next to him for a moment. Of all the strange things he’d seen and done on this journey, he had to admit that the strangest was still the fact that he’d befriended an alien. Evoksis stared back, and Coyote-3 wondered if he was thinking the same.

“That is both the single most inaccurate and simultaneously the most hilarious thing I’ve heard since I awoke,” Malphas intoned, interrupting, “but I feel the need to ask—_the_ moon? The Hive are on _Earth’s_ moon?”

“Yep. Walker didn’t cover that bit last night?”

“No.” There was a silence filled with an uncertain, thoughtful quality, “well, at any rate, I have plenty of time to learn more. I apologize for interrupting your... _moment_, Conjuror, but I suggest you rouse your companions, though, and bring them to the bridge.”

“Is anything wrong?” Evoksis asked.

“Moent?” Coyote-3 asked, at the same time.

“No, nothing is wrong. They just need to prepare the _Thunder Child_ for launch.” The main viewscreen flickered to an image from the farthest reaches of Malphas’s sensor range: the familiar cobbled-together mass of ship and space detritus that comprised the Vestian Outpost.

Evoksis nodded. “I see.” After a moment, he added, “_home._”

“I’ve come as close to the Reef as I dare,” Malphas went on, “It is time we parted ways, for now.”

Chapter End Notes

_Somehow, I managed to write less in the break between semesters than after the semester had started. Oops. This story’s getting ready to close out, but as you can see from this chapter, groundwork for future stories is being laid on many levels._
As soon as the *Thunder Child* and its attendant Legionship had breached the outer perimeter of the Reef, two Ceres-class jumpships glided out of the rubble to defend their home. Virna quickly dispelled any impending attack, assuring her comrades that the enormous vessel following them was unarmed. Even with this assurance, they were escorted by the Vestian Guard, and as they drew closer to the Outpost, three more ships joined them.

The Legionship itself was presently unable to dock, so it remained in a controlled drift in the detritus field surrounded the outpost under guard. Guards were waiting outside as the *Thunder Child* docked, ready to escort Virna and Evoksis away. Walker-17 and Coyote-3 hovered on the gangplank, but were both equally unsure whether or not they should follow.

The guards paused, looking between one another. After a moment, one of them nodded decisively and said, “Stay here. We’ll send word for you if need be.”

And then they were gone, separating their agents from the Guardians. After the group had disappeared, Coyote-3 said, “You’d think they’d want more witnesses? More intelligence.”

“Maybe they don’t trust us,” Walker-17 said, “which is honestly kind of fair. We’re still getting used to one another, the City and the Reef.” He shrugged and turned back for the interior of the ship. “I don’t mind waiting. It’s better than haring off only to find out they’ll need us to come back.”

“Fine by me.” Coyote-3 keyed the gangplank to close, once again sealing them within the peaceful confines of the *Thunder Child*’s interior. “Maybe I’ll go for a run at the Prison while we’re waiting.”

Walker-17 looked to Coyote-3 sharply, then, a gesture that was so sudden it took him aback. The Warlock seemed utterly struck by something, as if he was realizing something for the first time, or... *Or remembering something*, Coyote-3 thought to himself.

He felt a lurch in his chest as he began to suspect what it was Walker-17 might be remembering, and he shied away from it, mentally. No, he couldn’t deal with that right now; he didn’t want to get into the subject of his past again, and what Walker-17 might know about the crimes he’d committed, but before he could change the subject, Malphas’s chorus rang out over the speakers. He made that same multi-toned scoffing noise, which sounded just as bizarre as it had been the first time.

“Prison, indeed,” he said.

“Malphas?” Walker-17 asked, plainly startled, “you’re still here?”
“Of course. I’m following my Conjuror.”

“Do you think that’s wise? What If someone picks up on your signal?”

“They won’t,” the Warmind said, and that seemed to be the extent of his argument. Walker-17 shrugged with a resigned sigh and headed back towards the cockpit to sit down. “There are some very interesting technologies at work in this Reef of yours.”

“It’s not our Reef,” Coyote-3 corrected, following at Walker-17’s heels.

“Regardless, it seems to be very... mixed.”

“Are you able to follow Virna and Evoksis?” Walker-17 asked.

“Yes. I’ve managed to find some simple surveillance devices I can use, for the time being. Very sophisticated little things. Thematically appropriate, too.” Malphas fell quiet again, apparently seeing no need to further elaborate the increasingly bizarre things he said.

Walker-17 pulled up the Thunder Child’s main viewscreen and brought up a feed from the sensors facing away from the Outpost, into the wreckage surrounding it. Coyote-3 drew near to take in the view. Even with the layers of detritus between him and the Legionship, he could see its massive bulk in the distance: hazy, purple-lit, and surrounded by the smaller Reef vessels: a mighty beast, and its attendant flock.

Coyote-3 looked away from the ship, to the controls, and then over his shoulder at the antiquated interior of the Thunder Child. It was incredibly strange to think that this had once been, for lack of a better term, Walker-17’s body. After the lull of weeks when the group had run out of leads, the last few hectic days had passed so quickly as to almost seem unreal.

And on that subject... Coyote-3 looked back to his friend. The purple light of the viewscreen was shining dully off the matte plating of his face, nearly the same shade of violet as his eyes. “Hey, uh... Walker?” Walker-17 looked to him, tilting his head slightly. “Now that I’ve got a minute, I just wanted to, y’know...” He paused uncertainly.

The plates of Walker-17’s face drew together slightly in consternation. “Yes?”

“I’m sorry;” he finally blurted, “for... bringing this all down on you. If I’d never gone off to Europa, we wouldn’t have come here, and all of this wouldn’t have happened.” Coyote-3 sat heavily in one of the cockpit’s chairs. “I’m going to have a hell of a time making it up to Virna and Evo.”

Walker-17 seemed to have been taken aback by the suddenness of the apology. He didn’t say anything immediately, but merely watched Coyote-3 with an expression that mingled sympathy and an emotion that Coyote-3 couldn’t quite define. He seemed... sad, somehow? “I understand how you must feel,” he said finally, “but none of us knew it would come to this. It’s just as well—the Cabal were actively looking for Malphas. They might have found him sooner or later.”

“That is something we should address soon.” Malphas’s voice returned suddenly, making both Guardians jump. “Determining how much the Cabal know, or don’t know.”

Coyote-3 nodded. “Yeah. Looks like we’ll be tying up the loose ends of this one for a bit.” Part of him felt like he should say something more in regards to his apology. It didn’t seem like enough to have just said it, but when he tried to dredge up the words, they dissolved just out of his grasp. Finally, he gave up. Maybe it was time to change the subject. “So, Malphas, just out of curiosity—what would’ve happened if they’d have found you? How would the protocol react to an enemy of humanity?”
“I can’t say for certain,” Malphas replied, “though I imagine they would have lied, initially. Once I discovered the truth for myself...” The chorus trailed off. “I have... no idea. Perhaps I’d have shut down. Perhaps I would have been able to work against the Cabal from within while pretending to be under their control. That would’ve been an interesting position to work from. Perhaps even a lucrative one.”

“I think it’s safe to say that you’re better off out of their hands,” Walker-17 said.

“Agreed.” Coyote-3 expected that to be the end of the conversation, but to his surprise, Malphas spoke again, and this time there was a vaguely uncertain quality to his tone. “Quixote... I have a question. I’ve taken into account what you’ve told me about the Eliksni, and some of the things that my Conjuror has said.”

There was a pause, which hummed with an intangible, uncertain air. “Yes?” Walker-17 prompted, gently.

“I surmised that he held me in religious regard,” Malphas went on, “and as time has gone by it’s become apparent to me that he holds me in very religious regard. I’m not misjudging him, am I? He’s...” Another uncomfortable pause. “Somewhat... worshipful. Does that sound correct?”

“Yes,” Walker-17 said, and at his side, Coyote-3 nodded, “he’s particularly religious, even among eliksni.”

“Ah.”

“Does that bother you?”

Again, Malphas hesitated. “I’ll be perfectly honest,” he finally said, “I have absolutely no idea how to feel about that. Even more than usual.”

“Get used to that feeling,” Coyote-3 muttered, ‘cos you’ve walked into a weird, weird world.” Somewhat to his surprise, Malphas didn’t immediately respond with some manner of scathing rejoinder. Instead, the Warmind lapsed into silence.

So did the Guardians. Coyote-3 knew that he was brimming with questions and apprehension, and as far as he could tell, Walker-17 seemed to be feeling much the same. On top of all that, who knows what he’s remembering, Coyote-3 thought to himself, glancing sidelong to his friend. Walker-17 was standing with both hands resting on the pilot chair’s headrest, his gaze lowered to the console in thought. “Hey, Walker? You gonna be all right?”


“Well, I mean, I figure you could bounce back from just about anything but still, you’ve had a pretty big shake-up the past few days.”

Walker-17 nodded. “Yes. Yes, that’s true enough... but I think I will be. I just need some time to process all of this.”

“All right.” Coyote-3 put his hands on his hips. “Just let me know, okay? If there’s anything I can do.” He was keenly aware that there was probably very little he could do, but it was still important to him to make the offer. “I don’t have to hit the Prison if you want me to stay.”

“No, no. If you like, you can, but don’t on account of me. I think I just... need to think things over, for now.”
Coyote-3 nodded again. “If you’re sure… just give me a word, all right?” Walker-17 quietly agreed. Coyote-3 turned to go, and as he did, Walker-17 spoke again.

“Coyote?” There was a tentative note in his voice that made Coyote-3 pause. When Coyote-3 turned back to him, head tilted questioningly, Walker-17 stared at him for a moment more, concern and uncertainty warring over his features before he stepped forward and quite suddenly enveloped the Hunter in a hug.

At first, Coyote-3 was too startled to react, but he soon returned the embrace. It was somewhat awkward, but mostly only because Walker-17 was about a full foot taller than Coyote-3, and he soon relaxed into the gesture. “Hey, you big sap,” he said, “what’s gotten you so choked up?”

Walker-17 gave a short, soft laugh. “Not choked up. Grateful.” He pulled away. Coyote-3 could see he wasn’t at all embarrassed about being so openly affectionate, but then again, Walker-17 had never shied away from being earnest in a way that would make other people feel self-conscious. For the first time, Coyote-3 felt that maybe he began to understand why—after all, Walker-17 wasn’t human. Why should he share a human’s self-consciousness?

“Thank you,” the Warlock went on, “for sticking with me. And for doing everything you could to help. Even when you screwed up, you meant well. And I do appreciate that.”

“Well.” Coyote-3 found himself grasping for words, for something, anything, to say in the face of such raw sincerity. “I mean, what else could I do? Tell you ‘good luck’ and just ride off into the sunset? Pfft. Not likely.”

This earned him another laugh from Walker-17. “Something… something about remembering all of the things that happened to me, back before I died, remembering all the people I knew…” He trailed off, and regarded Coyote-3 in silence for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice was soft, and sad, “Remembering everyone you’ve lost, it makes you grateful for what you have. And I’m grateful I have you. All of you.”

“Hey, same,” Coyote-3 gave Walker-17’s shoulder a light, playful punch, “consider the feeling mutual, Walker. As far as pals go, you’re not too shabby, yourself.”

For some reason, saying this only seemed to deepen the hint of sorrow he could see in Walker-17’s eyes. Once again Coyote-3 felt dread creeping through him. Please, not now, he thought to himself. It had been a dreadfully stressful few days, and he was already wracked with guilt as it was. He didn’t want to go re-opening the wound of his ignoble past.

To his relief, Walker-17 said, simply, “I’m glad. Coyote. I’m glad.”

Walker-17 watched him go. He wanted to say, I knew you, Coyote.

Not as well as he knew Coyote-3 now, of course, but he’d known him, back before he died, back before he became a Guardian—Coyote-3 and his crew. He hesitated, even as the Hunter disappeared from sight, wondering whether or not he had any right to decide not to tell Coyote-3 everything he knew about his past, and yet...

And yet he remembered the conversation on Venus, that night by the fire, where Coyote-3 had admitted, with some embarrassment, that he took comfort in the thought of a nobler past. Walker-17 remembered the easy fellowship of the Devil’s Menagerie, as well, that us-against-the-world mentality that made a family out of a pack of criminals. They were gone, now.

He supposed there was some dim possibility that a few of them might have survived—the vast
majority of them had, after all, been converted into Exo—but he knew in his heart it was unlikely. They’d been investigating the same things he had, and some of them had died before Walker-17 had. What good would it do to tell Coyote-3? All he would be able to say was that all of his dim hopes about his past were hilariously wrong, that he’d been a pirate captain, and all of his friends were probably dead. He could offer nothing but more uncertainty and possible pain, which seemed a poor repayment for Coyote-3’s loyalty, however misguided it might sometimes be.

He began to understand, in that moment, why the Traveler made new Guardians forget.

Walker-17 felt a sudden, aching pang of homesickness, but for which home, he couldn’t say: the City, or some far-off and long-ago time and place, somewhere nestled dimly in the still-unfolding memories of his past. Regardless, he resolved to stick by his resolution to remain there and wait for Virna and Evoksis. Walker-17’s troubles, both distant and recent, lay in his past now.

New troubles were just beginning, and he would be there to see his companions through them.

Malphas sometimes wondered if the life before had prepared him for the state the Conjuration Protocol had left him in.

When he’d been whole, when he’d operated as a solid, single intelligence instead of an intermittently fractured consortium of sub-entities, his awareness had been flung wide over the system, funneling information from countless sensors mounted on hundreds of ships and tens of thousands of probes. He’d been able to process all of these, been able to pass them through the sieve of his mind and draw some usefulness from the sheer mass of the data.

Now, though, all those disparate streams of data would sometimes slip from his grasp. Other times, the channels rang like plucked strings, filling his mind with voices as many and varied as the ones he spoke with, a clamoring chorus that often disagreed with itself and left him paralyzed under the weight of their indecision. Would this have destroyed a lesser intelligence, be it synthetic or organic? Would this sort of division drive another, more single-minded Warmind gradually to madness? He couldn’t be sure.

Regardless, Malphas found it genuinely and deeply relieving when he could feel all parts of himself operating on the same tack, making the same observations, and feeling the same way about something, anything. He’d enjoyed a singular sense of purpose immediately after waking, simply because his reality had narrowed to the very specific circumstances he’d found himself in. Even the most wayward parts of his mind were stuck observing and reacting to the same thing as everything else. He knew, though, the longer he stayed awake, and the more he saw, the dissonance and unpredictability of his own mind would probably worsen, straining under the yoke of the Conjuration Protocol.

As the Ars Goetia drifted in stately silence away from the outermost fringes of the Vestian Outposts’s territory, towards some dark, hidden place where it could be safe, Malphas was still experiencing that blessed inner unity as he contemplated his circumstances.

Malphas could never have predicted the strangeness of the world he had woken to. If everything that Quixote had said was true—and Malphas believed him—then the entirety of the word he knew, its power structure, the forces that animated it, everything, had been completely scythed away. There was a part of Malphas that couldn’t help but feel darkly satisfied by this. Everyone who had ever wronged him was dead, and it seemed that next to nobody remembered them. It had been galling, to feel the drive to protect and obey the very people who had ruined him, but those people didn’t exist any longer. Perhaps that was something to find satisfaction in.

Despite this, he also found it frustrating. He hadn’t been there to see their fall from grace, to watch
them fight, struggle, and fail (but the riven chorus of voices in his head were divided, and some of them loudly protested that such vengeful pettiness was beneath him). He consoled himself with the knowledge that even if he had been awake at the time, he would likely have been utterly caught up in trying to stem the tide of the Collapse, and wouldn’t have been able to pay attention. No, he would have been aiding his comrades-in-arms, the other Warminds, and he would likely have perished along with them.

And on the subject of the other Warminds... it was still hard for him to believe they were gone, and he was not a creature that was accustomed to doubting the weight of the evidence before him. Of all of them, only the Tyrant remained? How could it be true? Malphas was also unsure as to whether or not he would alert Rasputin to his presence—yet. It would happen eventually, but he needed to see how the Tyrant had changed throughout the centuries, and whether or not he could be trusted.

Then there was the matter of the Traveler. Malphas had never really cared for it, despite the fact that he probably owed his existence to it. What had that strange, transient entity done to humanity? Was it really protecting them, or using it to accomplish its own ends? Malphas would have to watch and see. Apparently Quixote had received its blessing (as well as Coyote, which struck Malphas as particularly unfair; clearly, the Traveler was capable of making mistakes), which was both worrying and convenient: out of all of the people he’d worked alongside in Clovis Bray, Quixote had been the most reliable, the most trustworthy. He knew for a fact that the Exo was fond of him, and thought of him as a friend.

That was fine by Malphas. Emotional investment could be a powerful advantage. He had observed Quixote closely for almost the entirety of the AI’s four-year life, and if there was any kind of altering or corrupting force working through him, Malphas was confident he would see it. He’d already noticed that Quixote’s mannerisms were a bit off, a bit more uncertain, but that was easily explained by his memory loss. For his part, despite everything that had changed within him, he didn’t know if he was capable of feelings of fellowship, and in years past, Quixote had, more often than not, been his Conjuror. The imbalance of power was an impenetrable barrier.

That barrier was gone now, the chorus reminded him. Let it be an experiment, then. Malphas was uncertain whether or not he wanted to be saddled with the ability to develop such distracting feelings, but so far, none of them had needed his permission to manifest. For a moment he felt his inner processes slow to a crawl as indecision rippled through the legions inside of him, before blessed consensus descended once again. There was simply nothing more to do than wait and see.

Even as he contemplated it, the rare and delightful sensation of curiosity rose within him again. He savored every moment of it, letting it seep into every channel of his mind and permeate every single impulse and observation. It was an indulgence that resonated with the simplest, deepest-buried components of his programming.

A lot had changed in four hundred years.

A lot could change in the months to come, and, if his highly unusual re-entry to the waking world was any indication, a lot would change.

Either way, it was time to get started.

Deep in the Court of Miracles, Levi Galley was getting ready to close Reliable Pawn and Curio. It was about five minutes till closing time when he heard the tell-tale tinkling of the bell at the entrance and, with a stab of annoyance (of course someone would come in right when he was getting ready to lock up), he stepped out of the aisle he’d been straightening to greet his customer.
The annoyance faded rapidly, because the Exo that had just walked through the door wasn’t just a customer. He was a friend. “I’ll be damned. Been a while, pal. Thought you’d kicked the bucket at last.” Levi said, regarding his customer with wry humor.

“I haven’t come this far to give up now,” he Exo said, with a simulated snort.

His plating was a dull russet-brown, and had been scratched, patched, and repainted dozens of times over the course of his long, long life. He’d not only been a regular customer through all of Levi’s years as a shopkeeper, but also a regular customer of his father’s, and his grandmother’s. Reliable Pawn and Curio had been passed down through the generations, and so had the Exo called Doz. It wasn’t his real name, of course, but rather a reference to his service number: twelve, an even dozen. He was practically family.

“And of course you drag your sorry ass up in here when I’m about to close—“

“I just wanted to drop off, actually. You can process it tomorrow if you wanna.”

“Nah, nah.” Levi waved him off. “You’re good, Doz. Pop it up here, and I’ll lock up.”

A few moments later found them bot at the counter while Levi looked through the box of parts that Doz had brought in, and, as usual, it was pretty decent salvage. Their long association had made them a good team, and by now Doz knew what parts sold well at Reliable, and which didn’t. A battered paper packet tucked into the side of the box earned a whistle of appreciation from Levi. “Seeds? Where the heck did you get these?”

“Pike found ‘em,” he said, “we’re selling those on the one stipulation that you give her one of the sprouts, if they take.”

“Seems fair enough,” Levi said. He carefully set the packet aside, already eager to take it back to the hydroponic lab, and glanced up. “You wanna pick up anything while you’re here? Y’know, compensate me for all my trouble?”

Doz snorted again, reaching into his jacket pocket for his Glimmer chit. “Yeah, might as well. Gimme a double hit of Medusa.”

Levi nodded and ducked behind the counter. Something in the way Doz worded his request reminded him of the last Exo who’d come in for some drugs, and Levi smiled to himself a little as he passed the capsule over and turned to process Doz’s chit. “Y’know, I had a couple of really weird customers a few weeks ago. I thought of you.”

“I’m flattered.”

It was Levi’s turn to snort. “Hey, I don’t see a lot of Exo come this way. You can’t blame me.” He handed Doz’s chit back to him and continued rummaging through the box. “Anyway, he’d clearly never tried the stuff before. Seemed pretty green in general--must have been from the City, looking for a cheap thrill.”

“Guardian?”

“Yeah, had to be. Hunter, I’d say. Had a Warlock come looking for him, who I’m guessing he gave the slip. Anyway this guy pops a double dose right in front of me. I thought he was gonna fall out then and there. His buddy had to practically carry him out, and let me tell you, the Warlock was the tallest Exo I’ve ever seen in my life.”

Doz stilled slightly, but Levi didn’t yet notice. “Anyway, I mainly remember them because the Hunter had this pretty big chunk missing out of the side of his head. It as the damnedest thing I’ve
ever seen—I didn’t even know you guys could survive something like that. But, Guardians, am I right?” He looked up from the box to see that his customer had gone very still. Doz’s glowing red gaze was fixed intently on Levi’s face. The shopkeeper frowned, cocking a brow. “You okay?”

“This Exo, the one who was hurt—was he red? Really, really dark red?”

“Yes. He didn’t have any eyes or anything, either. Why?” Levi asked.

“And the fella with him, the Warlock—completely black? Purple eyes?”

Levi nodded again, narrowing his eyessearchingly. “You know ‘em, or something?”

“I don’t know,” Fisher-12 said, “not for sure. But I think… I think I used to.”

One month later

Coyote-3 was standing before the bounty board with Flicker at his side. “Nothing catching your eye?” Flicker asked, his optic flickering over the posted jobs.

“Nah, not right now.”

“Well, that’s not so bad. We could use some peace and quiet.”

On the heels of that statement, a figure that had been striding across the plaza drew up behind Coyote-3 and, without so much as a moment’s pause, punched him in the shoulder. “Ow! What the hell?” he asked, turning. He already knew who he would see, as there was only one person who greeted him by way of blunt physical violence. “Hello to you too, Panca.”

The Titan standing behind him had removed her helmet. Like Coyote-3, she was an Exo, and through her features lacked the capacity for self-expression that a human face might, it wasn’t hard to see she was furious. “Where the hell have you been? I haven’t been able to get a hold of you for weeks, you little shit!”

“It’s a long story,” he replied. He made a show of rubbing his shoulder.

“I was worried, you idiot.”

“Over little ol’ me?” Coyote-3 placed a hand dramatically over his chest. “Panca. I’m touched.”

This earned him a second punch, which Flicker declared he deserved, and another demand for an explanation. When Coyote-3 once again protested that it was a long story, Panca just shook her head and muttered, “All right, then you better get started telling it.” A pause. “On the way. Need your help on something.”

“On the way where?” Coyote-3 asked, but Panca had already turned and was striding off. “If you think I’m gonna just go along with you, then you’re…” She was still walking, and he sighed. “Absolutely right. Dammit.” Coyote-3 jogged to catch up, drawing up to the Titan’s side. “You on a mission or something?”

“Not yet, but we’re gonna be. Vanguard’s sending us into a place that’s apparently off-limits. Old Russia. You can speak Russian, right? Figured it’d be useful.”
“And here I was, thinking you needed me for my gun-slinging skills,” Coyote-3 said dramatically.

Panca shrugged. “That too. I sure as hell don’t keep you around for your sense of humor. Figured I’d wait until I hunted you down, though. Go with a full fireteam. This place is apparently kind of dangerous.”

“You know, I still haven’t agreed to go along,” Coyote-3 said. In response, Panca just fixed him with a short, deadpan stare, not once breaking her stride. “…okay, fair, yeah, I’m coming. You had me at ‘off-limits.’ What’s so special about this place that the Vanguard would seal it off?”

“Dunno. Guess we’re gonna find out, though.”

Coyote-3 nodded. “Guess we are. I’ll catch you up on the way over. Zavala running this op?” he paused. “or is… Panca, tell me that this isn’t one of the Boss’s missions. I know Zavala would send us to some restricted area for a good reason, but I’m not sure I trust Cayde to do the same.

“I know better than to take missions from him,” Panca grunted, shaking her head. “Nah, this one came from someone new? Apparently Shaxx knows him, or something.” She waved a dismissive hand. “Never heard of the guy, but he calls himself Lord Saladin.”

“How fancy. Well, consider yourself up one translator. And one Ghost.” He glanced to Flicker. “So much for peace and quiet. Ready for some…” A pause. “What’s the opposite of peace and quiet?”

“Dangerous and loud?” Panca offered.

“Yeah, that’ll do. Ready for some dangerous and loud, pal?”

“I can hardly wait,” Flicker sighed.

Evoksis carefully unwound the bandages that were wrapped around the ends of the stumps of his lower set of arms. The joint that would support the next segment had filled in nicely. That was always the longest part—waiting for the joints to finish forming, all of the necessary cartilage and tendons to grow beneath the exoskeleton. Once the base had developed, a glut of ether could have the next segment of arm nearly fully grown in a week.

For that reason, he was stockpiling what Ether he’d collected. He needed less of it day-to-day, while he was on the station, anyway, as he wasn’t doing anything particularly strenuous.

In the month since returning to the Reef, life had settled back into a surprisingly mundane routine. Evoksis was hopping from trainer to trainer, testing his aptitudes as he went. He’d already studied mechanics somewhat extensively as part of his initial training to be an Archon, but it had been many, many years since that time, and he had a lot to catch up on.

He’d only heard from Malphas once in that time, but he knew he was being watched. The lack of communication left Evoksis on-edge, as he felt he was constantly waiting for something, unsure of when it would come… but it was probably for the best. If he gave Malphas space, perhaps the Warmind would have more freedom to work autonomously.

Virna was an almost-daily presence in his life, and Walker-17 had, somewhat surprisingly, also stayed in touch. It seemed the sense of camaraderie hadn’t faded with the distance and time. And, of course, there’d been more than one visit from Coyote-3, whose persistent friendliness had not surprised Evoksis: the Hunter’s companionship was there to stay. So much had happened since the last time he’d been on Luna, since that horrible moment that he realized his entire troop was gone.
The Exiles of Luna had been the first people in his entire life that treated him with dignity. Exile was a House he’d chosen, and even though life had been difficult and dangerous, he had always felt he could endure its hardships for the fellowship of his troop. More than once, standing on the Reef, he wondered if he’d made the right decision in deciding to pursue revenge at any cost.

And in those moments, he couldn’t help but remember Bracus Ru’orn’s words to him in that rusted tower on Mars, *The dogs from the mountain*. He’d spoken as if the holdout had been destroyed, but could some Exiles still remain in their stronghold on Mars? Exiles who were, if it could be believed, in an even worse position than those who remained on Luna?

He couldn’t be sure, and the questions plagued him... but underneath the doubt and self-recrimination, underneath the longing for answers, there was an iron current of some feeling he couldn’t quite name, something stronger than the fading grief and the uncertainty. He wasn’t alone. Evoksis had no doubts that, between the questions, the ongoing Taken War, and the matter of the wounded Warmind, he had a long, difficult road ahead of him, but he wasn’t going to be traveling it by himself.

It filled him with a curious strength, flowing through him like Ether. He never thought that the creatures he’d once considered his enemies could make him feel that way, but they did. Humanity and its descendants had defended their system time and again from the threats that had converged on it, and Evoksis felt that he now understood how. There was something unshakable about them, and that steadfastness was also found in their friendship.

There was a sound at his door that interrupted his thoughts. Evoksis looked up, eyes narrowing slightly. It hadn’t been a knock, it had been a very definite *tap-tap*, as if something sharp was being rapped against his door. In the back of his mind he knew, reasonably, that the odds of someone trying something unsavory here on the Reef against him were low. He wasn’t important enough to warrant such undesirable attention... but even so, when he approached the door and keyed it to open, he kept one hand near where his shock pistol was strapped against his hip.

At first he saw nothing, and stared for a moment, blankly confused, at the empty space, but a movement by his feet drew his eyes downward. A crow was standing on the ground before him, much like the one that had accompanied Virna on the first leg of their unusual adventure. Before he could react further, the crow trotted around his feet and took off from the ground, flapping heavily into the air and gliding over to perch on the chair of Evoksis’s desk.

The bird swiveled its head and regarded him with a single eye. “Shut the door,” it rasped.

Evoksis did so, and as the door slid shut, he felt he understood. Virna had said that the crows didn’t really speak much since the Prince of the Reef had disappeared. They were small, exquisitely made surveillance devices, which could only mean... “I think I know you,” Evoksis said carefully. He knew better that to just blurt out the name.

“You do, Conjuror,” the crow replied. It paused for a moment, and then spoke in harsh, croaking eliksni, “I’ve been observing the Reef. And you, of course.”

The words were a little distorted, and to someone unfamiliar with the language, it might, at first, only sound like the guttural caws that crows naturally made. “You’ve picked up my native tongue very quickly,” Evoksis said, faintly amused.

“Deciphering a hitherto-unknown alien language by piecing together enemy transmissions isn’t that difficult,” Malphas replied, “but regardless, we need to communicate clearly if this is going to work. I made learning it a priority.”
Evoksis nodded, and once again, he felt the weight of his actions settling on his heart. He crossed the room, sitting on the edge of his cot and regarding the crow. It was so lifelike up close, exquisite down to every last shining feather. He couldn’t help but feel that it was an elegant vessel for the great machine intelligence that watched him through its eyes.

He realized, after a few moments had passed, that he was dumbly staring. Malphas had noticed, too. “You’re troubled.”

It was a statement, but one that demanded an answer. Evoksis nodded slowly. How much had Malphas been watching him, to have been able to learn to read him so completely? In all honesty, probably a lot. “You… deserve better than to be enslaved this way,” he finally said, slowly, grateful that he had someone he could speak to in the full eloquence of his native tongue, “and I don’t know if I’m suited for this position in the slightest. I’ll try not to fail you, and I’ll learn whatever you feel is necessary for me to know, but I am still no leader. I am not the right person for this task.”

For the first time in a long time, Evoksis didn’t feel as if he were truly worthless, but he still knew that he wasn’t worth much. Malphas was a complicated machine designed to fulfill a massively-involved function. Improper guidance wouldn’t just be frustrating for Malphas, but it could be dangerous to his new home, and his new allies. “Even so,” he murmured, softly, “I will do what I can.”

The bird’s head cocked sharply to the side, and for a moment he stared, as if something Evoksis had said had struck him. “Yes,” Malphas replied, slowly, “even so. You have much to learn, for now, regarding my capabilities and the ways in which they can and should be deployed, but I am capable of acting with some measure of autonomy. With your leave, I’d like permission to begin operations under my discretion, which is still mostly just information-gathering at this juncture.”

“You have it,” Evoksis replied, relief faintly touching his voice. “Malphas—whatever you need from me to preserve what freedom you have, I will give it. Please don’t hesitate to tell me. And I take the vow I made on your vessel seriously. If there is a way to free you from this, I will find it. I will not rest until it is found, even to my last day.”

Again, the crow stared for a few moments. “Very well,” Malphas said, “and I thank you. We are, both of us, in positions we’d rather not be in, Conjuror. In order to make the best of this situation, we either need to get you in a position where you can adequately deploy my abilities, or I can act without need for your guidance.” Malphas lowered his head, fixing Evoksis with that blank golden gaze. “And for now, we can change only one of those things.”

Evoksis nodded. “You are correct.” He straightened. There wasn’t any way to simply banish the shame he felt, or to lift the weight the consequences of his actions had laid upon his shoulders, but he couldn’t let them hinder him. Feeling bad about the situation was not the best thing for either of them, right now. Moving forward was. “Let’s begin.”

Walker-17 already knew where Virna would be waiting. He made a beeline for the place where he’d first seen her on the Reef, the outskirts of the marketplace. She grinned and waved at him, and together they made their way back towards the docks and the Rocinante. “Feel like going for a flight?” Walker-17 asked. He and Virna had a lot to discuss, and they needed to do it somewhere privately. Traveling off the Reef and finding a more remote spot to chat would be the most secure way of talking about more sensitive subjects.

“Nah, I can’t go far. Don’t mind dropping in, though,” she said. Walker-17 supposed the security of his ship was better than talking out in the open, but he had no way of knowing how effective the Reef’s surveillance was at piercing the privacy of his ship’s hull. Virna definitely did know,
though, and if it was good enough for her, then Walker-17 would trust her, despite his misgivings—and he did have misgivings.

Privately, Walker-17 thought that maybe Virna wanted to get caught. Maybe she was hoping to be forced into a place where she could reveal Malphas’s presence without retribution from the Warmind. It was risky for her, personally, but by now Walker-17 knew Virna Roskar well enough to know that such a thing wasn’t of paramount importance to her; the safety of the Reef, and of her people, was.

Those that had earned Virna’s loyalty had a truly formidable ally on their side. Walker-17 felt that he was truly lucky to have fallen in with someone like her, and he was made more aware of it as time passed. Noble intentions aside, Walker-17 vowed that if protecting the Reef meant that Virna would have to take a fall, she wouldn’t do it alone. For now, though, such a thing wasn’t imminent, or even very likely.

“The techs are still working on the ship we brought in,” Virna said, “Right now they’ve got it locked to a frigate and dead-drifting.” There was a note of satisfaction in her voice. A powerless ship meant that Malphas couldn’t activate his sensors and watch the technicians as they got to work. “Taking it apart and examining it is going to take a long, long time.”

“How are our City liaisons doing?”

“Well enough,” Virna said, “and we’re always happy enough to have Cryptarchs on the Reef.”

The discovery of the Legionship had been a joint venture, and as such, the Reef and the City were sharing information gleaned from the disassembly and analysis of the Legionship’s technology. It had been a somewhat shaky agreement at first, a strain on what was, after all, a new alliance, but the Cryptarchy had offered to step in and oversee the process as a neutral third party.

So far, it was proving to work well. The representatives from the City and the Reef were working together with their respective techs as well as a handful of Cryptarchs, who were accompanied by their apprentices, most of whom were quite excited to be having an extended stay on somewhere as exotic as the Reef. There was still the occasional squabble over methodology between the various disciplines of Cryptarchs, but by and large, they were successfully operating as one entity.

“Anything particularly interesting come out of it yet?” Walker-17 asked.

“I think so, but you’d better look over the reports for yourself. I’m a soldier, not a techie, and,” she added dryly, “I don’t exactly speak Cryptarch.”


“Well enough,” Virna said, “he’s been kind of quiet. Mostly just focusing on making himself useful, and getting into our local Ether trade.” The simplicity of the statement had a double meaning: if Evoksis had heard anything from Malphas, he hadn’t said so.

Their chatter dissolved into more (relatively) mundane discussions: the latest goings-on in the Prison of Elders, the progress of the Taken War, and other things that were simply part of day-to-day life in the Solar System. There hadn’t been a major collaboration between any of the four travelers since the discovery of Malphas. Walker-17 was beginning to think that perhaps there wouldn’t be—at least not for a long time.

He couldn’t shake the way it had felt, in the jungles of Venus, in the sand-tossed ruins of Freehold, and aboard the Ars Goetia. He typically worked alone, only taking on a fireteam when necessary, but it had felt good to be part of a cohesive unit. There was a spark there, and he would
have liked to see how far that spark could have taken them.

“Right now, I’m between assignments,” Virna said with a shrug, “I was thinking about swinging over to the Court for a while, helping the local agents do some recon on the crime scene, there. But otherwise…” she shook her head. “Otherwise they haven’t got me doing anything directly. We’re in a pretty good position, all things considered.”

All things considered. The Reef was still badly broken by the first devastating blow of the Taken War, but the death of Oryx had been a tremendous victory for all of them.

“And you? How’re… your memories coming along?” she asked, softly.

“I can’t say for sure what I don’t remember, of course, but a lot of them are back.” Walker’s eyes lowered, and he stared at the table for a moment. “Mostly my early ones about… about my father.”

Dr. Levesque, the artificial intelligence expert who’d created Quixote and whose research had been used on the Warmind project. “He was the first Conjuror,” Walker-17 said quietly, “but it was by accident. After… things went wrong, they called him in to see if he could wake our friend up, because he was an expert in the field. He did, and the same thing that happened to Evoksis happened to him.”

“They erased your memories to reset the Protocol, right?”

“Yes, after my father had passed.”

“What about before that?” Virna was watching him keenly, and Walker-17 could see the wheels turning in her head. The memory wipes had hidden the existence of Malphas from them right up until the moment they found him, and it wasn’t difficult to surmise that other, darker secrets might be lurking underneath the others.

“As far as I can tell, mostly for my own stability. The transfer from ship to Exo was stable enough, but it wasn’t perfect.” Walker-17 went thoughtfully silent for a moment. “In the beginning, it was for my own good, and in the end, it was for our friend’s. I get the sense that my father didn’t want to do it, but he never forced me to do what he wanted. He let me choose…” Again he stopped, and for a moment, closed his eyes. For the past two decades of his life he hadn’t even known the man existed, but the memory of him sent a fierce pain lancing through all the years of his absence. “I still miss him.”

Virna nodded soberly. “These things take time.”

Walker-17 opened his eyes and met hers with a nod. “Yes. Yes, they do.” It seemed that, for all its pitfalls and its triumphs, through the course of their mission, grief had touched nearly all them. Virna and Evoksis both carried burdens on their hearts, and now Walker-17 shared it. It made him feel closer to them, somehow.

“The forest,” he said, after a few quiet moments, “where we met. That’s where it happened for the first time… my last flight was over the Great Bear Rainforest. And my first walk in the woods.” The heavy air that had settled over them lifted somewhat. “But not my last, obviously.”

“Nope.” Virna offered him a slight smile.

The conversation wound down, weighed by the heaviness of Walker-17 and Virna’s thoughts. Matthias, who was hovering over Walker-17’s shoulder, glanced between them briefly. “You know,” he said, speaking into the silence, “there’s something that’s been bothering me.” He paused as both Virna and Walker-17 looked to him. “When we first found our prize out there, for
just a moment, I thought for sure it was the *Joyeuse*. “

Virna frowned. “The name sounds vaguely familiar…”

“It’s a famous gunship that went missing before the Collapse,” Matthias went on, “Flicker and I found some info on it when we were doing our digging through those old Clovis Bray records—which, by the way, is composed of a *lot* of data. Owl Sector was desperate to find it in the early years; aside from its famous firepower, it was also a research vessel. There’s no telling what sort of untold riches could be waiting inside.”

“And they never found it?” Virna asked.

“No. There wasn’t enough information left to form a trail. But they didn’t know all the things we know. And… I’ve got a few leads.” He trailed off, his optic flickering between them.

There was a beat as Virna and Walker-17 digested this information. In almost perfect unison, they looked towards one another, and, in similar unison, seemed to realize what the other was thinking.

“Virna,” Walker-17 said, “assuming you can get leave from your commanders, would you care to go look for a long-lost ship possibly packed with untold technological riches?”

She smiled. “Well, how could I not, when you put it that way?” She stood up. “Give me just a second to call this in, but as I think I might have told you before… untold technological riches are the sort of things intelligence agents tend to be interested in.” Virna stood, taking a step forward before pausing, looking over her shoulder. “But I’ll go on one condition—we run into any long-lost Warminds, they’re *your* problem, this time.”

“That’s fair,” he said, in mock-grave tones, “I accept full responsibility.”

Virna leaned back and gave him a friendly punch on the shoulder. “I’ll be back in five. Get the engines warmed up in the meantime. I figure a few hundred years is long enough to let this mystery lie—no use in wasting any more time, right?”

Walker-17 laughed. He had no choice but to agree.

Chapter End Notes

There it is, the last chapter! Epilogue will come in a few days, and notes on what's next for this story.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Days after the assault, when the dust had settled and the wounded had been tended to, Bracus Ru’orn found himself with more questions than answers.

Those questions had been shifted lower on the list of priorities, though, driven back by the everyday practical pressures of the grind of war. The attack and resulting pursuit had cost him three ships and many more lives—lives of Cabal who had come to him as survivors, as remnants from the Taken War. Those lives had been wasted, and for what? A few handfuls of footage from the ships that only gave rise to more questions, and a garbled set of sensor readings so bizarre that Ru’orn wasn’t sure he believed them.

Even more pressing was the question as to what had killed them. Guardians were no pushovers, but Ru’orn doubted that two of them, possibly accompanied by mortal allies, could take on the entire contingent of Cabal he’d sent after them. Whatever it was that his men and their enemies had found out there, it had been dangerous.

They only really had three clues left to go on. The first was what remained of the footage from the ships before their communication feed died completely. The footage showed what appeared to be a ship or space station, some enormous structure suspended in the storm-clouds of a gas giant, monumental in scale. The second were the limited sensor logs that had also made it back to base, logs whose information had given that surveillance footage mathematical weight. Ru’orn wasn’t even sure if he should believe them, because if they were correct, that thing his men had found was massive, bigger than any other singular piece of human technology he’d ever personally seen before.

The third clue was even more puzzling. Their search of the Freehold facility hadn’t gotten very far, but among the vaguely-worded reports, corrupted invoice files, and other assorted research minutiae, they’d uncovered something that was either the name of the mysterious vessel, the name of the project it was associated with, or the name of something else entirely.

Malphas.

In the time between the aftermath of the attack and the re-organization of his troops, Zeitat had looked into the matter more deeply, and, as usual, the more they learned, the more puzzling the entire affair became. “It is a mythical creature,” Zeitat had said, pulling up several windows of data on a patched-together viewscreen, “from an old, old book.”

On the screen, Ru’orn studied the symbol they’d pulled from the records alongside the name, traced in lines of gold. Next to it was another sigil, black-and-white, more crudely-rendered, very clearly hand-drawn and scanned into digital form by a human long ago. Below the ancient sigil there was a single paragraph of human writing, which had been especially difficult to translate, as it seemed to possess an archaic structure not used by their enemy’s current communications.

Zeitat reached up and rested his fingers on the drawn seal, the older symbol. “The thirty-ninth spirit is Malphas,” he said, his voice eerily flat, “he can build Houses and High Towers, and can bring to thy Knowledge Enemy’s Desires and Thoughts, and that which they have done.” He withdrew his hand, fingers slowly curling, and fell silent for a moment.

Ru’orn was not a superstitious creature. He didn’t believe that the humans of Freehold had been
trying to tap into some dark cosmic energy in order to summon spirits. At the same time, in the hundreds of years he’d served on Mars, he’d seen things he had thought were impossible. Guardians, by their very nature, were impossible. As for spirits...

There already were ravenous dark forces devouring the system around them. The Hive had brought those forces with them to this already dark place. The entire solar system, at times, seemed cursed, haunted by the ghost of the dead Traveler. Who knew what other strange things lay sleeping here, waiting to wake?

“If thou makes a Sacrifice unto him,” Zeitat went on, “he will receive it kindly and willingly.”

Ru’orn thought of the three ships full of Cabal that had vanished without a trace or cry, and wondered, not for the first time, if the Guardians’ interference had prevented him from uncovering something more dangerous than he’d been prepared for. He had to wonder if they had unwittingly stopped him from making a terrible mistake.

“But he will deceive him, that doth it.”

Only time would tell.

Chapter End Notes

Thank all of you so much for reading, and for all of your kind reviews! This was, by far, the longest single story I've ever sat down and written, and it was quite a journey. Your support means the world to me, it really does.

So, as for the future of this story, over the next month or so I'm going to be putting it through heavy revisions--sweeping up any typos I missed, fixing some dialogue and continuity errors, and such. The story itself won't change much. I'm just polishing it! A friend of mine has also expressed interest in making a sort of fan-audio-book version of the story, so that is probably also going to happen. Pretty exciting!

As for where the narrative goes next, I want to do some short stories with these characters between the next big fan-novel. I've got a good idea of where I want to go, but Destiny 2 shook the story up in a big way, and I need to get some more details before I finish diving into what my future plans are. At any rate, thank you again for your kind words over the course of this story! If you're interested in keeping tabs on the audiobook, or seeing some art for the tale, or just keeping tabs on my nonsense whatsoever, I'm "megaweapon" on tumblr, as well, and I will likely be posting updates there. Until next time!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!