Psi Corps: Liberation

by ComradeTortoise

Summary

This is... the start of an epic. I'm basically writing Psi Corps War and Peace. It's about a pair of Psi Cops on a large but outlying colony trying to build a life for themselves and protect their own people in the run-up to the Telepath War, the War, and its Aftermath, from 2263 through 2266.

Due to strong language, violence, psychological trauma inflicted on human beings of all ages, and (non-explicit to semi-explicit) portrayal of human sexuality this fanfic would probably be rated R by the MPAA. However, my protagonists are gay, so really NC-17. Seriously. there is some fucked up shit in here, and while I shy away from certain graphic details I can paint a picture without getting explicit (I am not writing it to titillate people who need therapy) so...reader beware. I've triggered myself writing this multiple times.

There are certain conventions I'm adopting. Anything in brackets is a deliberate projection. Anything in 'Italics' is a verbalized thought kept internal or at least not projected. Oh, and I speak German, English and some Latin, but a few others get used. Please forgive any errors.
TeepTown, Geneva Switzerland, 2248

There were too many telepaths, not enough vid screens; besides, the Psi Corps had work to do. Even as children were being evacuated to underground shelters in a vain effort to spare them, Elizabeth Levy's final address as President of the Earth Alliance, and upon this mortal coil, was relayed mind-to-mind to every telepath in TeepTown. Everything stopped, it was as if the panicked heartbeat of an entire people simply ceased as she spoke; her voice was grave and her face was a mask of fear.

"This is…This is the president. I have just been informed that our mid-range military bases at Beta Colony and Proxima III have fallen to the Minbari advance. We have lost contact with Io and must conclude that they too have fallen to an advanced force. Our military intelligence believes that Minbari intend to bypass Mars and hit Earth directly, and the attack may come at any time. We therefore can only conclude that we stand at the twilight of the Human race. In order to buy more time for our evacuation transports to leave Earth, we ask for support of every ship capable of fighting, to take part in a defense of our homeworld. We will not lie to you. We do not believe survival is a possibility. We believe that anyone who joins this battle, will never come home again. But for every ten minutes we can delay the military advance, several hundred more civilians may have a chance to escape to neutral territory. Though Earth may fall, the Human race must have a chance to continue elsewhere. No greater sacrifice has ever been asked of a people, but I ask you now, to step forward one last time—one last battle to hold the line against the night!… May God… go with you all."

Colin stood in silence at the boundary between the Minor Academy complex and the suburban streets and quads that formed the heart and soul of the Psi Corps: family housing and training cadres. He thumbed a pair of misshapen and blackened copper plates in his gloved hands and stared toward the place where he grew up. A lump formed in his throat as he contemplated that speech, knowing that when Elizabeth--she wasn't his president, telepaths couldn't even vote--talked about humanity having a chance to start again elsewhere, she didn't mean him. She didn't mean any telepath. Idiot mundanes had started the war, forced telepaths to fight in it, and not a single registered telepath would be on those transports because they'd been kept out of the lottery system. Somehow, that hurt him more than the certain knowledge that in a few hours or days he would be dead.

After a moment, Colin felt who he was looking for before he ever saw him. A familiar and calming affection suffused his mind and he followed it on foot until he made visual contact. A Caucasian man in middle age leading a line of thirty naked-handed children behind him like a line of so many goslings; projecting that loving calm into them for all he was worth, assisted by several other adults. Michael Chastain caught sight of him motioned for the other adults and the kids to go on ahead.

"Colin? Is that you? Good God, how you've grown!" He said. Colin knew it was an act, that Mr. Chastain was just as terrified as he was, but falling into what was expected running into an old teacher--or closest thing to a dad with both his birth parents dead--was immensely comforting so he went along with it.

"Yeah. I made it into the Medical and Metapol programs."
"That's great!" Mr. Chastain said, pulling him into a congratulatory hug, and projected the warmth and affection Colin desperately needed into it, well-beyond what could be accomplished through simple physical contact. "Which one do you want to do?" the older man asked as a follow up when he let Colin go.

"Honestly, I'm not sure." Colin replied. He was having difficulty keeping up the pretense, no matter how much it distracted his mind from the specter of his own impending demise. Michael sensed it too and gripped him around the shoulders.

"No matter what happens Colin, I'm so proud of you. You've become a fine young man and I wish... I wish it didn't have to be this way. I've gotta get back to the little ones though."

"I know Mike" Colin's voice cracked and he felt tears running down his cheeks involuntarily "They need you more than I do. Thanks. For everything."

"Any time, and there's no need to thank me. The Corps is Mother, the Corps is Father." Somehow, Mike packed a lot into that he didn't have to actually say. 'Love you kiddo. Don't give up hope just yet, someday if we survive, we'll never have to fear this again'. "Now go. Find your brother, I think I saw him lurking by the tree. You know the one." With a final all-too-brief hug, Mr. Chastain let him go and ran off in the direction his charges were headed, toward the emergency shelter.

<Love you too> Colin mentally projected at him, just before he left line of sight. Looking around, Colin could see others had the same idea. Linking up with their old teachers for lack of anyone else. The Corps might all be family, but some would always be closer than others and there were few bonds stronger than those between a child and the individuals who raise them. Mike was right though, he needed to find Marcel. Colin stepped from the concrete onto the grass, reversing the transition he'd made five years before. From there, he retraced old steps, almost the exact path he'd first taken from his childhood home to the Minor Academy until at last, an old oak tree loomed in front of him, backlit by the lights of a house he lived in for five years.

Standing in front of that tree was Marcel Szewczyk. Significantly taller than Colin with a medium build, slightly narrower features, he stood straight-backed under the tree where they'd first met when they were eight. Neither of them said anything as Colin approached and embraced Marcel with everything he had. They didn't need to. The sobs said everything they needed to say. Simply being held as his crying subsided stirred something in Colin that he thought he'd been over.

'Christ, now? Of all the times you want to kiss your best friend? You remember he's straight, right? Apparently I pine for the impossible when I'll be dead soon. Note for the not-future.' he thought to himself, doing everything he could to keep the thought private. He wasn't sure if he succeeded, because Marcel didn't react to it, other than to squeeze just a little bit tighter before letting him go.

"I brought something with me." Marcel said, his Polish accent as thick as it ever was. Colin had taught him English when they were eight but the accent remained. Not that Colin could throw stones. His own voice, he knew, was tinged with what he could only call a vague Europeanness. Speaking English, German, and French natively could do that. To say nothing of learning Polish while still in the cadre. Colin nonetheless raised an eyebrow at his friend. "Telescope. Ritchey-Chretien, pretty big mirror. Will need help assembling it."

Sure enough, there were several large boxes in a wagon, one of which was labeled '61 cm mirror assembly'.

"Holy shit, you weren't kidding." Colin exclaimed, and realized it's purpose "Gonna try to fight
back? Get line of sight on a fighter or something?"

"No." Marcel replied "We are. I figure we put our heads together and see if we can, how you say, reach out and touch someone. With this mirror, at lunar orbit, we should be able to resolve Minbari cruisers when they're fifteen kilometers apart." Colin didn't need to consider the question.

"I'm in. Though I have to ask...Where did you get the fifty thousand credits something like this must have cost?" Marcel gave him a quizzical and mischievous look.

"Credits? What do I care for credits, shopkeeper fled to the alps, mundanes are leaving all of us to die. Fuck them and their laws. Hell, even if we do all make it out of this alive, what are they going to do? Collect my fingerprints?" Marcel emphasized his point with black gloved jazz-hands. Colin couldn't help but laugh. Marcel could sometimes get downright spiteful toward mundanes in a way that Colin could only imitate, but he always left room for a bit of silly.

"Good point! Let's get this built." anything to get his mind off the fact that this sunset would likely be the last one either of them ever saw.

They picked a spot on the sidewalk near the statue of William Karges to set up, and got to work. Assembling the motorized base, then then getting the mirrors mounted and set into the tube. It was an hour of work with precision tools and careful reading of instructions, but they got it done just before the sun set.

"Well look at that..." Colin remarked, seeing the sun start to dip below the Alpine foothills to the West through the geodesic dome. Orange, pinks, purples, all rolling together, deepening as the sun dropped.

"To jest piękne. Zabawne, jak bierzemy za pewnik." Marcel said, switching to Polish to remark on how they take such simple things as a beautiful sunset for granted.

"Jeśli przeżyjemy, nigdy więcej tego nie zrobię." Colin replied, promising never to do so again if they survived by some miracle. As the sun set, the dread rose like a fog in the minds of every human being in Geneva. Humans were afraid of the dark by their very nature and the fall of night signified danger. Tonight brought the lie that every parent told their children to the forefront of the minds of every human being on Earth: there are no monsters waiting in the darkness. This time, there were. Bloodthirsty Minbari in a terracidal rage coming from beyond the Oort Cloud to obliterate their entire species.

All because one moron with more hubris and ambition than sense had panicked under pressure.

Evacuation transports and anything that could be retrofitted with a gun were taking off from the spaceport. Their drive plumes themselves shone bright like miniature stars even if the sound was only barely audible through the dome. Even so most of humanity was completely helpless as they were about to die and the terrified anticipation of annihilation ate at every mundane in Geneva. Colin figured it was every human being on Earth, but the fall of night just made it more poignant.

What saved him from falling into abject despair was the fact that telepaths weren't helpless. Marcel couldn't have been the only person who had this idea.

"Lets see if we can get some extra help. We'll need it to have any chance at all." Marcel suggested, taking off one of his gloves and offering Colin his hand.

'He has to know...but he's taking off his gloves anyway. Fuck it.' Colin thought, removed his right
glove and took Marcel's hand, keeping his feelings for Marcel out of his surface thoughts by focusing on the more immediate need to get as many people linking hands as possible. As soon as they made skin-to-skin contact he was struck by the depth of his friend's affection. Platonic affection, but affection. He knew right then that even if Marcel did ever find out, he wouldn't care. Colin held that knowledge in his mind, and used it to bridge the gap between their minds, combining both their abilities to extend his range beyond the range of his vision.

Anyone who wants to fight, come to The Grabber, we have a kickass telescope. We won't let them take us quietly.

Then they waited. It didn't take long, not more than a few minutes for others to start coming in. Some at a determined walk, others at a jog or a run. Most of them were young. Students who couldn't fit into the emergency shelters with all the kids, but were too young to have spouses of their own to spend their final hours with; but there were a few married couples who'd left their houses and yards. A cluster was forming around him and Marcel, and Colin reached out with his mind, and felt similar clusters forming in the dark around other men and women with telescopes. None of them had gone as all-out on the model as Marcel had, having only their hobbyist-grade spotting scopes, but they might work.

All the city lights were off, every light in TeepTown was off, the better to make the Minbari work to target population centers, and it made for excellent viewing conditions.

"Would you like the honors?" Colin asked Marcel.

"Better you, you're the P12." Marcel replied, being a P11 he was no slouch, but it was best if the strongest telepath took the lead. What Marcel did do was take up explaining what they were going to do to the fifty or so telepaths who'd joined them.

"Okay, we need you to take off your gloves and join hands. I know it's intimate, but you all know how to gestalt yes? Focus on something we all have in common. Colin here is a P12 and he's trained in attack probes. He'll take the lead and we'll see if we can make some Minbari regret their life choices."

Colin trained the telescope on the moon while everyone else took off their gloves and joined hands in a circular daisy chain. He needed both hands so Marcel placed his hand on the back of his neck. In any other context it would have sent Colin through the roof with happiness, but in this it was purely functional. There simply wasn't any other good place to touch. He felt the thought that would bind him into the group and joined it.

'The Corps is Mother the Corps is Father'

It was an odd sensation, being joined with that many sapient minds. His own thoughts became water in a pond, or perhaps more appropriately icecubes in a glass, distinct, but bound together. He could feel all their emanated thoughts, emotions, hopes, dreams, worries. Everything that made each individual unique and special, but binding it all together was that common thought. Despite their individuality, they had a group identity as well. They were one people, an extended family of some twelve million; and it made him feel invincible, even staring through the eyepiece of a telescope.

They waited. Colin had no sense for how long but it was long enough to see the blurry shapes of Earth Force cruisers transiting Luna. Then it happened. Pinpricks of light formed into cerulean vortices. Some he could resolve, some he couldn't because they were too close together. But emerging from those swirling holes in spacetime were Minbari ships. Hundreds within his visual field. They were blurry and sometimes indistinct but they reminded Colin of angrier versions of
pelagic sunfish. He didn't see their weapons, beams of collimated anti-neutrons, but he saw their effects when a Nova class dreadnought died. It's hull cracked in half and it's fusion reactors lost plasma containment, exploding like a star going supernova. He had to close his eye and could still see floaters for several seconds afterward.

He found a target. A war cruiser just crossing the moon that he could resolve. He reached out with his mind, with all of their minds, imagining himself to have eyebeams he could project through the telescope's aperture like some kind of laser. He found sapient minds, alien ones. He swam in their strange alien thought patterns, struggling to find his bearings and becoming nauseated by the strangeness of it, but he powered through. He didn't try anything fancy like trying to get one to overload their weapon systems. He didn't know enough about how Minbari think to do that. He just took every neuron he had at his disposal from himself, from Marcel, from everyone, and directed them toward pushing as many Minbari as he could into tonic-clonic seizures. He felt the biofeedback one by one, as hundreds of Minbari minds overloaded.

The ship veered off course and its weapons stopped firing, leaving it vulnerable to attack by quick reacting Earth Force ships, eager to pounce on anything that even looked like weakness. Better, their rapid change of course created local chaos as Minbari ships flying in close formation to protect each other against missile barrages and fighters had to take evasive action to avoid fatal collision. The ship Colin targeted went up like a thermonuclear bomb, and he couldn't assess damage to the rest at that range.

'Holy shit it worked. Score one for the Psi Corps!' everyone collectively exalted.

Colin tried again, picking out another cruiser, but he met interference. Something was blocking him, it felt like his scan was being scattered and he couldn't send as many into seizures. They were being jammed. At range that long, with fifty teeps, they could affect a lot of mundanes, even mundanes they couldn't see; but it would only take one combat grade telepath on the other end to jam them out of a critical crew space and let the Minbari maintain control of the ship.

Still, they kept trying, again and again. All the while more human ships were annihilated with ever-increasing frequency. Some of the weaker telepaths dropped out of the gestalt, and eventually, between the loss of power and the ever-increasing frequency of blinding flashes of light, it wasn't worth it to continue through the pounding headache starting to ratchet up in Colin's skull. He broke contact, snapping his blocks back into place like old friends and the tattered remnants of their collective consciousness collapsed. By the end, it was just him and Marcel. Colin slumped to the concrete in pure exhaustion.

"We got one..." he said, panting, the fatigue he hadn't noticed before catching up to him like speeding train.

"We did, yes. More than most Earth Force commanders can say. Though I'm afraid they'll take all the credit for that one. Not that it will matter." Marcel replied, sitting down next to him. Marcel tried to put on a cynical front, but it was a lie. The truth was important to him, even if no living being ever knew. The truth had intrinsic value.

"It matters to me. And you." Colin admonished him, then noticed a trickle running down his cheek. He reached a finger up and wiped it off, but it had a strange texture. He tasted it. Blood. 'Oh great. I'm bleeding from my eyes. Fantastic.'

"Come on Colin. Let's finish this where we started." Marcel suggested, referring to their tree. Colin couldn't think of anything he'd rather do with his last night alive. Well, he could, but that wasn't in the cards.
"Alright." he agreed. He was on his feet first and helped Marcel up. Then he had an idea. "Oh, but before we go..." Colin reached into his pocket and found a pencil and a pen light. The telescope's outer tube was white so what he wrote on it would be visible. He strode up to the telescope and started writing in his neatest handwriting.

We the undersigned telepaths of the Psi Corps used this telescope to render combat ineffective a Minbari War Cruiser in lunar orbit. It was subsequently destroyed by Earth Force, with other Minbari ships damaged.

He gave the approximate range, time, and declination. Then signed and printed his name, with his rating appended. Marcel signed it as well just after he did and appended his own rating.

"Everyone. Thank you. If... If someone ever finds this thing, there should be a chance that they find out what we did. Sign your names." There were some vocal and telepathic murmurs of agreement, but everyone was too tired and stunned to want to stop and talk about what they'd just done. He passed the pencil and the pen light to the nearest person. She wasn't even someone he recognized. Then he and Marcel left, putting their gloves back on as they departed.

They found their way home to their old house and that old oak tree. Marcel sat back against it, spread his legs just enough to let Colin sit between them. Colin got the message and settled himself down right there, Marcel wrapped his arms around Colin's chest and drew him back against his own chest. Then Marcel did something Colin didn't expect; he kissed the top of Colin's head and projected what Colin could only describe as an affectionate apology. Though what Marcel had to apologize for was beyond Colin's understanding.

"Kocham cię, Colin. Nic tego nigdy nie zmieni. Nie Minbari, nie upał - śmierć wszechświata." Marcel stressed in his emotions that the love he was expressing was entirely filial, but that didn't matter to Colin at that point. Just having him there was enough. Hell, Marcel was the only person who knew he was gay at all. It isn't as if he could ask for anything else.

"Znam Marcel. Nie tolerowałbyś mnie, gdybyś tego nie zrobił. Też cię kocham." Colin loved him too, and it wasn't simply brotherly, but Colin made clear through what he didn't say that he didn't expect any more than he had. He felt the smile he couldn't see.

"It's strangely beautiful, isn't it?" Marcel remarked, motioning with his mind rather than his hands toward the sky. Bright white flashes punctuated the darkness like fireflies rather than bright stars. They were closer now than when they'd started and the frequency was starting to slacken, even as more civilian ships took off from every spaceport they could see. But it was beautiful, in the same way a charging tiger might be.

"Yeah. It is." Colin replied. That's when he p'heard it. A chorus starting to rise. It started small and grew until he could make out the words from thousands of minds. A number of minds that grew until he could hear the words on the air. An old song from the Bad Times before the Psi Corps, when they were prey for mundane death squads. He felt drawn in, compelled to sing them too. So was Marcel.

And we will all come together in a better place, a better place than this
Our love will guide you, our love will hold you, And our love will show you the way.

There will come a tomorrow where we're free from our sorrows,

And our love will show us the way.

We are strong in each other, we're sister and brother,

And we will all come together in a better place, a better place than this.

Our love will guide you, Our love will hold you,

And our love will show us the way.

The song swelled, hundreds of thousands of mental and physical voices uplifted toward the heavens in unison. Some were hopeful for divine intervention; some grieved for the loss of all hope that the promise of the song would ever be realized; yet others were simply resigned to death and taking whatever comfort they could in the company of an unity with their own abused and abandoned people. Eventually it transitioned into a round with some starting earlier and others picking up, cycling the song over and over again.

Both Colin and Marcel kept singing until their voices were hoarse and their throats sore, and eventually they fell asleep against the tree and each other, not expecting to wake up.

... 

Regaining consciousness in full daylight in something other than a half-molten irradiated wasteland or the gates of St. Peter came to Colin as something of a shock. Almost as much a shock as whom he opened his eyes to see. He was staring directly into the steely grey eyes of Pensri Anusorn, head of the Major Academy. Colin stood up at attention faster than he thought possible, and Marcel was a half beat behind him.

"You two had a busy night..." she remarked mildly, letting only the faintest glimmer of a smirk into her eyes and betraying nothing from her mind. "I heard something about a group of telepaths who managed to get their hands on a research-grade telescope and gestalt themselves into a surface to orbit battery. I didn't think the ring-leaders would be a couple minor academy students." Colin had attention only enough to address her through his grogginess and tunnel vision, but he could hear children playing in the background. 'How the hell did we sleep through the little blighters getting back? They'd have messed with us.' he thought privately. Then he remembered who their house father was. Mike wouldn't have let them.

"We didn't want to die on our knees, Ma'am. Uh... speaking of which, how are we not dead?"

Colin replied as fast as he could.

"What he said, Ma'am." Marcel concurred. Mrs. Anusorn laughed a little.

"You missed a lot while you were asleep. Come on, walk with me. And drop the ma'am. What you did, you get to use my first name today. And Only Today."

"Thank you Ma-er Pensri." Both of them replied in unison and followed slightly behind and to her flanks as she walked toward the William Karges' monument.

"So, you're wondering why we're not dead. EarthGov is... still trying to figure that out. At around midnight, the Minbari completely annihilated our defensive fleet and was positioning themselves for orbital bombardment. They weren't going to bother with a ground invasion. Then they just
stopped. Three hours later, they broadcast a surrender, conceding the war to us on favorable terms."

"That makes no god damned sense." Marcel remarked in disbelief "To go from 'we will wipe out the entirety of Homo sapiens' to 'Just kidding!'? Really?"

"Not that we're not grateful to be alive it's just...yeah, what he said."

"Stop." Pensri said, it wasn't a command not to question, but to physically stop walking. They did. "Open up your minds and p'hear." Colin at least, did. At first, what he picked up from Geneva was the exhilaration of being unexpectedly alive and still walking upon the mortal coil and he would have left it there, but it wasn't everything. There was an undercurrent. It was subtle but once he noticed it he couldn't not notice it. Confusion, a bit of anger, but most importantly disbelieving suspicion. It was something he didn't feel from anyone inside TeepTown either. It was the strangest thing, and wasn't what Colin had expected.

"That's it. That right there." Pensri said. "What you're p'hearing is the trauma of a mock-execution and they're still waiting for the bullet. The next few years are gonna be rough as they process it. They might turn on us openly if they decide that bullet is going to come from us. Or they could go xenophobic and more fascist than they already are. Then they'll use us. Anyway, let's get moving.

There's something I want you both to see." They followed along after her until they came to the statue, and not far away, was their telescope, blocked off with cones and caution tape while someone slathered the area with concrete.

"What the?" Marcel asked.

"We're permanently mounting it and setting up a little observatory dome and monument. Viewing conditions won't ever be great, but..."

"Seriously?" Colin asked, excited and proud of himself but feeling like that was a bit much, so close to William Karges it just seemed putting on airs. And Marcel deserved more credit than him. Pensri smiled at him indulgently.

"Your humility does you credit. But at this point it's self-effacement. You're not the only ones to take out Minbari cruisers last night. There were other groups but they were all organized in advance by adults. For example, Military division temporarily appropriated the entire Lowell Observatory in Arizona; but you are the only ones to do so spontaneously and successfully while still in the Minor Academy. That warrants something. So here we are." To Colin's mind, that certainly explained why the ships after the first weren't caught unaware. Someone must have gotten a signal off and alerted their military telepaths to the danger in time to position themselves. They got lucky with that first one. Low crew readiness or maybe they lacked telepaths of sufficient strength.

"There were others." Marcel said "We weren't the only ones out here with telescopes."

"True, but you're the ones who could resolve Minbari ships because you stole one with a sixty-one centimeter mirror." Marcel tried to withdraw into himself at that, afraid of the consequences for grand theft. "But we're memorializing everyone who tried. Not just you. A plaque on the observatory, and we're etching your message and everyone's names permanently into the telescope itself. Oh, and don't worry about the theft." Pensri added. "The proprietor of the science-supply firm isn't pressing charges. You destroyed a Minbari ship with it, he considers that a fair price."

"Oh. Oh well...that's good then." Marcel was relieved. Pensri gave him a withering look.
"Don't ever do anything that stupid again though." She paused "Without good reason, anyway. Your disciplinary record is good so I think I can trust both of you to follow that advice?" Colin and Marcel nodded enthusiastically.

"If it's stupid and works, it isn't stupid?" Marcel asked.

"Good boy. So, you're both graduating this year. Where do you plan to go?" She asked.

"It's Metapol for me." Marcel replied. Colin gave it some thought. He had two good options and he hadn't decided which he wanted to take. He loved psychology, particularly neuropsychology, but he also wanted to protect his fellow telepaths, not just pick up the pieces when they were broken.

"I don't know." he said "I got accepted into Metapol and Medical."

"Hmm. Have you considered doing both?" Pensri asked. Colin raised an eyebrow.

"That's possible?"

"There's a course of study, it's only really open on recommendation, it isn't something you can apply in to. Dual program between Metapol and Medical for specialized forensic psychologists. You'll end up a PsiCop with a doctorate. Length of study is commensurate, though. So you won't be out of school for a while. On the other hand, you'll start your career at a First Lieutenant's rank and pay grade."

"Sounds like a plan to me." Colin replied, beaming.

Hamilton City Montana, Wednesday April 3rd, 2250

Eugene Hendriks, though he preferred Gene, woke up before dawn. It was four AM and just about the only time he could get any time to himself, to simply exist. He lurched out of bed and crept downstairs to make a pot of coffee. While it brewed, he used the bathroom and de-grogged himself with a steaming-hot shower. He knew from experience that he had about two hours to get everything done before he wouldn't be able to think so he threw himself into his homework. He'd managed the math the night before, it kept the voices at bay, but the reading and writing for history and physics didn't do that for him.

He did history first. ‘Fuck, what did we talk about in class yesterday?’ he wracked his brain trying to remember what it was, but he just couldn't. There was too much going on. Too many voices that weren't speaking, he couldn't pay attention like he should have. Like he used to. He pulled up the assignment on his computer and breathed a sigh of relief. It was an essay on Israel's strategic position going into the Third World War. That he could do in his sleep, that would be an A paper if he could get it cranked out fast enough. Others he hadn't been doing so well. The ones where he didn't already know the material from Before, for the most part. He had a stack of them, piles equally split between glowing commentary and angry red ink.

It only took him about an hour to get the necessary four pages written, knowledge and analysis spewing forth from his mind through his fingers and onto the page. For a little while, he felt like his old self again, and it was amazing. He sipped his coffee and recalled facts, figures, and references from memory. Occasionally he would stand up and consult one of the books lining the walls of his room and sit back down. He hit 'print' at about five and moved on to physics. By then, the daytime chorus was starting to rise as people with early shifts woke up and went about
their day, but he could still keep his head.

'It's just background noise. It's just background noise, nothing to worry about.' he told himself. 

Gene liked physics, and he went about doing his homework, which was go through and calculate the energy required to sustain and the power generated by fusion reactors using different fuel and to try to find the maximum net yield. He was fortunate it was a calculation heavy assignment because it seemed to him that it would take a while and maybe go over his time-budget. He worked his way through, putting the finishing touches on it while the background noise became a raucous storm of thoughts and emotions. None of them distinct just a dull roar of thousands of minds that intruded into his own existence.

He felt the intent to knock on his door before the knock came and he had to stop himself from telling his mother to come in before she could touch the door. After a subjective eternity, the knock came.

"Yeah, come on in, I'm decent." he said, and his mom opened the door.

"Hey honey, breakfast is ready. You didn't get your homework done last night? Honey is everything okay?" she asked. She'd been noticing changes in his behavior, he knew that. She was, afterall, a good mom and this had been going on for two months.

"Yeah" he lied "There was a lot of it. I had Spanish too, and got the calculus homework done last night." which was true. She knew he was lying, but she wasn't going to say anything about it. He wanted to tell her, to just come clean. She'd always said he could tell her anything, and when he'd told her was gay that was true, but this was definitely an exception she'd never considered. Not Her Son. He could feel her hatred of telepaths whenever they saw one of the commercial telepaths across the street while shopping. It was even worse with Dad, who joked about grinding them up and feeding them to dogs within their earshot. Gene avoided shopping like the plague now.

"Alright, well, if you decide to talk, you can always tell me. Love you Gene." She wasn't lying, but he knew she wasn't telling the truth either. A falsehood didn't have to be a lie. She was seriously worried about him though.

"Love you too Mom. I'm fine, really." Gene replied, outright lying on that last part. He packed his books and homework into his backpack and headed downstairs, to hastily eat his mom's pancakes and bolt down some orange juice before heading out the door. He didn't have a car and town was too small to need buses, so he walked, keeping to a route that no one else used. Instead of jogging the 1.6 kilometers east down Fairgrounds road like he used to, instead he cut north on Erie avenue to the Bitterroot river and turned East from there, moving overland and crossed Route 93. From there he slightly south until he hit Providence Way and jogged in from there. All in all, the distance was 3.5 kilometers, mostly on rough terrain or at a jog. It took a lot longer, but it had advantages. Fewer people meant he could have just a little bit more peace and quiet, it was also better for him physically. He somehow managed to keep himself in decent shape that way, despite no longer going to the gym and dropping off the fencing team entirely last week. The gym was too loud, and fencing practice was so gut-wrenching he didn't even want to think about it on his jogging-hike to school.

April in Montana isn't what anyone would consider warm. Just after sunrise he was lucky if it was above freezing, but the physical exertion kept him warm enough. Doing a combination of fast walking and jogging he managed trip in about forty five minutes and looked at two-story red brick and concrete structure. Hamilton High School might as well have been Dachau as far as he was concerned, but he didn't have much choice. He walked across the lawn slowly, giving himself time to catch his breath and steel himself before opening the doors. Already he could feel them clawing
at the inside of his mind, all six hundred students plus faculty. He called up basic integrals and ran
them through in his head over and over to keep the voices out before he even opened the doors,
doing his level best to ignore the other students who were entering at the same time he was.

'Oh look, there goes the mindfucker'

\[ \int x^n \, dx = \frac{1}{n+1} x^{n+1}, n \neq -1 \]

'Jesus christ what happened to him? He used to be normal.'

\[ \int \ln x \, dx = x \ln x - x \]

One of his old teammates intentionally bumped into him

"Opps!"

'Watch where you're going freak' Alan thought at him derisively. Gene reached the door and his
hands shook. The doors would open directly onto a hallways with lockers and busily talking and
thinking teenagers in a confined space.

\[ \int u \, dv = uv - \int v \, du \]

\[ \int (x+a)^2 \, dx = \frac{1}{x+a} \]

Gene opened the doors and stepped inside, and was hit by the onslaught. He could ignore
everything with his ears, but the integral functions only kept out so much. They distracted him
from the side-chatter but anything that was extremely emotional or directed at him slipped through.

'I don't feel clean anymore. Andy and I had sex last night! Oh MY GOD Becky you're such a slut!
Gene should just kill himself and get it over with. I wish dad would stop hitting mom. Maybe
something's going on and I should talk to him but if I do that than everyone will think I'm one too. I
can't believe he's still around. Someone should teach him a lesson. Oh fuck I'm failing English
mom is gonna kick my ass. He better not read my mind. I'm too nervous maybe Steve will open it
and read it for me.'

Gene focused on the calm rational order of mathematics. Not paying attention to everything he
picked up. Not wanting to know their secrets, not wanting to know who was having sex with
whom or in an abusive household or being molested by their priest, or how much they hated him.
But he couldn't not know. He knew everything, except for what he was supposed to be learning in
class.

\[ \int (x+a)^n \, dx = (x+a)^{n+1} / (n+1)(n+1)(n+2) \]

He opened his locker somehow, rote muscle memory letting him turn the combination lock despite
the horrendous distraction, put his backpack in, take out his notebooks and pens, removed his
mathematics textbook and was just about to close it himself when he picked up a surge of
aggression and pulled his hand out right before it slammed shut. Gene dropped everything and
turned around, fists clenched and ready for a fight when he saw the source. The snarling face of
his recently-ex boyfriend Alex, also of the fencing team. He was a little smaller than Gene was, but
more heavily built.

"So I've been thinking about something." Alex said. Gene tried to harden himself, but it was
difficult, having the keep out everyone else's mental voice.
"And what would that be? Like you have any right to be angry. You cheated on me, remember?"
Gene replied.

"That isn't the point! It's how you found out. Now I've tried to ignore the rumors going around about you but lately I've started to reconsider that. How the hell did you find out, huh? Did you invade my fucking privacy?"

He had. Not on purpose, but it's hard to not pick up on the fact that your boyfriend is cheating on you when his fuckboy is giving you the hate-eyes and thinking about how much it would hurt you if you found out. On reflection, maybe Gene thought that maybe he shouldn't have broken up with him on the spot, but no one was going to take his self-respect.

"Do you think I asked for this? Do you think I want to know what everyone is thinking? I'm doing calculus in my head just to keep from passing out, and I'm starting to get a migraine. Get the fuck away from me you two-timing bastard!" he hissed, hoping beyond hope that no one overheard him or was paying much attention. Fat chance of that.

He felt everyone turn and look at him; that extra attention and the need to block out all their thoughts prevented him from being able to react fast enough to avoid the fist heading for his face. He felt the impact, felt something crack in his nose and his head slam back into his own locker. He felt, somehow using the agony to briefly silence everyone's thoughts, but only long enough to really feel being kicked in the ribs twice. But he held onto the simple thought of that pain, brought it into the forefront of his mind. It sucked, but it was better than feeling everyone else approving of what Alex just did. That everyone knew, and no one cared that he'd just been the victim of his first hate crime.

Gene ached in his everything. His head hurt both from the dual impacts and the strain on his mind, he could tell his nose was gushing blood, and his chest hurt. But no one was going to leave him bleeding on the floor. He pulled himself off the floor and stood, regaining some shred of his dignity. He reached into his pocket to grab a tissue and use it as a compress while he tilted his head forward and reset his broken nose with a sharp stab of additional agony. Still holding onto the pain, far more effective than math he realized, he headed to the bathroom to clean off his shirt.

He didn't say anything to anyone until he sat down in his first period AP Calculus class. The one class, for no reason whatsoever, he wasn't struggling in.

Helen Malinowski was older, bespectacled, an a bit on the crotchety end of the spectrum, but Gene adored her. She didn't put up with any shit whatsoever and she was always there for her students. She could be downright auntish when she wanted to be and she got that way the moment she noticed Gene's nose and the hastily scrubbed blood on his shirt. He was early to class, and the lack of sight on everyone else gave him some small respite and he could move back to the less complex integrals as his aches and pains subsided.

"Gene, what happened?"
"I fell down some stairs." he lied. Badly.

\[ \int u \, dv = uv - \int v \, du \]

"Don't lie to me you're bad at it. Someone hit you, who was it?"

"Alex." he replied truthfully.

"What? I thought you two were...is he abusing you?!" She walked down the aisles to where he was sitting in the back of the room and put a caring hand on his shoulder. Concern and anger, not at him but for him, filled the entire room and bore their way into his soul. He felt just a little bit better knowing that someone cared.

\[ \int \frac{1}{(x+a)^2} \, dx = \frac{1}{x+a} \]

"No. Nothing like that. We broke up last week. He was cheating on me and apparently felt that how I found out was somehow a greater betrayal than what he was doing behind my back."

\[ \int \frac{x^2}{(a^2+x^2)} \, dx = x - \frac{a \arctan x}{a} \]

"Gene, I'm so sorry that happened to you. Would you like me to call the police and get a report started?" She wanted to give him a hug, but it was against pretty much every rule and regulation ever. She was already bending them with the hand on his shoulder.

"No. It's okay. That'll just make things worse." he answered.

\[ \int [x(x+a)^n] \, dx = \frac{(x+a)^{n+1}((n+1)x-a)}{(n+1)(n+2)} \]

"Okay. But I still have to report it to administration and if they decide to do that for you... well, that's the law."

"I know." and he did "But at least that way I can say I'm not a snitch. You know how it is." he tried to put on a brave face for her but it failed and she sighed.

"No, that isn't how it is. It hasn't been that way for a couple hundred years, Gene. The only way 'snitches get stitches' is a thing anymore is if everyone already hates you. What's really going on?"

'Why do you come up in staff meetings? Why did I get this paper to send you to the counselor's office? Christ, tell me. I can't help you if you don't. Please.' she thought and he cursed himself for letting himself slip.

"You have a paper to send me to Ms. McLaughlin's office." Gene answered. He couldn't bring himself to say the words 'I'm a telepath' without crying, but he could give her the hint to tell her anyway. It was just enough separation to manage that.

'Oh. That explains a lot. The distraction, his slipping grade in History, flunking Spanish, Civics, and Economics. How the hell was he still getting an A in my class? He isn't cheating is he? No, if he was he wouldn't be failing the other subjects.'

"Math keeps some of the voices out..." Gene croaked.

'Oh.' Somehow, she didn't mind that he was obviously sensing her inner monologue.

"Gene it's okay. I'm not like a lot of the people here. I have friends who are just like you, and I know you can't control what you sense right now. Come on, I'll take you to Ms. McLaughlin, and we can get you some help, okay?" Helen meant that, she wasn't lying. She never lied to her
"Okay." Gene replied feebly. She helped him, wrote a note on the chalkboard that she might be out for a few minutes, and escorted him through the crowded halls to the main office. He had to endure their judgmental looks and thoughts but at least he felt safe for the first time in weeks. When they got to Paige McLaughlin's office she was sitting at her desk with a cup of coffee.

"Oh hi Helen, Eugene." she said cheerfully, but she was a bit distracted and didn't notice Gene's injuries.

"Why did she bring him here personally?" she wondered. Gene didn't say anything.

"He prefers Gene." Helen replied. "He's been through a lot, I thought it best to make sure he got here safely." At that, Ms. McLaughlin took note of the broken nose and blood and nodded.

"That was probably prudent if that's fresh... I've got him from here Helen, you have a class starting in two minutes."

"Thanks Paige, I'll follow up later. Thank you. And Gene? It's going to be okay. I swear to you." She wasn't lying, but she shut the door and departed, leaving him alone in a room with a master of social work he barely knew.

"I'm a telepath." as soon as he said it, he regretted it. Ms. McLaughlin recoiled into a defensive posture, revulsion stabbed into Gene's mind like a drill.

"Well, looks like you got what was coming to you' she thought about his bloody nose. Gene didn't feel betrayed precisely. Mrs. Malinowski hadn't lied to him, she just didn't know this about her colleague. But it still hurt. It hurt more than being punched in the face had to have an adult, a school counselor, someone he was supposed to be able to trust, who was supposed to help him...hate him like that. He lost it. The dam in his mind broke and he broke down into body-wracking sobs.

"I bet that's how he's still doing well in Calc and Physics. He just pulls the answers from people's heads.'

"Is that why you're still doing well in Math and Physics? Are you cheating?" She asked, indifferent to his tears.

"N-No." He managed to stammer out.

"I don't believe you. You stay right there. I'm gonna go call someone who knows how to deal with the likes of you." by which she meant the Psi Cops. He knew what the Psi Cops would do to someone who violated the privacy of normals. Someone like him. They'd turn him into a
vegetable, or worse. She left him in there, and he heard her use the key to lock him inside.

"Officer O'Roarke?" he heard her speaking to the campus resource officer through the door.

"Yeah?" he replied.

"Make sure the boy in there doesn't leave. He's a telepath and I don't want him getting out until the Psi Cops get here."

"Sure. Sure. I can do that."

He didn't know how long he cried. Eventually the sobs turned weeping, and then tearful whimpering until there just wasn't anything left in his body to spare for tears and he got himself under some sort of control. Just enough for the dread to set in. He sat in there past bell letting him know the first class got out, stewing in blessed isolation. He was behind a few walls from most other people, and for some reason, a locked door helped. The voices were just a dull roar in the back of his mind.

'How much of this is my perception and expectations?' he wondered briefly. Not that it mattered. His life was over. Done. Fin. By the time there was any change whatsoever he was contemplating stringing himself up from the ceiling fan by his pants. That's when he heard something.

"Let me in. Now." came a male voice from the other side of the door.

"I'm sorry sir. I'm not supposed to let anyone by the Psi Cops in." Officer O'Roarke replied coolly.

'Fucking pFreak thinks he can tell me what to do...'

"We don't send Psi Cops after terrified teenagers you ignorant moron. Let me in right the fuck now, or so help me God, I will force the issue."

'Wait, he isn't a Psi Cop? The hell?'

"Are you threatening me?" the officer replied, getting angry at being insulted and challenged.

"No. Just explaining the facts of life." then something happened. Gene didn't know what it was, but he felt something and suddenly the officer became much more compliant because Gene could hear the door unlock and the door opened. Gene stood up to face his fate.

Officer O'Roarke was asleep standing, and whoever the man was, dressed in a black turtleneck and a tweed jacket and wearing black gloves stared at him. Gene could feel something strange again, and the man turned around. Contrary to what he thought that voice would look like, he was a gentle-looking man in his forties wearing round wire-rimmed spectacles.

"You must be Eugene Hendriks." he said gently, an entirely different demeanor to how he'd addressed Officer O'Roarke. To Gene's surprise, he couldn't hear the voices, just a gentle static. "I'm sorry it took me so long to get here, I had to drive all the way from Missoula. I'm Jason Andrews, Psi Corps Education division."

"So... you're not here to arrest me?" Gene asked "Oh, and I prefer Gene."

"No. Of course not Gene. I'm here to protect you from them, and make sure you're safe." Mr. Andrews gave him a once-over. "And you look like you've had a day. Mind if we sit?"

'Them, there's a them?' Gene wondered.
<Yes. Them. Mundanes. There is also an us. You'll learn.> It felt so strange but yet also right to have someone speak directly into his head.

'I suppose I will...' he thought, not knowing how to project his thoughts like that.

<You will. And speaking to me intentionally will be one of the first things, and as natural as breathing.> Already Gene felt better. He felt safe, protected, loved in a parental sort of way. He felt like it was coming from an external source, that Mr. Andrews could project emotions as well as words, but at that point he didn't care. It was something he desperately needed.

"Sure?" Gene replied, sitting back down while Mr. Andrews took Ms. McLaughlin's abandoned chair after shutting the door. "What'd you do to him anyway?"

"Felt that huh? Figures, you're really strong I could sense you pretty far down the hall just sitting here. I put him to sleep, took his keys, and then erased the memory of our conversation. He'll be in for a rude shock when he finds you gone..."

'Woah, okay, what have I gotten myself into?' Gene thought.

"You were born, Gene. That's all. He was being an asshole to deliberately cause you harm by prolonging your suffering, and I dealt with it in the least harmful way possible. He wasn't hurt. Should I have sat there and argued with for five minutes, then called in a Psi Cop just to get the door open? Would that have been the best thing for you right then? Because that is literally all I care about right now. Sure I violated the rules to do it but..."

"No... no you're right. That would have been even dumber than some of the shit I've read from Kafka." Mr. Andrews laughed, though Gene was still having some trouble with the strangeness of it, and then there was no small amount of existential horror that a telepath could rewrite someone's memories like that.

<With great power comes great responsibility.>

"So, what's been going on with you? I got a look at your file on my way down. Looks like you probably started manifesting about two months ago? It's when your grades started to slip."

'He must have been doing this for a while...'

<If have, yeah. Fifteen years.>

"Yeah. I just... couldn't concentrate. Ever. Math was the only thing that helped keep everyone out, and I know enough history that I don't actually need the class most of the time, I just have to remember what we did in class which is hard when you're too busy trying not to find out about people's private lives." Mr. Andrews nodded along as Gene told the whole story from beginning to end. How he woke up one day and went to class and would get flashed of knowledge he shouldn't have, then how the voices picked up, and people started to notice. The ostracism, Alex cheating on him. Everything.

"You seem like you need a hug," God did he. Mr. Andrews wordlessly asked for permission and Gene gave it. He stepped around the desk and wrapped his arms around Gene in nothing less than the fatherly hug his dad used to use when he was six. Gene wept again. Not sobs, there weren't any tears, but it was quiet machinegun weeping from release of emotional tension. He stopped in less than a minute, but Mr. Andrews held on for a few seconds after that until he sensed that the need for it had passed, then took his seat again.

"Kid, I know exactly how you feel."
"Really?" gene asked. "How?" it seemed impossible that this guy could really understand what he was going through and yet...he wasn't lying.

"There's three groups of telepaths within my division. The first are those who raise and teach the little ones. We raise our kids communally, you see. They have to be strong enough to protect their charges and teach them all the techniques they'll need later in life but the most important characteristic is that they're raised in the Corps from a young age."

"Why?"

"Because we have our own culture, and a lot of the time, it's all those of us who were born outside of it can do to assimilate into it. We need people teaching the six year olds who are steeped in it. The second group are people like me. We have to be willing and able to extract a young telepath out of a tough spot and it really helps to have been pulled from the sort of shit you're dealing with. It's the only way to keep going in the face of some of the horrible things we see mundanes do to our kids."<Yes. Our kids. Every telepath is a child of the Corps. That's another thing you'll learn.> Gene just accepted it.

'Fuck it. In for a penny.'

<Might as well dive in...>

"What's the third?" Gene asked "The third group?"

"Oh everyone else. People who don't fit one of more of those categories. There's all sorts of stuff they do. Curriculum design, informational posters, teacher licensing, vetting textbooks, teaching specialized courses in the minor and major academies. All that stuff."

"Huh. Sounds pretty cool." Gene said. Mr. Andrews grinned.

"Speaking of cool things. I have some good news for you."

"What's that?"

"Gene, I've been assessing you while we talk and you're a high-band P12. Psi Cop material, at least by rating I can't speak for disposition or what you might want to do with your life." Gene was stunned. He only had the vaguest sense of what the Psi-Ratings meant, but he knew a P12 was as high as any recorded human telepath had ever gone and they were outright terrifying. Strong enough to kill.<You could have killed people by accident. Hell so can a P5, but you could have killed dozens without meaning to. I'm amazed you didn't. Especially this morning.>

'Holy shit...'

<Holy shit is right. The douchebags outside are lucky that you're pretty level-headed with an internal locus of control.>

"Wait, what? Internal locus of control?"

"Basically, you believe that you control you and what happens to you. It's a personality trait. If it were the other way around and you had an external locus of control or a volatile personality... I've seen that in a bad way when someone goes through the kind of hell you have for the last couple
months."

"I...see." was all Gene could say to that. "So... what's next? Where do we go from here?"

"Hmm. Well, before we leave this office, I'm gonna teach you a more effective way to block out people's thoughts. That way I can stop jamming, it gets tiring after a while. Then, we're going to get you the hell out of this purgatory. I'm thinking lunch, on the Psi Corps' dime, then we go and talk to your parents and see about getting your stuff." Gene was not looking forward to that last part.

"I won't lie to you, It's probably going to suck. But I'll be there the whole time and I won't let them hurt you if your dad goes ballistic." Gene thought it over. He didn't think there was much of a choice, and he did have a lot of books he'd like to maybe take with him wherever he was going to go. What he did know is that he didn't want to stay here. In Hamilton, or for that matter in Montana.

"Sounds like a the best of all possible plans then."
Transfer

Omega VII Colony, Monday January 5th, 2263

Colin arrived at the medical examiner’s office on Omega VII. Even the lobby was sterile with the astringent smell of strong antiseptics and preservatives. The receptionist was a young man in scrubs, busily typing away and taking the occasional call. He looked up, his eyes immediately alighted upon Colin’s black gloves and Psi Corps badge, and Colin picked up the man’s loathing and fear through his blocks. The thoughts of mundanes leak everywhere, and while he was not supposed to pry, well, in a world of the blind why should the seeing man close his eyes all the time?

“Hello sir, what can I do for you?” he was professional enough to hide his bigotry, which Colin thought was something, at least.

“Dr. Shine put in a call to my office. Something about a body. I’m Lieutenant Meier.”

“Oh, right. I’ll buzz you in.” the young man replied. “Second slab on the right.” pointing down the hall.

“Thank you.” Colin said as the magnetic lock on the security door disengaged and the passage into the slabs was open. He walked down the hall a short distance until he reached the second door on the right hand side and knocked.

“Come on in!” came a woman’s voice from the other side, so he pushed the door open and walked in.

“Dr. Shine, I presume?” She was a distinguished black woman probably in her mid to late 40s, hair slightly graying. An epicanthic fold indicated some asian ancestry somewhat recently in the family tree.

“Yeah. Lieutenant Meier?”

“Are there any other Psi Cops on this planet?” Colin gave the medical examiner a look. Another had arrived the day before, but he hadn’t started yet, and Dr. Shine didn’t know that.

“...I suppose not, no.” she replied, feeling somewhat sheepish. Sometimes Colin forgot that not every mundane was terrible. His liaison officer was alright, and pathologists tended toward egalitarianism. Everyone was the same on a slab.

“Anyway, I have something for you”. She unzipped a body bag she had on her slab to reveal a young white woman, no more than thirty with shoulder length brown hair. She could have been pretty if not for the pallor of her skin and the Y incision along her abdominal and thoracic cavities, as well as the fact that her skull had been popped open with a circular saw and then pieced back together like something out of a Shelly novel. Her face however didn’t ring any bells and he knew every single telepath on planet.

“Well, she isn’t one of mine.” Colin said. “So if you need an ID…” something struck him and his stomach sank. “What's the cause of death?”

“Proximate? Multiple hemorrhagic strokes, with numerous brain lesions. Other than that, I was hoping you could tell me.”
“Well, I can’t scan the dead. Do you have imaging?”

‘Shit. Don’t let it be one of ours, don’t let the killer be one of ours.’ Colin silently prayed to a probably-non-existent God.

“Will it even be useful for you?” Dr. Shine replied while calling up the files on a computer terminal.

“I have a Ph.D. in forensic neuropsychology.” he replied lightly and looked at the images. He noticed the pattern of damage immediately. “Ah. Hell.” he said, dejected. “Yeah, this was a telepathic attack. You see those lesions in the anterior cingulate and parieto-insular cortices?” he said, pointing to two blanched white regions of the cerebral cortex folded deep in the sulci, and another area just behind the prefrontal cortex.

“Yeah, I do. Responsible for the physical sensation and emotional perception of pain.”

“Right; but if you look at the Thalamus, it’s normal. No injury to the skull or signs of electric shock or anything like that, the only thing that could have done this is a telepath going in and doing it intentionally.”

“So, what?” she asked “Did the perp go in and hyperstimulate those regions until the neurons burned out?”

“Exactly. Pain increased blood pressure, ruptured the vessels, the victim stroked out.” Dr. Shine’s face went white as a sheet as the implication hit her, but she didn't let it show in her voice or otherwise on her face.

Yeah, not a good way to go.' Colin agreed with her.

“So you are saying she was telepathically tortured to death? How powerful would someone have to be in order to do this?”

‘What can I tell her? There's no policy against informing her of the physical danger a telepath poses, and whoever did this is dangerous. On the other hand, a witch hunt could be even worse. Disorganized reprisals and collective punishment...’

He looked inside her mind, just to take a look at her personality. He saw a decent person, and a skeptical one. If he just parroted official line, she would look up the information and there was enough published that she could put two and two together. Then she’d be pissed and things might not go well. Her own lack of prejudice--which he realized was actually willful blindness--would likely work against him because she wouldn’t realize why he hadn’t told her. On the other hand she was used to dealing with confidentiality, and wasn’t going to dismiss a warning made in good faith. Plus, Colin knew he wouldn’t get anywhere without a pathologist; he didn’t have one on staff, so he didn’t have a choice.

“Okay, I’m asserting jurisdiction over this case, and it’s imperative that nothing I say leave this room. Think you can manage that?”

“Yes, I can.” She replied. He lightly scanned her, she was telling the truth. “Though I would ask why the secrecy is necessary.” Colin decided to beat her over the head with the naked truth.

“If normals knew one of us was hunting them, every telepath on this planet would be at risk. Doctor, I’m not kidding around. If this leaks before I’ve got a handle on it, innocent people could die.” She looked at him confused and Colin quietly bemoaned the ignorance of history cultivated by the Earth Alliance, and the pointed lack of publicity about hate crime statistics, but telepaths
couldn’t be journalists and ISN didn’t talk about what mundanes did to telepaths. He cut her off before she could ask the stupid question he could see forming in her mind.

“I’ll get you a reading list and some summary statistics when I get back to the office, but for now, just think about it. You can’t have gone through life without seeing it. Even if you didn’t pay attention at the time.” Colin knew that laying out a list of incidents would be worthless. She had to be reminded of what she’d undoubtedly seen, and maybe gently nudged.

His statement reminded her of things she’d seen but ignored; not just on Omega VII, but on Proxima III where she was born, and Earth where she did her medical training, to Mars where she spent the last decade. Her mind brought up what she’d seen in life, but at work stood out in her mind. She’d seen the beaten and broken corpses of telepaths. Dozens, of them. Shot, beaten to death, defenestrated. She’d done the work, diligently gathering forensic evidence to use in trials that she only rarely got called to testify at. She never did understand why, chalked it up to jurisdiction or lack of other evidence. Colin reached in and nudged a thought she’d had but never credited--never would credit on her own--up to take center-stage in her mind: She never got called to testify because the trials almost never happened, irrespective evidence.

Once she’d thought it, admitted it into consideration, a lot of things clicked in her mind and she ran with it of her own volition. She remembered her father’s ancestors in the United States who’d been subject to a set of laws called Jim Crow and never saw justice for crimes committed against them for a century, and how for nearly a century after that police would brutalize African Americans with virtual impunity. The knowledge that she’d never spoken out, that she’d been passively complicit through willful blindness, shamed her.

It might not be enough to get her to take an active stand against her entire society, but Colin knew she’d help any way she could short of that. It was enough. Colin didn’t really like manipulating a relatively decent mundane that way, but in the absence of an impartial arbiter, it was best to look to consequences; and lives were on the line. He’d take the life of even one of his own people over a mundane’s capacity to wallow in denial.

“I won’t say a damned thing until you want me to.” she finally replied, and she was telling the truth.

“Alright. Basically, we only train P8s and higher in attack probes under normal circumstances, because those are typically used to neutralize other telepaths.”

'Sometimes mundanes, but let's not go there.'

“Bloodhound units, military intelligence specialists, that sort of thing. Telepaths, even weak ones, have defenses that make it difficult to do damage like this so we only use strong ones for those jobs. A P5 can make a mess out of a normal with some effort, but we don't train them for it.” he left out the fact that simply killing a mundane was even easier than what this perpetrator had done.

“But if they’re not trained, how does someone manage it?” Dr. Shine asked.

'Good question.'

“Without a training curriculum, what someone figures out how to do on their own can be pretty random, and some of it is conceptual. It simply wouldn’t occur to the average commercial telepath to hurt someone unless their life was in danger, and even then doing so is illegal.”

“Wait wait wait… let me get something straight. You mean to tell me that a telepath can’t defend themselves if attacked?” she asked incredulously.
'I know, right? Crazy, isn't it' Colin thought.

“With their telepathy, that’s correct. If a telepath has a gun, they can use that, but they can’t use their minds. If someone tried to rape a commercial telepath, that telepath could be arrested if she used her abilities to stun her rapist. Now, Psi Cops, Bloodhounds and the like are different, but in the general case, that’s the law.” She looked at him aghast. He didn’t need to poke around inside her head to know that she was deeply disturbed by that. Mission accomplished. She would look up the laws later.

“Have there been other victims?” he asked.

“Not that I know of. My predecessor retired a month ago, I haven’t gone through the old files yet.”

“If you could look into older records, it would be of service. If this world were closer to earth or the political situation less tenuous, I’d have more investigative staff but I don’t. I don’t know if I can win a jurisdictional fight on other cases unless I come in with an established pattern. I don’t want to burden you, but I really don’t have much choice. This colony only barely rejoined the Earth Alliance after Sheridan's little insurrection.”

“I can do that, sure. What would you need me to pull?”

“Anything involving brain trauma. Strokes, aneurysms, any kind of lesion. I’ll need the full autopsy reports, including photos if you have them. Don’t be selective, send me everything. Do you and Earth Force Security share common case numbers?”

“Ummm, yes. Yes we do.” Dr. Shine replied, after a brief consideration. “Any death that comes to my slabs has at least a nominal case file with the police, just in case. I can pull the whole files.”

'Thank God for data sharing'

“Lovely. Alright, can you copy the files and send them directly to my office?”

“Sure.”

“Thank you. I need to go muster the troops, such as they are. It’s been a pleasure meeting you.”

“Likewise.” and she was telling the truth, so was he, which he inwardly admitted was a pleasant change of pace when working with mundanes. “It may take me a few days to go through them.”

“That’s fine. Not much we can do until that’s done, or if the killer strikes again. In any case, I’ll be seeing you.” he put out his gloved hand, which she took and firmly shook.

Colin left past the sneering receptionist and out into the open air of Omega VII colony. Surface gravity was about .8 Gs, with a rich nitrox atmosphere. There was even indigenous life, albeit highly surreal and incompatible with life from Earth due to dextro amino acid enantiomers. The buildings were plentiful and tended to be tall. Space was not at a premium, and gravity was less a problem for tall buildings than it was on Earth. The civic infrastructure was good solid construction. Lots of steel, concrete, well-made glass; water was plentiful on this world and there were a good number of fountains. Yet all but the richest were just a little bit more gaunt than they should have been—or at least a little bit below the body condition he was accustomed to seeing on Earth or Mars. It wasn’t starvation or anything, but food was mostly imported and thus expensive, so people ate a bit leaner on average.

He walked to his groundcar; a relatively large black sedan with the Psi Corps logo stenciled on the side in silver. A few mundanes illegally crossed the street to avoid him but he intentionally didn’t
react, even as he privately wished the traffic was heavier. It was uncharitable and vindictive, he knew. That they were raised to hate and fear him wasn’t their fault, but that didn’t mean it didn’t hurt every single time. He wasn’t about to begrudge himself the cathartic fantasies of street pizza.

When he reached the vehicle he started up the electric engine, and headed back to the Psi Corps annex.

... 

The annex was a walled compound, almost like a roman villa. Offices, lab space and a common area that included a kitchen were on the ground floor built around a central atrium. Living quarters were on the upper floor, and could accommodate far more staff than they actually had. There was a basement under the facility that had a training area, prisoner intake, and a small number of cells. Colin walked through the automated security checkpoint with a swipe of his identicard and a retinal scan, and then sent out a thought as powerfully as he could muster to penetrate the intervening walls and lack of vision.

<Summon the hounds. My briefing room, fifteen minutes.>

He got back a reply from Eugene Hendriks

<Woof! Woof!>

Colin rolled his eyes, though he had to admit, he set himself up for that one and couldn’t help but be amused.

He went to his office, and true to her word, Dr. Shine had sent over the case file. He threw together a really quick presentation with the relevant images and data on the victim, and sent Dr. Shine a history lesson by way of a reading list. By the time he was done, he was exactly on time as the rest were filing in. He loaded the presentation and got started, taking a quick mental roll call. His subordinates were six metapol support staff, rated between P4 and P7. Another two were legal attache’s, both rated P9 and directly assigned to him. Every single one of them were, at his insistence, trained to the limit of their abilities in psionic combat, and had put in some time in a gun range. If he couldn’t have Bloodhounds, his staff would need to be able to defend themselves.

Then there was Eugene, a strong P12 who’d transferred from Military division a year earlier and gone through crash retraining. Calling him an intern might be something of a stretch given his prior career trajectory, but that was still his technical classification.

“Alright everyone, before we get started, at some point during this briefing, I am going to try to scan you all. I won’t actually be looking for anything, just seeing if you are on the ball. You will know why pretty soon.” They muttered amongst themselves and he felt the texture of their minds smooth out and clam up behind their blocks. Eugene smirked at him from the back of the room. Colin clicked to the first image, the face of the victim, happy and smiling as she appeared on one of her social media profile pages.

“This is Francine Smith. A twenty-eight-year-old transplant from earth. She got here about a year ago and worked as a municipal surveyor; unmarried, no children. She is also dead.” he clicked to the next, which showed her body on the slab just before she was opened up. Her skin had taken on the grey pallor of death that comes with early decomposition, but she had not yet begun to bloat. “She was found in a public dumpster off Eastbound Route Zed” describing one of the municipal loops.

“Colin?” piped up one of the legal attache’s, a hispanic woman in her forties with steel colored hair
named Erika. “Why is this our case? She was a mundane.” the rest murmured in agreement

“Good question Erika, here is why.” and he clicked over to the brain scans. “Who can tell me what happened to her?”

“She was attacked by a telepath.” Eugene answered

“What makes you say that?”

“Anyone who’s been trained in attack probes knows what a precise telepathic attack looks like, even if we don’t know what was hit. That doesn’t look like an aneurysm and she’s too young for a stroke.” Eugene said.

’Good. This one has a head on his shoulders... but let's see how well he does...’

While everyone was looking at Eugene, Colin struck. He decided not to scan them, but to send an image of Rebo and Zooty in the horrifying comedic nude straight to the inferior temporal lobe, bypassing the rest of the visual system. With that image, he lashed out at their minds. The mental construct he used to conceptualize his active probe took the form of lashing tendrils that struck out to penetrate their skulls. His staff did not do particularly well. The public relations specialist Gerald Foresythe was only a P4. Unless he devoted everything he had to his blocks, they couldn’t do much more than register but not really enforce refusal. His defenses shattered like a window struck with a sledgehammer.

He didn’t even know he was being probed until the disturbing mental image of one overweight blowhard and his slim silent-type companion showed up painfully in his entire visual perception without spatial information or context. He reflexively tried to cover his eyes, even though he knew it wouldn’t help.

“Bloody hell, fuck you, you jack-booted shitgibbon!” he shouted. Colin knew he didn’t mean the jack-booted part.

His forensic accountants Su Cheng and Eduardo Gomez had better blocks up, but they were not expecting that particular probe and let him control the Imago. They had no idea how to deal with tentacles, and got the same treatment.

“Dios! Porque?!” Eduardo protested in his mother tongue. Su just winced and pinched the bridge of her nose.

’Ugh why!?’ She thought, and Colin caught it.

Hoshi Tanaka was a P7 and forensic scientist, and she did know how to deal with tentacles. She let him control the Imago and her response to it was to come at the tentacle with a mental cleaver. He could get through if he pushed, but that wasn’t the point of the exercise. She beamed at him. Then raised her middle finger to her right eye, pulled down her lower eyelid and stuck her tongue out at him.

<Gonna have to do better than that!> She sent at him.

Of the P6 pair, both of whom were computer analysts and cryptographers, Franklin Okumba managed to keep him out with a simple hard block, completely ignoring the construct.

“Nope!” Franklin replied “Do not want!”. He furrowed his brow and tried to send something back, but Colin never found out what it was. The probe plinked off his own defenses.
Hassan Hussein was blind-sided, and his defenses collapsed. He blurted out something in Arabic that Colin didn’t actually catch.

The legal telepaths did better, they were both more powerful and kept confidential information; their habitual blocks were sufficient to exclude him with a slight frown in his direction from Erika Flores. Max Cohen just grinned cheekily at Colin as the probe washed against his defenses ineffectually.

Gene was another matter entirely. His defenses were particularly spiky, in this case literally. The tentacle reached out and impaled itself on a forest of sharp spines, sending a stabbing pain through Colin’s mind that caused him to break contact reflexively with a wince. Gene just sat there with a smug expression.

<Well played.> Colin mindcast at him

'Passed his first exam...'

“Good job for those of you who succeeded.” Colin said. “That is what we are dealing with, and I did that to remind you of the importance of keeping up your blocks. We don’t know how powerful this guy is. He could be anything from a P5 to a P12” Colin glyphed them images of randomly constructed faces by way of demonstration.

“When he knows the Psi Corps is on to him, he may strike at us. He could fry your synapses and turn you into a vegetable, activate your pain centers and set them on loop, send a message to your brain stem and send you into a ventricular fibrillation.” He sent another image, one of an EKG in VF, followed by flatline.

“Or, if he’s not overly creative, he can just brutally scan you. Oh sure, we could probably reconstruct you into something that is mostly human. We could certainly get you to the point where you can feed yourself, but you’ll never be you again.” He sent them another image of a memorial service while a nice orderly teaches someone who looked like Hassan how to walk.

“He may be powerful enough to suborn Earth Force Security outright--even if they would or could help, which they probably won’t, not willingly.” he continued, and they nodded in disgust. There might be one who might, Colin mused, but he could be compromised like the rest of them. “Guys” Colin continued, backing down from superior officer mode down to friend and colleague mode “I know this seems like a quiet posting, and I put you all through an assault course when I first got here so you might feel a bit invulnerable but please, don’t get complacent. If something happened to you I couldn’t live with myself.” Colin turned to Gerald, who looked uneasy. “I know you can’t sustain heavy blocks all the time like rest of us. So be careful. The rest of us have your back. Always.”

“The Corps is Mother, The Corps is Father” they all said, in unison, and the room filled with protective affection for Gerald, who blushed and hunched into his own shoulders in mild embarrassment, but nonetheless appreciated it.

<Thanks Ladies and Gents> Gerald sent to everyone in turn. He couldn't group-cast, but he could do it in rapid sequence.

“Good. You’re all dismissed, except Hendriks. My office, if you don’t mind?”

“Sure.” the slightly younger man replied, and followed him into an office. There was the usual office furniture: a desk with a few chairs, file cabinet, computer terminal; and walls of books on a variety of subjects from criminal psychology to forensic entomology; including early production
runs of every book ever written by Carl Jung, all of them in German, except for one. Colin was missing ‘Der Mensch und Seine Symbole’. He kept the spot open for it, but it was hard to find print copies in the native language.

“Take a seat? Please?” Colin asked, and Eugene sat in the chair facing the desk while Colin sat in his swivel chair. Colin hadn't had time to really assess him when he arrived, so took the opportunity to mentally appraise him and his body language.

First approximation: Eugene had sandy blonde hair and blue eyes and was a bit taller than Colin was at 180 centimeters. Eugene clearly enjoyed his mandatory time in the gym and Colin would guess he was around 85 kilos. Colin exercised and even lifted because he had to, but didn’t enjoy it, and had a lighter build as a result.

Second pass: Calm and relaxed demeanor and open body posture. He wasn’t nervous; the opposite, he was sure of himself. He seemed almost giddy, but kept it contained. His behavior during the briefing indicated someone who paid attention and had a sense of humor; but there was a hard edge there too if his standard block was also an attack. The way he moved backed that up too. Colin was looking at a man who knew he could take someone apart with his bare hands as well as his mind, but who didn’t want to do it.

Colin liked what he saw. In fact, a little imp of a perverse reared its head in his thoughts that Eugene was kinda cute. Colin turned his gaze inward and glared at that imp until it went away back into the depths of his own mind.

“That was good block. If you can attack your opponent while defending yourself, that’s always good. Less effort. And you used my own constructs against me, that is excellent. You think on your feet well.”

“I suspect it says that in my file, sir.” Gene responded. Colin was starting to think that cocky smirk arcing across his face was a fixture. It suited him.

“Indeed it does.” Colin confirmed “It also says you were in Military division where you worked within Earth Force, but most of your record including who you worked for is code-word classified. I know there’s not much you can really say about that but why’d you ask for a transfer in the first place?” There were all kinds of reasons why someone might do that, but it wasn’t usually to Metapol. The Psi Cops really only got starry-eyed idealist recruits at a young age, not war-and-worse-weary Military division veterans.

“I know what the score is. Transferring to Metapol isn’t exactly a ticket to removal from combat stress, moral injury, and risk to life and limb; but I have skills that I’m damn proud of. I don’t want to waste them. I just got sick and fucking tired of being an attack dog for mundanes. I made that pretty clear to my handler and she got me out. <I won’t be used like that anymore, Sir.> the very thought left a bitter taste in his mouth that Eugene mindcast with the words, and there was anger and shame written all over his face. It didn't take a psychologist to know that Eugene had been forced to do things he found repugnant, and Colin was one and wanted to cross the desk and give the man a hug. It was obvious to Colin that living that life for seven years left scars that still bothered Eugene, but he restrained the impulse. Eugene was a later and he didn't want to brush up against his boundaries.

'What the hell did they do to you?’ Colin thought from behind his own mental barriers.

“There’s no need to be ashamed, Eugene. Mundanes make the rules, and their rules mean we either comply or we all die.” Colin softened his voice “That shit’s on them, not you. It clearly bothers
you though and I’m here to listen. If you ever need to talk, I know it might take a while, but that
offer stands.”

“I appreciate that.” Eugene said. His face said it wasn’t an empty platitude either, even if his mind
betrayed nothing.

“Good. Now, for something a bit more business related, you did a year of retraining and I’m
seeing rave assessments from your instructors, but I wouldn’t mind a subjective assessment.
Strengths, weaknesses that sort of thing. I’d like to get an idea about what my new partner can do
and what we need to work on.” it didn’t necessarily mean there actually were. But what he thought
he was weak with might give Colin an idea about his ability to self-assess. If he couldn’t think of
anything where he could use improvement he might be too self-assured and might need to be taken
down a peg, for his own safety if nothing else.

“Wait, what?” Eugene got a look on his face reminiscent of a 20th century mystery solving dog
cought out by something confusing. It was glorious.

“How is your scanning? Let’s start there.” completely deadpan.

“Well, I’ve never met anyone I couldn’t crack, but I meant the first part…”

“I know” Colin could not hide a smirk of his own. “I deal with rogue telepaths, the locals are
hostile, and I have a potential serial killer. Someone watching my back would be nice, and you
already have the baseline skills necessary for that, I think. Hell, you might actually be
overqualified for that part. But there’s stuff they can’t teach you at the academy, things you have to
experience with a mentor under field conditions”

<They can only teach you how things are supposed to go? Not how they actually do?>

<Yeah.> Colin replied <And not because they don’t know.>

<Not permitted. I know.>

<That, and there are just some things you have to see and feel for yourself.> Colin told him.

“Depending on how things go, I’ll have a convenient opening in my roster when your internship is
done. I have no intention of actually treating you like an intern anyway, except where required for
institutional checkboxes.”

“Oh. Right. That makes sense. It’s not like I’m some rookie twenty-year-old.” Eugene took a
second to collect his thoughts “Well I’m particularly good at puppeteering and reality fabrication. I
struggle with memory implantation though; mine tend to be a bit sloppy. Bits of the old memory
get left behind or incorporated into the new one.” Colin looked over the graded assessments. He
was actually very good at memory implantation.

'Maybe that's an insecurity?’ Colin thought to himself, but nodded.

“Alright. We can work on that.” Colin replied “Memory modification takes a certain finesse that
some people just don’t have the temperament for it. We’ll see how you do with some practice. I
mean, it isn’t like you can practice very readily under optimal conditions, but you’ll get plenty of
practice.” Eugene laughed a little before he went serious again. He’d definitely had to modify
memories under field conditions before.

“Um...sir?”
“Yes?”

“Well, I would appreciate it if you just called me Gene. I’m Hendriks to mundanes, and don’t really like how Eugene rolls off the tongue.” Colin smiled with a warm chuckle, he could definitely get to like this one.

“I was actually just about to request that you just call me Colin. We’re going to be working together pretty closely and I never really cared for formality among telepaths. Not among family.”

“Alright Colin” Gene replied, extending his hand.

“Welcome to Metapol, Gene.” he took the hand and shook.

...  

Mr. Foresythe answered a call, his british accent crisp and decidedly posh.

“Omega VII Psi Corps Annex, this is Gerald, how can I help you?”

“Hi Gerald” said a voice on the other end, somewhat haltingly, like she felt nervous about what she was doing or who she was calling. “This is Evelyn Walker, I teach at Humboldt Secondary. I’m calling to check in one of my students--former students I suppose.”. That got Gerald’s attention, there hadn’t been any new inductions in the past week and none of them from that school; not that he remembered anyway. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to check.

‘Why the bloody hell is she calling us? Shouldn't she be calling Education division?’

“Alright, can I get the name?”

“Antony Salleri” she replied. Gerald started typing.

“Let me enter that information in.” Gerald typed the name into his database. Parents were Michelle and Roberto Salleri, immigrated ten years ago from Florence. He looked up their files, and frowned. He hadn’t missed anything, the Corps had no record of Antony other than his EarthGov files.

'Bollucks...’

“It’ll take a few minutes to connect, so while we wait, why don’t you tell me what happened with him.” he lied disarmingly

“Well, he collapsed screaming in class this morning. I teach english and he was nervous about a presentation on Oedipus Rex. I called the nurse and he said he might be a telepath who manifested suddenly.”

“Yeah, we call it a mind-burst. Sometimes it happens slowly and the mind can get used to the extra input. Sometimes it’s like a light-switch, and it’s like throwing open the blinds and staring at the sun.”

“That sounds… awful.” she said, sympathy in her voice.

“It’s bloody unpleasant, but we can help him. You’re not the one who called the Corps, were you?”

“Uh, no. The principal or the nurse is supposed to do that, but they’re also supposed to let me know and that hasn't happened yet and I'm getting a little worried.” she paused “Wait. You’re
fishing. What’s going on?”

“You caught me.” Gerald said, and sighed “We don’t have a record of Antony. No one’s called us. That gives me reason to believe he’s being trafficked.”

“Oh God” she croaked

“This is important: don’t inform anyone you called us. Not the nurse, not the principal, not the secretary. No one. I’m dispatching Psi Cops.”

“Thank you.” the woman said, and promptly disconnected. For his part, Gerald typed up and sent a very clipped message to Colin’s console.

Colin you glorious tosser,

Actioned on twelve year old student at Humboldt Secondary, Antony Selleri, probable mindburst. Tests genetic negative for telepathic ability, it is possible parents are also telepaths. English teacher called to check on him thinking he was in our custody, school administration never informed us. Probable case of human-trafficking. Relevant documents attached.

Regards,

Gerald Foresythe

Colin got the message as he was filling Gene in on the political situation of Omega VII. He read it and frowned.

‘Fuck’

“Mind if we cut this short? Duty calls.” He said, trying not to tip Gene off just yet or bias him. This would be a teachable moment.

“Not at all” Gene replied “Mind if I see the case file?”

“You’re coming with me, so by all means” and he duplicated his display over to the other side of the desk. Gene read all the documents over.

“Question” Gene stated “Well, two actually”

“Sure.”

“Why does Gerald call you a ‘glorious tosser’, and why does he suspect the parents?” Colin could not help but laugh.

“We bond by trading insults in British. As for the second bit, look in the parent’s file. It is all in there. Pay attention to current job placement and education.”

“It says here they are employed as management consultants…” he looked down to the education
column “And they have no education past secondary school. So why on earth would anyone hire
them as management consultants?”

‘Quick on the uptake, good, just a little prod.’

“Unless…”

And then it clicked “Unless they were being hired for illegal scans or some other services. They
put their son in school because they both test negative and they were confident he could slip
through”

“Homeschooling is also illegal and his existence is known, they didn’t have much choice in the
matter. What are your thoughts on the case?”

“The school may have tipped off the parents or their employer and they went to ground, but there is
another possibility. Telepathic kids fetch a premium on the black market, and that seems most
likely to me right now.”

“Why?” Colin asked

“Mostly gut feeling. But there’s one thing about the parents that bothers me. Why would he take a
mind burst? If his parents were telepaths, wouldn’t they have trained him to block the voices out?”
as Gene spoke, Colin caught a flash of bitterness about the subject of parents.

‘Huh. Good point. Why didn't I consider that? Gerald psychologically priming me I suppose.’

Colin stood up and put on his PPG belt while he answered “That's a good point. Even if they're not
trained they would have had to get pretty good at blocking out thoughts and keeping their own in to
not be noticed by now. We teach kids how to do that before they manifest..."

“Well I suppose the only way to find out is to get there as soon as possible.” Gene replied,
shrugging.

“Yep. Grab your PPG.” Gene armed himself and they both went outside to the secure parking area
and hopped into a groundcar.

…

It was mid afternoon by the time they got to the campus, which reminded Colin a great deal of the
minor academy in Geneva. Classroom buildings were constructed of red brick and arranged
around a well-manicured grass lawn; or astroturf. Remembering where he was it was definitely
high-quality astroturf given the problems with agriculture. Most transit was done using maglev so
the parking lot was relatively small, and Colin directed the computer to take him to one of the
faculty spaces. Government plates exempted him from the parking police.

After they both exited the vehicle and made sure the doors were locked, Colin looked for the
office. The building with the biggest glass doors or most imposing entrance was probably it.
There it was, conveniently marked with the motto “Die gefährlichste Weltanschauung ist die
Weltanschauung derer, die die Welt nie angeschaut haben.”

“Good motto” Colin said.

“What does it mean? I uh, don't actually speak German.” Gene asked.

“The most dangerous worldview is the worldview of those who have not viewed the world” Colin
replied.

“You’re right, that is a good motto.”

They could already p’hear the silent keening of the boy’s mind inside their own heads. Mindbursts could force someone into unconsciousness, but when they woke up their minds were only adapted enough to all that extraneous input and confusion not to shut down again, it could be agonizing. And it wasn’t just that. He was terrified about something else but Colin couldn’t tell what it was at this distance through intervening walls. Colin looked over at Gene, he looked like he was in pain. Not physical pain, but emotional. He kept it under wrap, but what he shielded on his mind, the grimace and tensed muscles gave away. Gene might not have gone through a mindburst, but this reminded him of something he did experience.

Whatever else it was, to penetrate walls like that with his soundless scream, the kid was strong. They walked inside, gloves and badges announcing their identity to the secretary. A somewhat portly man who looked to be in his early forties, with a bushy mustache.

“We’re here to retrieve Antony Selleri, I assume he is in the nurse’s office?” Colin asked the secretary, politely displaying his credentials. The kid was still screaming at the top of his mind, which did not speak well of the people who were supposed to be looking out for him.

<Jesus Christ, why don’t they at least sedate him?> Gene asked, clearly frustrated and angry. Colin couldn’t blame him. His own rage was starting to climb into the stratosphere.

<I can think of a few reasons, none of them especially good.>

“I am sorry sirs, I am not at liberty to release that information.” the secretary replied coolly. He wasn’t sorry at all.

“You can, and you will, one way or the other. You can’t hear it but Antony is in pain and terrified and that I simply will not have.”

“You-you can’t scan me. You need my permission to scan me!”

Colin looked around, he was the only mundane in the vicinity. It was so tempting to just rip the information he wanted from the secretary’s mind.

“Have it your way then. I will need to speak with the principle then about Mr. Selleri” and he gently probed his surface thoughts. He didn’t actually know anything other than an apparent call to the nurse’s office earlier. The principal however, had asked to not be disturbed.

“I am afraid he is indisposed”

<I bet he is…> he sent to Gene.

<I hate officious little shits like this.> Gene replied, and glyphed Colin a memory of a tweed-clad telepath staring at a sleeping police officer. Civilian, not military, which meant it was on Earth where posse comitatus rules were still in force. He wasn’t about to interrogate Gene, but he filed it away to ask about later.

“Alright then, I guess I’ll just have to search. Have a nice day.” and both Colin and Gene moved to walk past him. The secretary tried to get up and position himself between the Psi Cops and the entrance into the halls.

“I am sorry sirs, I cannot let you in with-” Colin was done, and cut him off with a pointed stare,
reaching back toward his handcuffs.

“Shut the fuck up before I arrest you for obstruction. I can’t hold you for long, but you’ll be in our custody for two days. Is that what you want?” he commanded and put just a little bit of effort into a telepathic suggestion. Just enough to nudge the officious secretary’s decision making processes. He sat back down. The two telepaths walked past him into the hallways. The nurse’s office was next to the front office of the school, and no one but an overworked nurse was in there, the mental scream was from farther in.

“Shouldn’t he have been taken to the nurse’s office?” Gene asked. "Or maybe the counselor?"

“Yeah, that’s typical. The secretary must have been intentionally mislead. This is… odd. I don't like this.” Colin poked his head into the room and saw the school nurse, a young man of african extraction with the abnormally lanky build of a martian busily tending to a few mundane students who looked to be physically injured.

“Good afternoon.” Colin said, showing his credentials. “I’m here for Antony Selleri, but it seems he isn’t here.” One of the students shrunk away from the door, the other just stared with his mouth agape while having his knee wrapped up in medical tape. The nurse seemed like he was busy and not up to anything nefarious, but that impression didn't stop Colin from dropping his defenses enough to pick up the stray thoughts of the mundanes in the room.

'Oh fuck he's gonna rape my mind!' From the scared one.

'Woah. Someone's in deep shit! Cool!' From the one getting his knee taken care of.

'What the hell is going on? Why are the Psi Cops here for Antony shouldn't the Education teeps have shown up by now?' From the nurse.

“Just a second” he said finishing up “Alright Jarric, you're done.” he stood up and took off the pair of purple nitrile gloves he was wearing, tossing them into the trash bin marked biohazard next to the sharps container. Both kids bolted past the two Psi Cops for the safety of the completely open and empty hallway that provided no security at all.

<Okay, the one was kinda funny, the other. Ugh.> Gene grumbled.

<Welcome to the Psi Cops. We get that a lot. Mazeltov!> Colin answered, glyphing him a long-suffering grin.

“Sorry about that, some idiots” he looked past the door to the students to glare at them pointedly in their ineffectual hiding places peering around a corner “decided to turn a flag football game during phys ed into a full contact game without padding. Brian Burrows.” he reached out to shake hands, Colin obliged him.

“Colin Meier, this is my associate Gene Hendriks.”

“Good to meet you.” Gene said, shaking hands with the nurse. “So, we’re here about Antony.” Gene pressed.

“Right. I examined him just before lunch but Principal Stork said he’d take care of him and call you. Lunch is my busiest time of day between pubescent fools getting into fights, and administering medication…shouldn’t he be in the office?”

“He isn’t. Neither is Principal Stork. Antony is still in the building though.” Colin replied, in response the nurse’s expression turned worried.
"That's...really odd. Is he running?"

“How do you know?” Brian asked, trying to fish for information.

“Because we can still sense him here, he’s still having a mind-burst.” Colin said through gritted teeth and the only thing Brian Burrows thought about was how worried he was for Antony and how angry he was at whoever was doing it to him.

“What the fuck?” he paused. “Look, I’ve got a kid sister in the Corps. I know the statistics, you can’t be thinking..."

'No. No not one of my kids, no no NO!'"

"Do you need me to help search?"

“No, finding him shouldn’t be hard, we just wanted to take the time to eliminate you as a suspect.” Colin said. “We’ve done that, and will get out of your hair. But… thank you for the offer. I mean that.”

"That's fair. Go Go!"

“No problem. Don’t waste time with me. Go.” Neither Psi Cop had any intention of it and ducked out of the room without another word.

To find Antony, all they had to do was relax their blocks. That allowed them to localize the psionic wail. It led them down a long hallway to the other side of the main building to a door that looked like a disused classroom or large storage closet. Colin tried to open the door, but it was locked.

“Physical key. I have a cracker for electronic ones but this one is old school. You were taught infiltration techniques?” Colin asked

“Yeah...”

“Did that include lockpicking?”

“Absofuckinglutely!” and with that, Gene got down on a knee, took a lockpicking kit from his pocket and got to work with a dizzying array of little probes.

“And you carry the equipment around with you.”

“Never leave home without it in point of fact...and... got it!” He got up the instant the lock popped open with an audible clack, and opened the door. A boy, a little on the paunchy side with curly black hair and glasses was duct taped to a chair that had long-since toppled over. He was breathing extremely rapidly through his nose, every single muscle was taught like steel wire. On top of that, the kid had a fresh bruise over his left cheek-bone.

“What. The. Fuck. Is. This?” Gene demanded of no one in particular; his face twisted in rage, but carefully controlled so it wouldn't leak out and affect Antony.

'OOUT! OOUT! NOT MINE!' Antony's mental voice rang out, in pain, terrified, his mind invaded by an avalanche of foreign input with no coping mechanism or way to maintain his own distinctness without trying to drown them out with his own mental voice.

"Just what it looks like" Colin replied and rushed over to the kid, picking up the chair. He left the
duct tape on for the moment, audible screaming would not make this any easier. He spoke directly into the boy’s mind.

‘MAKE IT STOP! IT HURTS! VOICES NOT MINE!’ Colin extended his mental shield over Antony’s mind, not enough to fully block out the voices in his head, but enough to take the edge off and let him think. Then Colin projected his own mental voice, cutting through the din of mundanes.

<Antony, I am here to help you. I need you to focus. Focus on me.> he snapped his fingers to draw the kid’s attention <Focus on me and I can help you block out the voices inside your head> that got him to calm down a little bit.

‘It hurts it hurts, they won’t stop, make them stop!’ The poor kid didn’t know how to project his thoughts and the duct take kept him from speaking, but he could still get the message and think at someone. He knew what he was, at least.

<You need to learn how to do it on your own Antony, best to learn right now. I need you to imagine your mind like it’s an unfinished room and the voices are a hurricane outside, can you do that?> Colin p’ saw the barebones structure forming in Antony’s consciousness as he thought of the image and held it. <Good, Good. Now, finish the walls. Imagine the walls rising and blocking out the storm.> and he managed it. Colin could p’see that wall rising up and up, until he stood in the frame of an imaginary window. Antony calmed down quickly now that his world made sense. Colin eased back his shield and the rudimentary block held.

<Awesome Antony! Great job. Now let’s get this tape off you.>

‘Thank you…’ Colin got the tape off Antony’s mouth first, and Gene helped by cutting the tape off his hands and feet.

“Th-thank you. I feel a lot better.” Antony said once he could speak. “It’s…taking a lot to hold that house in my head though.”

“My pleasure Antony. I’m Colin, this is Gene. And you’ll get better at it, find ways that work for you. That’s just a really basic block that’s easy to teach in a hurry. If the gloves and badges didn’t give it away, we’re with the Psi Corps.”

“Psi Corps!?” Antony started with no small amount of alarm. He still didn’t understand what happened to him and was raised to distrust telepaths in general and the Psi Corps in particular.

‘But… they helped me, and they seem nice…’

“Yeah. Don’t worry, rumors of our evil have been… over-hyped.” Gene assured him with a warm smile.

<This… this I could get used to.> Gene remarked to Colin.

<Best part of the job.> Colin replied.

“How’d you end up like this?” Colin asked. He could pull the information out of the Antony’s mind, but he’d probably notice, and it would be rude. He needed to build trust, and this was how to do it.

“I had a presentation in english and I… I get pretty bad stage fright and it just happened. I don’t remember much about what happened after that. I woke up here and Principal Stork just got
finished taping me down. I must have said something he didn’t like because he told me to stay out of his head and… he hit me.” he started to cry. Remembering that betrayal hurt him more than the fist had.

Gene didn't bother shielding the pang of sympathy he felt and Colin was starting to get a clearer picture of Gene's personal history, but he stepped up, and Colin felt the memory percolating up into his mind.

"Antony, is it okay if I give you a hug? You seem like you need it." Gene asked. Antony registered the question and nodded. It didn't matter to him if he just met these people. They obviously cared and he needed someone he could trust and he needed the human comfort of physical contact. And Gene gave him that, letting Antony cry it out on his shoulder, talking to him in hushed tones.

"Shhh. It's okay. He’s never going to do that again. He is never going to hurt anyone again Antony, I promise. I know you've had a rough time, but I swear to you it gets better."

It impressed Colin immensely. Metapol didn't train people for this. It was something someone either already knew or had to learn. Gene already knew exactly what to do, and Colin got the distinct impression it was because someone else had done the same for him.

"What the hell was he doing in Military division? He was wasted in there. Scratch that, what the shit happened to him?’ he thought to himself. Colin would have joined in, but he sensed that maybe that would have been too much for Antony, but not Gene. Definitely not him. It took a few minutes, but Antony regained his composure enough to speak and signaled to Gene to let him go by letting go himself.

“Where are your parents? Are they like us? Yes, that includes you.” Colin asked, down on one knee at eye-level with Antony, who hadn't gotten up off the chair.

“Oh um, no. I don’t think so. They’re in business with my Godfather’s consulting firm.”

<Well, that explains that. Family hire. Guess you can’t be right all the time> Gene sent, poking him a little.

<They might be low on the scale, it would give them an advantage at work that’s not reflected in their schooling. Antony is pretty strong—I would guess somewhere between a P10 and P12, The odds of that cropping up among mundanes is low. I wouldn’t be shocked if they were.>

<Would we have to take them if they were?>

<Our call. The genetic screen would probably come up negative for at least his mom. Hell, if they are P2s or lower we can just keep them monitored after a brief induction. If we can take them in though we should. The Corps is Mother, and Corps is Father, but I’ve always found that the transition to that reality is easier if a biological family doesn’t have to be abruptly split.>

The bell rang, signaling the transition between class periods, and Gene shut the door. It would hedge out cognitive freight train just a little. A sudden onslaught of mundanes Antony could see might overwhelm his fragile mental barrier.

“Don’t worry Antony” Gene told him “I was just like you once, and Corps taught me how to keep those voices out much easier, and more besides. It just takes some practice. One day you’ll be able to keep those walls up without noticing, or even listen to an entire city and enjoy it if you want.”
Then they felt it. Several adult minds approached the door to the storage room, they were angry, afraid, and ready for a fight, but their PPGs weren’t drawn due the possibility of witnesses.

Both telepaths drew PPGs and whirled around as the door opened to see Principal Storck, or so they presumed. A reedy looking man in tweed, flanked by two much larger men in… fake Psi Corps uniforms. They stepped inside.

“Should I be professionally offended?” Gene asked.

“Yes, but I’m more curious to know why a school principal beats a child and tapes him to a chair inside a glorified closet to stew in his own uncontrolled telepathy. But before we find that out, I think someone needs to shut the door.” he spoke that last bit with the force of command, and as if of its own volition, the left hand of the left-most hired-muscle shut the door. This fact was somewhat surprising to the henchman who at that point looked equal parts terrified and pissed off. His right hand went for a PPG at his side, but then he froze in place. As did the other two men.

“I can hold them in place, if you want to go dumpster-diving.” Gene said, as the three men faintly shook in position.

“Think I just might.” and he hit them each with a penetrating scan.

Colin got to work. He started by rummaging through the memories of the two henchmen. They were planning for the one on the left, Mr. Udone, to hand off Antony to a middle man after a meeting tomorrow to arrange time and place. They didn’t have much information beyond that, they were just contractors.

Principal Stork was more interesting. When Colin started sifting, he found a lot of cognitive dissonance. He didn’t want to be doing what he was doing. That caused Colin to look around a little more and he found the telltale neural signature of an action block. He could want to say no, he could want to refrain from enslaving young telepaths. And he did. But he was compelled against his will to do so. Colin took one look at it’s structure and unraveled it.

<I apologize for the intrusion Mr. Stork.> he spoke into the principal’s mind <But it seems I misjudged you. One moment, I’ll try to make this a bit more comfortable for you.> Colin diverted his attention for a moment and put the other two into stage four sleep, they collapsed in a heap on the floor.

<Colin, what’s going on?> Gene asked, still holding the principal.

<He’s been action blocked. Keep hold of him while I explain things to him.>

<Take your time. I can keep this up for a while.>

Colin refocused himself and took a look around, burning the image of the room into his mind. Then he looked at the Principal and projected a simulacra of it into the man’s mind, joining him inside.

“Hello.” he said. The principal looked around completely dumbfounded.

“What the hell did you do to me?” Mr. Stork asked.

“Do? Nothing, other than free you. Whoever you were working for has a rogue telepath. They... straightjacketed your volition, This is just a safety precaution, and so I can explain what happened to you. Let’s cut to the chase. You’ve been trafficking in children. Telepath children. My Children.” Colin could feel the cognitive dissonance reduction strategy in Mr. Stork’s mind. He’d
started to rationalize his actions, his own native low-level bigotry ramping up to the point that he almost felt justified in what he’d done, like a sort of parapsychological stockholm syndrome. His mind, faced with something he couldn’t refuse, had adapted to it and accepted it.

“Let’s just cut that out too, shall we?” Colin said.

“What?” The school administrator replied, but before he could think anything else, Colin found the cognitive process that permitted that particular disease and routed around it. Mr. Stork would remember everything, but it wouldn’t affect him or his decision making. He’d feel guilty as shit, but he’d remember the interference.

“As I was saying. You’ve been enslaving children.” The principal just stood there inside his own mind, stunned.

“Oh god. Oh god. Oh God oh God oh God… What have I done? How could I have? Oh christ I punched Antony in the face!? I… I sold other kids…” Colin could tell the poor bastard wanted to die, but he wouldn’t allow that.

“It wasn’t your fault. As I said, you literally were not in control. I can get the motherfucker who did it, and the people who worked for them, but I need your help to do it.”

“What do you need me to do? If it’ll get them back for fucking with my head and making me…do that, I’ll fucking do it.” There was the anger. Perfect.

“I’ll need you to testify against two goons, and lay out everything to prosecutors. Everything. Hide nothing. None of the other victims will ever be able to say what happened to them because telepaths can’t testify. You’ll need to be their voice, and admit you’d been controlled in open court. You won’t even be criminally charged.”

“I can do that.” Principal Stork replied.

“Fantastic. If it’s alright with you, I’m going to make you sleep. Antony’s in the room, and he has no idea what’s going on. I can’t let you being awake traumatize him further.”

“Oh fuck, yeah. I… I can’t face him right now.”

“Okay.”

Then Colin broke contact, putting the unwitting slaver into a deep stage four sleep cycle as he did so. Colin shook his head, clearing the other person’s mind from his own, while Gene went about the business of handcuffing

“Colin” Antony started to ask. “What were they going to do with me and...what did you do to them?”

“You know the civil war?” Colin replied.

“Yeah. Everyone knows about that, this planet was blockaded for months.”

'Right. Dumb question.'

“Well, how do you think this colony got food and other supplies in? You can’t grow it all, right?”

Antony thought about it for a second before answering “Had to be smuggled in I guess. Guys with ships full of food who ran the blockade, came in through a jump point just outside the system and
coasted in on their inertia.”

“I’m impressed you thought of that, but yeah. Some of those smugglers were Sheridan’s people, and they’re alright. Just trying to help. Some weren’t. They didn’t leave when the war ended, and they have other projects like drug running and human trafficking.”

’What?!’ was Antony's first and most immediate thought.

“Human trafficking?” Antony tilted his head “You mean slavery? I thought we got rid of that hundreds of years ago.”

“Legal slavery? Sure. But the british empire, the emancipation proclamation, and the liberation of Nazi death camps still can’t stop someone from kidnapping someone else and making them work with a gun to their head. That never went away. Especially for us.” Gene replied

“Wait, especially for us? What do you mean by that?” Antony asked nervously. The implied question was obvious and written all over his mind. He was asking if the Psi Corps was slavery.

“No.” Gene emphatically denied the implicit question. “But being enslaved by munanes is something that tends to happen if telepaths run from the Corps. They’re pretty vulnerable, right? Criminals target vulnerable people just like a lion targets a sick zebra.”

“Okay, I get that, but why?”

“The Corps hires out commercial telepaths, but we have rules, and some companies want to break the rules.” Colin continued. He didn’t mention the other things people liked telepaths for.

Antony thought about it for a second “So they buy telepaths. Make them break the rules about scanning--my government teacher taught us about those.”

“Yes.” Colin gently corrected “But yeah. Sometimes worse than that, but that’s most of it. It’s always a danger for telepaths who aren’t in the Corps. We protect our own, but we can only do that if we know they exist, so when law and order breaks down, it can get bad.”

“Wouldn’t my parents look for me?” the boy asked.

“Not if the principal told them that the big bad Psi Corps came and just took you. We don’t do that. Not without at least telling the parents, and they can always say no and put you on sleepers until you’re eighteen. Most parents don’t, but they can.” Colin said.

“And your parents can surprise you, Antony. Sometimes you being a telepath changes how they feel about you.” Gene said, much to Antony's horror. He was trying to tell the kid the truth, but his delivery needed work.

<Sorry> Gene cast to them both, emoting sheepishness <That's my own baggage, kid. It doesn't mean your own mom and dad are like that. Most parents aren't. I just got unlucky with mine.>

“I was raised in the Corps from birth Antony, and I’ve been doing this for a lot longer than Gene. He really only has his own parents to go off of. Most of the time it’s harder on parents to let go of their kids. But they love them, and they know they can’t do everything that they need. Do you think your parents could have helped you today?”

“No. Probably not.”

“Right. And you can still visit. The Corps will even pay for it and make the travel arrangements if
we need to. You have nothing to worry about.”

“What about them?” Antony asked, nodding his head toward the slumbering forms blocking the door.

“Well, the two goons are going to prison. The principal is a bit more complicated.”

“I mean when they couldn’t move.”

“Oh. We can do that in self-defense because we’re Psi Cops.” Colin hand-waved away, leaving out the fact that Antony would be punished for doing the same thing. “Remember the rules about scanning you learned in government?” Antony nodded “Remember the other rules, the ones about testifying in court?”

“Sure. Telepaths can’t be called as witnesses or act as lawyers, judges, jurors, or hold elected office.” Antony recited like he’d memorized them for an exam, which he probably had. Colin decided to walk him through the logic so he could understand and accept it for himself.

“Well, the only direct witnesses to what these guys did are telepaths.” Antony furrowed his brow in thought for a minute. Colin didn't intrude on those thoughts.

“That’s really unfair.” he muttered

“Which part?” Gene asked.

“If someone hits me or takes my lunch I can tell a teacher and the teacher will believe me. It works that way in court too. If you tell the jury that someone hit you, they believe you. But I can’t tell the jury that Mr. Stork hit me, tied me to a chair, and tried to sell me to criminals? That’s not fair!” he didn’t shout it, just punctuated it with a vehement declaration.

“No. It’s not.” Gene said as he made sure the mundanes were thoroughly unconscious by telling their brains not to wake up. “But the Psi Corps takes care of its own. We make sure the mundanes don’t get to declare open season.”

“So you did something? Made them want to confess or something like that?” Antony asked.

“No” Colin said. He’d planned on that, but the principal made it unnecessary.”Mr. Stork is just as innocent as you are.” Antony scoffed, but Colin raised his hand in placation and the kid let him continue “Someone went in and messed with his head. Made him sell kids and hit you. I set him free. He remembers everything, and he can testify in court. People will believe him.” Antony made a face, both shock at what had happened to Mr. Stork, and disgust that people would believe the mundane but not him.

“It’s exactly as unfair as it sounds, Antony.” Gene said. “It’s okay to be mad. I sure as hell am. All the time.”

“As for the other two...I’ll level with you kid, I totally scanned them and then put them to sleep. The principal doesn’t know much and there’s a bigger operation going on. Think you can keep that part quiet?” Colin asked. Antony thought it over.

“Fuck them and their privacy.” he said. “So long as that’s all you did.”

“That’s all I did. And watch your language.” Colin admonished, grinning.

“Sorry. But you could have?” Antony asked “Psi Cops can do that sort of thing right?”
“Of course I can. So can you, actually.” Colin replied.

“Really?”

“Hell yeah. We won’t be sure until we’ve tested you but you’re pretty strong.” Gene said. “Once you’re trained, there isn’t much we can do that you won’t be able to do. Whether you’re allowed or not is another matter, but that’ll depend on what career you end up going into. What do want to do?”

Antony quirked his jaw to the side “I don’t know, but I like helping people.”

“All right then. There’s all kinds of stuff.” Gene replied. “There’s search and rescue, medicine, research, social work, non-lawyer legal work. A lot depends on what the Corps needs rather than what you want--we’re kinda communist that way--and I won’t lie, it’s not always an easy life. What I can promise is you’ll never be cast aside or adrift without purpose. That’s a hell of a lot more than the mundane economy will ever promise you. No one in the Corps is ever homeless. It’s the least we can do for each other.”

“Hey Gene, did you see the message Laura sent?” Colin asked as he descended the stairs just behind Gene, referring to the Education telepath who took over Antony’s case after they cleared the school.

“Yeah! Antony’s a P11, nice kid. Provided the mundanes don’t beat the humanity out of him he’ll do alright. You were wrong though, his parents are mundanes.” Gene replied as the both of them descended the stairs to the basement cells. “Granted, there are more P11s born to mundanes than telepaths, but that’s a product of sheer numbers more than individual odds.”

“Well, I can’t be right all the time. If I was, why get up in the morning?” They reached their destination and opened the door to the first cell. Both defendants, Vincent Udone and Martin McCleary were inside, sitting next to each other chained to a table with their lawyer standing next to them. The lawyer was a well-manicured blonde woman named Evelyn Trudeau.

Off in the corner, away from the three mundanes, was someone else, a petite and tired looking brunette. She wore the black gloves and badge of a telepath, and was as far away from the two defendants as she could possibly be, trying to keep her eyes off them and cover herself as much as possible. Colin recognized her; she was Kirsten Santos, a P8 legal telepath. Vincent was leering at her and Colin could pick up his very loudly projected thoughts. They were positively vile.

<You okay Kirsten?> Colin asked in her mind.

<I’m fine> She lied before changing her mind, mentally speaking to both of them <No. I’m really not. I’m starting to get a migraine. Vincent over there likes to describe what he wants to do to me while undressing me in his mind. But he doesn’t say anything verbally so I just have to stand here and take it, or get a migraine. I’ve chosen the fucking migraine. Bastard thinks he’s invulnerable because no one can testify and with me here you can’t fuck with him without being noticed. So I guess he’s right.>

Evelyn was saying something to her clients, but Colin didn’t much care what it was. To them, he’d just be standing there having a silent conversation with Kirsten. Complete with body language.

<Shit. I’m sorry. How long have you been here?> Gene asked. <If you want, I can give you a break. I’ll stand back here menacingly, Colin can do the talking. I’ll block him out so you can
Gene sidled in beside her and started sending out light telepathic static, which blocked out all the city’s mental chattering, as well as the projected fragments—or complete thoughts—leaking from the mundanes. Colin nodded to him in thanks and sat down. Then gazed at Ms. Trudeau’s clients in disgust, and glared at her with what he hoped was abject contempt. He couldn’t say anything, or risk Kirsten being blacklisted by the local mundane lawyers.

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t have ex parte conversations with our telepath.” Nice, Colin thought, not even using her name. Colin knew that he had some level of power, his position gave him leverage that Kirsten didn’t have. With her permission, he’s use it.

“Want me to dress her down a little? Just a bit, I promise.” He asked, it took a little more effort than usual to cut through the jamming, but it wasn’t hard. “Just a reminder that you have a name.”

“Please. Don’t risk my job though.” Kirsten replied. Then something occurred to him. He could fix that whole problem.

“I have an idea about that, but I’ll keep it to a minimum.”

“Her name is Kirsten Santos.” emphasizing that she’s a person who has a name. “It wasn’t anything pertinent to the case, strictly personal and of a non-compromising nature.” the temptation was very strong to project what Vincent was doing over to her, but he stifled that. Evelyn seemed mollified

“Honestly, I don’t know why we’re even here. You don’t even have a complainant in the case to accuse them, because telepaths can’t testify.” she paused and smiled a smug little grin “Because your abilities mean your existence is a privacy violation and a danger to the integrity of the judicial process. You can’t prove there even was a crime, other than maybe trespassing and impersonating a Psi Cop.”

Colin gave her his best lopsided predatory grin that went right to his eyes.

“What?” She asked. She turned toward Kirsten, who simply shook her head.

“I don’t get to say this very often with mundanes, so you’ll forgive me if I relish it.” he leaned forward, slowly “I’ve got you, motherfuckers. Dead to rights. See, we can’t testify in court. Neither can Antony. You know that, you rely on it. Thing is, schools have security cameras, there are mundane witnesses including the school nurse, and english teacher. We’ve also got the principal.”

“What? How the fuck did you get him to testify?!” Martin asked in an astonished almost-shout.

“Shut up you moron!” Evelyn slapped him upside his head “Everything’s been recorded since they walked in the room.” she hissed.

“And your spontaneous admission of guilt.” Colin added “To answer your question though. I’ve got people searching your homes, computers, financial records, dumping communications logs. On their own, we could bring you to court, but we’d never convict. But that brings us to Mr. Stork. Did you know he was telepathically coerced? He’s kinda mad; and guilt-ridden, but mostly angry. And he remembers everything. He can paint such a lovely picture to a jury, connect all the dots, including for three other cases.”
“What are we looking at?” Ms Trudeau asked. Not so smug anymore.

“I’ve got your clients on kidnapping, human trafficking, criminal conspiracy, impersonation of a law enforcement officer, and assault on a law enforcement officer. I’d say they’re going away for a while, but that wouldn’t be true. The Earth Alliance is just going to erase them.” he replied, referring to the alternative to the death penalty: death of personality, where someone’s mind is wiped and a new more prosocial personality constructed in its place. The mundanes deluded themselves into thinking it was more humane, but Colin thought it was just the death penalty with extra steps.

The two suspects were visibly terrified, but they were old hands at crime and they knew enough to keep their mouths shut, single outburst of stupidity notwithstanding.

“Give me a minute to discuss this with my clients?” the defense attorney asked.

“Sure.” Colin got up out of his chair.

“You gonna be alright in here Kirsten?” Gene asked, sliding in behind Colin as he left.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. Thank you.” She replied, nodding in thanks. Gene shut the door behind him.

When they got outside, Gene cracked his knuckles and had to fight to take calming breaths.

“Fucking christ, and Udone’s the one we have to preserve?” Gene asked.

“If we want to get to the bottom of this, yes. He might take twenty five to life in prison. Still a victory though, we don’t usually get this far in a case, unless there’s a body. Corpses speak for themselves. Then its up to jury selection whether or not they’ll convict or mistrial.” Colin hung his head in dismay, remembering some of those. The broken body of one young man thrown from a tenth story window, another child so brutally beaten in an attempt to ‘exorcise’ her of her abilities that they had to use genetic records to identify her.

Gene reached over and squeezed his shoulder. He had strong hands, Colin realized, not that he expected otherwise, and the touch made him feel a little better.

“Been there. Not with the courts but the bodies. I know what that’s like.” Gene said softly.

“Thanks.” Colin said. “And I’m sorry.”

“So am I.”

The door opened and Kirsten wordlessly beckoned them back in, with a giant smirk on her face where her employer couldn’t see.

Colin and Gene filed back in, and shut the door. The microphones turned back on.

“Let’s talk deal. Five to ten years, they tell you everything they know about the human trafficking operation and how to get their employers, but they’re not saying a word until the documents are signed.” Ms. Trudeau started, immediately.

“No.” Colin refused.

“What? What do you mean, no!? The jury might hang, do you really want the risk of going to trial?” Colin didn’t respond to that. Instead, the classic prisoner’s dilemma reared into his head, and he smiled wolfishly.
“We’ll give one of you twenty five to life in prison if you not only hang your buddy out to dry, but agree to assist us in hunting down your employers. Contingent on your ability to do so. You’ll have to submit to a scan to verify, of course.”

“I can’t advise either of you to take that.” She said, both of them were considering it, but only Vincent had anything they could use.

“If she was only representing one of you, she’d be screaming at you to take it.” Colin admonished. Ms. Trudeau stared daggers at him. “What? It’s true and you know it.” She stood silent, but Colin could hear her cursing in her head.

Mr. McCleary looked crestfallen, while Vincent Udone turned his head on his thick neck between his friend and Colin, weighing his options.

“There’s an expiration date. I walk out of this room again and you’re both fucked.”

“I’ll do it.” Vincent said. “Sorry Martin, but I don’t wanna get scrubbed.”

“Fantastic!” Colin exclaimed, beaming at him “I promise, Martin won’t regret it for long. I’ll go get the paperwork drawn up while you two discuss who gets to retain Ms. Trudeau’s services. You’ll want to separate your cases. Don’t worry Vincent, I’ll put you in the other cell so Martin here doesn’t strangle you while you sleep.”

<Well that isn’t the outcome I was expecting. So much for invulnerable.> Kirsten sent at him.

<Speaking of which, come by my office when you wrap things up. I have a business card to give you. Somewhere where they’ll treat you like a human being.>

<...Thank you. Who?>

<The Corps has legal council on this planet, her firm. Use me as a reference, that’ll get you in the door. You deserve better than… that.> Colin got up to leave. Gene stuck his fist out to be bumped, so Colin balled up his gloved fist and did so. Colin realized he should probably socialize with his new partner outside of work, especially if they were going to be spending ninety percent of their working lives together.

<Come on up to my quarters in a few minutes. Have beer, will bond.> Colin told him.

<Works for me.> Gene replied.

Late evening found the two men sitting out on Colin's balcony. He had an apartment on the upper floor of the annex, overlooking the street. It was a modest place, but the balcony itself was comfortably large if sparsely furnished. A couple of chairs flanked a coffee table with several bottles on it. Beer imports were expensive, but Colin figured post-debrief bonding was important enough to justify the expense. Plus, the fact of the matter was, they'd both earned it, and Gene was good company.

“So now we've stumbled into a slaving operation. Talk about first assignments.”

“Honestly? I think I might prefer wading into a shoot-out over having to comfort kids. That was almost a disaster.” Gene took a pull off his beer. Colin shook his head.

“Are you kidding? You were fucking amazing! I don’t even have actual parents” Gene looked at
“That was a bit tangential. Let me rephrase: I neither emerged fully formed nor was decanted. I am the get of mortals; but they didn’t raise me.” and unlike most telepaths raised in the Corps, they couldn’t visit him on sundays because they were dead, but Colin didn’t mention that. “So yeah. The Corps literally is mom and dad as far as I’m concerned. I did much worse my first time dealing with kids born to mundanes, I had to learn how to relate to them. You knew exactly what to do and connected instantly. Sure you slipped up with the parent thing, but... he needed to be warned of that possibility.”

“Heh. True enough, I suppose.” Gene took another swig and sank back into his chair. “So, I’ve gotta ask, is it always like this? They taught us how to handle all the different scenarios, but never really went into prevalence.”

“No?” Colin answered and also asked “It’s different. Normally it’s someone in their teens or early adulthood who realizes that their entire life is about to change, freaks out, and runs away.”

“And at that point... half-cop, half counsellor?” Gene asked.

“Yep! It’s actually the part I like the most.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I get to help someone in a clear and uncomplicated way. I spent the last year just dealing with the backlog. The locals... You’d think with the Corps gone, they’d find some way to accommodate the telepaths who’ve been manifesting under their noses, but they don’t. Discrimination in employment, housing, education. Our people wound up on the streets.”

“So what do you do? Comb through homeless shelters in your uniform broadcasting ‘I’m with the Psi Corps and I’m here to help’?” Gene asked.

“Yeah, basically. That and sensing their mental impressions. None of them know how to mask it. They tend to form little cliques so that makes it easier. The overwhelming majority come willingly.”

“Don’t get many actual rogues or higher-category blips out here?”

“Nah.” Colin said dismissively “I caught a few when I first got here, but the rest scattered. We’ll see how long that lasts though. We haven’t started seeing the precursor ‘remember Byron’ graffiti yet. Once we do I’ll start to worry.”

“Yeah, that shit’s all over Earth and the larger colonies. I even got an unadulterated-by-Bester copy of that crazy bastard’s manifesto.”

“Wait, he has a manifesto?” Colin asked, incredulous “Please tell me you still have a copy.”

“That creepy bastard didn’t send me the manifesto?” Colin thought.

“Oh fuck yes, it got passed around during my retraining. Let’s head inside, I’ll go to my quarters and grab my datapad.”

“So he wrote this thing inside an introductory training manual?” Colin asked. He and Gene were on Colin’s couch, pouring through the three hundred page document.
“Apparently. Bester modified it, put in even crazier bullshit to discredit his ramblings some more, and leaked it. Seems to have put something of a damper on recruitment, but not enough.” Gene said.

“Oh my god. Rambling about the Karges incident being staged, his little scrawl about the suppression of knowledge of the original rogue movement. We get taught all about that in school. There’s some truth in here, but it’s so distorted and misinterpreted that it might as well be false.”

“So tell me, Doctor, what on earth is his problem?” Gene asked.

'Well, he's in for it now. Let's see if he can handle me in nerd-out mode.'

“Are you asking in my professional or personal capacity?” Colin responded wryly.

“Wait, there's a personal? Did you know him or something?”

“Oh yeah. Not very well, mind you, but we were in the academy at the same time and there aren’t that many P12s.”

“Ah okay. Possible to combine the two?” Gene asked.

'Oh is it!'

“Okay. Diagnostically, what I’m reading here doesn’t mean much. It could be garden-variety conspiracy theorist crap, or it could be the ravings of a delusional psychotic. They’re really hard to distinguish without examining a patient. If he is a schizophrenic or something like that, he’d be on the tail end for onset time. What I can tell you is that he scores high in narcissistic and machiavellian personality traits, but not psychopathy, and not highly enough to fail a psych evaluation. He masks them with high agreeableness and openness.”

“Aren’t narcissism and machiavellianity both negatively correlated with agreeableness and openness?” Gene asked, which Colin thought was a good question. Gene definitely was the sort to pay attention to and retain information.

'The personality psych course within Metapol is dry as hell. He took it, and retains it? I reiterate to self: what was he doing in military division? I'm gonna have to ask someday…'

“Oh, absolutely. But that’s just a correlation, it’s not causative. It’s entirely possible to be a very kind warm and open manipulative narcissist--or at least to appear to be and make people think that’s what you’re like. Remember, you have to be charming and personable to form a cult. You have to give people something in order to get the adoration you crave.”

“Sure that makes sense, but how wasn’t that picked up on?”

“It was, I noticed it back then, and I read his file after he died. He just didn’t have a personality disorder. But you combine those traits with later onset schizophrenia or some sort of psychological stressor that leads to a toxic pattern of thinking and viewing the world…”

“And you’ve got yourself a monster?” Gene tried to finish the statement.

“Did I really come off that cliched?”

'Please God No. This is not a crime drama!'

“A little bit, yeah” Gene confirmed, and Colin mentally smacked himself.
“God damn it, I refuse to be a stereotype! No. He wasn’t a monster. Just a deluded guy with a grandiose personality who desired and felt entitled to attention and adoration, and was very good at getting both. I honestly don’t think he ever intended to form a cult. He just kinda did; and he legitimately believed his own bullshit. But again, I can’t examine or question him. He’s dead, so a lot of that is speculation.”

“About as good as anyone’s gonna get I think. Put it that way, it’s actually kinda depressing” Gene said, nodding

“It is, yes. Especially because he was a pacifist. His own followers are shitting all over his grave.” Colin trailed off, memories bubbled to the surface he didn’t want there, feelings of betrayal and grief he wasn’t able to hold at bay. He thought he kept them in at least, but telepathy wasn’t the only way to read minds and Gene must seen or heard the change in affect,


‘Shit. Well, it’s gonna come up at some point. He should know.’

“Byron isn’t the only one of them I know, Gene. I grew up next door to Lyta Alexander.” Gene’s face went blank, not knowing what to say about that until he tried to deflect a bit with humor.

“Small world?” he said after a few seconds. Colin chuckled a bit.

“Kinda? Not really? There aren’t many P12s, but growing up in Geneva in one of the cadres you tend to know people too. Her family is old within the Corps and she was raised in Cadre Prime.” Colin said, referring to the name for the very first cadre ever formed back when the Psi Corps was still the MRA. “I grew up in another cadre for telepaths who manifest young, and they tend to be clustered around Cadre Prime. Lyta would come over with the rest of her cohort and do theatrical plays for us, and she was never shy about playing with the younger kids. Kids like me.”

“Christ. She’s like a big sister to you?”

“Something like that? I don’t really know how that sort of thing translates. Something happened to her in ’58 and she went rogue. Ended up with Byron and the rest is…well…bloody. God, she was always so earnest and kind. Now…” Colin didn’t mention how accurate Byron’s manifesto was with respect to her involvement with the Vorlons. Officially she was still a P5. Unofficially she was off the charts over in pants-shiting terrorville.

‘Now her people kill children. Christ I hope she doesn’t have that much operational control.’

“I’m sorry, Colin.” Gene said sincerely. “That’s pretty rough. I’m gonna grab another beer, you want one?”

“Sure” Colin replied, and Gene heaved himself up off the couch. With it at eye level and less than a meter away, Colin couldn’t help but notice Gene had a fantastic muscular ass, and quietly enjoyed watching as he walked away toward the refrigerator; until Colin realized what he was doing and turned his attention to something else. Anything else. Gene returned a moment later with two open bottles.

“So Gene, I have a question for you, and it’s a bit personal if that’s alright.”

“Go ahead and ask, I might not answer, but you can always ask.” Gene replied, taking a pull from the bottle.

“Gene, I picked up on some things today. That business with Antony hit close to home for you,
"didn't it? I don't want to reopen old wounds but I do want to understand you..." Gene stiffened, inhaled and let out a deep breath

"Oh, shit. I've gone too far."

"There’s no pressure. If you don’t want to you don’t need to fee..." Colin started, but Gene cut him off.

"No, I’ll answer. It’s something you should know, and I should talk about it." Gene sighed “Might be a bit of a rant though.”

“That’s fine.” Colin replied

“For me it started slow. Little things like hearing a voice I couldn’t place or knowing the answer to a question when I hadn’t done the reading for class as carefully as I should. At first, I could lie to myself, think I was just intuition or that I’d studied better than I thought I had; but it got more intrusive. Without even trying I’d know what my friend Travis was reading, or know that John Stevens had a broken arm because his dad threw him down the stairs.” Colin winced inwardly and let Gene continue. “What’s worse, I acted on it. I responded to what people were thinking instead of saying because I couldn’t tell the difference.”

“I take it people noticed, then?” Colin asked. Gene nodded. People were used to hearing their own voice, and so they thought in their voice too. Which meant an unpracticed telepath couldn’t necessarily tell the difference.

“It started with ostracism. People I thought were my friends crossed the room or hallway to avoid me, refused to touch me...” he trailed off. Remembering it obviously hurt; even if Colin couldn’t feel it he could hear it in Gene’s voice. Instinctively, Colin wanted to provide some small comfort, but didn’t know where Gene’s physical boundaries were, so instead he took that desire and projected it outward toward Gene’s mind just to let him know the desire was there. It seemed to help. Gene’s expression relaxed and he sent a little emote of thanks across the space between them.

“Anyway” Gene continued “By then I suspected what was going on. How couldn’t I with my classmates calling me a mindfucker? I tried bringing it up with my parents but it’s hard when the Psi Corps PSAs come on in the middle of ISN news and they say things like ‘Thank God no son of mine is one of them’, and crack jokes about grinding up telepaths and feeding them to dogs.” Gene shook his head “That wasn’t gonna work.”

“No one you could talk to? The school didn’t have a resident education telepath, nothing like that?” Colin asked.

“Nope. Hamilton City only has a population of about six thousand. There might have been one or two business teeps and someone would come down from Missoula for annual testing but that’s about it. Even if they were there, I was afraid of the Corps.”

'So afraid that you'd wallow in misery? Jesus.' the thought bubbled up in Colin’s mind, but Gene either sensed it or it just flowed so logically from what he was saying he anticipated it.

“You’ve gotta understand what gets said in small towns. It’s not just the individual bigotry; they invent bizarre conspiracy theories about the Corps too! They’re plotting to take over the government, they’re a Dilgar or Minbari fifth column--never mind how many of us died in both wars.”
That last bit brought back a whole host of traumatic and triumphant memories for Colin, but he didn’t say anything. Why Gene was trusting Colin with this, Colin didn’t know, but he was; and Colin wouldn’t interject himself into something like this.

“So I was trapped. I couldn’t confide in anyone, I couldn’t run away to the ‘Evil Psi Corps’... all I could do was desperately try not to be a teep! I figured out how to block out all their thoughts, emotions, sensations. All of it. Fucking exhausting, man. Turning last night’s math homework into a shield around your mind? Forget actually learning anything in English class. My grades suffered. I went from a straight A student on track for the Naval Academy, to flunking three classes inside two months.”

“You carried on like that for two months?” Colin asked, dumbstruck. “I’d half expect you to be a suicide statistic after that much time.”

“Too stubborn for that, I guess.” he replied, managing a bitter chuckle before continuing “I got called into the councillor’s office and just broke down. Instead of, you know, doing her job and helping, Ms. McLaughlin left me locked in her office with the CRO at the door and called the Psi Corps office in Missoula. Then Mr. Andrews showed up. The CRO gave him a hard time so he just knocked the bastard out and walked in.”

'Mr. Andrews must be a live one... no timid Education telepaths in Montana, no sir...’

"He gave me a hug and treated me like a person, talked to me, let me know I wasn't alone and that I'd be okay. I didn’t find out until he told me I’m a P12 that he was assessing me. He took me out to lunch and then we had the conversation with my parents. If you could call it that.”

Colin braced in his own mind. Gene had mentioned this, but he got the impression from Gene’s pause and the way he was shaking that what he was about to say would be gut-wrenchingly sad.

“When my mom answered the door and saw his badge she just started crying like she’d just found out I was dead and then I realized it was exactly that because as far as she was concerned, I’d died. My dad, he just looked at me like I was some sort of inhuman monster. The hatred in him was sick. Filthy. I knew he didn’t like teeps but I’d never felt it like that, directed at me. I don’t even know where it came from, he just learned it as a kid or something, stewing in that fucking town.”

Gene was slumped forward, hands folded in his lap like he was praying. All Colin could pick up from his mind was that he was buttoned up like a submarine, but his body language said everything regardless. Half a lifetime later, this was still agonizing. Gene was his student and subordinate, there was supposed to be a certain professional distance. On the other hand Gene was also his brother, maybe his friend. Brothers didn’t let their brothers sit there and suffer in isolation. Not after experiencing that.

Colin scooted over on the couch and put an arm around Gene’s shoulders, and Gene reached up and grabbed his hand, just holding it there for a minute while he collected himself. A few isolated tears ran down Gene’s face but he managed to not break out into sobs.

“I didn’t mean to drag up this much pain Gene, I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. I’ve never told anyone this, needed to.”

“Not even a therapist between deployments? You’ve been carrying this around for thirteen years?”

“I’ve disclosed it to them, but it’s different. They’re paid to help. You give a shit.” seeming to anticipate him, or having caught a snippet of Colin’s surface thoughts, Gene continued “And it
doesn’t matter that I hardly know you. You still give a shit. I can tell.” Gene leaned into him and Colin let him. It was all he needed, but for a medical telepath, role confusion was an even trickier needle to thread than it was for him. They couldn’t afford to get too close. Colin could.

“Well, you’re right on that one.” Colin said, applying a bit of a squeeze to Gene’s shoulder.

“Well, you’re right on that one.” Colin said, applying a bit of a squeeze to Gene’s shoulder.

“Anyway, it doesn’t end there it’s just less…”

“Traumatic?” Colin ventured.

“Imagine all that happens to you and you wind up in a new city; Vancouver in my case. You’re seventeen, but suddenly you’re eighteen because everyone shares the same birthday and this extends to your legal documents. It feels like you’re an interchangeable part.” Gene’s affect had changed. These memories weren’t terrible, and he could appreciate a certain humor in his teenage Psi Corps experience that just didn’t exist for his earlier memories. He straightened up, and Colin took that as a signal to remove his arm, but a squeeze from Gene told him otherwise.

‘Huh. Never thought of it that way. Though there is a certain logic to it.’

“You know, I’ve never thought of it that way...” Colin replied about the birthdays.

“It’s not the sort of thing you’d notice growing up in the Corps. It’s just your birthday. But, like so many other things, it’s a Mundane imposition. They want us to be listening devices, so they treat us like we come out in batches. We gave it real meaning and made it ours. But it wasn’t mine, then. You know?”

‘But is now?’ Colin thought, grasping the implication. ‘So Gene's gone fully native...’

“Yeah, I can definitely see that.” and the insight was not something Colin would have even considered. He’d always thought of Psi Corps birthday as a symbol of solidarity and a celebration of their salvation from a genocide. The day they were all reborn. He’d never given the reason why the Corps adopted that convention a second look. “Those of us who were raised in the Corps tend to think that laters don’t ‘get it’, but I suppose a lot of that is just culture shock and a difference in perspective?”

“Something like that? It’s very jarring. I’d never seen that many motivational and propaganda posters in my life. In a mundane school, it would be unheard of to have posters saying ‘Remember, you are your sibling’s keeper!’ ‘Self-defense training keeps you safe!’ and ‘A healthy body makes a healthy mind! Exercise and eat your vegetables!’”


“You know what the art style reminds me of?” Gene asked.

“What?”

“Sino-Soviet friendship posters from the mid twentieth century. Let me show you.” Gene grabbed his data pad and showed Colin. Colin caught something immediately in the art, completely outside it’s cultural context and thus unintentionally hilarious given the time period. Colin had to share, partially because Gene needed the laughter, and partially because it was the sort of thing that once seen could never be unseen. He arranged them in a particular order.

“Ignore the words and just look at the art. There’s a story here.”
Gene looked, and then Colin saw recognition light up across his face.

“Holy shit. How did I not see this? These two guys met in a factory, got married and adopted a couple kids, then moved into the countryside to live off the fruit of the land. In the nineteen fifties!” then Gene just started giggling like a crazy person and the laughter was catching. The only thing that kept both of them from falling over was the fact that they formed a bipod.

“I needed that.” Gene said when he was between aftershock giggles.

“I figured.” Colin replied “And you’re right. The color pallet is a bit different, but someone in Education straight up plagiarised the art style for some of those posters. The ‘Stronger, Together’ poster for instance is an outright copy.” Colin pointed out one of the images of a Russian and Chinese man, standing in front of both their red communist flags, clasping their hands above their heads.

“Oh that one, yeah. It was the Earth Alliance flag in the background, they were uniformed in gloves and the chinese man was a woman, but yeah. Always thought the badges stood out in such stark contrast that we were meant to pay attention to that instead of the Earth Alliance flag…”

‘Because they were.’ Colin confirmed to himself.

“No comment.” Colin replied with a knowing smirk.

“Anyway, we got sidetracked, where were we?” Gene asked.

“Jarring culture shock, Laters not ‘getting it’.” Colin supplied.

“That’s right. Culture shock is certainly part of it. But a lot of us don’t get it. Not for a while, at least. We already have families we had to leave, we had hopes and dreams that joining the Corps shatters; we don’t know the history, purpose, or origin of anything. It’s all we can do to get our abilities controlled and harnessed. Some end up integrating and basically going native like I did. Some just never get there.”

Colin nodded, and thought that maybe, just maybe, it was that way by design. He caught a tiny piece of Gene’s surface thoughts. Just a feeling of suspicion that confirmed Gene suspected it too. If it was by design, it backfired to a certain extent, because even if they didn’t necessarily ‘get it’, Laters were often fanatically loyal to the Corps because it saved their lives and sanity. Sometimes they weren’t though. And Colin could understood why Laters sometimes run, and why they sometimes get tricked into collaborating with the Director’s office beyond merely attempting to curry favor or maintain the privilege they used to enjoy.

“Thank you Gene, for sharing that with me.”

“Uh, you’re welcome, I guess. Thanks for being there for me, it helps more than you know.”

“Any time, Gene.” Colin replied.

“So… we have beer to finish.” Gene said.

“Yes we do.”

A few hours later, they moved into darker humor.
“So how many Dilgar does it take to change a lightbulb? Colin asked

“An entire fleet of warships and a hundred million dead Abbai?” Gene tried to go for the obvious answer.

“Nah, the lightbulb burned out and exploded before they could escape.” Gene laughed. Hard. They were almost done with the case by that point and both men were getting more than a little drunk.

“Someone call a family therapist, we are in desperate need of help!” Gene joked once he had calmed down enough to actually speak. That in turn caused Colin to giggle uncontrollably, because jokes aside, it was far too true.

Colin looked at the clock, and was getting to midnight. The days were a little bit longer than earth, but not by much. If they got to bed right now, they would have six hours before they had to be up and hopefully not hungover. In his early twenties, that would not have been a problem, but they were now both in their early thirties.

“We should probably pack it in for the night. It’s getting late, and we have to hunt down a criminal syndicate in the morning, at minimum.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me. Alright. You have a good night, I’ll see you bright-eyed and bushy-tailed in the morning.” Gene got up and finished his beer, settling the bottle into recycling and looking briefly pensive.

“Something bothering you?” Colin asked.

“No no, but something just occurred to me.” his expression brightened a few shades.

“Anything major?”

“I uh… haven’t had an actual friend in a while. I think that just changed.” Gene’s expression was optimistically hopeful. Colin supposed he would have been very lonely among mundanes.

“Damn right!” Colin told him sincerely. Gene’s hopeful grin went from ear to ear. Colin returned it.

“Now off to bed with you. Early start tomorrow.” Colin followed up; Gene went to the door and opened it. Just before he left, something occurred to him and Colin called after him “I assume you know how to use longarms, not PPGs but slugthrowers?” Gene shot faux daggers at him for needing to ask.

“I figured, but I had to check, don’t judge me!” Colin declared with an exaggerated placating gesture.

“I am always judging, it’s just not always negative. Good night Colin.”

“Night Gene. Sleep well.” Gene left and shut the door. That left Colin feeling lonelier than he expected to, but he shrugged it off and washed down some ibuprofen with the oral rehydration solution he kept on standby, and started getting ready for bed.
Colin’s entire staff was in the briefing room again, arrayed in their seats, legal team up front, support staff to the rear. Gene was in the back, standing at ease by the door.

“Alright, this is a full-court press. A criminal syndicate calling themselves the Omega U.P.S. has been enslaving our children out from under the mundanes.”

<For Unconventional Personnel Solutions. Don't ask me how criminal syndicates name themselves. Someone did an MBA in Criminal Enterprise but didn't hire a black-marketing person or something.>

"Apparently they took up residence here during the civil war. They specialize in kidnapping telepaths who manifest their abilities outside the Corps.” A collective telepathic buzz of pure unfiltered rage filled the room.

<Harness that anger. This is gonna be a slog.>

“Our Judas Goat Mr. Udone indicated a location they were planning to meet with a middle man this evening to arrange drop-off and payment for Antony Saleri.” he put the location, a seedy dive tavern in a bad part of town up on the screen. “There’s a central clearance and holding facility. Mr. Udone doesn't know where it is. U.P.S. keeps their operations compartmentalized. They also don’t exchange much information electronically to avoid wiretaps. We managed to keep the arrests out of the media. No leaks so far. We need to infiltrate that meeting. Thankfully, our Judas Goat agreed to help us.”

Colin felt an upwelling of pride fill the room. It was so rare to actually get sure convictions and non-telepathically coerced cooperation from mundanes that everyone’s morale had gone up a few notches after months of slogging through a two year backlog of blips. Of course, there was the possibility that the middleman would be a rogue telepath, which meant their ruse could be discovered and it was unlikely Mr. Udone would survive were that the case.

<Any compunctions risking a mundane, Gene?>

<For this? I wouldn’t be comfortable pulling someone off the street, but a slaving fuck? Not at all. To be honest I’d just as soon go General William Tecumseh Sherman on slavers everywhere.>

<Who was that?>

<Oh, right. You wouldn't know that one. American Civil War. Fought for the North. He marched his troops from Atlanta to the Sea, and up along the eastern seaboard to Columbia, burning as he went.> Gene also included a mental image of railroad ties bent around telegraph poles.

<I approve of the sentiment, sir.> Colin told him.

“What I need from you guys is background data. I need to know every single person who tested positive for telepathy within the school system who the Corps has no other record of. I need their names, biographical information, parent’s residence. Everything. We need to account for all of our lost siblings and they could potentially have a many as four hundred if their coverage is good enough. I’ve already gotten you clearance for confidential records.”
“What if the schools discontinued the tests in our absence, plus the negative testers, hell how did their cover even work while we were off planet?” Su Chen asked.

“I was getting to that, and it’s the harder part. You’re going to have to look for kids who are no longer in school, but whose parents haven’t moved offworld. Then track them down individually. We have a few dozen commercial and education telepaths on planet, they can help you with the leg-work. As for the cover... Parents were lead to believe we black-bagged their children.” It was fucking perfect. Take telepathic children and then blame the Corps for it, thus decreasing the chance that anyone would report the abduction to the Psi Corps. 

’No wonder it's been so hard to re-establish operations.’ Colin mused internally. 'No one bothers to ask where the kids are or if you have them. No, they just sell off most of your assets and saddle you with having Earth Force providing manpower instead of your own people. Fucking christ.'

<Do good work, you are your sibling’s keepers.>

<Consensus: The Corps is Mother>

(The Corps is Father> Colin replied.

“We also know they have at least one telepath, considering what they did to at least one school principal, which means our Judas Goat might be scanned. There might even be sleeper agents in place who’ve been telepathically suborned. So I need to go in incognito to reconnoiter and observe the meeting. I’m not risking any of you on that prospect. Gene is heavily armed backup. Mundane forces will provide manpower arrests and interrogation. Our opportunities for invasive scans will be limited after that. They are however aware of the telepath risk, and will only close the trap once that is dealt with.” which is to say, that is how Colin planned the operation because they would be a liability otherwise “Any questions or concerns?”

“Yeah I do have a question.” Gene spoke up “Why don’t you want me going in with you?”

“Because whoever goes in cannot be conspicuously armed. I can beat any telepath one-on-one, but I need someone I trust with an assault rifle to come in if a bunch of mundanes interfere while I do it. I could simply kill them, but there's a chance they're innocent and that would be...dodgy, politically.”

‘Plus I've always managed to avoid killing humans. I don't want to break that streak due to carelessness.’

<You have no idea how much it relieves me to have you in that position. I’d otherwise have to rely on mundanes, or less-well-trained support staff. I trust them but...> Colin sent him.

<I've got you. I've done this before. They've just spent time on a gun range. No one will touch you.>

What Colin felt then was odd. It was a change in Gene's affect that he couldn't place, like Gene had reclassified him and thus himself. He didn't pick up the content or context, just the process of it.

“Oh. Okay yeah, that does make sense, but why do you suspect their telepath will be at the meeting?” Gene replied and followed up. If mundanes were around, the questioning might be silly, but Gene was still a student and this was the sort of thing that comes with experience and reading case file after case file. It was why internships existed.
“It’s a security precaution I would use if I had access. Send a telepath to make sure that the no one can pull off the ruse we’re attempting. It isn’t a guarantee, they may not have someone they can rely on to do this sort of thing without running… but it’s a concern, and I like to plan for bad-case scenarios and be pleasantly surprised than be unprepared for one.”

“Ah, gotcha.”

<Always try to think like your quarry. If you can’t put yourself in their head-space, a good fallback is rational self-interest.> Colin told Gene privately.

<Yeah, it's what they told us about High Value Targets too, I was just working with more legwork behind me from EAIB> Earth Force Intelligence Bureau.

...  

A few hours later, Vincent Udone was over in a corner booth wearing a carefully concealed data recorder. Colin was across the bar in a booth near the kitchen entrance, watching, waiting. He scanned the surface thoughts of the bartender and every patron. He found the usual mix of work-related concerns and frustrations, personal musings. Being a telepath in a mundane bar was uncomfortable enough, but he felt outright naked without his gloves.

Mr. Udone was almost stereotypical muscle. He wore a cheap suit, and didn’t have much of a neck. He sat in his booth calmly, with the cool certainty of a man who was used to danger. He wasn't at all nervous, and Colin wasn't sure if that was a good or a bad thing. On the one hand, it made his job easier. On the other hand, he didn't feel comfortable with the prospect that this guy would ever leave a cell alive and with his personality intact.

A new face entered the tavern, one that Mr. Udone reacted to. He looked to be about thirty five years old 1.8 meters tall and weighing somewhere near 70 kilos with black hair and sporting a goatee. Mr. Udone stood up as the newcomer approached and offered to shake his hand, the person he was apparently there to meet took his hand and shook it, smiling warmly. That’s when it happened. A deep probing scan that Colin could detect telepathically from across the room, and was certainly going to be noticed by anyone in the pub given Vincent's strangled gasp and convulsions.

Neither the barkeep nor the handful of other patrons reacted at all, the implications of that froze Colin’s blood in his veins. He was in trouble. The scan took a few seconds; long enough for Colin to slip on his badge and gloves and tap the panic button that would call Gene from his position concealed in the alley behind the back door. He would have to come in through the kitchen, which would take a few seconds longer than Colin liked, but it was the only way to not be noticed.

The apparent rogue telepath finished his scan, frowned, then shot Mr. Udone in the head with a PPG while he was still sprawled out on the floor. Superheated plasma burned straight through his skull and boiled his brain, which exploded forward and backward through the entry and exit wounds.

Then Colin felt an omnidirectional telepathic broadcast. Quick surface scans of the patrons and proprietor--six men and four women in total--showed their thoughts in chaos, a sure sign that memory vaults were opening with implanted telepathic commands that didn’t just nudge their personalities, but awakened whole new skill-sets and extensively overwrote who they were.

'Fucking christ, this guy's been trained!' Colin mentally noted.

Colin stood up, pulling his own concealed PPG in the process, pointing it directly at the rogue.
“You are under arrest.” he said, preparing his mind and making sure his own blocks were up “Will you come quietly, or will I have to use force?”

<You don’t have to do this, I don’t know what they have on you, but the Corps can help you. You don’t have to enslave your brothers and sisters anymore. Come back to us.>

The rogue just scoffed at him. “I have a counter-offer.” the rogue said. “There’s is a lot of money in this business. You could be a very rich man if you play ball...” he smiled a smile that didn’t reach his cold soulless eyes as he said it. Colin knew that smile intimately, and could feel the shape of the mind that produced it. The incidence of severe mental disorders was higher in telepaths than in mundanes. The academy was good at weeding them out, but among rogues, sociopathy was not uncommon. And this one was at least a P10. “Come on Psi Cop. You’re alone, I’m almost as strong as you, and these fine citizens are armed. You can’t take us all.”

Colin took a leap of trust in his partner and began his telepathic assault immediately with his customary tentacular construct, attempting to wrap up his opponent’s consciousness in emotional states he couldn’t experience on his own: fear, regret, guilt; in order to undermine his will to resist with outside context problems that his mind never learned to cope with as a child.

Outside of Colin’s mind, he was almost completely unaware of his surroundings, his cognitive faculties were elsewhere. The mundanes were shaking off their disorientation and arming themselves when Gene burst through the door from the kitchen clad in a black flak jacket and carrying an H&K G42. He took one look at the rail-thin barkeep leveling a PPG at Colin and shot him three times in center mass, then let out a barrage of suppressing fire throughout the bar, forcing the hostile patrons to hit the deck. It bought him just enough time for him to crab over to Colin’s booth, overturn the table, and firmly coax Colin to take cover behind it. The barkeeper's pain and fear assailed Gene's mind, but he'd learned to hedge that out long ago and ignored it.

Colin was on autopilot devoting just enough processing power and awareness to keep his body upright, and comply with signals drilled into muscle memory. When Gene pressed down on his shoulders, it was one such signal, and he crouched into a kneel behind the table. This close and with mental contact already established, line of sight was not an impediment to what was going on between the two entangled telepaths.

Unfortunately, the attack failed when the sociopath conceptualized his thoughts as an amorphous solid, and oozed through the grasp of Colin’s mental tentacles. Then he launched an attack of his own; he molded his formless thoughts into spiked projections of obdurate will and extended them toward Colin’s mind, going for his autonomic nervous system and control of Colin's breathing and heartbeat.

Colin countered by transforming his tentacle construct into a diffuse energy field between them, comprised of weaponized self-doubt dredged from the depths of own consciousness, corroding the projections well before they reached him. Throwing that much into an enemy and failing was draining and Colin could feel his opponent’s quickening heartbeat and rising blood pressure. Not enough to take advantage of yet, but soon. Very soon. He instantly counter-attacked by pushing that same doubt-field forward to begin chewing away the sociopath’s blocks.

Back in the world of flesh and object permanence, nine mentally compromised mundanes were
discovering the drawbacks of PPGs. Bolts of superheated helium plasma impacted the aluminium table as fast as they could be fired, but were unable to penetrate it. PPGs were designed to do terrible things to an organic body, but the energy dissipated too quickly through materials with high thermal conductivity to be particularly useful unless that material was heated faster than radiation and convection or there was sufficient momentum to penetrate. The table was large and fairly sturdy, and the turbulence created by those same bolts of plasma created all kinds of convection currents that facilitated heat-dumping. Still, the table was beginning to heat. Gene had to drag Colin a meter away from the surface to prevent him from dry-roasting.

Unfortunately with nine other combatants firing PPGs as fast as they could be emptied and reloaded with fresh energy caps, Gene was effectively suppressed and unable to get a shot off without risking his face being melted.

...  

It seemed that the unnamed rogue telepath had figured out the rules of the game. There were no rules. He tried to take control of the Imago and reconceptualized Colin’s own attack as a swarm of insects he could fry with a cognitive flamethrower comprised of his own anger. Knowing what would happen next, Colin had to decide how to defend himself. On an emotional level, anger could be diffused by love and compassion, and he had that for his fellow telepaths to spare. He conceived it as a river flowing out from him and into the world around him, dousing his opponent's anger and aggression well before it ever threatened him.

The rogue was starting to get tired and desperate. Glyphs of memory were leaking through his defenses as his brain prioritized more critical processes to defend to save energy and head off a stroke, broadcast as little motes of light that Colin could focus on and see with perfect clarity. In desperation he attempted to induce an involuntary motor response, but Colin just reflected it back. Then as a final act of defiance the rogue retreated behind his last mental redoubt. The beaten telepath encased his mind in a spherical crystalline construct and retreated from the battle of Imago entirely, entrusting his memories to all he had left: his will to resist an invasion of his mind. He was hoping to outlast Colin, but that was a losing game for a P10 against a P12 who'd been training since he was born.

...  

'Okay. The table is turning red. That isn't good.' Gene worried. Mercifully the floor was tile and not wood, otherwise it would have already burst into flames. Gene knew had to create an opening fast. He stretched out with his mind, feeling the thoughts of the mundanes. He focused on them, isolated them, and then did the best he could do without line of sight against multiple targets. He sparked their brains with the equivalent of a telepathic cattle prod. Their bodies instinctively recoiled and ducked behind cover.

He popped up from behind the glowing table and fired six short bursts at different locations around the room, guided by his knowledge of where their minds were right before he broke off contact. Traveling at over a kilometer per second, 5.56 mm rounds tore through tables and into their bodies without significant resistance. Gene felt something open, and two minds vanished into oblivion before it closed, accompanied by the shrieks of sapience evaporating into the mists of eternity. Two of the others were severely wounded, and he felt their spasms of pain and terrified panic leak through his own blocks. Two of the others managed to dodge out of the way but got themselves in Line of Sight by accident. He grabbed hold of their minds and knocked them unconscious. The remaining three were up momentarily and started to fire again, but he could sense their anxiety as
he ducked back behind the table. They were running out of ammunition.

... 

Colin was at a point where he could wield his thoughts like a blunt instrument. He focused his mind and drilled into his opponent’s defenses until he reached the tasty little nut of everything that Ronald Jenkins is and was. He poured in and once inside, raked through his personality, his memories, his hopes, and his dreams; and still Ronald resisted, straining against an invader who was too powerful to dislodge. Colin learned a lot about Ronald Jenkins. He was born in an Adamist enclave on Beta Colony in 2227. He also learned that while Ronald was born a psychopath, he was turned into an outright monster by years of systematic abuse.

His parents hated telepaths and when Ronald manifested his own abilities at the age of six, they left him locked in a soundproofed closet for a week until the screaming stopped. When the Corps rescued him, he was completely broken. He was diagnosed with attachment and conduct disorders, because a diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder wasn’t possible for someone that young. Sometimes they responded to treatment, and Ronald did, to a point. It took years of medication and telepathy-assisted therapy but eventually he was judged safe around others in controlled environments and tracked into a program for teeps with special needs. Unfortunately, the Psi Corps center on Beta Colony wasn’t as secure as it should have been back during the Earth-Minbari war, with so many high-rating telepaths drafted into the war for humanity’s survival, he was able to abscond, disabling two teachers in the process.

There were always unscrupulous corporations and criminals willing to work with or coerce unregulated telepaths, and Ronald met up with some who were working with a Centauri telepath named Yanik Reela. Between them, they scanned, blackmailed, and telepathically conditioned their way to the top of their criminal gang. Colin found the location of their central holding facility, its layout, and security precautions. Twenty telepath children currently being held, all sedated; another two hundred had passed through over the prior three years, telepathically conditioned for compliance by a P10. Two dozen school officials had been compromised, but not by bribery; action blocks, followed by bribery.

There was just one thing left for Colin to do. Psychosurgeons couldn’t do anything for this one. Even if they could reconstruct him with a different personality, they couldn’t create a conscience without the anatomy there to support one. Telepathy had it’s limits. Ronald would always be a danger to others, and particularly the Psi Corps. Ideally, they’d lock him in a secure facility or but times were changing. Director Johnson feared and hated telepaths and not only did things to them, but consolidated power and control around his office; stripping telepaths of as much autonomy as possible. After he died and York took over that morphed into something worse, and someone like Ronald would be of great use to him. An instrument of terror.

Colin weighed his options. He could do the unthinkable, or he could risk something even worse.

He made his choice and hated himself for it. He accessed Ronald’s autonomic nervous system and hyper-stimulated clusters of neurons in his brain stem that set heart rate, sending him into fatal ventricular tachycardia. But he didn’t pull back. He couldn’t just kill a man and not explain why. Colin found himself in a featureless void, much like the Assyrian afterlife, or the loading program in an old movie called The Matrix. In the subjective middle, there was a little red closet door--that little red closet door. In front of it was Ronald Jenkins.

“What the fuck is this?” Ronald asked.

“The end of the road I’m afraid. Through that door is...something or somewhere else. I don’t know what. No one does.” Colin’s mental avatar replied
“The end of the road? So you’ve murdered me? What kind of man are you, Psi Cop?” Ronald said it with venom, but Colin could feel his mind and it was just a ploy, a manipulative act of self-preservation designed to take advantage of Colin’s own conscience. Ronald didn’t actually feel moral outrage.

“Some must be sacrificed, if all are to be saved, Ronald. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.” Colin replied, and meant it. “But someone would use you as an agent against your own people just as surely as you’ve been enslaving them of your own free will.”

“I’d be okay with that. Being used is better than dying. I’ll be someone’s pet.”

“Thankfully, it’s not up to you. I’m the one with the stranglehold on your central nervous system, and I’m not okay with it.”

“Fuck you!” The door opened, and Ronald turned to look at it for the first time, and Colin could feel his anxiety.

“Goodbye Ronald. Good luck.” Colin said, before breaking contact. He did not want to be there when Ronald went through that door, which is when existence went black.

Outside the mindscape Ronald collapsed to the floor writhing in a spasm so intense that his head was trying to touch his heels, while Colin knelt behind the table, sorrow written all over his face. That expression was not something Gene ever wanted to see, it broke his heart, but there it was and there was nothing Gene could do about it but make sure the mundanes didn’t kill him.

Two of the bar patrons took advantage of his momentary distraction and rushed him with knives while the last one with ammunition provided covering fire. They were broadcasting their thoughts in all directions and Gene knew they were in full fight or flight mode, switched in a loop to fight whatever bore the sign of the Psi Corps or the Earth Alliance. He didn’t actually want to kill them, and decided to go gentle.

They were civilians on a lower gravity world and not in the best shape. Gene fixed them both with surface scans to predict their movements as they closed and let his rifle hang from it’s strap. The first one lunged toward his face with a utility knife. Gene sidestepped and grabbed his wrist, pulled the knife in past his face and used his other hand to apply opposing pressure to the man’s upper arm, dislocating his elbow with a sickening pop; Gene’s attacker went down screaming and clutching at his arm, which now hung in a direction it was most definitely not supposed to.

Gene turned his attention to the other one, and used his right hand to parry a clumsy slash toward his own throat, but doing so caused his rifle to slip off his shoulder. He focused his mind on the woman and took direct control of her motor cortex for just long enough to hit her in the face with a right hook and knock her unconscious. Her nose broke in a shower of blood and he cut his hand on her teeth through his glove, but she’d live.

That’s when things went wrong. Gene had been so focused on dealing with non-lethal close quarters combat that he lost track of the third person. She’d used the other two as a decoy to go for Ronald’s PPG and get an angle on Colin, who was in no position to defend himself. By the time Gene realized this the command had already been sent from her motor cortex to her finger to re-engage the weapon’s powerful electromagnets and fire. He couldn't stop it. He couldn't even kill her in time to stop the shot.

Combat was inherently stressful, but long training and exposure had dulled Gene’s fight or flight
response so he could function rationally through it. Nothing in the past minute or so had really scared him, he was calm and clear-headed. That high pitched whine of a PPG about to dump its entire energy cap into a single shot terrified him and adrenaline spiked. His perception of the world and his own racing thoughts slowed as his heart-rate climbed. He realized that there was nothing he could do but put his own body between Colin and a miniature sun. As the pitch increased, his slow-motion mind contemplated his options; he would rather die than stand by and watch a mundane hurt another one of his people, let alone a friend he'd promised to protect. The choice was easy.

'Fuck!'

Gene whirled around and pounced forward and to his right, wrapping Colin in his arms and tucking both their heads down, crouching as low as he possibly could and exposing the minimum amount of unarmored surface. He tried to resign himself to death in the subjective eternity he was waiting for electromagnets to propel something down range. He beat the propagated picostar by a fraction of a second, and it impacted in the middle of his back right over his spine.

It hit the outer layer of carbon fiber and the magnetic field dissipated, releasing its deadly payload into the jacket’s composite structure. The first few layers of carbon fiber and kevlar were no match for superheated helium, which burned right through them deep into the bulky garment. The only thing that saved Gene’s life was the fact that plasmas dissipate rapidly through air via a path of least resistance, and the jacket had absorbed the momentum. Even so he felt like his entire torso had been set on fire, which was an appropriate sensation because the outer layers of the garment fulminated on impact. But Gene was alive, which came as something of a shock to him until agony banished his surprise.

“GAHKH! FUCK! SHITSHITSHIT FUCK!” reflex arcs responded to Gene’s sensory nerves screaming alarm and his body spasmed, trying to remove the source of searing heat and failing miserably. Thankfully, flak jackets were self-removing for this exact reason, their fasteners were not very thermally resistant and the jacket fell away from his body under its own weight. It hit the floor, smoking and rapidly disintegrating in high temperature flames. Gene’s shirt was a charcoal wreck. The acrid smell of toasted cotton, smoldering carbon and something that smelled a hell of a lot like burned pork assaulted his nostrils as he turned and looked at the woman who had just shot him.

In the span of about four seconds Gene had gone through terror, resignation, surprise, unspeakable agony, and had now cycled around to frothing madness. He wasn’t even angry about what was undoubtedly a god-awful plasma burn; what sent him over the edge was an attempt to execute a defenseless telepath, someone he cared for. For about a second, he lost control. His vision turned red and he directed his gaze through her face as she fumbled for a dropped knife and went straight for her defenseless mind.

He recalled the effects of sarin gas and forced her motor cortex to contract every skeletal muscle in her body, then set each process into a feedback loop. She started to sweat bullets and her eyes dilated like dinner plates; her entire body went rigid and contorted. Bone, muscle, and tendon creaked under the strain, but nothing broke. He felt her pain and terror through his blocks and came back to himself, remembering that she was every bit a victim as everyone else in this room and feeling mortified at what he’d done. He eased off his control, ended the muscular contraction, and before she could grasp what was happening or what had been done to her, he sent her into a telepathically induced coma.

'God, what the hell... fuck, no. That is not what I want to be. Shit shit shit. Okay, I'll have to erase the memory, that's how I'll fix that. Yeah. What she doesn't remember can't hurt her, don't mind
Gene turned around and Colin had slumped forward onto his face, too close for comfort to a still-hellish table that had started to scorch the tile flooring. At the same time, he felt that same opening-shut sensation and mind scream from the rogue telepath, and knew he’d died.

“Shit shit shit” he muttered under his breath. Colin hadn’t regained awareness and he could put two and two together. Telepaths had died doing necroscans. Adrenaline spiked for the second time. He dove to the floor and dragged Colin away from the burning metal in a one-armed crab walk back toward the wall, and let Colin rest on the floor between his legs, propped up on his own chest. Unconscious. Gene upgraded his cursing

'God if you exist and let him die, I don't care what I have to do, I will breach the gates of heaven and fucking kill you.'

“Fuck fuck fuck”. Gene removed a glove and pressed his finger to Colin’s carotid artery. Both a pulse and a mind; he breathed a heavy sigh of relief and his heart-beat slowed to something safer.

“Colin? Are you okay? Come on buddy wake up!” then he shouted into Colin’s mind.

<Colin!>

...

<Colin? Are you okay? Come on buddy wake up!>

<Colin!>

Colin started awake to the moans, weeping, and psionic shrieking of the wounded and possibly dying. He managed to break contact before Ronald went past the liminality, so only felt like part of his soul had been drawn through a pasta machine rather than removed outright. He was on his back, Gene’s upside down face was looking down into his eyes with concern plastered over it like argon lights. He realized in his drained and exhausted state that he must be up against Gene’s chest, who still had his arms under Colin’s own and partially around his abdomen. For some reason that little imp snuck back into his conscious awareness, and he was aware that he rather liked regaining consciousness like that.

That thought woke him up like smelling salts, and he clamped down hard on his own consciousness. He simply could not afford to let that leak out where his subordinate could pick it up. It would be unprofessional, awkward, and the sort of stupid blooping of thoughts that children get mocked for.

“Yeah, I’m alright, necroscans are fucking exhausting. Uh, two questions.” he said.

“Sure?” Gene replied, frowning.

“One: did I leak any thoughts just then?”

“Oh, no. Did I?” he looked concerned, and Colin had no idea why.

“Nope! No blooping for either of us. Fantastic, we are not children.” he responded, much to Gene’s relief if his facial expression was any indication.

“And the second thing?” Gene asked.
“Yeah, how long was I out?”

“Oh twenty to thirty seconds, Ronald went down for about fifteen seconds before dying, about 20 seconds actually unconscious. Did he fight so hard that he croaked from the scan?”

‘Do I tell him the truth?’ Colin considered ‘Yes. I fucking have to or he can't trust me. I can live with killing someone, I can't live with my partner not being able to trust me, even if he never knows it.’

“No, he was actually pretty easy to beat. I’ve had duels with P10s go on for half an hour. I...I euthanized him”

“You...what?”

“Sociopath, no chance for reclamation just...creating a different monster, so I killed him. I got everything we need out of him though.” Colin explained shakily. The guilt was gnawing at him. He had the authority, it wasn't murder under the law, and it was necessary; but it still felt like murder. Filthy nasty extrajudicial murder. Gene must have noticed and frowned down at him, holding onto him just a little bit tighter.

<Have you killed before?> Gene asked him.

<...No. Until tonight I had always managed to avoid doing it.> He left out a few caveats. That Minbari Cruiser, and those fucking death-urchins. Different circumstances.

<Shit. We’ll talk when this is over, okay?>

<Okay.>

Looking around, the tavern was a complete wreck. The wall behind him and Gene was charcoal in places the table didn’t cover, smoke filled the ceiling rafters. The table in front of them was cherry-red and radiating heat to the point of distorting the air, there were probably a few corpses in the room and he could hear the piteous cries of the wounded. For some reason he couldn't fathom, Colin hadn’t actually expected that much destruction and carnage. For all that though, he liked where he was. Colin hadn't been held in ages and some part of him didn't want to get up, even though he knew with absolute certainty that he needed to. He was tired, his soul hurt, and Gene had a very comfortable chest. He had that thought locked up as tight as he could make it, and hoped nothing leaked.

Gene piped up as if reading his mind “Mundanes will be coming in any second, it would be awkward if they walked into this room in its present state.”

“Oh god, yes!” Colin replied, heaving himself upright, and seeing a woman with no obvious injuries in an obvious coma. “What happened to her?”

Gene replied from behind him, hoisting himself off the floor before Colin could turn to help him up. “Tonic paralysis and a fight-or-flight stack overflow. I uh... lost my temper when she shot at you.” Gene replied. In an odd way, Colin was touched, but he knew that he couldn't let her remember that.

“Ah. I see. Make sure to excise the memory, let me know if you need help.”

“I was planning to do that anyway, as soon as you were safe.” Gene replied.

Colin saw to the one with a dislocated elbow, easing his pain telepathically and making sure he
was safe for transport using zip ties from his pants pocket. Gene passed behind him and went over to the psionically traumatized woman. First, he bound her hands and feet with zip ties; then excised all memory of her nightmare experience and released her from her coma into stage four sleep.

Right after he finished, the mundanes came in, too late to be useful. They came in heavy: flak jackets and PPG rifles at the ready, along with a fire extinguisher which was rapidly put to use. Gene and Colin froze in place and put their gloved hands in the air. Upon request, they both produced their credentials. Colin just rolled his eyes.

Every single officer knew who they were, they had briefed them that morning for fuck’s sake, but it was ‘procedure’. A ‘procedure’ that mundanes insisted on as a petty power trip, and just another annoying fact of life. Still, they did their jobs and went about securing the prisoners. They even brought in EMTs to see to their injuries. He turned to pointedly give Gene a tired expression and saw his torso for the first time since regaining consciousness.

His shirt was in scorched tatters, holes in the fabric revealed a patchwork of second degree burns across his body, and he could only see the front.

'And he held me against his chest with those? That couldn't have felt good. Selfish shithead I am, wanting to stay there.' Colin thought, but noted that Gene hadn’t complained or let even the slightest pained thought escape his mind. Shock maybe? So high on endorphins he didn't notice?

Colin focused his mind on a Warrant Officer and momentarily eavesdropped on her sensorium to take a look at Gene’s back. It was even worse. The margins were red and surrounding by blistering skin, but the tissue at the small of his back was white and somewhat shriveled. There wasn't any penetration of fat or muscle tissue, which meant third degree burns. Emotions roiled within Colin; curiosity, anger, but most of all worry.

<Jesus christ! What happened to you!?>

<Me? Oh, I got shot, flak jacket caught most of it, so I’m fine. I’ve had much worse> the base fact was something that Colin could confirm from the outlines of older scars. They were clearly visible through the tatters of Gene’s shirt. Gene’s assessment of his own injuries however was not in the least bit accurate.

'Vacit save me from men who ignore their own injuries…'

>No, you’re not fine. You got broiled! You have second degree burns across your torso, and if that weren’t bad enough, a third degree burn on your back that’s about thirty centimeters across!>

<Really? Third degree?>

<YES!>

<Huh. Doesn’t hurt. The second degree ones sure as fuck do.>

<Third degree burns don’t, you should know that!> Colin replied, giving his partner an exasperated eyeroll expression.

<You’re right, I should have. That was the impact point.> Gene glyphed an image of himself facepalming.

<Wait ha…I then he got it. The only way he would have been shot in the back with a max power PPG with the way the scene was laid out is if Gene had to physically shield him <Oh. Thank you.>
<No problem--well it is--but you would have done the same for me>

<Of course I would have, but it was the other way around. So thank you. I definitely owe you one.>

<Let’s hope I never have to collect on that> Gene replied <It could have gone differently I don’t want that...>

“Hey, talk so the rest of us can hear you.” the lead officer, a middle aged man with roseate cheeks named Captain Brian Roach barked, apparently two telepaths staring at each other with their hands up unnerved him. Of course, it was his recommendation and assurance to the planetary cabinet that hamstrung Metapol and kept Colin reliant on Earth Force to begin with.

“Oh, how is this for out loud? While you are holding us up here did any of you notice that Mr. Hendriks over there requires medical attention? Did you not notice the burns and missing shirt, or just not care?” delivered in a firm but calm tone. The sort of tone used by fathers--Colin surmised--who were about to make their negligent son go cut his own fresh willow branch and present it for inspection and castigation.

The question was loaded of course, and Captain Roach was not very quick witted. He stammered for a moment and simply ordered one of his men to go fetch an EMT. Too late. The liaison officer between Earth Force and Psi Corps had already gone to fetch one of the unoccupied EMTs outside and brought her inside, directing her toward Gene.

“Thank you Mr. Washington”

“Think nothin’of it” he replied, giving his own CO a contemptuous look when no one was looking.

<We’ll get you patched up. You want me to come with you?> Colin asked. Gene grinned in appreciation, but shook his head

<You have actual work to do, work that really can’t wait. There'd no way a firefight failed to attract news crews.>

<Right, ISN will be all over like flies on shit and that might warn our little friends. Still, I’m not leaving until you at least get looked at. There should be time for that.>

Gene grudgingly nodded <Yes mother>

<Damn right ‘Mother’. The Corps is Mother, The Corps is Father, and I will look after you even if you are too damn stubborn to do it yourself.>

The EMT who came in was a professional and immediately got to work checking the burns. Good thing too, because five minutes after he was shot, Gene started going into burn shock and had to be helped into the ambulance.

... 

Colin slept on the way to his target. Truth be told, he slept with Gene’s gun across his lap--safety on of course--completely insensate. His dreams weren’t nearly as placid. Giant malevolent sea urchins swam in the waters of his thoughts, he reached out and grabbed them with his mind, but they wriggled and writhed in his grasp in desperate attempts to escape. A minbari next to him screamed in terror, eyes wide. He woke with a start to the gentle prodding of a hand on his shoulder
“I can kill you with my brain you know…” brought back into consciousness, he felt miserable, like his soul had barely avoided some sort of traumatic amputation. Or maybe that was just guilt catching up to him.

‘Warum nicht beide?’ He thought in introspection.

“I know” said the deep baritone voice of the Chief Warrant Officer who woke him up and who had served as his driver “But then there’d be paperwork. Take this, we’re a block away from the warehouse and have twenty minutes to kill. Perimeter needs to be closed before we move in.” and all Colin could focus on was the dark skinned hand holding out a steaming cup of the Water of Life. Coffee as black as obsidian. He smelled it; it was as strong as a brace of angry Narn.

“Marry me?” he looked at his savior adoringly, taking the cup and sipping it greedily. Chief Warrant Officer Steven Washington chuckled in response. He was in his late thirties and had served as the liaison between Earth Force and Psi Corps on Omega VII about as long as Colin had been there. He was honest, kind, and practical; and almost singular among mundanes he’d met, had a sufficiently cultivated curiosity to actually be aware of the shit-sandwich handed to telepaths over the past hundred and fifty years. Hence, why he’d pre-empted his own commander less than an hour earlier. Colin actually liked and respected him.

“I don’t think the Psi Corps would take too kindly to that” Steven said jokingly.

“Marrying a non-telepath decreases the odds of breeding more P12s, Mommy and Daddy would be most displeased.” that earned him a good belly-laugh while he chuckled at his own joke.

‘Of course, two men have the same problem…’

“Besides, already married” the ground-pounder replied, holding up his ring finger to show the wedding band. How had Colin never noticed that before? Was it new?

‘He was on leave for two weeks about a month ago… Oh Ho Ho!’


“Thank you! Liz is the light of my life, we have our first kid on the way” Colin could tell the man was barely restraining the urge to pull ultrasound pictures from his wallet. He couldn’t help but pick that up. The pregnancy explained the sudden marriage.

‘Oops. Well, maybe not an Oops. More like a happy moving forward of the engagement…’

Still, the Warrant Officer was happy about it, and so Colin was happy for him. There was some imminent pappa anxiety there. Not just some, a lot of it.

“Mazeltov!” Colin responded guzzling down the coffee, which felt ridiculously good almost burning his throat. “And thank you, Chief, really. I needed that.”

“You’re welcome. If you don’t mind my askin’, what the hell happened in there?”

“That depends on what you mean by ‘in there’. I don’t say that to be evasive” he clarified when Steven gave him a look. “Mr. Hendriks was responsible for the physical mayhem. I...was somewhere else.”

“Somewhere else?” now that was the platonic form of quizzical looks; an expression that was basically guaranteed to get Colin into teacher-mode.
“Without doing anything active, I have normal and telepathic versions of all my senses. So I hear what someone says, and I p’hear their internal monologue, which I have to either block out or find some other way to ignore. Same with the other ones. Mental images I p’see as little wavy glyphs, for example. Make sense?”

“Sure. Well, no, but I can wrap my head around it to get what you’re sayin’.”

“But that’s all passive. A surface scan is just me not blocking out what someone close to me is thinking. Telepaths can block off their broadcasts, but normals can’t. If I do anything active, it’s a different story. If I want to see through your eyes, like I’m doing now, I’m replacing my vision with yours.”

“Wait, seriously? You’re lookin’ at yourself right now usin’ my eyes? I don’t even feel that!” Colin could tell he wasn’t mad, more like fascinated.

‘Mr. Washington is too precious by half for Earth Force. What the hell is it with people who are so suited to doing other things going military?’ Then he really looked at himself. ‘I look as bad as I feel. But I can keep up the pretense. I think.’

“Yep. Cool huh? And I can do that easily without causing you pain because all I’m doing is intercepting signals reaching your optic lobe, and processing it with my own brain, vision is a surface-level process. Typically everything going on in the neocortex is. It's stuff that's in your direct consciousness.”

“But when you go deeper… gets complicated?”

“Right. I’ll leave out undefended minds, suffice to say… to me your mind might as well be surfing the net without firewalls or admin passwords.” At that, Steve went still and more than a little uncomfortable. Colin paid attention for just a moment and learned that Mr. Washington had just realized the restraint telepaths displayed. And yet, the man realized, they did display that restraint, at least the overwhelming majority of the time. So he wasn’t afraid of Colin or anything. Colin expected that response, but it was nice to have confirmed.

“Oh.” Steven verbalized.

“Yeah. Anyway, defended minds. Every telepath has standing defenses. The strength varies by Psi-rating, training, and effort. For little things or blitz attacks it typically stays overlaid on normal senses, but it can escalate very quickly to the point that we’re devoting our entire consciousnesses to psychic warfare inside a shapeless mind-scape. We wield our thoughts and emotions like weapons out of Salvador Dali’s nightmares”

“Sounds like a mythological shaman battle to me.” that gave Colin a good grin.

‘I could do something nice for him... He's earned it over the last year...Hell, he earned it with the coffee.'

“That’s exactly what it is. I...could show you.”

“Really? You can do that?” he sounded really curious and without a hint of fear or mistrust. Practically giddy. Colin wished all mundanes could be like him, how he lucked out getting this guy as his liaison officer he had no idea.

“Not everything, there’s some stuff in there you don’t want to see” and that he wanted to conceal, Colin considered “but yeah. I can.”
“What kind of stuff?” Steven asked, just curious.

“Something no human being was ever meant to see. Ronald Jenkins—the telepath I was scanning—died during the scan and that has side effects. Just trust me, it’s not something you want to see. I don’t know if it’s even safe for you.”

Steven nodded, mollified “Will it hurt?”

“No at all, though I would recommend sitting down, it’s a bit… disorienting.” Steven was broadcasting curiosity at the top of his mind and didn’t hesitate to hop up on the trunk of his groundcar. The vehicle sank noticeably. Steven was not a small man, rather large actually at two meters and heavily built. Colin also checked for a little green light just above Steven’s left pectoral muscle. It was on, which meant there would be a record of consent.

“Alright, I won’t be scanning you or anything like that. Just try not to resist.” he said, placing his gloved right hand on the Warrant Officer’s temple. Then he began. He showed Steven the initial confrontation, his assault on Ronald’s mind, and the information retrieval scan, not his own subjective impressions—those were his—but he did show him the pseudosensorium of the whole thing, except for the extrajudicial killing and subsequent necroscan. It only took a few seconds, but the subjective experience was much longer because he also affected the other man’s perception of time.

“Holy Shit. That was amazin’!”

“Isn’t it though?” Colin let out a chuff of breath and shook his head “It never gets old. That one was quick by comparison. A P10 who knows what they’re doing can hold me off for much longer. He tried to match me strength for strength for the most part, and that’s just a losing proposition.” he was keeping calm about it, not letting the mundane know how much everything affected him, or at least he thought he was.

“But there’s more to it, isn’t there?” Steve asked. At which point, Colin figured he could be relatively honest. That he was distressed was obvious, he could talk about part of the reason.

“Yeah.” he rubbed the back of his neck in a nervous gesture. “I experienced his memories from his point of view, but with my own reactions. And my brain filters it out to the most salient bits so I’m not seeing the boring days where all he does is homework. It was hard to see.” Fuck it, might as well tell him. It might save some other telepath the request someday. “Then there’s the necroscan. They’re… bad.”

“What the hell? Necro as in death?”

“Yeah. The courts sanitize the concept and call them a deathbed scan. We call them necroscans.”

“Where they bring in a telepath to scan a dyin’ guy for information or somethin’? So you just did that by accident?”

“Yeah.” Colin lied. “What you actually see isn’t so bad. There’s always a liminality. A gate, doorway, cave entrance, whatever their mind comes up with to conceptualize the transition between life and...whatever comes after.”

'That fucking doorway...'

“So no one knows?” Steven asked. His mind was tending toward religious questions like whether anyone’s ever seen Jesus or St. Peter on the other side.
“Fuck no! When the person dies, the gate tries to drag you in with them. If you don’t get out before then and can’t pull yourself out, there’s no coming back. And if you do drag yourself out...you leave something behind that doesn’t come back, at least not easily.”

“Jesus christ, that happened to you?” the large man was concerned, and when he got concerned he wanted to either bear hug or hit something, but professionalism and respect for boundaries won out over his concern.

“No, no. I got out in time, but not before the door opened and so it just feels like… I don’t know how to describe it. Have you ever slept wrong and fucked up your neck?”

“Yeah. Everyone's done that.” Steven replied.

“It’s like that, only my soul. Nothing a few hours or days won’t fix, it just sucks right now.”

“So let me see if I got this right: you feel guilty over killin’ a real bastard you ended up feelin’ a little sorry for, you’ve got a kink in your soul, you’re about to go raid a warehouse full of slavers and their victims where you won’t just see wrongness, but will get to experience it all secondary-like. Oh, and your new partner got shot on his first major op. Why the hell are you standin’ here talkin’ to me? Shouldn’t you be cryin’ in a corner or somethin’?”

Colin laughed. It started as a giggle but propagated into a deep belly laugh before subsiding.

“Probably? But if I break, others suffer, so I can’t break. If talking to a friendly person helps, and it does, I’ll do it. Which I suppose means ‘thank you, Chief Warrant Officer’.”

“Pshaw” the big black man responded, waving a hand dismissively “You can call me Steve.”

“Likewise, call me Colin.” Colin reached out to shake Steve’s hand. Steve took it with a warm smile of his own. Being on a first name basis warranted a new hand-shake.

... 

The warehouse was surrounded by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire, three stories tall, and didn't have many windows. None on the first floor. Getting in without giving anyone enough time to dispose of evidence or captives wouldn't be easy. Behind the Security cordon, half a dozen men and women from the Psi Corps' Education division, the Social Workers of the Corps, were standing by to get kids physically and mentally out of bondage and deliver them safely to the annex. It was the only place where they could be held and taken care of while their parents were found and arrangements made to take them into the Corps. So many at once meant they couldn't be put on commercial transport on short notice, but Colin figured they'd burn that bridge when they got to it. Transport division would have to be engaged, but they could only use their above-board assets with as much public scrutiny as this would get.

'Colin, focus.' he admonished himself.

"If we can get the fence cut without triggering any alarms we might be able to get morph gas grenades in through the windows. Knock everyone out." Steve suggested. Colin gave the fence a good once over. It wasn't electrified. He wasn't detecting any live current running through the fence at all. It was purely a mechanical barrier.

"The fence is clean." he said.

"How do you know?" Steve asked.
"Any telepath above P9 can detect magnetic fields and electric currents if they're trained for it. I can even short out delicate circuits, comes in handy for disabling cameras or bugs in a room."

"Or finding alarms and electric fences, yeah... okay." He turned toward two of his men "Cut the fence." and the two officers, covered by half a dozen others took bolt cutters to the fence and cut an entrance. Steve tapped on his comm link and gave a the same command over it to other groups making entry from other sides.

"Yes, the fence is safe." he confirmed to what Colin assumed was a voice of protest or skeptical concern through Steve's earpiece. Colin looked around and saw a fire escape leading to the second and third floors. Most warehouses didn't actually store product on upper floors when multi-story, but they had catwalks for access to shelving units and and to access the lights and air con. He could probably get up there pretty easily and make entry without being noticed.

"I'll get up the fire escape. There should be a catwalk on the upper floor, if I can slip in without being noticed I can lock Reela down. I'll need a glass cutter and a gas mask." Colin said. He didn't know if he'd need the glass cutter, it would depend on whether or not there were actual escape hatches or if people were just meant to break out the windows. Steve stepped away and returned after about a minute with both, along with some oil for hinges or to lubricate the cutter.

"Here you go." The big man said quietly.

"Thanks." Colin replied, slipping the gas mask on and taking the glass cutter. He crept up the fire escape, being careful not to make a sound that couldn't be attributed to wind, and got up to the third floor. He looked at the window and while it could be opened, it was locked and he would need to cut the glass to slip inside. He couldn't see anyone through the window, and didn't feel anyone's mind in any of the visual blind-spots either.

It was a single large pane, so that would make life relatively easy. He fixed the glass cutter to the surrounding fixed window panes with suction cups after spit-washing them fixed the central hub to the escape hatch pane. Then he extended the arm, and applied oil to the glass surface and slowly made a circular cut he could just slip through, thankful the glass was thin and he wouldn't have to tap it to open the cut from the score line.

Then he turned the ratchet, applying pressure on the glass, which eventually came free with a clean snap and stayed fixed to the central hub. He removed the assembly from the surrounding windows and took his circular silica frisbee off with it, silently, gently, placing it on the fire escape floor. Then he slipped inside, trusting his gloves and uniform to keep him from cutting himself. He managed to get in undetected and peered over the catwalk.

'No one ever looks up...' he mused. Sure enough, there were twenty kids in what looked to Colin like the kennels one might see in a city animal shelter. Chain link fence divided the floor space into a grid with space between blocks of cells. Only a few were occupied, and there was space for a lot more. The floors had rubber gym mats for beds, some foam pillows, mylar blankets. Sanitary facilities were jury rigged at best. One bucket for fresh water, another for waste with a rudimentary privacy curtain and some bog role in each cell. The kids weren't taking on the listlessness that characterized Sleepers at least, and from what Colin could p'see, they'd been taught blocks sufficient to let them function without being driven mad by the thoughts of mundanes.

They were, however, blooping their fear and misery all over the place.

'Jesus Christ. Even the re-education camps are better than this and those things are required by law to be 'austere'.' Colin thought. He couldn't let his anger alert Yanik to his presence. He didn't know how powerful the Centauri was. He counted there were twenty adult humans, twenty kids, each in cages no larger than a walk-in closet. Most of the kids were between ten and fifteen or so,
but there were a few younger ones. A couple who looked like they couldn't be a day older than six, but he didn't immediately spot the Centauri.

"Wo ist dass Schopfschweinhund?' he thought to himself in German, frustration mounting; then he saw him. Yanik Reela looked like something out of a lovechild opereta written by Gilbert, Sullivan, and Shakespeare. Knee britches, a puffed and slashed shirt, wearing a waistcoat that went down to his mid-thigh. Plus the hair-crest done up as high as gravity permitted. Clearly Yanik thought highly of himself if he wore his hair that big.

'Wow, he's probably violating Centauri sumptuary laws.'

The good news was, Yanik was alone in an office with a big window on the second floor overlooking the cages. Colin figured it was some sort of management booth. The Centauri was pacing back and forth nervously and Colin could imagine why. Ronald was overdue to come back. Colin shifted his perceptions and p'saw Yanik. He was on the high end mid-range, maybe P7, P8; and his habitual mind-shield was sufficient to shrug off the casual scans of teenagers who didn't know what they were doing, but not enough to keep Colin out. What happened next was the psionic equivalent of ambushing someone from behind a corner with a rag soaked in chloroform.

<Hello Yanik>

'!' 

Yanik tried to fight back, to defend himself against the more powerful mind that ambushed him from where he couldn't see, but his probes were woven out of his own fear, and his defenses shattered when Colin wielded his anger like a club and smashed them. After the Battle of the Line, Colin made a point of learning how to deal with alien minds effectively. Colin got in and just pushed. One second Yanik was standing, three seconds later he was fast asleep on the floor of the management booth. Colin was tempted to induce a grand mal seizure or send Yanik into inescapable nigh-terrors but that might have caused a commotion.

'I could almost do this on my own. No. I definitely could.' Colin thought to himself. 'But the mundanes wouldn't take kindly to that and I'd be unlikely to get clearance to use any information I got from their minds while doing it. Fucking mundanes...two hundred children and they hamstring me. Oh who am I kidding, the manpower helps. I couldn't control this many prisoners myself. What I wouldn't give for my own Bloodhounds though...'

Colin tapped out his All Clear signal on his own comm unit and a few seconds later, gas grenades came in through the windows. On impact with the floor they filled the whole space with a soporific haze and within ten seconds, he was the only conscious person in the building, breathing through layer after layer of chemical filters. Earth Force came in about ten seconds after that, busily zip-tying prisoners while Colin descended the stairs to the lower level.

Morph gas didn't take long to clear when exposed to the air, and after that it's half-life inside the body was about thirty seconds. Colin only had two minutes to go around freeing as many as he could from the obedience compulsions implanted in their heads. They were a blunt instrument, no care was taken in their structure to prevent psychological trauma to the person implanted with them. They made Colin soul-sick and for a moment he felt less-bad killing the person who inflicted them on children.

The last one he got to as the Education division telepaths came in to finish the job and people started to wake up was a little girl of South Asian extraction. He couldn't tell exactly where. She was starting to stir and Colin couldn't leave her in there. There was a man behind him, cuffed and screaming angrily through a gag someone wrapped around his head and through his mouth. Colin
strode over to him and plucked the keys from his belt. What was interesting was that Colin
couldn't sense anyone's thoughts, but he realized pretty quickly that he could perceive the
telepathic static of jamming. His colleagues were protecting the minds of the little ones from the
elevated emotions and thoughts that would be filling the confined space.

Colin unlocked the cage and stepped inside. By then, the little girl had come to, she couldn't be
any older than ten or eleven, and she'd scrambled into a far corner in confused terror. One minute
she'd been locked in cage for the last few weeks? Months? She didn't actually know it has hard
for her to keep track of time. The next minute there were so many strangers and the people who'd
been both tormenting and feeding her were on the floor writhing against restraints and there was a
man clad in black inside the only place that was hers.

'What's going on who are these people I'm scared I hope they don't hurt me' her little mind
chattered as it tried to get a handle on everything. Colin got down on her eye-level at a respectful
distance.

"Hey." he said in gentle tones, at a slightly higher pitch than he normally spoke with "My name is
Colin. I'm a Psi Cop and I came in with Earth Force to get you and everyone else out." He didn't
say 'take her home' because that probably wasn't happening, but freedom from a cage was
something he could promise. "What's your name?" Colin cut through the jamming and used an old
trick that his teachers had used on him when he was upset, he projected feelings of love and warm,
safety, directly into her mind. Like he was already holding her.

"Z-Zara. Zara Tam." she replied.

"It's good to meet you Zara. What do you say? Wanna get out of here?" Tentatively, she inched
toward him and suddenly pounced onto his chest throwing her arms around his neck. He scooped
her up into his arms as he stood. She was heavy and he was suddenly glad he spent all that time at
the gym. His shoulder didn't stay dry after that. She hadn't let herself cry the entire time she was
here, for two whole months. Tough little kid, she didn't want her captors to think she was weak.

"It's okay sweetheart, you're safe. Cry all you need to. I've got you."

Steve drove him and Zara back to the annex and stayed to help comfort and reassure twenty
frightened and confused children, and make contact with their parents. He had no idea how that
was going to go. Statistically, some of them were going to reject their children. That made the
transition into the Corps easy, but it was one more thing that would hurt them and precisely none of
them needed that. He didn't like having to leave Zara either, but she was asleep by the time he got
back and it was a simple matter to tuck her into bed upstairs. But had another concern that was
somewhat more pressing now that he had the time to consider it. He had no idea how Gene was
doing. Burn shock was potentially fatal if not treated and Colin needed to know he was okay.

Colin took his own groundcar to Omega Mercy Hospital at best possible speed. He parked in the
visitor lot and headed inside to find the burn ward, but first he had to check in at the front desk.
There sat a middle aged man from the Indian Subcontinent of medium build. He didn't look like
he smiled a great deal, but then again low level administrative staff never smiled. When he caught
sight of the badge and gloves however his neutral expression turned into a scowl.

“Hi, I’m Lieutenant Colin Meier here to see Eugene Hendriks, he should be up in the burn ward, or
recovery.” Colin offered him his credentials, which he dutifully scanned into the computer.

“I am sorry Mr. Meier, but we are out of open visiting hours right now and I am not supposed to let
you into the ward if you are not the next of kin.” Colin breathed in, and out. Slowly. When someone ignored earned titles, it was a sure sign he was going to be in for a rough time.

‘Why is it always the receptionists? Is a willingness to be dicks to telepaths part of the job posting or something?’

“First of all, that is either Doctor or Lieutenant Meier Mister. Patel.”

“Sorry Doctor. I still cannot let you up there.”

“Second: The Corps is Mother, the Corps is Father. In a metaphorical sense, we are all his next of kin. In a legal sense, in the event of hospitalization outside of a Corps facility, power of attorney falls to his wife of which he has none, his designate of which there is none, or to the Corps directly by way of his ranking local departmental superior. Given that I am the highest ranking Psi Cop on this planet and he is also a Psi Cop, that would be me,” he calmly recited chapter and verse of the regulations despite growing internal frustration that was beginning to border on anger.

Mr. Patel stood his ground and would not budge.

“I am sorry Doctor Meier, but I am unaware of these regulations. We don’t have many telepaths on planet. I will need to call our staff attorney to check these over, but she’s at home. Would you be willing to take a seat? It shouldn’t be more than an hour.” At that point, Colin decided to pay attention to Mr. Patel’s surface thoughts. He knew the regulations alright. He just didn’t like telepaths and wanted to make things as difficult as possible. He was also lying about the wait time.

“Slightly tangential. Did you catch tonight’s local ISN feed? Something about a firefight in a bar and subsequent raid on a warehouse used to store telepathic children for sale on the galactic slave market? Did you happen to catch the bit about a Psi Cop being shot?”

‘Maybe I picked the wrong one to fuck with...’ Mr. Patel thought to himself.

“...Yes...”

“That was us. The Psi Cop in question is in your burn ward, he took that PPG shot so that I wouldn’t. I am not in the mood to deal with your bullshit. You are legally required to know that I am entitled to visit my subordinate. Cooperate, or I’ll bring in the lawyer Psi Corps has on retainer, and she’ll eat you and this hospital for breakfast, vomit you out, and feed you to stray *dogs*.” Colin hated having to use the velociraptor in human form, but he loved having her around for situations like this. He also privately enjoyed turning that popular 'joke' around on someone.

He p'saw the adminbody’s calculation, and p'heard him consider the depth of shit he’d be in for if he got the hospital sued.

‘I definitely fucked with the wrong one. I'm just going to give in and hope it goes away...’

Mr. Patel folded, handing Colin the datapad for sign in. “Room number is 342.”

Without a word, Colin signed in, then followed the signs to the lift that would take him to the third floor.

A hospital was never an easy place for a telepath to occupy. All the thoughts in a hospital were strong, and he could sense them all pressing against his barriers. The prayers of someone with Lake’s Syndrome, the exuberant exhaustion of new parents, the disconcerting mutterings of a trauma surgeon on the 20th hour of a shift who desperately needs stims to avoid killing patients. It was a lot to take in but Colin was an old hand at it, and just for good measure sung ‘Hej, sokoly!’
over and over in his head.

‘Hej, tam gdzieś z nad czarnej wody
Wsiada na koń kozak młody.
Czule żegna się z dziewczyną,
Jeszcze czulej z Ukrainą.

Hej, hej, hej sokoły
Omiłajcie góry, lasy, pola, doły.
Dzwoń, dzwoń, dzwoń dzwoneczku,
Mój stepowy skowroneczku.

Hej, hej, hej sokoły
Omiłajcie góry, lasy, pola, doły.
Dzwoń, dzwoń, dzwoń dzwoneczku,
Mój stepowy dzwoń, dzwoń, dzwoń’

‘The architect who designed this building really needed to be shot’ Colin thought to himself when he got lost for the third time.

A few twisting corridors later and Colin found room 342. Gene was awake, sort of. His expression was vacant, but he was conscious, encased in a shiny white modular tube. It looked like it had pieces that could extend or retract to accommodate the whole body or exclude specific appendages. The inside was glowing faintly and there were wires and tubes coming out of it for power and to supply what Colin could only assume were various cellular growth factors and nutrients.

“Hey…” Gene said, brightening as Colin entered the room. There was something off about it though. “Are you an angel? You have a halo around your head.”

‘Wow, they broke out the good drugs.’ He thought.

“Oh no. You sir, are high. They have you on the good drugs, don’t they?” Colin asked, chuckling, a too-wide smile expanded across Gene’s face

“Ohhh yes. They have me on Metazine.” he replied, glancing over at the medication dispenser. Colin looked; definitely Metazine. It was usually used to treat neuropathic pain from terminal degenerative conditions.

‘Jesus christ. That shit’s addictive too. I do not need a junkie for a partner… but if that happens we’ll deal with it.’

“Apparently…” Gene trailed off before snapping back into focus “this machine heals without scar
tissue, but regrowing damaged nerves is excruciating. Op-o-pi... morphine and stuff don't work.” Colin pulled up a surprisingly comfy chair to the bed and sat down.

“Well then Metazine is the painkiller for that” Colin nodded, concluding that the addiction risk was worth Gene not screaming in agony. “Oh, I brought you something. Hospital food is bad, I figured you could use something with an actual flavor.” he reached into his front outside pocket and pulled out a hand-sized brown brick wrapped in a transparent plastic. Gene’s smile brightened by several shades and went all the way to his eyes, it was almost childlike and all kinds of adorable.

“Is that what I think it is?” Gene asked, hopefully.

“If you’re wondering if it’s fudge from a certain hole-in-the-wall confectionery in Geneva right outside TeepTown, you would be correct. I have a small case imported once every few months with various odds and ends. For days like today.”

“You are an angel” Gene declared. “But I can’t use my hands.” in fact, Colin couldn’t see Gene’s hands. He had them wedged under him and Colin could tell he felt incredibly vulnerable. They’d taken his bloody and tattered gloves off to prevent infection but didn’t give him a set of exam gloves.

‘Fuck this hospital.’ Colin internally grumbled “Okay Gene, give me a second to fix that.”

“Okay.” Gene replied distantly. He was there and lucid, but a bit disconnected.

Colin got up and looked around the room. 'If I were a mundane hospital where would I keep the exam gloves?’ he talked to himself his own head until he found the drawer containing nothing but individually wrapped pairs of sterile examination gloves. Purple instead of black, but they’d do the job. Colin took off his own gloves out of Gene’s sight, and scrubbed up to his elbows, then he took out two pairs of exam gloves and put one on himself. After that, he walked back over to Gene.

“Okay.” Colin said, turning around “I found the exam gloves. So if you’ll put these on... honestly they were right about the infection risk, so I’m feeding you anyway.”

“Thanks.” Gene replied. “Cover your eyes.” And Colin did by turning around, though he couldn’t help but wonder what Gene’s hands looked like, and hoped Gene didn’t pick that up. A bit of tearing, a bit of nitrile snapping and the gloves were on. “God these feel weird.” Colin turned around and sat back in the chair.

“If you wear exam gloves enough, you get used to them. Hopefully you won’t be here long enough for that to be an issue.”. Colin broke off a bite-sized piece of chocolate. “Open up.” Gene did so, sticking out his tongue. Colin placed the Swiss delicacy on the man’s tongue and watched as he brought it in like a lizard capturing prey, then saw his eyes roll into the back of his head as he hummed in confectionery ecstasy.

When it came time for the last piece Gene held up his hand.

“You get that one.” he said, licking up a piece from his chin that didn’t exactly stay in his mouth.

“No no, It’s all yours. You earned it. Besides, I have a stockpile.”

“I insist. No isn’t an option.” Gene replied, turning up his nose at the offered chocolate. Colin sighed.

'I can't even be mad...'}
“Alright, thank you.” and Colin popped it into his mouth. It never ceased to amaze him how delectable swiss chocolate was and had been for the last six hundred years. It also helped him feel a little better, that, and Gene’s high as a kite food-antics.

“How’d the raid go?” Gene asked “Wish I coulda been there.”

“Textbook. No friendly casualties, plenty of prisoners, rescued twenty kids. Erika and Max are working up scanning warrants with The Velociraptor and her firm.”

“Whaa? Who?”

’Oh right. Context.’

“Our resident mundane legal counsel. Serena Carmichael, of Carmichael and Robinson. She wears a couple hats. She’s attached to the court as a prosecutor with the Corps, but also runs her own general legal partnership.’

“But why give her the nickname of a vicious pack-hunting...oh.”

“It’s a term of endearment. She has a cousin in the Corps she’s close to and represents us in civil and criminal courts because she wants to, not just because we pay her.”

’Of course, we still pay her. Good God do we pay her...’

“And she lets you use it, huh?” Gene asked.

“Use it? She came up with it, of course she lets me use it. When I first got here she approached us and said ‘I’m the legal velociraptor you’ll need here’. And she was right. She’s good. Really good. Better, she treats telepaths well, and employs a number of them. The only difference as far as she’s concerned between having a JD from Harvard and a Psi Corps Legal Certification is that one can argue in court and the other can’t because they’re not allowed. Not because they wouldn't be competent.”

“She... sounds like a good person. How about you, are you doing alright?” Colin thought it was sweet that he worried from his hospital bed, and gave him a wan smile.

“Been better. Better now that I know you’re okay. The chocolate helped too. Thanks for making me have some.”

“Looked like you needed it. What happened in his head?” Gene asked, referring to the late Ronald Jenkins.

Colin gave Gene a description of his duel with the late Mr. Jenkins, and the necroscan. They both avoided the elephant in the room that Colin had killed someone--however necessary it may have been. It wasn’t time to have that talk. Besides, Gene was still stoned out of his mind and everything he said was a little dreamy in its affect.

“A shapeless void? Is that normal?”

“First one, but from the accounts I’ve read, no. The only personal thing there was the closet door.” Colin shuddered at the thought.

“Huh. Why?”

“Best guess? And I’m speculating here: there was nothing important to him but himself. The only
emotionally resonant memory he had was probably being locked in that closet, so it was the only thing his mind could construct to conceive of what was happening.”

“Colin, I’m sorry that happened to you.”

“Hey, I did it voluntarily. I wasn’t about to execute someone and not tell them why. At least he didn’t go alone I suppose.” not that it meant much to Ronald, the thought just made Colin feel better. He knew that, but he was going to cling to it. “Anyway, it’s coming up on two AM and you probably need to sleep as much as I do.”

“Can’t.” Gene replied glumly. Which is when Gene noticed just how knackered the man was. He was basically in the manic-tired stage of exhaustion and was coming down from it as they spoke. His eyes drooped and he was a bit slow to respond. Hardly noticeable unless you looked for it, but it was there.

“Why not? Metazine should have put you out like a light.”

“No voices.” which is when a lot of things clicked together for Colin. He’d been so focused keeping all the voices of the hospital at a dull roar that he hadn’t noticed Gene’s lack of telepathic presence, or the fact that he was broadcasting his surface thoughts. He couldn’t keep them in anymore. “Sleepers. ‘Hospital policy’, they said.”

Colin knew the side effects. Feelings of dislocation were common, and severe enough to induce intractable insomnia. Sleepers flattened someone’s subjective perceptions, making the world seem two-dimensional, colors faded and sometimes became sepia. Some people adapted, others didn’t and all too often killed themselves due to ennui and dissociation.

Colin took a deep cleansing breath, trying to calm himself down from the righteous fury building in his soul. It failed.

’No one treats one of mine like that. No one! Especially not him... Okay that got personal, but the point still stands, and what the hell it IS personal. What the fuck is wrong with these people?!’

“I am going to find an M.D.” Colin stated through gritted teeth “And they will give you the counter-agent.”. Colin started to stand up and Gene reached out a hand and with what leverage he had, held Colin down on the chair. It wasn’t much, but it gave Colin pause.

“Don’t. It’ll only make things worse for the next teep who ends up a trauma patient. The hospital might refuse treatment.” which, Colin realized, they might be legally allowed to do, and this was the only fully equipped burn ward and Level 1 trauma facility on the planet. Colin looked into those blue eyes, pleading with him, and then down at the interposing hand on his chest. It knocked the gale-force wind right out of his sails. Gene and every other telepath were more important than his anger. He had an idea though.

“Okay. But I’m not leaving you like this.” Colin said, reaching up and gripping Gene’s hand, then relaying the muted telepathic chorus of the rest of the hospital. “You should at least be able to get some sleep. I’ll stay here with you. Just start counting sheep if you don’t want me picking up your surface thoughts.” Gene gasped as minds whispered in his head and let out a shuddering sigh as he relaxed into it, knowing where he was in the world again.

“What about you?” Gene asked, counting sheep over and over again in his head as an inuteral thought while uttering what he wished. Colin was impressed he could focus enough to do that while drugged.
“I can sleep anywhere. I’ll be fine.” Colin replied, scooting the chair around so his arm would be in a more comfortable position, and changed his grip so their fingers would intertwine and be more secure. Gene drifted off to sleep in about three minutes, with Colin following soon after; slumped over in his chair and still broadcasting everyone’s little whispers.

Wednesday February 7th, 2263

Colin didn’t wake up until a someone came by and shook him awake.

“This is becoming a theme…” he muttered, disentangling himself from Gene’s hand and looking up to see a doctor he pegged to be of Japanese stock and in late middle age due to his graying hair and care lines looking down at him with a soft smile. That was confirmed by the name on his ID badge: Akira Ishikawa. Funny, he didn’t strike Colin as a telekinetic demigod.

“Sorry to disturb you” he said in a soft but oddly resonant voice “But I heard your comm unit beeping and thought it might be important.” Colin checked, it was Dr. Shine and he’d missed her call. He looked back over at Gene, who was still soundly sleeping. Colin didn't want to leave him, liable to wake up in a nightmare without any sort of help and devoid of contact.

'It's going to be a busy busy day.’

“Thank you doctor.” Colin checked the time. Just after ten AM. “Oh...crap.” Colin sighed “Late. Wait, I’m the boss. I’m allowed to be late.” The doctor chuckled at that.

“I heard you gave Rohit a hard time last night. He was complaining at shift change” the older man stated

“No worse than he gave me.” Colin started, but the doctor cut him off by raising a hand in a placating gesture.

“Good for you, he is made of stupid.” he said, with a conspiratorial wink that said ‘administration is the enemy’. Colin couldn't help but return the earlier chuckle. In the Psi Corps it was sometimes literally true with the upper admin. The Director's creatures, the lot of them. Lower and Mid-level were usually alright though.

“Doctor Ishikawa, I have a question and a request, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure.”

“How long until he’s out of here?” the doctor looked at the chart and replied matter of factly

“He should be out by tomorrow. And the request?”

“Good, um… could you keep him off sleepers? I’d have him transferred to a Psi Corps facility if we had one, but he can’t sleep when he’s on them and I may not be able to be here to help him.”

“Why can’t he sleep? I’m an intensivist, psychiatric medications are a bit outside my wheelhouse.” The Doctor replied. Colin explained it to him.

“Oh! Oh my” the doctor’s eyebrows were climbing through the ceiling about half-way through the explanation “You’re right. No one should be on those but…” Dr. Ishikawa paused “It’s hospital policy that telepaths be put on sleepers. It’s out of my hands. I’d start him on the counter-agent if I could.”
Colin pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration “I will not let him wake up to that doctor.”

“I understand. If you want, I’ll administer a mild sedative to keep him asleep while you… work on other options.” Dr. Ishikawa knew enough not to say the words, but he was thinking them.

'Holy shit, he all but told me to sue. He must really hate his administration.'

“Thank you doctor.” Colin waited for the doctor to administer the sedative and leave the room before he made a call. The chipper voice of a morning person picked up on the other end.

“Serena Carmichael’s office, this is Jennie, how can I help you?”

“Hi Jennie, this is Lieutenant Colin Meier with Metapol, can you put me through to Ms. Carmichael?”

“Of course sir!” Jennie replied with an almost disturbing level of enthusiasm before Colin heard three tones on the other end of the line.

“Good morning Colin you’re not calling to pester me about those warrants are you?” She was allowed to use his first name. He still called her counselor most of the time.

“No counselor, it’s another matter entirely. My partner was injured last night. He’s at Omega Mercy and they have him on sleepers without his consent on policy grounds. The side effects are bad, he wants the counter-agent administered and I’m willing to move heaven and earth to make that happen and expunge that policy. What are our options?” Colin’s voice came off a bit more clipped than he might like it, and just verbalizing that policy had his hands shaking with rage.

“They’ll probably try to justify it on the grounds of medical privacy. Mind if I check caselaw, get in touch with your legal specialists, and get back to you?”

“Sure. Thank you counselor.”

While he waited, he made another call to Dr. Shine’s office. It beeped a few times before she picked up.

“Hey Dr. Shine, this is Doctor Meier. You have something for me?” For some reason he enjoyed switching between title and rank, depending on the social context.

“Yeah, sorry I missed you earlier.” She replied.

“It’s my fault, I had a long night, I should have set an alarm or something.”

“That happens to the best of us. Anyway, I was just calling to let you know that I transmitted some older case files to you. I also got a body in last night” and she described Mr. Jenkins.

“Oh, don’t worry about that one. He’s mine.” he said matter of factly “Rogue telepath, not our guy, but he fought hard enough to made me kill him.” he lied.

“...oh. I see why you had a long night then.”

“Yes. Thank you for your help doctor. I’ll call back with anything I figure out.” Colin was eager to get off the comms, he didn't know when Ms. Carmichael would call him back.

“Any time, you have a better day.”

“I will certainly try. You too.” at which point she hung up, and he waited. The problem was, he
didn’t have anything to do so his eyes wandered around the room until they alighted on Gene, blessedly unconscious and sleeping contentedly, eyes moving rapidly behind his eyelids. Colin considered peeking in and seeing what the dream was, but that was more a product of his boredom than actual curiosity.

‘Besides, it would be rude.’

Colin had time to introspect. Had he done the right thing back in that bar? Was the chance of Ronald being used instead of simply imprisoned high enough to justify taking his life? His actions meant that he deserved death, but who was Colin Meier to decide that? He could have just arrested the guy and left it to others to decide, but wasn’t that abrogating his responsibility to every single one of his brothers and sisters a sociopathic P10 might harm? Not even might harm, he had already irrevocably altered the lives of hundreds.

“Am I a terrible person? Maybe the fact that I'm worried about it means I'm not? But then, everyone thinks they're a good person in their own reference frame. It would be all too easy for me to slide down that talus slope... I've seen that before. I don't want to be like Bester, Gene...” Colin knew he wouldn't get an answer, but he found the steady rise and fall of Gene's chest comforting anyway. Maybe because it anchored him in reality instead of his runaway thoughts? Gene was alive. So were twenty other telepaths.

‘Isn't my job to maximize the number of us who keep breathing?’ he asked himself ‘Can I avoid the uncertainty of speculative scenarios? Or is my job more Kantian than Utilitarian? Ugh. There's a reason they don't teach ethics much in the academy. Too many variables. Paralysis of Analysis doesn't do anyone any good. It's done.’ He tried to stop ‘If it's done then why the hell can't I stop thinking about Ronald's face when I stop to catch my breath?’

Eventually, Colin dozed off again. He woke up to his comm unit beeping angrily at him. He answered with a groggy grunt.

“Lieutenant, I have good news. I've got 'em. I might even get to litigate New Law if they push.” Colin got the impression that if Serena could, she would have triggered an ominous piano sting in a minor chord when using the words ‘litigate new law’.

“Counsellor, that’s great news. But… how?”

“Well, they stepped in an intersection between Crawford-Tokash, various EA regulations on telepaths, and informed consent laws. They run headlong into each other because no one ever thought to spell it out. Lots of hospitals have policies like this, but there is usually a Corps facility nearby and they can legally justify it in various ways. Where there isn’t one like on Babylon 5, these policies don’t exist. Nobody wants to risk a lawsuit. These bastards fucked up because they forgot to change their policy when the colony re-entered the Earth Alliance. If we take it to court, odds are fifty percent; but we’d get injunctive relief and cost them years and millions of credits. The Corps can afford that. A hospital can’t.”

“Huh. So you’re hoping they see your Legally Angry Letter and fold?”

“Fuck that, I’m going in person to deliver the documents. I love watching administrators squirm. You’ve got to have all manner of rancid shit to do Lieutenant, your partner is in good hands. I’ve got this. I won’t let anyone hurt my Cousin Maddy's adopted siblings.”

“Thank you Counsellor. I mean that.”

“My pleasure. Just invite me to the Birthday party this year and we’ll call it even. Personally
anyway, I’m still gonna bill the Corps. I have temps to feed.”

“Of course. Consider it done. Good hunting.”

“See you on the flip side.” and she hung up.

'Ve don’t pay her enough.'

...

Gene regained consciousness and p’heard the voices again with his own mind, felt the familiar whispering of hundreds of minds coursing through him again. He opened his eyes, and he saw in normal colors and depth again. He squeezed his hand and no one was there, he looked around for Colin and he was nowhere to be found, but someone else was. A black haired woman with narrow aquiline features in a wheelchair. Not having his partner there when he woke up hurt a little bit.

'Who in the hell is this? Where’d Colin go?' he wondered. 'Probably back at the annex dealing with the aftermath...' the logic of it erased the hurt. It wasn't personal. How could it be?

“Morning handsome.” She said “You are one tall drink of water, let me tell you…”

'Oh Christ she has to be a patient wandering around. Oh fuck, I don’t have my badge on and don’t have regulation gloves. This is a legal and PR catastrophe if I ever there was one... I have to warn her right now.'

“Fair warning: I am a telepath, and so I’ve been told. Don’t get your hopes up though…” Gene replied groggily.

“Oh? And why not? It isn’t the spina bifida is it? That pisses me off so much...” She grumbled.

“No. Not at all. It’s just that you’re a woman and I’m not into your half of the species. Who are you, anyway?” Gene asked. She blushed crimson and he plucked her name from her surface thoughts. Serena Carmichael, JD. Also known as The Velociraptor.

'Oh Thank God!’ Gene decided that he had to mess with her somehow. As a petty revenge for making him panic about his accouterments.

“God, I’m sorry.” she said, a little mortified. Gene pounced on it.

“Hi Sorry, I’m Gene.” Gene gave her a wicked grin.

“Ugh! Fucking dad jokes! If you’re gay there’s no way you’re one of those!” she riposted.

“Hey, I’m a P12 in excellent condition, I’ve been donating sperm since I was nineteen. I could be.”

“Point, but there’s a distinction between father and dad!” and the stop-thrust. There wasn’t much he could say to respond to that. Not if he didn’t have adopted kids or something.


“I take it I have you to thank for my… not being slowly driven mad?”

“Yes and no. Colin put in the call to my office this morning. He was…upset. He didn’t say it, but I’ve heard him morally offended before. This went beyond that.”

“He had a rough night.” Gene said. “I can’t say too much, but to go through what he did and then
find me on sleepers...he didn’t take it well.”

“You say that like you’re not the one in the hospital bed.” Serena chided.

“I’ve been shot before.” Gene replied, waving a hand in a dismissive gesture “Don’t get me wrong, it fucking sucks and it’s never come this close to killing me before, but...what he went through was worse.”

“You’re the telepath, I’ll take your word for it.” Serena allowed.

“After all that, he came up here and held my hand to help me fall asleep. Easier to relay the...” he waved his hand to indicate the space of the hospital “ambient telepathic noise. I don’t even think he went home until the morning...”

“Uh Huh.” Serena intoned. Gene looked at her and p’saw what she was thinking.

“It isn’t like that.” Was it? Gene thought about it. Colin was sexy as hell; nice smile, kind bottle-green eyes, and that ass... plus the personal qualities.

'Okay' Gene thought 'Maybe there was a bit of that.' he admitted to himself, but knew acting on it was a professional and ethical minefield.


“I’ve just spent a career around mundanes—no offense.”

“None taken.” Serena reassured him. “I’m an exception. Distaff relations.” Gene tipped a phantom cap in her direction by way of a thank you.

“Mundanes who don’t give a fuck. The last time I got shot, no one came by medlab to make sure I was okay. Here? I put myself in front of superheated plasma because I know in my soul that if our positions had been reversed, he’d have done the same.” Gene paused “I’m rambling, aren’t I?” Serena gave him a patient little smile.

“You are, but that’s alright. You’re currently drugged. And uh, don’t worry. I won’t tell Colin you like him. I know that would be a mess for you. I don’t even think he’s gay, just married to his work.”

“I do not” Gene lied, and he knew it was a lie because that bit of information caused his heart to sink a little. ’Of course I'm not that lucky...’

“Pfft. You don’t need to be a telepath to read minds, and you’re drugged. You’re...not thinking straight.”

'The Velociraptor is now officially cool.'

“Hah. I see what you did there. I have to ask how you’ll avoid tipping him off to your baseless suspicion though.” Colin paid attention to her thoughts and understood. Other than intentionally letting her name and suspicions slip, she’d been running the legal code through her head while having a conversation.

“My cousin taught me.” She said. “It isn't fair that you guys have to do all the work of ensuring the privacy of mundanes. Besides, I can't reasonably expect you to blind yourselves, no matter what the law says. So I pick up the slack, and teach my mundane staff to do the same.” It was such a small courtesy, and yet it was too damn much for so many billions. She was the first mundane he
ever met who bothered.

"No wonder Colin likes you..." He said. "I certainly do."

"Well that's good to know!" she replied.

When Colin got back to the annex, Steve had gone home and parents had been contacted. Almost all of them horrified about what had happened to their kids and twelve pairs had insisted on coming in to at least visit their children, most had been taken home but there were a few whose parents hadn’t been able to come by yet. They’d all have to make a decision about whether to put them on sleepers or let the Corps take them in. Luckily, the Education teeps could handle that aspect easily enough. Childcare within the Annex for eight kids between the ages of six and twelve was another matter. Everyone was pitching in though as far as he could tell, and it warmed his heart to see. Colin could smell something cooking, a lot of something. Something brothy, it might have been ramen, but it wasn’t being served straight up. It had other things in it. He could smell broccoli and surimi at least. Someone raided the emergency supply closet and got all the kids changed out of what they had been wearing. And in the front atrium, Gerald took up entertainment duties.

Colin wanted to help, but he had murders to sift though. The first order of business was to obtain coffee, and Colin ended up taking two liters of french roast to where Gerald was reading a book to just over half a dozen of little ones. The older ones he heard talking to Hoshi in the kitchen.

<Hey Gerald, can I borrow you for a minute?>

<Sure thing> Gerald replied.

“Alright you apes, I’ll be back in a minute. Boss needs me…” he mimed dragging a ball and chain behind him. They all laughed, but one of them stood out specifically in Colin's mind. Zara was still with them. It was good to see her smiling and laughing with the other kids. She needed that. On the other hand, he was worried for all the one's whose birth parents hadn't shown up yet. Some of them were legitimately far away, at least one pair lived in an agricultural commune on the other side of the planet, but there would always be a few who never came. It was just a matter of figuring out how many that would eventually be.

Colin waved at her though, and she waved back with a grin on her face.

<You doing okay?> he asked her. She furrowed her brow not knowing how to send the thought back privately and not really sure how comfortable she was doing it anyway. After a second she nodded and gave him a thumbs up. That worried Colin. Zara wasn't talking much but that could just be shyness in a new setting. Different kids recovered in different ways. On the other hand, Zara's reluctance to use telepathy meant she was probably dealing with some self-loathing. She was responsive though so that was a good sign. He returned it with a little heart-shape made from his fingers and thumbs. Zara giggled and returned it before Colin was out of sight.

“I expect ISN will be all over yesterday’s business." Colin told Gerald when they were out of earshot of the children."Do we have a media strategy?"

"I've been wee busy Colin, but I have an interview request in my inbox." Gerald replied. "If we don't at least send a mundane surrogate, it's ISN, they'll spin whatever narrative they want."

"And it's ISN... that narrative is going to be so yellow it looks like a gold vein, I know." Colin cupped his face in both hands and stretched the skin of his face "I just don't want to trust a
“I could go.” Gerald suggested “I'm familiar with the case.” Colin rejected that idea.

"No, no. It has to be someone who was on site, who saw everything. Someone who can speak with authority and that's me. Fuck, why are we even talking about this? Is this even legal?” Colin knew it probably was. Gerald was trained in public relations, which meant he knew the regulations that grew out of the Psi Corps Charter's prohibitions on journalism like the back of his hand. If he was offering to go, it was legal.

"So long as you don't offer your opinion on politics or EarthGov policy, you should be okay. You can even remind people what that policy is, and offer your personal justifications for why you might have done things. Just don't comment on bullocks like the current government's stance toward the Psi Corps and arrangement with EarthGov with respect to Metapol staffing."

"Fuck. I hate this. I can make time tomorrow afternoon provided I have the necessary permissions from the Corps. Until then, I have a pile of documents to sift through."

<Murder case?> Gerald asked.

<Yeah>

“Too right. Got you covered, I'll send the clearance request to Geneva and wait for a response before I schedule anything.”

“Thank you. I owe you one.” Colin replied.

“No worries mate.” then Gerald thought better of it “Newcastle, you owe me Newcastle.”

“The city? I am not sure I can do that…” just to mess with him.

“The ale you barmy…” Gerald touched Colin’s shoulder so he could send thoughts without the kids picking it up and learning naughty linguistic habits.

<fuckmuppet.>

<Cockwomble> Colin replied.

<Shitgibbon> Came Gerald’s response

<Gormless chav> Colin finished, complete with a glyphed image of Gerald wearing a baggy tracksuit and jacket with a popped collar, ratty baseball cap, and gold chain.

Gerald was barely containing laughter at that point, snickering under his breath.

“First to laugh loses Gerald, get back over there, the munchkins are starting miss you.” Gerald departed while still trying to suppress laughter.

Colin went into his office and closed the door, starting in on the coffee Colin began to pour through about a hundred case files going back ten years. He arranged them in chronological order and started looking for common patterns in the brain scans and medical minutiae. Not all of them were murders. Up until 2258, none of them were the murders he was looking for; a stroke here, aneurysm there, the occasional blunt force trauma resulting in a hematoma. He filtered those out quickly. It looked like Dr. Shine had basically searched her files for brain injuries, which made sense given her workload, particularly in the last 24 hours.
But in early 2259 he found a presumed homicide, and began to dictate his notes.

“Victim: Jason Clemens, black male traffic analyst, mid 20s, 173 centimeters in height, mass of 85 kilos, black hair and brown eyes. Rough ligature marks on the wrists and ankles, likely from hemp rope.” he shuffled through the document “forensics report confirms hemp fibers embedded in the skin. The victim presents with multiple injury modalities including: minor contusions and abrasions, lacerations exposing muscular tissue and bone, blunt force trauma to the face and skull including multiple tooth fractures. There are also manual extractions of the teeth. Also evident are multiple simple and compound fractures to the ribs and long bones from lateral and torsional stress, as well as blunt force. Repeated breakage of phalanges, metacarpals and metatarsal bones are also in evidence as well as removal of the nails. The shoulders, hips, knees and elbows were also traumatically dislocated and reset. Repeatedly. Many of these injuries were given very basic medical care and permitted to partially heal.” Colin read the next part, and shuddered.

"Evidence of trauma to the anus and genitals--no fluids other than his own blood--and the pattern of damage was consistent with multiple modalities of foreign object penetration. He was well-fed, but blood work and liver biopsy indicate periods of starvation.” Colin stopped the recording.

This poor young man had suffered every injury Colin could think of that was possible to inflict on another human being without killing them and that would not require a surgical theater. His body was unceremoniously dumped in a public trash can, no forensic evidence in the form of hairs, fibers, or DNA were detected that could be separated from contamination from the dump site or that could be used to identify a suspect. The cause of death was a widespread pattern of stroke throughout the brain, eventually leading to cardiac arrest. He had been scanned, brutally and probably repeated.

He found another from early 2259, Chunhua Zhang, a female university student, 19 years old. Similar pattern, adjusted for her anatomy. There were more. A dozen more between 2259 through 2261, spanning different races and genders. Colin had to get up and pace around his office just to take his eyes off the dossiers staring at him through the abyss of his monitor; to say nothing of visiting the bathroom, that was a lot of coffee.

He’d seen a lot of awful things during data collection and later during his internship and four years as an active Psi Cop, but this topped them all. Torture and degradation that went on for weeks. He needed a drink, no that would be stupid. But he needed something, and Swiss chocolate was not going to do the trick like it usually did.

More than being a murderer this bastard was a loss of the control and regulation that was the Psi Corps' part of the social and written contract with the mundanes. The social contract that kept telepathic children from being smothered in their beds. Sometimes the means used to make that regulation happen were less than ideal. Deeply troubling, even. Yet, every year someone in the Earth Alliance Senate submitted a bill to disband the Psi Corps and either put telepaths on sleepers or turn them all over directly to the military. The registration, badges, and the gloves; they all made telepaths easy to identify and another genocide campaign was never out of the question either. With stakes like that, the necessary and the right thing often did not coincide. His own hands were hardly clean and he knew it.

No matter what the Psi Corps did to make itself a ghetto where telepaths could live in happiness and safety. As much as they all worked to one day free themselves from it's walls, the Psi Corps was still a ghetto, and Colin was a police officer enforcing the laws imposed on it's population. He had no illusions about that. He just preferred to think of that job as secondary to the protection of telepaths from the predations of mundanes. But this? This was a living example of why mundanes were terrified of telepaths, and why the Sword of Damocles hung over his head every day of
Colin's life. There was also one more fact he couldn't escape. Mundanes or not these people were still sapient beings who deserved something like justice for the beyond-the-pale things that had been done to them. Done to them by one of his own, which he just found offensive. Maybe by dealing with it he could make people thankful that the Psi Corps existed for five whole minutes.

So he forced himself to sit back down.

Starting in early 2262, the patterns of injury shifted over time. First the physical injury was reduced, then the amount of neural trauma was reduced in scope but increased in intensity to nothing but the pathways into and from the thalamus leading to the anterior cingulate and parieto-insular cortices. These cases, of which there were 6, stopped at the end of the year. Francine Smith was the first victim of this year, and completed the progression targeting only the anterior cingulate and parieto-insular cortices.

What really galled Colin was that her case was the first time an apparent luminary in the local mundane bureaucracy thought of bringing the Psi Corps in.

The police knew they were murders but it either never occurred to them to bring in the Corps, or they didn’t want the Corps in on their investigation for bigotry, political, or turf reasons. Of course, that was also something of a tumultuous time for the Earth Alliance, and it is likely no one was available who could help them in 2260 and 2261. Still, they should have brought him in last year.

So he fumed there for a moment staring at the wall and squeezing a stress ball he absent-mindedly pulled from a drawer. Then he sighed, drew his hands down his face stretching the skin out, and started recording his initial findings. He thought he had some ideas, but whoever they were this person was truly sick, and the twisted part was, he didn’t have enough data to distinguish between possibilities. Not enough with all this misery.

He would need more data; more corpses.

He played everything back a few times to make sure he hadn’t missed anything, pouring over each case file and set of neural images each time. Nothing new popped out at him. By the time he finished it was late and he needed to be at the hospital in the morning. He went home--upstairs--and checked his calendar. Sure enough he had an interview scheduled for three PM.

Colin crawled into bed, and had fitful dreams.
Colin got to the hospital the next morning just in time for Gene to be discharged. He went up to his hospital room, navigating with through the Kafkaesque morass of hallways. He almost had to resort to the left-turn-rule but eventually made it to his destination with a spare uniform so Gene wouldn’t have to leave in hospital scrubs. He was almost too late, because Gene had evidently just put on a set of scrubs with his Psi Corps badge pinned to the chest, though he was still wearing the exam gloves. Gene beamed a smile at Colin as he saw the familiar black uniform nestled in the crook of his arm.

“You are far too fucking good to me. I can’t make hospital scrubs look good.” Colin disagreed. He was pretty sure Gene could make anything look good, short of something ridiculous like socks and sandals combined with leopard print spandex, but he kept that to himself. He also kept private the thought that Gene might look good in nothing but leopard print spandex.

'No, there is no might about that…'

“That’s what I thought.” he replied, concealing the lie of omission behind his own cognitive-fortress.

“Check this out!” and Gene lifted his shirt. Showing off a muscular abdomen and lower back with only slight mottled discoloration; without a hint of wound contracture. Older scars from various other injuries remained, however.

“No new scar tissue!” Colin could only respond for a moment with silence as his thought train derailed due to an attempted mutiny by his limbic system. He got it back on track fairly quickly. “Colin?”

“Sorry, I’m just amazed. I didn’t know they were that good.” which was true enough he actually didn’t.

“Neither did I. I’m used to field medicine. It gets you back on your feet, but it isn’t so tidy. Even the discoloration will heal eventually; or so Dr. Ishikawa tells me. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“I’m pretty sure the good doctor was truthful with you. Met him yesterday, he was honest enough to admit he didn't know something, so I don't think he'd over-inflate your prognosis.” He handed the actual clothing over to Gene, including a fresh set of black gloves “I’ll give you some privacy.”

“Thanks.” Gene said, as he grabbed the garments, but didn’t pull them away and held Colin’s gaze “and not just for these. Thanks for staying with me. And also for getting me off that damned ‘medication’.” Colin almost felt like Gene was thinking something else too, but had no idea what it was, but he liked those eyes.

“It was my pleasure. And a certain Dromaeosaurid is more responsible for the latter than me.” Gene smiled that infectious smile again, and they broke eye contact before it got uncomfortable.

“Yeah yeah, she came and talked to me; made sure they didn’t dick around. She’s good people and I see how she got the nickname. Anyway, I should put these on.”

“Yeah you should. I did lug them all the way up here...” and Colin rounded the door frame. He heard the rustle of clothes being changed. Woosh woosh, underwear.
“Oh hey, you even brought me clean underwear. They took the old ones off me, I was afraid I was back in Military division. It was nightmarish.” Colin groaned at the awful joke but also had to clamp down on his mind to avoid blooping his own mental image.

“That pun was vile.” Colin said. Gene chuckled at his suffering. Then came the sound of a hopping stumble followed by woosh woosh, properly dressed Psi Cop.

“Am I cleared to enter?” Colin asked.

“Yes you are cleared to enter.” and Colin rounded the door frame again. Gene whistled, a low note followed by a high one "Officer on deck!"

"He's in a mood...' Colin noted. 'Probably just so happy to get the hell out of here he's getting silly.'

“Ready to go?” Colin asked.

“Yeah, let’s get the hell out of here.”

...  

Colin hated interviews. A mental battle in a surreal mindscape with a telepath bent on turning him into a vegetable? That he could handle. Journalists were another matter entirely. Telepaths were not allowed to be journalists of any stripe, they couldn’t even blog. They could however be interviewed by journalists on matters directly related to the Corps for public information purposes, with permission from Geneva. Or so he had been informed by Gerald, much to his potential extreme chagrin and mortification. Colin knew that if he screwed up trying to take down a P11 mindshredder he could die. He was at peace with that, statistically he was distressingly unlikely to see his fortieth birthday. If he screwed up with a journalist he could end up disgracing himself and the Corps, putting everyone at risk. He wasn’t sure which would be worse. However, he had an advantage that someone else in his position did not have.

The reporter was a woman named Trisha Nguyen, she sat across a large table from Colin looking over her notes just before air time.

“We’re on in three...two...one” came a voice from beyond the event horizon of the stage lights “and go” and the cameras were on.

Mrs Nguyen turned to the camera with a practiced wide smile “Good afternoon and welcome to Omega Seven ISN News Live, I’m your host Trisha Nguyen. We have a special guest today in the form of Lieutenant Colin Meier, our local Metapol station chief, here to talk about the recent raid on the Omega U.P.S. Welcome to the show!” Colin put on his best stage smile. He imagined that footage from the raid was being green-screened in.

“Happy to be here Mrs Nguyen.” he lied.

"So about that name?" She ventured.

'Oh thank heavens something easy that I can play off.'

"Honestly, I have no idea. I can only guess that somewhere in their history someone got an MBA with a concentration of Criminal Enterprises and never hired a black-marketing firm. There's no accounting for the names of criminal organizations. This one at least means something. There's one raider group that used to operate in Babylon 5 Space that was called The Sanguine Badgers. None of them were from places that even have badgers," Trisha actually laughed a little at that.
“Alright then, well I suppose we should get into the real business then. How did you not know about these...people?” he paid attention to her inner monologue; it was an innocent enough question, no hidden traps. Still, he had to be careful because the answer could damage the Corps if he didn’t handle it properly.

“Well, partially it goes back to the Civil War a few years ago.” he raised his hands in a placating gesture when he felt an interrupting question forming in her mind and written all over her face. “I am not going to comment on the civil war itself, the Psi Corps and myself are neutral in those matters, I merely describe its unintended consequences.” she nodded, mollified, and motioned for him to go on. She considered bringing up the Director’s endorsement of Clark, but decided against it.

“Wars bring chaos, it's practically a law of nature. In this case, the Psi Corps was forced to leave this planet, and couldn’t perform any of our functions. Genetic screening, monitoring for hidden talents, or follow-up on kids we already knew about from genetic screening; that sort of thing. The schools are our typical points of contact outside of parents, and school officials had been… compromised.” he did not like admitting to that, but it was public knowledge by then.

“Tell me about that.” she asked, again, no traps in that question, but she was trying to lull him into a false sense of security in order to spring something on him.

“Ronald Jenkins, a rogue telepath, probably somewhere in the P10 range; also a complete sociopath. They exist among telepaths the same way they do among everyone else, which is one of the reasons Psi Cops exist. Lets just say he had no problems breaking Psi Corps rules about telepathic manipulation. He suborned the will of some civilians and did not go down easily. He forced me to kill him; no I will not comment on that.” the reality was, it was still eating at him.

“You did kill some innocent people...” he could feel the shark-like grin in her mind. Colin was not about to let himself humiliate the Corps or himself.

“They were well-armed. I couldn’t free them from his control while being shot at and also keep a P10 from turning me into a zucchini.” he replied coldly “In fact, my partner took a PPG shot to the back shielding me with his own body while I dealt with Jenkins. If you have an alternative course of action we could have taken other than ritual suicide or letting people who enslave children go, I am all ears Mrs. Nguyen. I’m sure the viewers are as well.”

'Impress me with your acumen...'

What interested Colin was that she felt no shame at what she tried to do. She’d been raised from birth with the notion that telepaths should sacrifice themselves for mundanes and wanted to press that without realizing why she did or how vile it was. Yet, she couldn’t think of a better course of action when forced to consider it, so she dropped it. Then she found the only other wrinkle.

“What about your informant Vincent Udone? He also ended up dying. Why did you so casually put his life at risk?”. She was trying to bait him into becoming angry or saying something that might indicate he broke the rules. He hadn’t in that instance, that day, though he was certainly doing so now, but she didn’t know that.

“I didn’t. We took every precaution to preserve his life. And don’t try to pretend he was some innocent flower caught up in something beyond him. He was enslaving children into forced labor and sexual exploitation, he gave up any claim he might have on my sympathy at that point. He took a deal to avoid death of personality and it went bad. Civilian police and Earth Force Security use the same tactic all the time, and sometimes, the informant or mole doesn't make it out.” Colin shrugged and kept his voice calm. “I don’t know what you expect from me here.”
“Maybe exploring other options?” she asked.

“What would those have been? I can’t scan normals without their consent, nor was Mr. Udone fully informed; they compartmentalized too well.” He wanted to ask her if she would be asking these questions if they were mundane children, but he wasn’t about to actually risk the possible blowback from confronting people with their own double standards.

“Okay, we have gone a bit farther afield than I intended.” she lied. He didn’t even need telepathy for it, she was trying to save face and he hoped the audience would see it that way too. No telling with large groups of mundanes though.

“About how many kids do you think they managed to take, and how will you track them down?” she asked. For his part, Colin slipped into teaching mode easily.

“Between 100 and 300, that’s our best estimate, but it’s just that. Would you like me to break down the numbers for you?” She nodded. “Great, if you could pull up the age-structure graph I sent you?” he did tell a bit of a fib. He had the exact number of absconded kids, but that was not public knowledge and he wanted to keep it that way. Particularly because he got it from a scan. A scan of a telepath naturally, and that wasn't privileged information because Telepaths didn't have a right to privacy to intrude upon, but Colin figured that was neither here nor there, and going into it would let her draw him into a discussion about Crawford-Tokash.

“Sure” and she did, displaying it on a screen behind them and on the surface of the table.

“About one in a thousand births to non-telepaths results in a telepath. People talk about a ‘telepath gene’ but it’s a lot of genes working together. It’s an emergent property like intelligence. Genetic testing looks for the markers for alleles we’ve identified, but we don’t have all of them.”

“And that’s why modern tests identify more than older ones, you’ve found more positive alleles in that complex?” She was legitimately curious.

“Correct, but we haven’t identified all of them. I won’t get into the genetics, we would be here all day.”

‘And I don’t want to give you one more second than I have to.’

“The take-home message is that with genetic screening, about forty percent of those who test positive will definitely be telepaths. We typically approach their parents immediately and raise them in the Corps. The remaining sixty percent who test positive might be telepaths, and we wait until they manifest their abilities before we take them into the Psi Corps. Plus there are the ones we don’t detect. That comes to a total of around six hundred and thirty school aged children with this planet’s population.

"Two follow-up questions if you don’t mind. First, which were you? And second, what do you mean ‘might be’ telepaths?"

"Bit personal there, but that's alright. I was never actually tested. I was born fully manifested. About a tenth of one percent of telepaths born in the Psi Corps are, biased toward the higher end of the scale."

'Oh the poor thing, he didn't get to be normal ever.' She thought.

'I don't need or want your bigoted fucking pity.' he mentally growled before continuing, keeping his
"As for the second question, they’re latents. They have the genetic markers, but maybe they’ll manifest, maybe they won’t. As I’ve mentioned, the genetics are really complicated. Some people have a genetic combination that means they’ll manifest telepathy without fail. Others require one of several different types of environmental trigger.” he replied.

“But you don’t take them into the Corps?” she followed up.

“No. Latent telepaths are basically normal people with special sauce. With practice, like if they have a telepathic family mother, they might sense if they’re being lightly scanned by their mother, or might be able to block it if mom doesn’t push. But they can’t scan anyone and they don’t have to register with the Corps. It’s basically a coin toss whether or not they’ll manifest full-blown telepathy, so we keep track of them, but that’s about it.” Colin paused, considering whether he should talk about the P1s and P2s that didn’t formally join the Corps but were still registered, but he decided against it. “Do you have other questions, or should I continue?”

'Let me get this over with, damn it!’

“We’re good.”

“Excellent. A number of factors: time-scale of the slaving operation, whether they manifest their abilities at home or at school, how many missed testing due to the war; they all go into that estimate.” he pointed to an equation on the display. “We are still trying to identify candidates and check in with their parents to confirm whether they’re missing or not.” he took a moment to look into the camera “If any of you watching have been told that the Psi Corps came to school and took your child within the last three years and you never met with a Psi Corps representative, please, call us. The Psi Corps never takes children without consulting their parents and discussing their options.”

“Well, we do sometimes, but usually because that consultation gets cut short by calls never returned or a door shut in our face.’ he thought bitterly, thinking about what happened to Gene. So far none of their most recent rescued kids, but Zara had been there longer than the rest and that was looking increasingly likely.

“Yes, please do. We’ve set up a hotline as well and will be passing information along to the Psi Corps, the contact information should be at the bottom of your screen.”

'Okay, she’ll get some positive credit…’

“Thank you Mrs. Nguyen. Mercifully, we did rescue twenty on site. We’ve contacted their parents and they will be making decisions about what to do in the next few days. Some will join the Psi Corps, and some might go on sleepers until they’re adults and can decide for themselves what they want to do. The important thing is that they’re safe.”

'Please God, don’t let them go on sleepers.’

“And tracking them down?” she followed up. Perfectly reasonable question, but one he could not answer. Partly because he had no clue, and even if he did he was not about to tell the people currently abusing telepaths how he would hunt them down.

“For operational security reasons, I really cannot answer that.” he replied.

The interview continued for another twenty minutes, she asked about Gene’s injuries and treatment and how the kids were getting along in the annex, and otherwise kept it pleasant. Thankfully she’d
realized that her attempts to catch Colin out, reveal casual disregard for human life, or some other embarrassing nonsense were doomed to fail and stopped. She was good, had he been a mundane police officer it might have worked, but the ability to bypass language and get to intention made him better.

Finally though, it was over.

“Well that wraps up a lively and informative discussion. Thank you Lieutenant Meier for taking time out of your day to come on our show.” she said professionally.

“You’re welcome, I am glad to help.” he said, equally professional. Then he got the hell out of there as fast as his legs and the necessity of removing stage-make up could carry him.

...

When Colin got back to the annex he felt something a little bit off. He dropped his walls and started to filter down what he perceived. Layer by layer, Colin shut out distant city noise, then the closer thoughts he could snatch words or distinct thoughts from, closer and closer until all he could perceive was coming from within the annex. Most trained telepaths were disciplined enough not to broadcast their own thoughts but Gerald couldn’t maintain blocks of that strength indefinitely and was nattering away on a call with one of his older children in his room. Then he caught it: a knot of despair coming from the common area lounge. He headed toward it and recognized who it was.

‘Oh no I was hoping this wouldn't happen.’ Colin thought to himself.

As he got closer, Colin could make out the sound of someone crying through the door, and it was definitely Zara's voice.

All of the other kids were gone, taken home by their parents over the course of the day so they could take a few weeks to make up their minds about what they would do, and in most cases say goodbye. Zara was in the center of one of the lounge couches.

“Zara, what’s wrong?” he asked. When she just sobbed more, he gently touched her mind and found the answer. She’d slipped away about five minutes prior and overheard Hoshi having it out with her parents. “Is it your parents?” She sniffed and nodded, tears streaming down her face.

“They’re not coming…” she whimpered, the first words he'd heard her speak since meeting her. She’d been kidnapped, abused psychologically and possibly in other ways, and now the people she counted on to always be there to guide and protect her had thrown her to the wolves. She’d been keeping her spirits up on the hope that her parents would show up, and now that hope was gone. Her entire world shattered out from under her and she finally just broke.

Colin’s heart sank. Every last child they’d rescued was at risk of developing post traumatic stress disorder, and this made it worse. There was only one thing he could think to do about it. She needed hope, and she needed someone she could trust who cared about her. Colin was there, he figured he could do that.

“Oh sweetie, I’m so sorry.” he sat down next to her and put his arm across her shoulders. She buried her face in his chest, so he wrapped the other arm around her and just held her, not just physically but with his mind as well. He needed someone who had been through this before, so he turned his mind to a rarified telepathic frequency that only very powerful telepaths could pick up and sent as strongly as he could to overcome lack of line of sight and the intervening ceiling.

<Gene, if you could come downstairs, I need your help with someone. You’ll do a better job than
Gene's mental voice strained. Colin gathered as much will as he could and sent Gene a glyph of Zara, complete with a nametag.

<Oh no… parental rejection?>

<Yeah>

<Fucking hell. Give me a minute, was taking a bath, will be down momentarily.> Gene replied.

“I know it doesn’t feel that way right now. But it’s all going to be okay,” he could tell she didn’t believe him, how could she? Yet, the physical and mental reassurance helped; someone was there, someone cared.

She subsided quiet weeping by the time Gene got into the lounge. His hair was still sopping wet, and he sat down on her other side. She disentangled herself from Colin, so she could look at the newcomer.

“Hey Zara” she turned to look at him. “I’m Gene. Colin called me down because he thinks I can talk to you, would it be okay if I did that?” Zara looked at him skeptically. She knew Colin, trusted him. She'd gotten to know Gerald and Hoshi but this guy was new.

'He doesn't know me, what does he know?’ She thought.

"That's fair, the situation isn't exact but..." Gene reached out with his mind and sent them both the image of him, standing in front of his door, with a scholarly looking man behind him gripping his shoulder tight with black-gloved hands as his parents grieved for a child who wasn't dead and hated the messengers.

'Maybe he does know know then... But how could it ever get better than this? How will anything ever be the same? They were supposed to protect me from that, they said they'd always love me but they lied!' What am I supposed to do? Zara thought, angry, devastated, and confused all at once.

“Yep. I know that feeling too. But you know what? When I lost my first family I gained a new one. A family twelve million strong that understands and loves me without question or hesitation. Telepaths, every single one. In fact, I just got a new little sister.” Gene lightly tapped his index finger to her forehead. “That’d be you, silly.”

“You’re one of us, and we'll always be there for you. Thick and thin. No matter what. There’s millions of us, sometimes a family that big fights and we’ve got some enemies too. But we’re all standing behind you. Always.” Colin interjected.

Zara was starting to feel a little better, but they’d just asked her to swallow a big pill. And Colin knew it was a touch bowdlerized, but it was what she needed right then. She was too young and new to learn the wrinkles in the ideal.

“Really? How does that even work?” Zara asked, a very astute question in Colin’s estimation. She just couldn't fathom something that large.

'Holidays...' she considered.

“We can show you, if you’ll let us. And only if you let us.” Gene answered.
“But..I’m not…”

“It’s okay.” Gene said “It won’t hurt; but we’ll only do it if you want us to. If you change your
mind tomorrow or two weeks from now, the offer is open.” Colin got a flash of memory from
her. She’d gotten used to little mental touches from other telepaths, but this was big and the last time
someone had gone into her mind it had been forced. That memory warred with her curiosity, need
for hope, and her growing trust in the new adults around her, but it was still a big thing they were
asking.

<Did you have to take them prisoner?> Gene sent to Colin

<Mundanes were watching>

It took Zara a minute, but she made up her mind.

'They won’t hurt me and...I need to know.'

“Okay. Show me.”

“Okay Zara, if you take our hands, it’ll be easier for you to connect to us. Might be best if we form
a triangle on the floor though.” Gene said, sliding off the couch and forming one corner. Colin did
the same and took Gene’s left hand, while Zara took his right; and picked up the spare with their
free hands.

“Alright. I’ll go first.” Gene said. And to Colin’s surprise, he felt Gene’s mind brush against his
own and he dropped his blocks to let him in. Apparently, Gene wanted him to see this too

Colin saw a version of Gene he couldn’t have imagined. A frightened and emotionally traumatized
version of Gene just arrived in Vancouver. Somehow, despite being an extremely fit teenager, he
 came off as lanky compared to what he was now in the way that people who hadn’t quite filled out
their skeletal frames sometimes could. He walked into his third-floor dormitory with nothing but
the clothes on his back and some basic supplies, and his roommate turned around.

“Hi Eugene, I guess I’m your new roommate, Julian. Mr. Pearson told me what happened and if
you ever need to talk to someone, I’m here for you. We all are.”

Gene never did, but he carried that memory with him. There were others. So many others. Colin
saw his thankless disliked isolation among mundane special forces in the Military division and
how much he found himself missing the friends he made in the academy. Colin felt his excitement
when he got his transfer orders and his unbridled joy and relief when he was finally among his
own people again in retraining.

There were two more, the penultimate was when he and Colin talked just days before and the
thought that at last, he’d found his place in the world. The last was that night in the hospital. All of
it.

When Colin’s turn came, he guided them both through his childhood, growing up in a cadre with
the same housemates from the age of six until he was ten when the cadre shuffled. Learning to
climb a big oak tree in front of the cadre house blindfolded while his friends sent him telepathic
suggestions. He showed both of them his meeting of Marcel, his childhood best friend. Colin
taught Marcel English, Marcel taught Colin Polish, and he was constant thread through the cadres,
and the academy.

Colin showed them the transcendence of gestalting his mind to fifty other telepaths, skipped taking
out the cruiser, but did show them the plaque and the little observatory.
He showed them the Corps itself, throughout his training, pushing him to the best he could be and being there to catch him when he inevitably stumbled; and him being there for others to pick them up when they fell. He gave them the day he graduated from the Major Academy. Lastly, he gave them the memory of falling asleep in hospital, helping Gene through the injury he’d received saving Colin’s life. And he definitely counted being put on sleepers part of that injury.

When they broke mental contact, Zara rubbed at her temples a little bit. It was a lot to take in; but hope for her own future was starting to fill in the void left by despair.

“See?” he said “Everything’s going to be okay. And no matter what, you’ve got the two of us. We won’t let you face the world alone. Not ever.” Colin told her. This time, she believed him. “What do you say we make some popcorn and watch a vid? I’m a connoisseur of old Japanese cartoons--don’t worry, these ones are all in English except for the theme music.”

Gene glyphed him an image of his eyebrows raising.

<Don’t judge me!>

<Always judging, it’s just not always negative. This time I approve. And she does need something normal, watching cartoons is about as normal as things can get for her right now> Gene nodded appreciatively, and Colin allowed himself a soft smile.

Zara mulled it over for a minute and then nodded. She could go for cartoons. She was very self-aware of the fact that she was nine and not yet too old.

'Hmm Colin isn't too old, maybe I don't have to be either?’

Colin got up and made delicious buttery popcorn, and some well-sweetened chamomile tea for Zara. While the water boiled, and corn popped he bounded up to his room and grabbed the last of the other evening’s beer for himself and Gene.

He went back and found that Zara had scooted over to a corner, so she could curl up against the armrest and Gene had taken the middle seat. He handed popcorn and beer to Gene, and the tea to Zara, then went over to the control console and called up Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood.

“Um... Colin, when you said old, how old?” Zara asked.

“Early two thousands.” She almost choked on her tea

“How do you even find things that old?!!”

“Archival sorcery. You’ll like it, I promise.”

“I let everyone else know we were doing an impromptu movie night” Gene confessed as Colin sat down next to him.

“The more the merrier!” Colin replied.

<Good idea, in fact. Reinforces the point.> If there was one thing Colin never was, it was sparing with praise.

<That was the idea, yes.> Gene replied, glyphing Colin an image of captain obvious with a cheeky expression.

Gerald came in and stretched out in a recliner with some earl grey, Erika Entered and sprawled out
on the floor with a pillow, waving happily to Zara who returned the greeting. Max pretended to lurk in a corner but really, he’d just been sitting all day staring at legal documents and needed to stand. Hoshi looked at the screen sideways, her eyes brightened a few lumens and she threw herself into a beanbag chair.

<You know being an Otaku went out of fashion two hundred years ago, right? Now you’re a Vintage Otaku and I don’t even know how that works.> she sent over to Colin.

<I’m not. There are just a few of these I really like. You I worry about though. If I search your room am I going to find a reprint of The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife? You dealt with my tentacle probe far too easily!> It took her a second to get that one, which meant no, he would find no such reprint in her room, or ‘interesting’ film collections. When she did understand, she sent him a mental image of shifty eyes.

<Just think they are funny, okay!... Just Kidding! No no, I just make my own sashimi, or did until I came out here. It’s so far from earth that it’s expensive to get fresh fish outside of bulk consignments, and if it’s just for me it isn’t worth doing that. So it’s surimi in ramen and sushi rolls for me...>

<Why did I not know about this? It's been a year! Seriously Hoshi, we can make arrangements for communal meals.> Colin replied.

<I never thought of that... I guess I just got out of the habit after the academy.> She said.

<I think all of our culinary talents are being under-utilized for that exact reason. Note for future: Fix.>

Franklin brought additional popcorn that he was willing to share. Su and Eduardo arrived and grabbed bean bag chairs. Even Hassan who fancied himself above anything animated seemed to enjoy himself. Everyone in bean bag chairs became something of a pile, stretched between them with zero personal space boundaries. The standard Psi Corps cuddle pile. Just about everyone raised in the Corps was raised on them and those who assimilated later eventually accepted the concept most of the time. Colin honestly had no idea how mundanes managed on the much more restricted human contact and affection they allowed themselves.

’Maybe it's just because that's the closest they can get so it gets reserved for more intimate relationships?’ Colin mused. ’Kinda the same with us and removing the gloves, and snuggling can mean more. Context matters I guess.’

It may not have been the choice of show necessarily, just the distraction and people, but Zara seemed to relax and forget her worries for a while. Eventually it got late, and everyone was going to be busy the next day. The Psi Corps had no drop in its workload on casual Fridays. People started to head up to their own apartments and once everyone but Colin, Gene, and Zara were gone, Gene noticed that Zara was snoring gently up against his shoulder.

<Don’t really want to wake her up to be honest.> he sent to Colin, so as not to wake her up.

<Then don’t move. I’ve got her.> Colin replied.

<Thanks. Hurry back, I'll keep this paused.>

Colin got up, and gently lifted the girl--still in a fetal position--into his arms. The guest quarters were upstairs and that is where she was staying, so he carefully ascended the steps. He got the door open and tucked Zara into bed without her ever waking up. He didn't even need to keep her
awake. Poor thing was exhausted physically, emotionally, and had been through a lifetime worth of hell.

Colin looked down at her and shook his head. The transport for all the kids who were joining the Psi Corps was in two weeks. They'd made good progress with her tonight but nowhere near what they would need if she was going to adjust well to being in the Corps. She might need extensive treatment with a good telepathic therapist. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he was certain that was true. Still, they could help her feel normal for two weeks; start training her properly and keep up at least a little bit with a school curriculum. He wasn’t sure how he’d organize it, but he’d see to it when he got the chance. Most importantly, he was sure that he and Gene could ensure she felt like she was loved and wanted. Zara deserved at least that.

He left and crept back downstairs to the darkened lounge, where Gene had stolen his seat and patted the center of the couch.

<You did good today Gene.> Colin thought at him, sitting down.

<All I did was what Jason Andrews did for me when I was twice her age. But I seem to remember saying that we were gonna to have a talk, yes?>

Colin had been putting one foot in front of the other, focusing on everything else he had to do. He simply hadn’t had the time or emotional safety to sit down and really process everything that had happened since Monday. In that moment though, he knew he did. So he thought about it. He'd seen children kept in glorified kennels, he'd killed a man. A terrible man, but still a man; and he'd done it directly and cold from a position of absolute power. He'd sifted through years of torture and murder in impersonal and ultimately dehumanizing medical and police reports, and needed more. His soul had been put on the rack and stitched. He thought about all of it, needed some sort of emotional release, but when the time came he couldn't do it.

WHY!?' He internally screamed at himself and he got an answer 'Because you have to be strong for everyone else. They need you to be unflappable more than you need to emote.'

He felt Gene’s arms slide around his shoulders and start wordlessly coaxing him into a different position, and Colin let it happen. Before he knew it, Gene had propped himself at an angle on the arm of the couch and Colin’s back was resting on his chest, legs stretched out across the seats. Then Gene just held him like no one had in ages, silently giving him permission. Colin’s mental barriers disintegrated. Not just the ones that protected his mind from outside intrusion, but the walls of professional conduct and societal expectation, the bulwarks that kept his emotions in check; all of them. Colin had been keeping it together for days, longer, and he just couldn’t anymore. He didn’t want to.

Every mutilated corpse, every enslaved child, Ronald Jenkins and that fucking gateway, that mundane hell-pit of a hospital, the never-and-always-alone isolation and burden of responsibility his vocation demanded and everything he had to grin and bear because of it; it all came tumbling out in a brief explosion of tears and sobbing.

<It’s okay. Let it out. You don’t have to keep it bottled in with me.>

Colin didn’t know how long he was like that, it could have been ten seconds or fifteen minutes, but through it Gene just tightened his grip and flooded his mind with warmth until he pulled himself together and reconstructed his mental shields. It was amazing to him how much better a simple thing like crying his eyes out could help him feel, but the knot was still there.

Gene loosened his grip and Colin knew he’d let go if Colin wanted him to, but Colin didn’t. Just
the opposite. He felt safe there, reassured. Dare he think it even loved; platonically of course, he told himself. Instead of getting up or separating, he relaxed his body weight onto Gene and reached an arm backward to run his gloved fingers through Gene’s hair by way of a thank you.

<You’re welcome. I get the impression we have more to talk about than Jenkins… and that it’s been more than a week.> Gene replied softly in Colin’s head.

<Picked that up, did you?> Colin replied wryly.

<Yeah.> Gene replied. <But we’ve got to start somewhere. Was that really the first time you’ve killed?> Colin hesitated to answer for a moment. The Earth-Minbari war was one thing, he’d basically arranged to have a cruiser killed and it was one of the prouder moments of his life. The Shadow War was another, and while he was immensely proud of what he’d done, even if it gave him nightmares not born of guilt, it was security sensitive.

<In the interests of honesty, yes and no. I haven’t directly killed… people.> Colin could feel the interrogative coming. <When I was eighteen I helped kill a Minbari cruiser, but that’s actually a good memory and another conversation. Other than that I’ve killed… things. Things that weren’t people.> Gene’s thoughts looked at him funny.

<I want to tell you about the latter but can’t. There’s an action block for OpSec purposes. I need to get it released before I can tell you. You’ll have to be vetted first, by someone not-me.> Colin clarified, slowly and carefully so as not to trip over the block. He wanted to tell Gene with every fiber of his being, but he physically couldn’t let certain information out of his head. Information vital to the security and safety of the Psi Corps.

<Fuck, man. That must be some heavy shit if you’ve got those. Even I don’t have any of them in my head, and I worked in special ops and intelligence.>

<It is. I’d trust you with it if I physically could. I’ll try to get clearance for you, it’s…something you should know. Especially if we’re going to be working together long-term.>

<It’s alright. I understand. There’re things I can’t talk about directly either but the only thing stopping me is the law. Action blocks to prevent leaks? That’s above my pay-grade.>

<Stick with me, and the pay-grade gets suitably cosmic without an actual raise.> Colin replied with affected mirth. Gene didn't reply verbally, Colin just felt his acceptance of that fact, and his person. In that moment, he knew Gene trusted him with whatever that information was, and with whatever came out of it. He didn't have any idea what he'd done to earn it, but it meant the world to him that he had somehow. For someone like Gene, who'd been hurt and betrayed by his own parents and then used by mundane handlers for the better part of a decade, he didn't think that kind of implicit trust came easily.

<They told us in the academy that most Psi Cops get blooded early, and I certainly didn’t buck the trend.> Gene said, and Colin recalled the bar. <And uh… prior experience. The first time isn’t ever easy. Hell if it gets easy is when you run into problems. The best I can do is to help you square the why of it in your head. So, walk me through it?>

‘Okay. Teacher mode. I can do teacher mode.’ Colin thought, and took a moment to collect his thoughts and how best to lay everything out. Particularly because it tied into his own action blocks. There was some background information he couldn’t discuss. On the other hand, he figured Gene might be able to fill in the gaps enough with his own experiences to paint his own picture.
That's something I can do. Ronald was a born psychopath, like some one percent of the population. They're more common than we are for fuck's sake. Had he been raised well, he could have ended up a successful CEO if he weren't a telepath. As it was, abuse turned him into a sociopath.

I never really understood the difference if I’m being honest.

Short version: Psychopaths are born. Sociopaths are made, usually but not always from psychopaths. A psychopath has no conscience or empathy but they can fake it. They can appear normal and even charming, but they view other people as objects to be manipulated for their own ends. When abused... they become much more dangerous.

And both would be ruinous in the Corps. Gene stated in realization. We couldn’t trust them to not break the rules or at least break them judiciously. They’d be dangerous.

That wasn't quite true. A psychopath might even follow the rules about scanning more strenuously because they were basically emulating being a good person. They'd only break them if it was definitely in their advantage to do so, and they could be sure they wouldn't get caught.

Psychopaths are much less a problem. Tend to make good surgeons. Sociopaths though... think of the distinction like this. Psychopaths are sick in the head but it isn't necessarily obvious socially. Sociopaths are sick and and manifests socially, and their personalities can't be reconstructed because the problem is anatomical. If a regular guy had a fucked-up childhood that turned him into a monster, we could work with that because he has the anatomy to support the new personality. A sociopath doesn’t.

And prison wasn’t an option? I assume you considered it… Gene asked.

Of course I did.

Well, what made you reject it? I know we don’t use sleepers as a matter of principle…

If I’d left him alive, he wouldn’t have ended up in a cell. He’d be a deniable asset for the Director’s office. He couldn’t go into the exact details, but he didn’t have to. Director York was a mundane, and everyone knew in broad strokes what that meant. I couldn’t let that happen.

Colin. I don’t know what you know, but from what I do know, also classified to the gills, I wouldn’t trust the Earth Alliance with a sociopathic P10, to say nothing of Director York specifically. From where I'm sitting, you made the right choice. Just remember the reason why it’s necessary. It’s gonna hurt every fuckin’ time, but so long as you’re not doing it for the wrong reasons, you’ll be able to sleep at night. Eventually. Gene curled his fingers in a bit and ran them up and down Colin’s sternum. Colin knew that he’d have to kill again. He knew he’d been lucky he hadn’t had to kill anyone up until then. But he also knew too many Psi Cops who were dead inside from having to kill or watch others die too much. Colin didn’t want to end up like that.

I know Gene thought at him, apparently sensing his surface thoughts through physical contact. I don’t want either of us to end up like that, and given the state of the galaxy, I don’t think anything is going to get easier. But I’m also not the the sort of person who believes that someone who isn't already fucked in the head can get a taste for killing unless they let that happen. If you think you're inevitably going to turn into a monster, then you probably will. It become self-fulfilling. Just... outside immediate life or death, never let it become reflexive or an easy solution, and you'll be fine. Hopefully I will be too.

'That makes way too much sense to be coming from a student... of course in this, who is the
teacher, exactly? He's been here before.’ And Colin knew Gene was right, be beat Colin over the head with something that Colin knew academically but never had a reason to internalize. People with an internal locus of control were more resilient to psychological stress of all kinds. Colin had never thought of it in terms of not becoming like Bester. ‘But maybe I should?’ he thought. ‘This must be what an epiphany feels like...’

"You're... right. God damn it, I'm a fucking psychologist, how the hell did I not realize that?" Colin said, more than a little irritated at his own stupidity, but he felt a lot better realizing that most of what he was feeling wasn't actually guilt, but fear of becoming something he feared. Ronald Jenkins did need to die, there was no getting around it, wallowing in guilt wouldn't fix that or somehow absolve him of it. He had to take ownership of the decision and the information that lead to it. It sucked to have to take a life, but he'd rather do that than, through inaction, destroy additional lives.

"Because you can't shrink yourself effectively?" Gene answered with a question that wasn't actually a question.

"Ain't that the truth?!!" Colin chortled weakly.

"Which is why you need to talk about this shit. I know why you don't talk about this shit with anyone else. I got the same training you did."

"Psi Cops have to be respected and feared to do their jobs. They also have to be completely unflappable as an example to everyone else. Yeah." Colin replied.

"It’s a mantle you can’t take off, and it’s a lonely way to live.” Once again, Gene wasn't wrong. Being liked was a luxury Colin had but it didn’t leave Colin with much room for a support structure in a very stressful job. He wouldn't dare cry in front of Gerald, or even Max who he was pretty sure would understand and not hold it against him in any way. At the end of the day he had friends and was rarely actually alone, but he was always isolated.

'Until now, apparently.' Colin thought privately.

"So, I have a suggestion. I'm in the same place you are. It was worse spending all my time with mundanes, but now...It doesn't have to be that way for either of us." Gene's offer was... tempting. More than tempting, it made Colin’s heart metaphorically skip a beat. Sometimes people just clicked, and as far as Colin was concerned, they fit together like click bricks. The ship on any objections he might have had with anyone else had actually sailed on Monday and threw anchor at a foreign port when he bawled his eyes out in Gene’s arms. The reality was, they were just formalizing an arrangement they were already in.

"You lean on me, I’ll lean on you, and maybe together we’ll stay upright and not break?” Colin asked, for clarification.

"That's the idea. I mean, I know it maybe isn't what you're used to, but you were there for me when I needed you and I'll be damned if I don't try to return the favor."

“You don’t need to convince me Gene. I was sold when I sat down.” Colin told him. Gene cracked a wide and infectious smile that he made sure Colin could feel even if he couldn’t see it. Colin returned that smile of Gene's with one of his own that Gene could feel, projecting it into his mind and reaching back to affectionately squeeze his shoulder.

“So, care to update me on what happened while I was regrowing skin?” Gene asked. “Other than the interview, I was watching that.”
“The medical examiner sent me all the case files she could find on possible telepathic murders. I can show them to you, or I can give you the overall pattern.’ Gene heard him, considered for a moment, then reached a decision.

“I think the pattern should work, I don’t know enough to interpret the raw data anyway.”

“Okay. Just tell me when.”

“Ready when you are.” And with that, Colin recalled the details of the first murder as well as the number of murders fitting that same methodology, then moved to the second stage, then the third. He mentally described the pattern of injuries and neural trauma for each stage. Gene let out a long heavy breath when it was done. He was obviously disturbed, but it wouldn’t leave him with nightmares.

“You walked around for two days with dozens of those in your head?” Colin nodded. “And you wrote a dissertation on data like that?” Colin nodded again.

<Stipulation: they were not usually this bad.>

“I’d be having nightmares for a week with this.” Gene said, sympathetically, “Well, we’ll see how long they last” Colin replied with a pained chuckle “But the worst part is, to get anywhere, I need...more” he felt Gene’s mind go spinning

“Okay, I can see why that would bother someone used to seeing this shit, but why?”

“Stage one and two have no pattern other than the damage he inflicts. Whoever this was picked people of different ages, genders, race. There is not a lick of commonality between them. I think he was experimenting. Trying to figure out the neural pathways that generate conscious perception of pain from first principles. Most serial killers like this are trying to fulfill some very specific need they have, and you can figure out what motivates them and maybe get ahead of their killing and catch them if you can figure out what that need is and how they select their victims.”

“But you only have the one case where he perfected the technique, and that does not a pattern make.” Gene got it. “What do you think it could be?”

“Hard to say. They could be sexual sadist who gets off on causing pain. They could be a really fucked up masochist who wants to experience agony by proxy. We’re not talking normal BDSM here, that’s something else entirely, and non-pathological. They could be a deluded nutjob searching out some idiosyncratic notion of ‘perfect’ pain. They could be trying to achieve some sort of fantasy scenario with a victim set of a particular type. Plus these are just the forensic parts of the evidence. I need witness statements, time tables, when victims went missing, that sort of thing. I need to get jurisdiction to get that information, and that will probably take at least one more murder.”

“Makes sense. It sucks baboon balls, but it makes sense.” Gene said after thinking everything over for a moment.

‘Tell me about it.” Colin checked the time and mentally cringed. After talking, he felt a lot better, and he was very content and comfortable where he was, but no good thing could last forever. Still, he figured it didn’t have to just yet.

“So... catch one more episode before bed?” He felt one response spring into Gene’s head, but couldn’t tell what it was. Whatever it was Gene must have thought better of it.
“Sure. Could go for more than one, it’s a good show.”

“We have an early-ish morning. Need to start you on scan and counter exercises to bring you up to Psi Cop standards. Can’t neglect your training, or you get turned into a vegetable. I don’t want someone to make you a carrot.”

“No, that wouldn’t do. Though if forced to be a vegetable, I think I’d rather be a zucchini.” Gene replied. “Or maybe a Brussels Sprout. Less chance of being eaten that way.”
Thursday January 8th, 2263

The morning began in the training room. It contained a small gym, shooting range, and most importantly the meditation and close-combat mats. Colin and Gene sat on a mat in the half-lotus three meters apart; a small box full of sealed envelopes between them and off to one side, and a box of tissues on the other side. Both were in workout clothes: black t-shirt, black gym shorts. There was a dress code to adhere to after all.

“Alright, so we’re going to start by seeing how long you can maintain a brute force probe, I’ll try to keep you out. Once we’re done and rested, we’ll switch places.” Colin explained.

“I promise I’ll be gentle.” Gene replied, and Colin figured he was trying to mask trepidation with bravado.

“Don’t. I’m testing my own defenses as well” Colin paused and that little voice in the back of his head, the part he one he tried to ignore, managed to drop something into his speech before he could stop it “That and I like it rough.” Colin added.

'God damn it! Did I really just say that?'

“Noted.” Gene replied jocularly. Colin decided to end that before he got too flirty and reached into the box and pulled out an envelope, opening it up to see the card on the inside: a toad with a top-hat.

He stared at it until it was burned into his memory and then ressealed the envelope to set aside. Colin focused inward, checking the integrity of his blocks. There they were, trusty and solid, wrapped around his memories, thoughts, and cognitive processes like multiple protective layers of mother of pearl, each layer comprised of a different emotional state or abstract concept. His confidence, his dignity, his simple will to resist, his knowledge of the universe, everything he could use to shield his mind.

“Ready when you are.” he said, looking into Gene’s eyes, The other man nodded, and began his attack. Gene’s mind coalesced not into a tentacular construct, but into something similar. Entities resembling liquid shadow and constructed of doubt that could seep into any crack in his defenses. He enveloped Colin’s mind in them, seeking out a weakness in Colin’s opalescent mental fortress. Then Gene started to squeeze like the ocean depths against a pressure hull. Slowly ratcheting up his effort. Colin felt his barriers creak under the strain of keeping out such a powerful mind. He threw his fear of failure into them, and coated the inside with an additional layer or defense. The outer layer of confidence crumbled and was swept away, only to be replaced by an inner stronger layer; his dignity could withstand self-doubt.

Gene was strong, with each new layer breached he was able to redouble the pressure on Colin’s mental defenses. Eventually, those defenses were almost at the point of complete collapse when the pressure slackened. Gene was exhausting himself. He tried for one final push but the brief respite gave Colin the breathing space he needed to reconstruct his own confidence, and the attack washed against it like waves upon a rocky coastline.

When he came back into the world, Colin could see Gene leaning forward trying to control a nosebleed. He immediately grabbed a tissue from the box and used it to pinch Gene’s nose to stop the bleeding. Gene had been leaking for a while, blood had dripped down his chin on to his shirt
and pants.

“How long were we out?” Gene asked, his voice distorted from having his nose closed. Colin looked at a clock.

“Half an hour. Pretty good for your first time, in my first session I barely managed the five minute minimum.”

“Well I'm not exactly fresh out of the academy.”

“Heh. True. I'll get you some water. You almost had me there. I haven’t contended with another P12 in a while, it’s usually Max and Erika using a gestalt probe” he turned toward a little table that held pitchers of water and some fruit at the front of the room. He retrieved a glass of water and returned it to Gene, who guzzled it down greedily.

“Any suggestions?” Gene asked.

“That was a solid brute force probe. It’ll crack weaker minds like an egg shell, but it’s not so good against a harder more practiced target. It takes a lot of effort and if they can outlast you, well… I would recommend concentrating your effort. Don’t exploit a weakness, make one.”

“Hmm. I think I can do that. You’ll need to give me a few minutes though. That took a lot out of me.”

“It will help if you move around a little...I know.” Colin walked over to a wall upon which hung a pair of rapiers. Not foils or epees, actual rapiers with blunt edges and covered points. A return to traditional fencing had come back into favor by the late twenty first century and the Corps had adopted it as a form of training and exercise. Alongside the rapiers were the pieces of very necessary safety gear in various sizes. “How’s your fencing?”

“It isn’t terrible.” Gene replied, looking a bit smug rather than modest or cautious in any way. That made Colin nervous. Gene had a physicality to him that screamed athlete of some sort or another. Colin hoped it wasn't fencing for the sake of his own dignity. On the other hand, hadn't he just done the same to Gene?

'Turnaround is fair play...'

“What did I get myself into?” Colin asked.

“You’ll see.” Gene replied, his face a complete mask.

'Shit.’

They geared up, putting on the padding and face masks that would prevent injury, saluted, and went into guard position just out of measure. The fact that Gene was ambidextrous and using his left hand would take a bit of adjustment, but nothing Colin couldn’t deal with.

Colin was the first to move, stepping into wide measure and they both probed each other’s guard, trying to gain an advantage, but Gene struck first with sudden lunge that Colin barely managed to parry. His riposte was easily countered by Gene’s superior footwork. And so they danced a waltz of thought and steel, glyphing real or false feints in the hope of deceiving the other.

Something that struck Colin was how Gene moved. He always liked watching athletic men in motion, but Gene was something else. He flowed like water in and out of measure, dancing off to the side, transitioning movements from within his own glyphed illusions leaving after-images that
kept going on their own or doing something else; they were almost impossible to distinguish from
the real person through sight, such was the solidity of Gene's sense of self. It was both beautiful
and ruthlessly functional. By comparison, Colin's footwork was measured, precise. He didn't
have Gene’s raw physicality and he knew it, but compensated through exact and practiced
movement drill.

He was good, but Gene had him completely outmatched and all he could do was delay the
inevitable; and he did. Colin compensated for inferior fencing skill through telepathic creativity;
false sounds, triple images, illusions on multiple attack vectors, obscuring shrouds. Gene cut
through it all, but it took just enough cognitive effort that Colin could hold Gene off.

Eventually though, the additional strain put on his mind by keeping up the effort of telepathic
confusion began to tell, and he was exhausting himself and not thinking as clearly as he should
have been. Gene tried to advance inside Colin’s guard, which he countered by stepping back and
trying a stop-thrust, but it was a glyphed feint, and Colin left himself over-extended.

Gene stepped through his own glyph inside Colin’s guard and Colin found himself on the floor
with Gene’s sword point at his throat, his heart pounding, and not just from the exertion. Colin was
more than a little turned on. Uncomfortably so. '

"Fucking limbic system."

Gene removed his mask, sweating profusely but a smile etched all the way across his face. “I think
that’s match.” he said, “You actually gave me a challenge, that hasn’t happened in a while.” Colin
removed his own mask.

“You fenced competitively, didn’t you?”

“Yup!” Gene answered in the affirmative. "Before I joined the Corps, I was the captain of a
regional championship team. In the Corps, well... you know how in the 2252 the Vancouver Major
Academy Team went from existing to ranking fifth in North America?" Colin nodded "Yeeaaah...
I'm not going to say that was all me, because it wasn't. But I helped."

“So that’s how it is...I just fenced as a hobby for overall strength training and cardio. Didn’t have
time with the dual studies to go competitive.”

“Still pretty damn good.” He reached down and helped Colin up off the floor. "No hard feelings
right?” Colin smirked evilly.

“You ready for round three?” He was not above a bit of petty revenge against his friend.

“Ready? No. Willing? Yes.” Gene replied, confident visage vanishing to be replaced by a
nervous one.

“You’ll do just fine” Colin reassured him, patting Gene on the shoulder and giving it a
companionable squeeze.

They took their half lotus positions on the mat, and Gene opened an envelope for his target image.
Colin saw him close his eyes and steady his breathing, feeling his customary barriers against
external intrusion into his mind reinforce and harden.

“Are you prepared?” Colin asked. Gene simply nodded in the affirmative, and Colin began his
neural siege.

Gene’s habitual defense was a single-layered spiky ball comprised of pure thought. The same one
he had used on monday, and it definitely restricted Colin’s options. The spikes represented neural
feedback loop triggers that could fuck him up if touched and would prevent the sort of generalized
attack that Gene had used earlier. Colin elected to modify his tentacle constructs into a probe that resembled a pneumatic drill press and pointed it at a vertex between spikes. Then he began to slowly, inexorably, borrow past Gene’s defenses. The barrier was inflexible, and was comprised of only a single emotional state: pure defiance. The counter for that was its counterpart, the desire to succeed, and Colin had that in spades.

Eventually, be broke through and scanned, looking for the image Gene had hidden away in his mind. Gene conceded defeat by pulling it into his surface thoughts rather than holding on to it and risking injury. An orange tabby cat sitting regally in a box. Colin broke contact, and both men slumped forward in a state of abject mental exhaustion.

“That… was a good defense. You lasted for…” Colin looked up at the clock “Forty minutes.”

“I still didn’t keep you out though.” Gene replied, dejected.

“No, but it limited my options, and could keep out the vast majority of untrained P12s, hell I could learn a thing or two from that thing’s structure.” that perked up Gene’s spirits a bit. “Think you could modify it a little? Maybe get a layered defense going? Use multiple emotional states, it would force me to switch up my attack and slow me down.”

“Hmm.” Gene considered “I could bury the neural feedback loops inside other defenses, give you a rude shock.”

“Oh… oh I like that. I won’t like being on the receiving end,” Colin corrected “but it’s good.” he heaved himself up and it was his turn to help Gene get up off the floor.

“So” Gene said “In addition to mental workouts, we want to team up for the physical ones?” Gene looked him up and down. “You’ve been skipping leg day sometimes. You’re not… slacking necessarily, but it affects your footwork. You could use an accountabilibuddy.”

“Sure.” Colin replied, but was pretty sure he’d come to regret that. Or maybe not. Working out was more tolerable with someone else. The little demon that was his amygdala also approved. On the other hand, Gene seemed the sort to take over and work him harder than his comfort zones. He’d need to invest in some form of self-defense. “I wouldn’t recommend doing them back to back except for cardio” Colin replied.

“Fencing is good for that.” Gene replied in approval.

“Oh god, what am I doing to myself? Why am I agreeing to this?’ One look at Gene's eyes told him why and he internally cursed his own mixed motives, but didn't change his mind.

“Early evening? Work requirements permitting? Say...seven or so?”

“Works for me!” Gene replied happily.

“Excellent.” Colin replied, then considered an idea “Want to grab an early lunch?”

“Sure. Anyone you want to take along?” Gene asked.

“I think Gerald took Zara out for the day. Called ahead to the art museum to arrange a private tour. If he were a P10 they would have practically conscripted him into running a cadre house.” Gene chuckled and shook his head.

“He’d be good at it too, only the kids would have British cooking inflicted on them.”
“I don’t know, his pasties are pretty good.”

“Huh. Alright then.” Gene replied contemplatively, considering that possibility “Anyone else?” Colin actually did have someone in mind. Gene would need to get to know Steve.

“Yeah. Have you met Warrant Officer Washington, our liaison with Earth Alliance Security?”

“Briefly I think, wait, wasn’t he the one who got the EMT before anyone else bothered?”

“Yeah. He’s a good guy. I suspect you’ll like him. Besides, cultivating a relationship with the a normal who treats us decently is probably a good idea. If nothing else, good backchannel.”

“Hm. I’m taking official notice of the fact that you didn’t call him a mundane. Alright, give him a call. Thai food?”

“I’ve never had Thai food, but its reputation precedes it. I like spicy but Thai might as well be in hyperspace from what I’ve heard.” Gene grinned at him and Colin was suddenly less sanguine. It was the same grin Gene gave him when fencing was suggested.

'Oh no. He has plans...'

“Don’t worry, I can help you calibrate your taste-buds, I eat a lot of the stuff.” Gene said, sensing Colin's apprehension. "I won't torture you. I promise. Well, unless you want me to anyway."

“Well, I’ll try anything once.” Colin informed him without thinking of the double entendre until it was too late.

'God damn it. Did he bait me into that?’ he chided himself, wondering for a moment. Gene nodded approvingly but a mischievous look wound its way onto his face and he looked at Colin a bit sideways.

“And the appetizers? How are you with insects?”

“Please, I developed a taste for them in Amsterdam. Granted, they weren’t prepared with enough capsaicin to kill a horse...” Gene was visibly excited as Colin fetched his comm unit off the refreshment table and gave Steve a call.

<Sala Thai is where we want to go.> Gene informed him. Colin didn't question it, figuring Gene had somehow managed to scout out restaurants or read reviews.

“Hey Steve, It's Colin. Gene and I were going to do Thai food for lunch, you up for joining us?”

“Thai food?” Steve asked. “Hell yeah! I love Thai. Now I know what that indescribable cravin’ was.”

“Alright, can you make it to Sala Thai in about half an hour?” specifying the restaurant Gene had suggested. Where he found the time to scout out a Thai place was beyond him. Could have been reviews he supposed.

“Uh...little early, but I can make it in an hour.”

“Oh, we were going to go a bit earlier, but we should probably shower anyway. Training session was a bit brutal.”

“I hear you man. See you there.”
“Later” and Colin ended the call.

...(omitted text)

An hour later, the two telepaths and Steve met up at the front entrance to Sala Thai, a charming little hole in the wall, brightly lit and decorated in flower motifs, hanging paintings in traditional style, with little statues of the Buddha.

“Shall we?” Gene asked, practically twitching with excitement. Colin made a note of this, as Thai food was apparently Gene’s favorite thing in the world. He mentally paused and corrected.

'For all-inclusive definitions of world.'

“Psi Cops first” Steve said, motioning them through the door, opening it for them politely “Little place, it’d be awkward if I took point” which was fair enough. From the looks of it, the internal paths were only barely large enough for him to walk through. Better mechanically for him to follow in their wake, and there would certainly be a wake.

The lunchtime rush crowd was treated to the sight of two Psi Cops in their severe black uniforms walking into the small reception area backed up by an NFL lineman sized Earth Alliance CWO. The crowd looked nervous, which may or may not be a bad thing. It was always a balancing act between enough intimidation that no one felt brave, and too much which might cause someone to panic or think less of the Corps than they already did. From the susurrus in the room, mental and audible, they’d found that balance.

“Is there something I can help you with?” asked the young hostess with a light accent. Gene gave her his best disarming smile

“Don’t worry, we’re just here for lunch. Table for three please.” her expression went from ‘wary but polite’ to ‘so happy to see you!’ in half a second but her thoughts were racing anxiety. She was used to telepaths coming in, so were the clientele, but Psi Cops were another matter entirely.

“Follow me please.” she suggested and grabbed three menus. She managed to get them a nice window booth right at the front of the establishment. People edged away from them as they passed and Steve was able to get through without too much trouble. Gene and Colin sat together and Steve sat across from them a short moment later.

<Crowd Control: Letting the Bigotry Work For You> Gene mentally commented.

<Crowd Control: Letting the Bigotry Work For You> Gene mentally commented.

<Unexpected perks, I suppose...>

“Alright Gene, I have to ask… how the hell did you find this place so fast?” Colin asked.

“Their site on the net advertises that they’re teep friendly, and I might have come here while you were fending off media-crucifixion.”

“Ah, that explains it.” Colin felt now was the time to get the elephant in the room out of the way. "So, about the spice…”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got you covered. Mind adjusting your blocks?” Gene suggested, and Colin saw what was cooking in that head of his, even if Gene’s own blocks kept him actually p'seeing.

“Wait, hold on a minute, what are you gonna do?” Steve asked, momentarily saving Colin from what was certain to be a very interesting experience. For Chinese curse values thereof.
“Well Steve, I came here yesterday and ordered a sampler with varying spice levels. Just to test them out and Colin here” motioning toward his companion with a game-show like motion “does not know what his tolerances are. So, I’m going to help him find out without ordering something he can’t finish. So, mon amie, care to adjust your blocks?”

“Huh. That’s just fuckin’ useful.” Steve replied with a contemplative expression.

“I’m going to regret this…” and Colin adjusted his blocks to permit direct sensory stimulation.

“Ok, this is the traditional mode of preparation” It came on lightly at first, but quickly ramped up and Colin was flush, sweating, and feeling like his face was on fire. He reflexively clamped down on his blocks, hedging Gene--and the culinary abomination--out of his mind.

“Sorry!” Gene said, but his words betrayed him because he was giggling sadistically and Steve--that filthy traitor--was getting his schadenfreude on just as hard. However, Colin couldn’t actually be mad, and started laughing along with them.

“Alright” Gene finally managed to stammer out “let’s adjust down to something only somewhat spicy by Thai standards.”. As soon as Colin dropped his defenses the flavor hit him. It was…surprisingly optimal. Spicy, very spicy in point of fact, but not intolerable and it could go nice with yellow curry.

“There we go” encouraged Gene “there’s hope for you.”

Eventually, a waiter named Somchai came and took their order. Everyone had the tea with an appetizer order of locusts. Colin ordered a moderately spicy yellow chicken curry, while Steve chose a red chicken curry. Gene was another matter entirely; he went for cashew chicken and the waiter had to double check with the white guy on the spice. He enthusiastically confirmed. When the food arrived, Gene hummed happily to himself while chowing down and barely broke a sweat.

“How?” Steve asked, completely dumbfounded.

“Yeah, it’s like you’re eating food-flavored mace.” Colin elected to add “do you even taste the chicken?”

“Oh fuck yeah. I just developed a tolerance, and this is the only way I can taste the full richness of Thai cuisine.” Well that explained it. Gene was insane.

They chatted amiably, and this time, Steve did pull ultrasound photos from his wallet and gush over them. Gene and Steve hit it off well and had a surprising amount in common. Before being posted here, Steve had spent a lot of time aboard ships including the EAS Vesta during the war and had been a member of the group to wrest control of the ship from its very-briefly acting ‘Captain’ Philby. He was extremely proud of that moment. Colin had his own beef with Sheridan, but Colin would give him credit for being right about President Clark.

“What did you do durin’ the war?” Steve asked them both. Gene shook his head.

“Military Intelligence, I really can’t say much more than that. I wish I could.”

“I can respect that. You guys are kinda stuck between a rock and a hard-place sometimes, aren’t you?”

“That would be an understatement” Gene replied, but pointedly didn’t elaborate. Colin shuddered inwardly; being killed for the will of a mundane dictator was not a good way to go. Especially for Gene. He deserved way better than that.
“Thankfully” Gene continued and reached over a bit to lightly chuck Colin’s shoulder “This one’s a fuckton more pleasant to work with than Earth Force Military Intelligence.”

“Oh yeah, you’re just flattering me so I pick up the tab…” Colin replied sarcastically. “Joke’s on you, I was going to anyway. For my part I was chasing rogue and unregistered telepaths—specifically insane ones—throughout Earth Alliance controlled space” Colin left out the time he spent as a jamming device on a Minbari ship and hunter-killer in a Starfury.

“I didn’t know you did that. You all chase down rogues and investigate crimes involvin’ telepaths, but I didn’t know the Corps had people specifically goin’ after the insane ones.”

“There are a few. There aren’t enough criminally insane telepaths to rate having a specialized unit for it, but we still have to have people around who know how to track them down and can do research. Basically, I create psychological and telepathic profiles of suspects, based on the damage they cause to victims and a bunch of other information. Then I try to track, identify, and capture them.”

“How did you even get into that?” Gene asked “It’s been killin’ me how you picked that exact line of work.”

“I couldn’t decide whether I wanted to be a Psi Cop or Medical teep, so I applied to both programs. Got accepted to both. I still couldn’t decide, so I asked myself: why not both? Actually, the story behind that decision is…” Colin trailed off, wondering how to describe it "Funny, sad, and beautiful all at once." Gene gave him a look that for the life of him he couldn’t describe or classify but curiosity was part of it.

"Can you tell us?" Gene asked, but his psionic affect told Colin that he really meant 'me' as the personal pronoun.

<Of course I can.> Colin replied privately. <This one I can shout from the rooftops. Well figuratively, and I'm worried it might get too political to raise my voice about it in a crowded place.>

"Of course I can." Colin said for Steve's benefit. "So I was eighteen and just about to graduate from the Minor Academy when the Battle of the Line happened. Telepaths fought for humanity in the war, we didn't sit it out; we died by the thousands protecting Earth Force soldiers from Minbari telepaths and securing vital information about their fleet and troop movements. And at the end of the day, when EarthGov was organizing the evacuation of Earth, the powers that be decided it was best to leave all of us to die. We're one in a thousand, they could only get a tiny fraction of humanity off world and into sanctuary in the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, so I suppose they considered a population of twelve million to be a rounding error."

He said those words, but he made damn sure his voice said he didn't believe it. It was coldly calculated prejudice. Conversation stopped.

"While people sacrificed themselves to buy time for evacuation transports to depart, we were left twiddling our thumbs waiting on oblivion to come in a stream of directed anti-neutrons... that wouldn't do. Marcel—he's my brother in every sense that counts--somehow managed to sneak out of TeepTown, steal a sixty-one centimeter telescope from a science supplier, and smuggle it back in."

Gene saw where that was going and started to snicker, but Steve looked confused before speaking up.
"What the hell can you do with a telescope? Minbari stealth systems meant guns couldn't target them with anythin' other than optical scopes too, but last I checked TeepTown doesn't have that kind of firepower anyway." Colin gave him a predatory grin.

"Sure we do. Telepaths. It's a funny thing, in a way. The Psi Corps teaches line of sight, because it's easy and consistent. But the Centauri use telepaths in the royal court who are raised together from birth to make sure that no matter where the Emperor is, he has a secure line of communication to their homeworld. Anywhere in the galaxy. Some Psi Cops have trouble picking up someone's surface thoughts behind a closet door, but give them a telescope and they can find someone floating in space untethered but alive twenty kilometers away and make contact. I've always been pretty good about not needing a direct line of sight. I can talk to Gene on different floors. And what one of us can do when we decide we have nothing left to lose?" Colin shook his head "We don't know enough about how our abilities actually work to pin down hard and fast rules."

"I gotcha, so, a big 'scope let's you extend your range?"

"Hell yeah it does. A telescope that big let's you resolve Sharlin Class Warcruisers in lunar orbit that are less than fifteen kilometers apart. But that doesn't mean I'm powerful enough to reach out and touch them..." he gave himself a pregnant pause basked in the look Gene was giving him.

<This is going to be really badass, isn't it? I think I know where this is going.> Gene asked.

<Some might think so...>

"on my own." Colin continued. "Marcel and I got about fifty other telepaths and joined our minds into something we call a gestalt consciousness. The whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts. A bit like an array of radio telescopes actually. Not only does sensitivity increase, but our ability to affect other minds does too. We were able to reach out a light-second and induce seizures in the crew of an entire Minbari ship, crippling her and letting Earth Force take her out. I think it was the... Zhal'Enfilla."

Steve went still and dropped his fork. 'An entire Warcruiser? They have a crew of hundreds...One of these days the Corps is gonna have enough of our bullshit and then there's gonna be a reckonin'.

<He's right, you know.> Gene remarked.

<Probably, but don't tell him that...> Colin want to say, but couldn't, that the preparations were being made and that it would likely be sooner rather than later. Almost certainly within their lifetimes if they made it past forty.

"We weren't the only ones. A bunch of others had smaller scopes, and of course Metapol, Military division, and Transport got in on the action too by seizing observatories for the night. Helped take down about a dozen Warcruisers all said and done before their own telepaths got their wits about them and jammed us out. Marcel, the others, and I got the last one, smaller telescope, so we were a bit late to the party."

"Colin" Steve said "Earth Force only destroyed sixteen Sharlins that night. Some of those were through suicide attacks."

"I know. And I also know that Earth Force doesn't admit it had help getting even that many. The
Psi Corps reports went unanswered and unacknowledged when it came time for commendations. Though they're not classified if anyone should want to look them up.” Colin replied, more than a bit smug, and not mentioning it was only night for half the world. Earth Standard Time in Geneva is what counted there. "After that... after that we signed our names to the telescope in the hopes that future xenoarcheologists would find it, and left." Colin smiled weakly at that memory, looking down to where his food lay half-eaten. "Marcel and I we... we went home, to the cadre house where we were raised, curled up under our favorite oak tree, and waited to be obliterated. Eventually we fell asleep looking up at human ships die like the flashing of fireflies in the void. We woke up very much alive to see the head of the Major Academy staring down at us.” He pointedly left out the song. That wasn't for mundane ears. It wasn’t theirs.

"I'd heard about that, didn't know you had something to do with it...>

"Honestly, It sounds more awesome than it was. I mean, I know I sound like some kind of hard-ass but you know me. I'm not that. I just didn't want to die without giving my murderer a bloody nose. None of us did. And it was Marcel's idea, I just took the lead because I'm a P12. In the end... had it not been for Minbari religious mumbo-jumbo, we'd have died with everyone else.>

"Still pretty awesome. Makes me wonder why Earth Force doesn't push for more military telepaths on ships during engagements though. I know that they know we can do that. Wait. Nevermind. Just answered my own question. They don't want more than one or maybe two of us on any given ship because they're afraid we'll take the ship.>

"I didn't say it...> Colin replied, projecting a wiley eyebrow raise at Gene. "If they knew what we can do in hyperspace they'd do it anyway...>

"She wasn't angry about the theft of what must have been a very expensive telescope was she?" Gene asked. The Corps was, afterall, a very loving but also rather strict parent. Particularly when it came to doing anything that would piss off mundanes.

"Not. One. Bit. Actually that telescope is part of a monument now. Not just for the bunch of us, but for every telepath who fought in the war, and particularly those who fought uncredited on the Line. It's inside a little observatory dome, there's a plaque, and our names are still scrawled in pencil on the telescope's housing. But she did ask me what division I wanted to go into, and let me know that she could recommend me into a certain dual enrollment program. I figured both sounded good..."

"So, sort of a 'fuck it, I only live once' sorta thing?" Steve asked.

"Exactly that, yes." Colin replied. Steve nodded sagely, understanding the impulse. Then he leaned in and lowered his voice.

“Actually, this conversation reminds me of somethin’. A bunch of murders--real bad ones--homicide’s been rackin’ their brains for a couple years. Nothin’.”

“Oh thank god.” Colin exhaled with a sigh of relief, earning him a very confused look from Steve, but a doozy whistle from Gene. “I am... aware of them. I have the forensics case files--I won’t say how, I trust you.” he didn’t fully, but as much as he did any mundane “but I won’t take chances with someone’s job.”
“Reasonable” Steve agreed. He knew the shitstorm that would happen if Captain Roach found out that the Corps had his case files.

“Right. He was experimenting before last week, now he has his methods figured out and he’s going to start killing in job lots, though I don’t know about his timetable. Once the next one shows up, ask the Captain to bring me into the case.”

“He’s not gonna take it well…”

“Yeah I know, he dislikes telepaths a great deal, but he’ll change his tune when more bodies start piling up on his desk. Guilt will do the job; his pride and prejudice won’t override his conscience.”

“You could go over his head you know…” Steve replied

“I could, but then I destroy what relationship the Corps has with your department, and I do need that to function. He might replace you or simply transfer you out, so don’t tell him that I know.” Steve nodded. A quick surface scan revealed sufficient self-preservation instincts that he would not risk being suspected of a leak. "I'm going to be up front with you Steve, I am actively looking for ways to remove the need for Earth Force cooperation entirely. You understand why."

"Of course I do. You have two hundred kids to save. If we weren't lookin' over your shoulders the other night, you'd already have 'em back rules or no rules. I don't disagree with you either."

"I didn't say it. You did. I don't even have the authority to scan Yanik Reela" Colin agreed, and that fact bothered the hell out of him. He didn't have jurisdiction over Centauri telepaths and so couldn't scan them at will. Not that it would matter. Both Yanik and Ronald kept themselves completely divorced from sales due to the danger of either of them being scanned. "Think you can manage to do what I've asked?"

“Alright, I'm in. I'll let the Captain know.” he looked at his watch “I should probably get back.”

“Us too; and I wasn’t kidding about picking up the tab.” Colin said in a 'so don't even try' tone. It was expensive, but not too-expensive. Chicken was vat grown in large quantities and the grasshoppers were raised on plant by-products locally and mixed into flour for supplemental protein without anyone ever really thinking about it. They and other insects were easy to get, even if most people didn't for it eating them unprocessed. They called the waiter over for the check.

<Now we just wait for the shoe to drop.> Colin sent to Gene

<Yeah. Hopefully the good Captain won’t wait too long.>

...

When they returned to the annex Gerald and Zara were back, and Zara was so excited she was leaking her thoughts all over the place. Colin leaned in toward Gene and whispered into his ear conspiratorially.

“We’re going to have to teach her to batten down the hatches or she won’t have any privacy. Imagine what would happen when she develops her first real crush.”

“I don’t even want to think about that… but it could get a lot worse than that with what she’s been through. She’ll end up broadcasting flashbacks.” then an idea struck him. “We could help her reclaim some power. Increase her confidence, improve her odds of never being mistreated, again. And let’s be honest, the more she has to do, the less time she’ll have to dwell on...well...everything.”
“True, but just so we’re clear you’re talking about teaching a P6 combat telepathy?” Colin asked. That typically was not done beyond basic self-defense, but it did appeal to him. If he had his way, he’d teach everyone how to send mundanes into intensive care.

“Well I don’t want to turn her into a mind-shredder or anything…there isn’t time for that anyway” Gene said defensively

“No no. I like this plan. This plan could go places. Good idea, now let’s discuss implementation.”

They retreated to Colin’s office to plan. When they exited an hour later, they found Zara busily working on some math homework.

“Is that math homework I see?” Colin asked her, getting down to her eye-level to look it over “Geometry?”

“Yep! I was in the advanced classes...before, and Misters Hussein and Okumba are helping me catch up and teaching me how to code. Ms. Tanaka is helping in sciences. Ms. Cheng and Mr. Gomez have me learning how the Psi Corps works inside.” she certainly sounded enthusiastic enough. In fact, calculations were streaming forth from her head; she was talking to them and still solving the side lengths of triangles.

“What about the other subjects?”

“Well, Mr Foresythe is teaching me something called textual analysis and art. He took me to the art museum at lunch, he really likes surrealism, but...I think I like romanticism a little bit more. And he’s also teaching me what the artists were trying to say, and I really like that. Mr. Cohen has Psi Corps history, and Ms. Flores is teaching me all the Psi Corps rules about scanning.” Colin glanced over at Gene who was nodding approvingly.

Colin’s heart swelled with a bit of pride. Everyone went through a lot of trouble, made their already busy lives a lot more hectic, and they did it of their own accord. He’d only idly thought about doing something like this last night, but they’d self-organized a whole curricula.

“Well, when you finish up your math, Gene and I had a thought. We could get an early start on teaching you how to use your telepathic talents before you start formal training. What do you say?”

“You mean I can do more than I can now?” Zara asked excitedly, and she was thinking about surface level and deep scans.

“Absolutely” Gene cut in “And you’re in for the long-haul right? You might as well get an early start.” She nodded in enthusiasm, but then thought of something and got a bit nervous.

“I… I watched you practice this morning. You didn’t notice me there and I left for the museum before you finished” she replied a bit cautiously “It looked kinda scary…”

“It can be.” Gene admitted “On the other hand, we’ve been doing that for a long time, and we’re both the telepathic versions of a black-belt or an Earth Force marine. Both of them can be pretty scary too, right?” She thought about it and nodded. “And if it came down to it, wouldn’t you want to be just a little bit scary?” She thought about it, Colin could feel the proverbial gears turning in her head, the memories being called up. She shivered internally and externally, then looked at them both and nodded.

“Awesome!” Colin replied encouragingly “Now, we’re not going to start you on anything
frightening to begin with, just the basics. And more important, you can stop at any time. We also won’t ever invade your privacy or scan you without permission. Okay?”

“Okay!”

They stepped away after she got them into a group hug to let her finish her homework.

<Think she can handle it?> Gene asked. Despite it being his suggestion he wasn't entirely oblivious to the issues with the whole thing. They were, afterall, going to be teaching a traumatized nine year old some pretty advanced techniques that could be used to kill mundanes, even if they weren't specifically for that. And there was all the information she'd have to know and remember to do things right and not accidentally hurt someone, and she was only nine.

<You felt the contours of her mind right? She’s a smart kid. If we were in Dune, I’d say she has mentat capabilities. And so long as we approach it from a loving place and set up some ground rules, she should be okay. I don't think she'd ever hurt someone unless she really had to. There isn't a mean bone in her whole body, though I think some potential for dark humor might be there...> Colin replied.

<Note to self: Someone else likes Dune. She trusts us too, which certainly helps. That actually surprises me, given what she’s been through.>

Colin shrugged. <It’s gonna go one of two ways. She won’t trust anyone, or she’ll latch on to whoever’s there who seems safe. We pulled her out of that hellhole, physically and mentally, if Zara’s trusts anyone, it’s going to be us.> Colin thought about it for a second. <We can always see where she is by giving her a choice in what she learns. We can get a sense of her disposition that way, and tailor our approach accordingly?>

<That definitely sounds like a good plan. It can go places. Let's do that.>

....

An hour later after their workout, Zara joined them downstairs, her little feet pitter-pattering down the steps with a celerity that Colin almost couldn't credit. How she managed that pace without falling he had no idea. She got to the bottom and the open door and gave the room a good once over, taking in all that she beheld including the gym, shooting range, and a white board that Colin had hauled down and fixed to one of the walls.

“So, how is this gonna work?” She asked.

“Well, we’ve talked about it, and I think where we start should be up to you. There’s all kinds of things we could teach you to do quickly. The first is really basic: we can teach you how to use other people’s eyes and ears. Other than that, there’s also simple attack probes: ways to defend yourself against a mundane without hurting them too much. Or we can go for broke and teach you how to scan someone so hard you put them in the hospital.” Gene told her.

"And don't forget to show your work on your answer." Colin chided her, giving her a little grin that she returned.

She thought about it for a minute, scrunching up her nose and visibly weighing her options by shifting back and forth like she was having a conversation with herself. Colin didn’t intrude.

“The first one seems the easiest and learning how to do that might help with the other things. If I ever have to fight things have gone really wrong. I'd rather never get there again. Knowing where trouble is is the first step in doing that. Plus that will help day to day and just be really cool.” She
said. Gene grinned broadly.

<Told you so. Nothing to worry about.> Colin said.

<Point taken.> Gene replied, tipping a cap that didn't exist to Colin.

“Yeah it will, especially because Colin over there is gonna have to teach you about the brain.” Gene said "And that, you can use for all kinds of stuff, including self-defense if everything else fails."

“Really?” she asked, her eyes wide with visible excitement, she was practically giddy in the way that only small children and graduate students could be for new knowledge.

“Yep!” Colin confirmed “Later, you’ll get to dissect a sheep brain if you want to, and we’ll have you practicing on some lab mice too. But that’ll be in a couple of days. Gene and I decided to do this today, and I need to draw up lesson plans. So, we’ll actually start tomorrow.”

“This is gonna be awesome...” Zara said with a sidelong look on her face that told Colin she low-key kinda wanted lightning to flash in the background so she could cackle.

<I think she’s going to end up in graduate school>Gene sent to Colin.

<I…you’re not wrong. I was exactly like that in biology class as a kid.>

...

That night, Colin was sitting up in bed catching up on his journal reading when he felt a burst of terror. The kind of horrible soul-crushing terror that people experience when they’re staring death in the face, and it was coming from Zara’s room, which was next door to his on the other side from Gene’s.

He shot out of bed in his black pajamas and practically bolted out the door. Colin crept through the hall and opened her door, across the main room to the bedroom partition. Zara was thrashing in bed and crying even though she was still asleep, but with line of sight, what she was experiencing in her night terror jumped across the gap into his mind and he immediately recoiled, throwing up every defense he could to get that terrible thing out of his mind.

That wasn’t something he needed to see; it wasn’t something she needed to relive, even if she wouldn’t remember it. The only thing he could do was to go back in, not to observe, but to end it. He shunted her brain from stage four sleep directly into REM. The thrashing ceased, and her cries quieted, tears stopped leaking from her eyes, and she slept soundly. He looked inside her mind again and saw nothing but swirling chaos. It wasn’t a nightmare, but it wouldn’t be conducive to restful sleep either, and it could always transition into one.

“What the hell do I even…” he muttered to himself, then had an idea. He dug deep and pulled up a memory of when he’d had a nightmare when he was little, and all the other kids piled into his bed. He remembered how he felt: safe, protected, loved and mixed it with every bit of affection he had for Zara and sent it very gently into her mind so her dreams could incorporate it.

“Sleep tight.” Colin said softly and turned around to see Gene stalking out of his own room, also in black pajamas.

<Everything okay?> he asked. Colin motioned for Gene to join him in his room, and shut the door when they were both inside. He plodded wordlessly into his bedroom partition and sat down on the corner of his bed. Gene sat down on the other side.
<No. Zara’s having night terrors. I stopped that one and maybe she won’t have another tonight but…> Colin didn’t know what he was feeling, exactly. Rage? Horror and disgust? Sympathetic despair? He settled on Yes. The face of the mundane in that brief glimpse would be burned indelibly into his mind forever, that much he knew. Brown hair and eyes, stubble, bit of an underbite, and a scar from some old fight or another down his left cheek.

<What was it?> Gene asked. Colin didn’t have to actually say anything, he just let a little bit of what flashed through his head when he asked leak though his own defenses and Gene caught it, and had to keep himself from vomiting.

<Please tell me that didn’t actually happen.> he pleaded.

<I don’t know> Colin replied <It could be something she saw or was afraid would happen. Either way, I can do psychological first aid. We both have been. She’s at risk of developing complex PTSD, but it hasn’t fully emerged. She needs more than that, and I can’t do it.> Colin sensed the usual question of ‘why not?’ common to most people who weren’t psychologists <I’m not trained for therapy, and even if I was… >

<Medical ethics?> Gene asked.

<Kind of? Role confusion. Both for me and her. We’re basically foster parents. Someone’s parent shouldn’t be their therapist, for a whole host of reasons, but the main one is that the relationship is fundamentally different but also hard to separate.>

<Gotcha.> Gene nodded <Transference is a problem for therapy, it’s exactly what you want in her relationship with us.>

<Right.> Colin confirmed. He realized that he’d basically volunteered to become Zara’s dad if that’s what she needed. He was never expecting to become a parent at all, except in the genetic sense.

'But here I am…'

<So, what do we do? I mean, do we have anyone qualified on this planet?> And so had Gene if his use of the word ‘we’ was any indication.

<There’s exactly one person in the Corps I trust who’s qualified and on this planet. I’ll give her a call in the morning. We really don’t have a choice. Unless Zara does get actual therapy and probably medication, between captivity and being rejected by her mundane trash-parents, her going to earth is going to cause all kinds of psychological harm. I don’t want to uproot her unless she’s ready for it.>

There was a knock at the door. Colin stood up, walked across the room, and opened the door. To his not-surprise, Zara was on the other side in the night clothes--covered in little goat faces--they’d raided from the emergency supply closet. Colin made a mental note to take her out to get some clothes she could possibly actually like.

'Maybe she likes the goats?'

“Hey Zara” he said softly, getting down to a knee on her eye-level “What’s up? Is something wrong?” Colin asked. He heard Gene’s footsteps round the corner.

“I can’t sleep.” she said, obviously exhausted. She didn’t have to say why, even if Colin didn’t already know. The fact that she didn’t feel safe was leaking from her mind. Colin thought that maybe she did remember that night terror, at least a little. “Can I stay with you two?”
<How can anyone say no to that?> Gene asked him, using a mental register she wouldn’t pick up.

<I know I can’t. You alright staying? My bed should be just big enough.>

<Of course I am.> Gene replied.

“Of course you can.” Colin told her.

“I know I’m too old…but…” she tried but couldn’t say it. She couldn’t even remember why she was scared. Not fully. Colin wrapped her in his arms and gave her a hug, projecting feelings of warmth, acceptance, and safety into her mind very gently, so she wouldn't know they were coming from him.

“You’re never too old to be scared. I get scared, Colin gets scared.” Gene reassured her verbally. “That’s what we have each other for. Come on, you’ll be the safest little girl on the whole planet. Nothing bad will happen to you unless it gets through us first.”

“Thank you.” Zara said, almost zombie-like she was so tired. Colin let her go and she shambled into the bedroom partition to crawl up into Colin’s bed, worming into the blankets dead-center.

<Looks like an early night for us.> Gene sent over to Colin as he went to the side of the bed away from Colin’s nighstand.

<Yep.> Colin replied <Hopefully not every night but… if it is that’s okay by me. So long as she feels safe.> Colin replied, crawling in on his side of the bed.

<Yeah, I’d be okay with that too. Poor little thing. She deserves better than…> Gene glyphed an omnibus gesture.

<Yeah, she does. But that’s what we’re for.>

<Damn right. Night Colin.>

<Night Gene.>

“Lights, ten percent intensity, red spectrum.” Colin said, and the lights dimmed down and shifted to red. They’d provide enough illumination to see, but the brightness and color wouldn’t affect their sleeping brains. An effective nightlight. Then he closed his eyes and slowly drifted off to sleep.

_Friday January 9th, 2263_

Colin woke up without any kind of alarm, the local star was shining in through his balcony window. He turned over a little bit and saw Zara still sleeping in a fetal position, with Gene wrapped protectively around her fast asleep. It was adorable. Colin sat up a bit and couldn’t help but let his eyes linger. It had been ages since he’d seen another man sleep, not sedated or hospitalized, just sleeping contentedly. The Minbari believed that a person’s true self was revealed when they slept, and observing a partner while they were asleep was one of the final ritual steps in Minbari courtship. Colin liked what he saw, even if speculation on that subject was a pointless exercise.

Going there in his mind, he suddenly knew his feelings for Gene were going beyond the platonic with great alacrity.
'Going? Have gone. In days. Less than one working week, Jesus fucking Christ.'he corrected his own introspective grammar and castigated himself for being dumb.

Physical attraction was one thing, and he could easily deal with it by ignoring it. This was more than that, and it was something he couldn’t ignore. Yet, there so many problems with that. Gene was his student, he didn’t treat him like a student but there were hard ethical limits. Plus, what right did he have to be with who he wanted when so many others couldn’t? How could he be with who he wanted, someone with whom he'd never produce offspring, when almost everyone else in the Corps had to submit their partner for genetic screening and pray, or have pre-matched individuals suggested to them until they find someone they can tolerate?

The simple answer was, he couldn't. He couldn't ever look another telepath in the eye if he did that. He'd stolen evenings here and there over the years semi-anonymously, but no one who really knew him knew he was gay at all. Except Marcel.

On top of all that, Colin had no indication that Gene liked men to start with, so it was moot. He knew mundanes would use physical and emotional intimacy as an indicator, but for some reason Colin couldn’t understand, they engaged in collective self-isolation. Telepaths didn’t, and Gene... in a lot of ways he died and was reborn in the Corps. Might as well have been raised in it.

However, looking at the rise and fall of Gene's chest and the little dribble of drool leaking from the corner of his mouth, he smiled faintly despite his frustration and sighed, letting that frustration go. There were things he could change, and things he couldn't. He couldn't change the breeding program. He couldn't change Gene. He could change his own perspective.

'It isn't that bad.' Colin told himself. 'Gene won't ever let me feel alone again. I can trust him with my life. He's absolutely devoted to our people and I know in my soul he'll be at my side along with Marcel when the revolution comes even if I can't tell him about that yet. What more can I ask for?'

Then there was Zara. Gene had been right, she deserved better. A smart little girl like her should have spent the last month playing with other telepath children and learning who and what she was, not trapped in a cage, not being--Colin's mind shuddered at the thought--abused.

He wanted to make it all go away, and while he knew he could, going in and surgically excising memories would violate who she was. He didn’t mind doing that to protect his own people or if someone did something to deserve or necessitate it; but he wouldn’t do that to her or any innocent telepath for that matter. So instead, he privately vowed to move the cosmos to make her life even marginally better. It was all he could do,

It was then he realized that he didn’t have the heart to wake them up even though he knew he should. He and Gene had a full day ahead of them and that was before they taught Zara how to eavesdrop on the senses of small mammals. Instead, he elected to do so gently and indirectly; with their stomachs.

He slid his legs to the side and didn’t haul himself out of bed so much as transfer his weight to his feet and rise up. He walked as silently as a dormouse into his small kitchen and opened up his refrigerator. He had exactly half a dozen fresh eggs, expensive to import, but worth it, along with some egg substitute for the waffles he was planning to make. He couldn’t get actual pork bacon, but vat grown bacon he did have, so he pulled that out along with some vanilla and a waffle batter dry mix. The milk was skim and produced by artificially grown cow mammary tissue, but it was still pretty good. Margarine would have to substitute for butter though because real butter was prohibitively expensive outside special occasions, even for him. Cheeses however, he didn’t skimp on; not ever, and he kept a lemon stilton handy for special occasions.
Colin got to work. He whisked up batter and heated the waffle iron, then put the eggs and pseudobacon on two separate skillets to fry. It wasn’t long before he heard the other two stirring, as the scent of bacon filled the air.

“Is that bacon?” Gene asked, plodding sleepily into the kitchen where Colin had already poured him a cup of coffee. Gene looked at him like he was a god.

“No actual pigs involved. The eggs are real though.” Colin replied.

“Plus fresh coffee.” Gene took a sip and melted “Cold-extracted?”

“I went to graduate school. I don’t screw around with the first cup of the day. Institutional swill works the rest of the time, but the first one is special.” Colin replied, taking a sip of his own coffee.

“Are you making waffles?” Zara asked on approach to the kitchen, she walked up and looked up at Colin “I could smell them in the bathroom.”

“ Heck yeah! Along with bacon and actual eggs” Colin replied.

“No way, real eggs? I think I’ve had those like once.”

“Yeah, they’re hard to get” Colin leaned down and whispered in her ear “but you’re worth it.”
Later on Friday January 9th, 2263

After finally writing up his formal report on the incident involving Ronald Jenkins and transmitting it to Psi Corps headquarters in Geneva. Colin stretched and cracked his knuckles, then got up. Zara was at the doctor’s office with Gene and dinner was cooking, so he had some time. He opened his desk drawer and pulled out the case of chocolate he kept in there and parcelled out blocks of the stuff, then he got up. He walked out his door and down to Gerald’s desk, where the brit was manually searching missing persons reports and tabulating them into a spreadsheet.

“Hey tosspot.” He said cheerily.

“Hey there boss-wanker. Heh. Works both ways. What can I do for you?”

“Gerald, you’re awesome.” Colin said sincerely. Gerald raised an eyebrow and looked like he was waiting for the punch line. “Seriously. You know why.” He flashed an image of Zara into Gerald’s mostly-undefended mind, then all the other kids whose attention he’d manage to keep off terrible things.

“Oy!” Gerald started to protest. “Oh. Right. No need to thank me Colin. I know somewhat what I’m doing with little ones.”

“I know.” Colin sat down in a chair opposite him. “Something happened last night though. Need a sanity check on something.” Colin briefly explained about the night-terrors and what he and Gene decided to do about it. Gerald thought it over before saying anything.

“If you’re going to do that, go all in. I know it won’t come naturally to you at first because you’re an orphan raised in the Corps. You think of parenting as a collective thing. Zara wasn’t, and even if she goes to the Corps in not-too-long, she’s going to need parents who’re hers, and dependable. Honestly, I’d do it, but I’m not the one she feels safest with.”

“Okay. That settles it then. Thanks Gerald.” Colin said, getting up and secreting a brick of chocolate where Gerald would find it but not see it right away. Then he headed down the long hallway to call upon Hassan and Franklin. When he got there, they were stage-yelling into headsets.

“Allah give me strength not to murder these developers.” Hassan yelled up at the ceiling. “This database schema is insane!”

“I know! Whoever designed this needs to be Ceaușescued!” Franklin agreed.

“Don’t tempt me!” Hassan retorted "Wait, how the hell do you know that reference? That was hundreds of years ago in an obscure part of Europe best known for vampire folklore!"

"I'd ask the same question of you!" Franklin retorted in pure frustration.

"I... I don't know! I don't know! I must have picked it up in a net-dive at some point!"

"Well where do you think I learned it!?"
Colin popped his head into Hassan’s office and saw him staring at something on one of his monitors while writing up some technical document or another on his other monitor. He was somehow managing to type quickly with gloves on. Of course, he had high-end gloves that hugged the skin; lambskin, as opposed to standard-issue pig leather.

“Don’t you think you guys are being a little...extreme?” Colin asked doing his best not to laugh and not succeeding in hiding a smirk and the odd snicker.

“NO!” they replied in unison before Franklin clarified “We’re trying to develop a program to cross reference Earth Alliance work records with school records. They’re worse than electronic health records to actually work with.”

“Holy shit.” Colin said, remembering the database clusterfuck that were in Medical division. “Are we talking Kafka or Lovecraft?”

“Come take a look for yourself.” Franklin suggested and pushed his chair back a little. Colin turned around and entered his office. Looking at the monitor, Colin was pretty sure his eyes were going to start bleeding. The schemas for both sets of information were vast, but also poorly organized and had almost no documentation. Earth Alliance records were particularly terrible because of the extent of both their tracking and prediction fields. They had every prior residence, every frequent social contact, predictions of voting patterns; and the organization made no sense. Colin knew the fields he needed for work but had no concept of the breadth and depth of the whole database.

“Good god it’s both; with a side-order of Orwell.”

“Yeah.” Franklin shook his head in dismay “Yeah. Once we get through it, identifying candidates to check up on is going to take all of ten minutes, but we have to get through it first.”

“I’m more concerned with this item here…” Colin said, hovering over a category in the ‘Civic Engagement’ API called ‘dissident risk category’. There was no documentation about how that was arrived at, or what the categories were. “Mind looking me up really fast? I’m curious.”

“Sure!” Franklin agreed. By then, Hassan had gotten up and crossed the hall to look over both their shoulders. He turned to his second monitor and typed in a query.

“Psi Corps.” Colin said when the computer spat out the response. “That’s it? Nothing else?”

“Seems so.” Hassan replied. “No documentation either, I can’t tell you what it means. High risk, low risk. No idea.”

“Well that’s disconcerting.” Colin muttered, and it was disconcerting. He didn’t know whether the Earth Alliance considered the Psi Corps to be loyal, politically neutral like the charter dictated, or if the Earth Alliance considered the Corps to be a threat. Colin knew which he considered more likely; for a large number of reasons.

“Yes.” Hassan agreed. “So what did you stop by for?”

“Honestly, just to hand you guys these.” Colin said, passing them both bricks of chocolate. “You’ve been working pretty hard. Harder than is required, given that you’re teaching Zara math. Just my way of saying ‘thank you’.”

“Are you sure you’re a Psi Cop?” Franklin asked. “You’ve always been friendly but just coming by to say you value us? That’s strange. I mean you’ve done it before but it’s still strange.”
“Yeah, aren’t you supposed to be rigid and severe or something?” Hassan followed up. Colin gave them a long-suffering look. “Wait, did you get laid?”

“No.” Colin replied flatly. "So... is that your way of saying thank you and you’re welcome?” he asked.

“Yes.” Franklin replied. Colin affected an exasperated sigh, shaking his head.

‘Programmers are strange...’

“Well you’re welcome, and thank you.” Colin told them, then had an idea regarding revenge by way of terrifying workplace scenarios. “Could be worse. Instead of the strange Psi Cop, you could be working for the perfectly normal Administrator.”

“No no. That’s fine! We’ll take you any day.” Hassan replied back, just thinking about working for Admin again made him cringe. Franklin wasn’t much different. Too many synergistic management solutions for either of them to ever be comfortable. Thoughts about that leaked from their brains as they recoiled in horror.

“Keep up the good work guys.” Colin said, and left the room. Strolling farther down the hall to Erika’s office. She was a cushy chair reading the Harvard Law Review.

“Taking a break?” Colin asked. She looked up and smiled.

“Hey there!” she said “Kind of? I’ve made sure our lawyer has everything she’ll need for her next round of arguments, plus warrants on whole new bank accounts…”

“Sounds like a busy week. Surprised you’re not in the common room or upstairs though. Hell, out seeing a vid or something.”

“Still a work-day, which means if I don't have anything else to do, I still do legal things, like my reading.” She replied cheerily. Colin recalled that she kept a rigid work-life separation. Work time was work time, home time was home time; nary the two shall meet.

“So, what are you reading? Anything interesting?”

“Yeah. Though not especially good. It’s an argument in the Harvard Law Review that the courts should strike down or severely limit our use of parallel construction in criminal cases.”

“God damn it.” Colin cursed, though he waited on what Erika had to say before he allowed himself to get angry.

“Yeah. They’re basically arguing that even the direction of an investigation based on telepathic scans is, by nature of the inadmissibility of the scan, fruit of the poisonous tree. They’re arguing that we should be able to maintain an ability to seek warrants for scans to save life and limb, but that’s it, well, that and accidental scans reported to mundane authorities can still be used to establish exigency.”

“Fuck.” Colin cursed again. That would kill a lot of criminal investigations right at the starting gate. “So, let me get this straight: a mundane officer who hears someone call for help can break into a house and search it. Anything in plain view is admissible including the fact that the kidnapped person was in that basement. We would have to get a warrant to scan someone in order to establish probable cause to enter, and nothing we find is admissible, we just didn’t commit the crime of breaking and entering? And on top of that, if a telepathic scan should point us in the direction of an investigation that we follow up on from square one finding entirely independent
"Jesus fucking christ, everything collapses. Even if I get admissible evidence on a bunch of slavers. Bills of sale, mundane testimony, the victims can't testify but I'd still have them; the fact that I even knew the location of the warehouse at all is from a perfectly legal but now useless scan... fuck! The courts adopt that and even my current arrests get tossed.'

“Basically. Though if a telepath picks up a telepathic cry for help or notices that someone is carrying a bomb, that can still establish probable cause for whatever a mundane security officer wants to do.”

“Any chance the courts will adopt the argument?” Colin asked. Erika shrugged.

“I’d say even odds, if nothing else, scans of telepaths will remain legal and admissible because we don't an expectation of privacy." Erika replied grimacing.

"<I love arguing in court against our own civil rights in order to protect our children from slavers by the way. Have I expressed that to you lately?>

"<I know Erika... I know... Fuck Mundanes.>

"We’ll be arguing it this week. Or rather, Serena Carmichael will be having it out with Evelyn Trudeau this week. I’ll just be writing some of the briefs. God, I hate her.” Colin understood her perfectly.

“Shit, Erika, I think every telepath on this planet hates her.”

“Oh, the feeling's mutual. She hates us. All of us. Even the ones who work for her. She’s the type of person who’ll talk about how we shouldn’t be able to legally reproduce in a room full of teeps. She doesn’t take cases defending scum because she’s ethically required to. She just likes fucking us over.”

“I see. Thought as much. Would you say she creates a hostile work environment for the telepaths who work in her firm?”

“Between her own bigoted comments and letting her mundane staff sexually harass or emasculate them...yeah.” Erika paused “Wait. You’re not planning on retaliating in some way, are you? Please don’t. That could bite us in the ass in court if she decides to play innocence abused in front of a judge.”

'Don't tempt me.' Colin thought, but didn't say.

“Not directly, no. I might send a message to Francois,” Colin said referring to the Psi Corps’ local administrative head “letting him know I’m getting reports about sexual harassment and other forms of mistreatment in the work place. He’ll be a helpful busy body and send out a planet-wide memo about not having to put up with toxic work environments and letting everyone know that it’s okay, the Corps has them covered.”

“Then what? Hope everyone gets the hint?” Erika asked.

“Basically. We have to put up with a lot of shit, but the reality is, we have the bargaining power. They can’t blackball us because they need us, but we can refuse to work for them. What are they going to do, hire scabs if everyone walks out?”

“Hmm. So long as nothing comes out of our office about it, we should be fine. Should be. Not
sure I’m comfortable with it though. It seems way too much like trying to impede her ability to argue in court.”

“Would waiting until after we’re done make you feel better?” Colin asked “I don’t want to just let her continue mistreating our people.” Erika went into a thinker-pose for a second and considered.

“Yeah, I think I’d be okay with that.”

“Okay. I’ll wait. Half tempted to low-key investigate her actually, but I won’t. Not yet. Anyway, this is for you.” He laid the chocolate down on the arm of her chair.

“Woah! I didn’t get you anything.” Then she saw what it was “I can’t take this, you can’t possibly come by it easily.”

“Easier than you think. I import up a case from time to time. So, you can take it, everyone else is getting one.” Erika stared at the bar with outright lust in her eyes, then secreted it away for later.

“Thank you. Though I need to ask why…”

“Because something struck me today. Gene and I get all the glory, such as it is, but everyone else does important work that’s often more than a little thankless. I’d give everyone a raise but that is beyond my lofty powers. So, this is just my little way of saying that I value you as a person, and I value what you do.”

“That’s… that’s sweet of you, thank you.”

“My pleasure.” Colin said as he ducked out and tried to find the others. Not in their offices or Hoshi’s lab space, though the thermocycler was running. Then he heard people laughing in the kitchen, three voices, and headed in that direction. Hoshi, Su, and Eduardo were reading chinese takeout fortune cookies and it looked like Eduardo was the last one in the round.

“You will go on many marvelous adventures.” He paused “Except in bed.” And the other two started laughing both at and with him.

“Ladies and gentleman, I bring gifts, because I’m not allowed to unilaterally give you a raise.” Colin said, holding up three chocolate ingots.

“Why hello there!” Hoshi exclaimed, more to the chocolate than to Colin, her eyes locked on like a missile.

“Colin, have you been holding out on us?” Su asked.

“Yeah what gives?” Eduardo followed up, pretending to look offended but really just staring at the chocolate like a dog fixated on a pork rib.

“Maybe a little? You know what I stare at for hours at a time, sometimes I need a pick me up and I don’t use drugs so…” he sat town on a chair on the unoccupied side of the table.

“We got you, we got you.” Eduardo nodded. “So… why the change?”

“How’s your investigation coming?” he asked the two accountants.

“Ugh!” Su slammed her head down into the table in frustration “So much money laundering. They’re good at it, they could open up a financial dry-cleaners.”

“That’s why.” Colin said, sliding them the chocolate. “And yours Hoshi?”
“Mine’s less tedious and more… I don’t know what. It seems like everyone and their mother went into and out of that warehouse leaving DNA all over the place from… various sources.” She shook her head “It’s a mess. But I’m used to messes.” He slid her chocolate bar over to her.

“Keep up the good work. I’m not sure if it’s right to say I’m proud of you because that implies I had some mentorship role in your awesome and I’m not sure that’s true, but the sentiment is there.”

They sent a telepathic thanks because all three had shoved swiss chocolate into the mouths and were basking in it’s glory.

“Anyway, I need to get upstairs. Dinner to make. Zara’s gonna be hungry when she gets back from her psychiatrist.”

<Why not do dinner down here?> Su asked.

<Because I don’t have enough chickpeas and vat-grown chicken to make dinner for the whole class. Though that is a good suggestion for the future and I have no idea why we haven't arranged it already...> Colin replied. Before he went upstairs again, he stopped by Max's office and left a bar of chocolate there. Max was at synagogue and wouldn't be back for a while. Colin figured he could thank Max for being fantastic later.

...

Gene and Zara were in the waiting room for Zara’s appointment with Dr. Cavanaugh on the psych ward of Alliance Arms Hospital. Her office, and that of her colleague Dr. Petrovich, had its own shared waiting room, and Gene liked the way it was done up. All calming earth tones, subdued lighting and ferns. There were some landscapes and still-life paintings on the walls, just enough to attract the eye but not anything too busy.

Zara was happily reading one of the books Hoshi had given her; this one on physics. From what Gene could tell it was a treatment written mostly conceptually with lots of diagrams, but it had side-bars for the math. She was sprawled out across two of the chairs using his side as a back rest. When two mundanes walked into the office, Gene didn’t give them much thought. Just a bog-standard white couple. Plenty of mundanes needed the kind of help that only a telepath psychotherapist could provide. This one looked like a military vet and maybe his girlfriend or wife? The haircut gave veterans away, hell if it weren’t for the badge and gloves his would too.

Zara on the other hand reacted a bit differently. Gene could feel her unease. She put the book down and squirmed a little bit, she tried not to pay attention to them but Gene could sense an oncoming panic attack. Gene draped his arm across her in a half hug and contacted her mind.

'Unknown Mundanes. Not safe. Not Safe.' her brain was basically in an anxiety feedback loop trending into a full fight or flight response. Her rate of breathing was going up, and her heart was starting to race.

<Its okay, I’m here and they can’t touch you. If they do they’ll answer to me, and I’ll put them down with extreme prejudice.> he said into her mind and projected a feeling of safety and calmness into her mind just like he had when they were going to sleep the night before. Zara started to calm down to just being nervous.

The woman looked at them and Gene could p'hear her thoughts, he was alert for danger and not blocking them at all. She was wondering what the mindfucker was doing to that innocent child, and was about to say something, maybe call someone when the door to Dr. Cavanaugh’s office opened and another telepath stepped out. This one a younger man with middle eastern features
wearing business casual.

“Thank you Doctor” he said, with a relieved expression on his face and holding a prescription in hand.

“My pleasure Aziz.” The psychiatrist replied in received pronunciation and looked over at Zara, her pleasantly neutral expression brightened a few shades.

<New symptom doc. I just had to head of a panic attack when the mundanes entered the room.>
Gene told her before she got out a word.

<Noted. Thank you. Pleasure to meet you Gene, Colin was singing your praises when we last talked.>

<Likewise. He trusts you, I count that as high praise.>

<Well he should… I taught him everything he knows about clinical psychology.> her smile turned a bit cheeky and aimed at Gene before she spoke verbally.

“Why hello Zara! How about you come in for a private chat, just you and me, hmm?”

“Ummm” Zara replied verbally but looked up at Gene uncertainly, wondering if this was okay and safe. It broke his heart to have to let her go anywhere with anyone who wasn't him or Colin without her necessarily wanting to, but it was the only way therapy could go at this stage. She needed to be able to talk about things she wouldn't want them hearing.

<You’re leaving me here? Do I have to go in alone?>

<Never.> Gene replied <I’ll be right out here guarding the door. But you should always talk to the doctor privately. You can trust doctors with things you wouldn’t want someone else to know. And it’s always important that you be honest.>

“If you’d rather he come too, that’s okay. We can make it work.” The doctor clarified, but Zara got what Gene was saying.

<No, it’s okay. I… I think Gene is right. I don’t remember everything that happened but if I do…> was what Zara said to both of them, before she excluded Gene from the conversation. He could tell they were talking, but he very pointedly didn’t pry. If there was stuff she wanted to tell him, she could, and she knew that.

Dr. Cavanaugh ushered her into the office leaving him outside.

“What was up with her just then?” the veteran asked, his accent was Czech.

“And what exactly are you doing here with her?” the woman followed up. Gene didn’t see a wedding band, so he presumed she was either a sister or a girlfriend or something. Her male companion looked at her with a ‘what the fuck just got into you?’ expression that was born out by his surface thoughts.

“What?” she replied to the look “I think I have a right to know what one of those people is doing with an innocent little girl!” Gene wanted to snap at her; maybe show her things she couldn’t un-see. He didn’t do that.

“Zara is a telepath, and she had a panic attack because you walked in the room.” He answered both their questions in a completely neutral matter-of-fact tone despite his own desire to throttle her.
The woman didn’t say anything, but her thoughts summed up to ‘Good, telepaths should be afraid.’ Any concern she had for a human child vanished. Gene felt in her the kind of filthy hatred that he did from his own parents and it made him sick. The young man was just mortified.

“Good god, why?” the presumed veteran asked.

“Catch ISN the other day? Telepath trafficking?” Gene answered.

“Yeah.” He replied.

“The guy who was on there is my partner. Do the math.”

“Oh. I see. Tell her I’m sorry for scaring her, would you? I didn’t join Earth Force to scare little kids.” That changed Gene's perception of the guy and he reclassified the man from 'potential threat' to 'potential friendly'.

“Will do, thank you...?” Gene asked, fishing for a name

“Frantisek” the guy replied, figuring out what he was after.

“I’m Gene. Where’d you serve Frantisek?” Gene asked. He figured he could confirm with that question. Someone who was prone to thinking the worst of telepaths would think they'd been scanned. Anyone else would assume it was because other features like their hair gave them away.

“Earth Force Marines, under James Lefcourt.” Gene got a flash of memory of a telepath wrapped up in the ship’s wiring begging for help and death from his surface thoughts. Frantisek didn’t know what the hell was done to them. He knew only that they were smuggled onto the ships in his battlegroup by Sheridan’s forces and that the Psi Corps people who came to collect their bodies were horrified. Some of them cried openly in the spaceport. Frantisek remembered that. He couldn't un-see it. What happened to those people haunted him night and day. Gene heard that something had happened in orbit over Mars, but he didn’t know it was that. Then he thought about what Colin had said about shit that was so secret it required action blocks. That was the sort of shit rebellions are made of. Just picking up the mental image of it made Gene want to go to Minbar and put Sheridan to the question.

It was bad enough that Frantisek was here for psychosurgery, to have the memories sectioned off so he could recall them if he needed to testify someday, but where they wouldn’t affect him emotionally. He’d picked that up too.

“Before that here and there. You’re Psi Corps Military Division? The hair gives it away.” Gene chuckled at Frantisek's question.

“I was. Metapol, now. Saw combat on Akdor, and a bunch of other places I can’t say.” Gene replied.

The woman was becoming increasingly agitated

“What the hell are you doing?” she asked in plain and open English. “Bad enough you’re willing to have one fuck with your brain and do god knows what other than you’ve asked, now you’re just talking with one? You know they can’t be trusted, how do you know he’s telling the truth about anything? What if he’s just read your mind and is telling you what you want to hear?”

Gene couldn’t help but wonder what a seemingly nice guy like Frantisek saw in someone like that. Frantisek was wondering the same thing, even as he replied he was re-evaluating their relationship. He liked her because she was hot and had sympathized with him for staying loyal to EarthGov
during the civil war when a lot of people didn’t, especially on this planet. He wasn’t a Clarkist, he just didn’t think a military coup was how you fixed things. He didn’t have nor would he tolerate the kind of virulent hatred on display here. He wasn’t even wrong. Most of the Clarkist regime were never ousted from their positions when the war ended.

“Maria, how do I know you’re even real? How do I know I’m not just dreaming everything in my entire life?” Frantisek shot back. “I don’t, not for sure. But Gene seems like a nice person, so I’ll treat him as such.” Then he paused. “You know what, no. There’s something wrong with you. We’re done.”

“You’re breaking up with me because I’m not a teep-loving degenerate mental-defective?!” she yelled, getting up just so she could get in his face from the high-ground. He wasn't having any of that and stood up too. He was in a neutral posture, but Gene knew that could change instantly. He debated what he’d do if it did.

'On the one hand, if he does knock her unconscious, he'd be the hero this lobby needs. On the other hand, he'll be guilty of domestic violence...'

“No. I’m breaking up with you because you have too much hate in your soul for me to stand. Leave. Or I’ll make you leave.”

“I’ll help.” Gene remarked casually. She looked at them both, hatred and betrayal in her eyes and written all over her mind, and she stormed out the door ranting something about traitors in a language that sounded like Russian but wasn’t. Ukrainian maybe? Frantisek looked over at Gene sheepishly.

“Sorry about her.” He said.

“No problem, buddy. Sometimes we end up in bed with bad people. Happens to the best of us. How’d you meet her anyway?” Frantisek laughed at the question, though it wasn’t entirely happy laughter. Mixed in there was shame and a sort of questioning sadness that Gene picked up.

“It’s funny. I mustered out as a corporal and I always told the privates not to marry the strippers. A lot of those who didn’t listen are happily married now. Some aren’t. I met Maria on a dating site.” He shook his head “She didn’t care that I fought on the other side. We never talked politics, just had wild monkey sex; and for the last two weeks I’ve had someone to...help me through flashbacks.”

“Yeah, I picked up on some of that.” Gene said sympathetically. Frantisek looked at him “Not on purpose. It’s like someone coming into a classroom late and everyone instinctively turns their head to look because it’s a new thing. I’m ignoring the whole hospital right now but powerful emotions or memories being recalled...”

“I understand. Not a problem.” Frantisek sighed, wondering why he was talking a Psi Cop’s ear off but not really caring “Civilian life isn’t the same. When I was still in, everyone understood. If I woke up screaming someone was there. Now, well... looks like I’ll be alone for that.”

Gene got it. Of course, when he was in, the mundanes weren’t there for him, they never let him into the group no matter how much he did to prove himself. Some of them were at least kind, but part of it was that he was technically a civilian and part of it was that he was Corps, there was always that separation. That otherness.

“Tried linking up with other war vets?” Gene asked. Frantisek shook his head.
“On this planet? I might have spent my teens here but local Earth Force security are all people who defected and got reinstated after the war. Civil wars are… uncivil. They were under blockade. They’re not going to like someone like me.

“Not everyone. I know a guy. Warrant Officer Steven Washington, he was an MP on the EAS Vesta, acts as our liason.”

“Didn’t they defect?” Frantisek asked.

“They did, but it took their captain being talked into it while under fire. He won’t hold it against a marine who couldn’t exactly hand over his ship. He has people, he can introduce you.” Gene took a slip of paper out of his wallet along with a pen, and wrote down Steve’s contact information, then he got up and handed it over to Frantisek. “Tell him Gene Hendriks told you get in touch.

“Thank you.” Frantisek replied, taking the note gratefully.

“Honestly it’s my pleasure. I’m in a better place than I was a year ago thanks to the people around me. Might as well pay it forward.”

Gene heard a door open, and it was the one to Dr. Petrovich’s office. There weren’t any patients coming out, but Gene figured that even a busy psychiatrist needed to eat a late lunch. The bearded Russian stepped out and beckoned Frantisek inside.

…

Watching Zara stuff her face was hilarious. Evidently, she liked chicken shawarma a great deal. From the looks of it, so did Gene, given the gusto with which he attacked his second sandwich after devouring the first.

<Ohmygod> Gene thought at him. Colin chuckled. <Where did you learn how to make middle eastern food?>

<My roommate in the major academy was raised by mundanes. Immigrants into Switzerland from Syria. I didn’t pick up Arabic, but I did learn how to cook.>

<Like it that much huh?>

<You have no idea. I decided I needed to learn because if I ended up wandering the galaxy for a while I might not be able to find more. Behold, I ended up wandering the galaxy for a while. Came in handy.> No matter where someone was in the galaxy, chickpeas could be transported easily, so could jasmine rice, and virtually everything else one would need to make vegetarian dishes. Meat was more variable, but doable.

<That was a smart move. I wish I’d done that with Thai food.> Colin filed that information away for the future. Birthday perhaps. A random gift might be a bit much, but on Birthday? That was something he could do.

Zara finished inhaling dinner by gobbling through the last of the pita bread and hummus.

“You made the hummus from scratch?” she asked. Colin loved teaching, and particularly enjoyed teaching her things. Plus, good bonding. He jumped on the opportunity.

“Yes I did. Want to learn how?” he asked in response. “You too Gene.”

“Excellent. We can go and pick up some more chickpeas tomorrow then.” At that point, Zara got nervous. Colin could feel it. “What’s wrong?” he asked gently.

“Mundanes.” She replied with her eyes downcast, not really wanting to admit she’d developed a mild phobia.

“It’s okay. That’s what grocery delivery is for.” Colin reassured her. The shopping experience was part of the fun for him, selecting ingredients, maybe haggling over price, but if he had to choose, her comfort zones were more important. Anything that might be done to stretch those was to be done in a therapeutic setting where any fear and feelings of not being safe could be processed without him being the one doing it. His job was to provide a safe place for her mind.

<That’s new.> Colin directed at Gene on the high-band.

<Yeah. She just about had a panic attack in the waiting room when a couple mundanes came in.> Gene replied.

<Hmm. What did Dr. Cavanaugh say to you afterward?>

<Latent complex post-traumatic stress, really early stages, hasn’t gone full feedback loop, but she’s suppressing the conscious memories so it’s mostly negative associations, night-terrors, a fear of mundanes she can’t place. That sort of thing. It’s not really affecting her day to day yet…> 

<But once the memories surface, yeah. Her recommendation?>

<She told me ‘Colin gets an A.’> Gene replied, and Colin breathed a sigh of relief inside his own head.

<Excellent, good to know I’m not useless. I imagine her treatment protocol is going to be MDMA and telepathy assisted psychotherapy?>

<Yeah. Most effective treatment modality, barring psychosurgery which she refuses to use except in extremis.>

<Okay.>

Their mental conversation took place in flashes of thought over the course of only a few seconds, not enough time for Zara to even notice.

“So Zara, how was your trip to the doctor?” Colin asked, bringing it back.

“Nishita’s really nice. We just sat and talked for a while. About how I grew up mostly, but also… well… you know.” It wasn’t so much that Zara didn’t want to talk about it, it was that she couldn’t. She knew it was bad but her brain refused to recall the specific memories and that was a good thing for the time being. Dr. Cavanaugh would help her bring them to the surface under the influence of psychoactive drugs and process them. If they surfaced on their own, treatment would be more difficult.

“I don’t mind going, but why do I need to?” Zara continued. “Is something wrong with me?” she asked in a tone that was heartbreaking for Colin to hear.

“Absolutely not. You’re perfect just the way you are sweetpea.” Gene reassured her in flat denial of that line of reasoning and reached over, pulling her into a half-hug “You’ve just been through some nasty stuff that can hurt you if we don’t take care of it. Kind of like how if you get burned, you go to the doctor to get patched up or it could get infected or leave nasty scars. Same thing, but
“up here.” Gene said, tapping a finger to both their temples.

“That makes sense I guess. How often do I need to go see her and what is she gonna do?”

“Every day except Sunday for a little while, then we’ll see. Healing can take a while, and the mind doesn’t do a good job fixing itself without help. She has ways of bringing memories to the surface so they can’t hurt you. That way, you can deal with them safely.” Colin said, being careful about what he said, he didn’t want to trigger a memory she didn’t need cropping up. “But we’ll be here every step of the way to make it easier.”

Wednesday January 14th, 2263

A week after the raid, Franklin and Hassan had nearly driven themselves insane creating their cross-referencing algorithm, but thanks to it, the Psi Corps Education division had finally been able to identify every single missing child and inform their parents. Colin plastered their information all over the Psi Corps internal network like a massive Amber Alert in the hope that someone saw one of them at some point and remembered to call it in. Until warrants came in on those already captured, all Colin could do was wait for leads.

Wednesday morning a very tall black-haired woman wearing the badge and black gloves of the Psi Corps along with a very well-tailored suit walked into Colin’s office.

“Lieutenant Meier?” she asked, a Swedish accent coming through loud and clear. Colin wracked his brain for who she was. She wasn’t someone he had regular contact with, she’d only ever checked in once. Then he remembered, mostly from the height and accent, she was as tall as Gene, though far slimmer. Astrid Bergsen, a P9 commercial telepath concentrating on corporate counterintelligence, currently on a long-term contract with one of the larger agricultural research firms on planet.

“Ah, Ms. Bergsen, what a pleasure seeing you again.” he said taking a cue that she’d rather keep their exchange formal.

“The pleasure is mutual Lieutenant, but this is not a social call. Might we skip the pleasantries?” her smile at the so-called pleasure was at best perfunctory. Colin got the impression that she was all-business while on the clock, or had next to no joy in her life for whatever reason.

“Uh, sure, what can I do for you?”

“I have information regarding at least one of your missing telepaths.” That got Colin’s attention.

“I’m all ears Ms. Bergsen.” he pressed a button on his desk to transmit the conversation to Gene’s office, where he was catching up on old case files.

“I am employed with the GrowRite corporation, they specialize in adapting plants to grow on this planet without the need for greenhouses.”

“I’m familiar with it.” Colin replied. Their research and development arm was responsible for one of the strains of rice he particularly liked.

“For the past several months the details of my client’s research has been leaking to one of our larger competitors, Plowshare Corp. They’ve scooped my client enough to warrant suspicion. An
audit showed no intentional leaks or evidence of any corporate espionage through electronic infiltration. So I applied for and was granted permission from the Corps' Commercial division to perform a sting operation. My employer suspected that their staff scientists were being covertly and illegally scanned.”

“I see.” Colin said, nodding in acknowledgement “Do continue.”

“They often frequent a pub on Fridays as part of a journal-reading and problem solving group, so I accompanied them incognito last night to monitor their minds for intrusion. I found it. A boy in his late teens. Powerful but not well-trained, he managed to hold me off and escape, but I succeeded in getting his name. Albert Lawson, and got his handler, Dr. Gordon Chandler. I think he may have deliberately given that up, it was far too easy given my lack of traction with actually subduing him. I checked the name, and it is on the list you circulated”

“A cry for help you think?” Colin asked. He remembered the action blocks and other forms of conditioning all his victims were under. Albert might have found a way around them. He had to fight back if scanned, and he couldn't go for help when he was out. That didn't mean Yanik and Ronald thought of the contingency of him just letting something go.

“It’s possible.” she replied. “I have not told my employer what I discovered yet, I thought it would be better to come to you first so the Corps could deal with it on our own without mundane authorities being involved, or at least so we could make that decision ourselves. Fewer questions that way, fewer restraints. Still, I can only really wait a day, maybe two, before they expect my report.” Colin developed a foxlike grin.

“Thank you for the information. We'll get him, we'll make sure he's safe.”

“You're welcome. The Corps is Mother, the Corps is Father. I won't let mundanes take our people, or impede us in getting them back.” With that, she made a polite exit.

“You got that Gene?” he spoke into his microphone.

“Yeah” came the reply.

“You have my undivided attention.” Colin decided to test Gene’s thinking “How would you play it? Keep in mind, the courts might fuck us in couple weeks.”

“I think…” Gene answered “I think we hunt down Dr. Chandler and tail him. We don't need a warrant then, we're just following up on an 'anonymous' tip. We get enough evidence to either use the exigency exception right then and there, or get a warrant legally. That way, everything is admissible.”

“Given Astrid’s employer, I don’t think we can afford to go in covertly. There'll be follow up through official channels and we can’t leave an illicit trail of breadcrumbs, so I tend to agree. I'll give the Velociraptor a call.”

Gordon Chandler Ph.D, Vice President for Research and Development at Plowshare Corp was eating lunch the next day at a trendy French restaurant. He was savoring the pressed duck. Actual duck. There were ways of doing French food relatively cheaply on Omega VII, but pressed duck was something other than a meal. It was a statement, and Colin found it disgusting. He’d splurge on small luxuries, like chocolate, or decent cheese, and he’d always share. This guy was something else.
Colin was observing him through a set of binoculars from a building across the street. Gene was waiting in an alley around the corner in plain clothes, looking like an average guy in jeans, a t-shirt, and faux-leather jacket. The badge was hidden under the jacket, and his hands were behind his back.

Gordon finished his meal and paid for it a little while later. It would have cost Colin a week’s pay.

<He’s coming out, proceed.> Colin sent the signal

When Gordon exited the building he never actually encountered Gene, who looked for all the world like a guy leaning up against the wall of a cafe across the street waiting for someone to meet him for lunch, or maybe one of the baristas spending the last few moments of freedom he had before the start of his shift outside. Gordon passed him right by and never even really saw him as he got into a car and left, inching his way through the busy pedestrian-clogged streets of a light commercial district at lunch time. It gave Colin plenty of time to bring the car around, reverting to radio contact with Gene, who was maintaining line of sight on foot.

"Getting a little distant" Gene said into his subvocal mic. "Re-establishing contact with the drone"

Colin saw the little drone fly up as he stopped at the curb to let Gene in. It was a little palm-sized quad-copter that would fly up and look search vehicle transponder registries, then track the one Gene selected.

"There you are you bastard..." Gene said from the passenger seat almost as soon as he sat down, his eyes glued to a datapad screen.

"Got him?" Colin asked.

"Yeah. You drive, I'll navigate." The actual driving had to be done manually because the groundcar's AI didn't have a covert tail setting, which was surprising to Colin considering the fact that it was government issue and the Earth Alliance was a low-key authoritarian state at best.

'Maybe no one's figured out how to teach a computer field craft?' he wondered.

They wound through the streets, occasionally stopping or taking a turn to throw Dr. Chandler off thinking he was being followed until his car stopped and he got out. They passed on by, then double-backed a few minutes later to his destination. Gordon entered a building in an industrial park on the outskirts of the urban core of the colony. It had a gravel lot and a large number of modular buildings. The sort of hollow shells that could be customized into anything from movie sets to office cubicles to lab space. His building was a medium to large prefabricated structure that could be divided into multiple sections and rigged for water and power in several different configurations depending on the needs of the end-user.

What it didn't have was external surveillance cameras. Nothing in that industrial park did. Not private, not governmental. That made Colin suspicious immediately because it meant that someone had managed to convince both the planetary government and the Earth Alliance not to install them, and that almost certainly took bribes. That, however, wasn't his jurisdiction.

'Unless it becomes my jurisdiction...'

While Gene took a portable battering ram out of the trunk, Colin crept up to the door as silently as possible on gravel, and fed a tiny microphone under a gap in the door. It absolutely was illegal eavesdropping, but he needed to know what was going on inside and listening through the door with the mark one ear had its limits. Therefore, he wasn't recording, simply listening and relaying...
“Number three, report yesterday’s findings.” that would be Dr. Chandler’s voice.

“Y...yes sir” came the voice of a young man, who would have to be Albert Lawson, stripped of his name and reduced to a number. Colin considered that there could be more in there if Albert was three. Which justified the use of the microphone.

Silence followed for a few moments. Colin figured the kid was transferring his memories. That made sense, he wouldn’t know heads or tails of what he was scanning for, but someone with a Ph.D. in the subject material would.

“Stupid boy!” Gordon shouted, at which point Colin heard a thudding sound and a muffled cry of pain. “Fuck! You two, take out the trash, we have to clear out now!” A lot of things occurred to Colin at once. First, Albert didn’t know enough about what he was doing to partition a memory and section off a part of a given chain of events to prevent transferring something he didn’t want someone else to know. Second, there were at least two other mundanes. Third, they were likely about to commit murder.

<Go Now> he sent to Gene. They hit the door with their battering ram. The hinges popped out of the frame with a sharp pinging sound, and the door itself collapsed.

Gene was the first through the door, clearing the entry so Colin could follow, moving into an interior space, it seemed smaller on the inside than the outside and was blank save for a few tables and chairs, vid screen, and a coffee pot. They saw Dr. Gordon Chandler with a PPG in his hand turning around to face them, and the boy Albert on his knees, ducking for some sort of cover, any protection at all. There were also a pair of guards, both mundanes carrying stun batons and PPGs. Gene sent the minds of the guards into a cognitive feedback loop, stunning them long enough to shoot one in the chest. Helium plasma vaporized his skin, blackened his ribs, and cooked his heart and lungs. Death was instantaneous and he collapsed to the floor. The other he just turned out the lights on, sending him into stage four sleep to collapse on the floor next to the corpse. Gordon’s eyes went wide and he raised his PPG toward Gene, whose attention was elsewhere for a few too many critical seconds.

Colin took the simple expedient of seizing control of Gordon’s motor cortex.

“Drop the weapon” Colin Growled. Gordon dropped it.

“On your knees, douchebag” and he got down on his knees. He had no choice, the verbal commands were just for emphasis. Colin dropped a full set of manacles down in the floor.

“Restrain yourself” and Gordon did, clumsily. Prisoner secure. Colin released his grip on Gordon’s movement

“Gene, please be so kind as to see to Albert.”

“I’ve got him” Gene replied, and walked toward the table the teenager was hiding under.

Astrid was right, Albert was seventeen and looked...younger. Rail thin to the point of malnourishment with brown hair mussed with his own blood from being struck in the head, along with other older injuries. He was cowering under the flimsy table in a fetal position, between the hired muscle. Calmly and slowly Gene got down on the floor so he could meet the boy at eye-level. He’d been so systematically brutalized he’d regressed to a pitiful child-like state, rather than
the insufferably arrogant teenage boy he should have been, it was written all over his thoughts, thoughts he wasn’t even bothering to shield.

“Albert? Albert, we are from the Psi Corps.” Gene said, then remembered the conditioning and immediately knew that was a mistake.

'Psi Corps!' Gene felt an instruction activate in Albert’s surface thoughts before he was shut out by reconstructed blocks. Albert lashed out clumsily with his mind, but he had no idea what he was doing and Gene’s own defenses brushed it aside, several times. His surface thoughts were nothing but panic and terror.

“Open your mind Albert. I can help you if you do that. I don’t want to open it for you, but I will if I have to. Please.” Gene looked back over to Colin.

<If you find more, don’t tell them you’re Corps, they’ll resist. They have contingency triggers>

<Figures. Gotcha> Colin replied.

...

“Tell me where they are Gordon. I can feel their minds, but can’t see them. Tell me or I will take it from you.”

“Eat shit, you’re not allowed to scan me.” came the petulant reply. He was running ‘Mary Had a Little Lamb’ through his surface thoughts as a countermeasure. Slippery bastard, Colin thought.

“Allowed? No. Going to? Yes. I needn’t worry, I can always remove the memory when I’m done.”

Colin wanted to scan him so hard that his brain turned into a blood clot, but he needed this one alive and mostly unspoiled to convict the others; so instead of doing that Colin didn't keep the scan going for longer than necessary. Nor did he do the scan cold. He followed the pathways of association inside his memory that Gordon was thinking about at the time and found the necessary memories easily with minimal neural disruption. Four more, false wall, key in drawer by dead mercenaries, door lock disguised as a fire alarm.

'This place isn't even up to code. Must have been constructed during the war. The Earth Alliance might be a fascist state but at least it enforces a common fire code.' While he was there, Colin rummaged through other connected memories as well, mapping the web of linked associations looking for everyone else who knew what he was doing. He would go after everyone even faintly complicit in Gordon’s crimes.

“Thank you for your cooperation.” Colin said contemptuously, kicking Gordin in the ribs before carefully going in and excising the memory of his scan and ‘attitude adjustment’. He didn’t bother to replace it with anything, Gordon would have some missing time, a splitting headache, and a broken rib, but that was it. Colin did take the additional small liberty of forcing Gordon’s mind to go into deep stage four sleep. The better to prevent him from crawling away or attempting to arm himself.

<I’m going to retrieve the others> Colin informed Gene.

<Understood. I'll be freeing Albert's mind. Call if you need me.>
“Alright kid, you’ll thank me later.” and Gene went in. Albert’s mental shield was basically a cocoon of fear, it was the only emotional state he had that he could use. Gene worked as gently as possible. Instead of using negative emotions, he searched his soul for something better. A wellspring of love and kindness that he wove into a luminescent blanket and wrapped around that fear to apply gentle pressure to his defenses. It wore its way through the terror-chrysalis enough for Gene’s mind to slip through.

There he found what he was looking for; the structure of the action blocks Ronald had conditioned his victims with. The part Gene thought was particularly cruel is that they weren’t accompanied by memory vaults. Albert could remember wanting to resist, wanting to rip Gordon’s mind apart, but being completely helpless to act. It was a brute-force compulsion that forced Albert to act contrary to his own will. Thankfully, Jenkins’ technique was bad, and they were easy to pick apart and release.

When he broke contact, Albert was, mercifully, unconscious.

…

Colin found the key card in the drawer, and opened the false wall. Inside there was a passageway with five metal doors, one of them was Albert’s and stood open. There was also an inset on the far side that looked like it contained something that might be called a shower. Except instead of a shower head it had a garden hose. Enough to keep the people locked inside clean and presentable when sent out so no one called in a neglected teenager to Security, but not enough to make them feel like people. Suffering permeated everything like the stench of decay on an unpoliced battlefield and made Colin sick to his stomach.

He didn’t open the first door, it had a porthole that would let him look inside. It was a solitary confinement cell; maybe two meters by three meters. There was a combined sink and toilet unit like one might see in a prison; a single ventilation duct in the ceiling, and the only light was provided by a single flickering fluorescent bar. A small foam-rubber mattress took up most of the floor space with a blanket that was wrapped around a fitfully sleeping lump.

Colin went in as carefully as he could, excising the compulsions holding her--and that lump was definitely a girl--in bondage. He didn’t know her name, he couldn’t see her face, and he couldn’t bear to wake her to consciousness until he could get everyone out at once. Better to let her dream for a moment while he saw to the others.

The next room was identical, except that in it, there was a too-skinny black teenager of indeterminate age rhythmically beating his head into the concrete wall, leaving a red smear behind.

“Hey, I need you to stop hurting yourself, okay?” the young man didn’t stop, he didn’t have to obey Colin, so he wouldn’t; Colin could feel that little spark of rebellious contempt underneath everything else and couldn’t help but grin faintly. He could respect that even if couldn’t let it continue.

“Hey! I am here to get you out of here, and to do that I have to unshackle your headspace. I can’t do it safely if you’re hurting yourself. I’d rather not make you do anything... but I can if you make me. Come on, stop for a second and tell me your name.” to Colin's surprise, the kid stopped and looked at him.

“You’re fucking kidding me, right? Is this some fucking trick?”

“Not a trick. Gordon’s shackled on the floor outside, I’m here with a friend getting all of you out.”
Colin replied.

“And how are you gonna ‘unshackle my headspace’?”

“I’m a P12, and the bastard who put the action blocks in wasn’t exactly well trained. I’ll manage.”

The young man thought it over for a second. His blocks were weak and his surface thoughts were plainly evident. He figured that he might as well take a chance because whatever awaited him on the other side had to be better than here. There was something else there too. Colin could sense a constant connection between him and the others, including Albert, even though he was on the other side of several walls.

'Well I’ll be damned...' Colin mentally remarked. 'How long have they been here like this? Long enough for a parapsychological bond?' The thought filled Colin with both awe and horror. That sort of telepathic connection was rare and usually born of profound emotional intimacy, shared trauma, or both.

“My name is Sam. Sam Green.”

“My name’s Colin. What I need you to do is drop your blocks, I can tunnel through them but I’d rather not, you understand?”

“Okay” Sam relented, and lowered his blocks. Colin focused his mind, and removed Sam’s action blocks in a surgical strike that left the boy momentarily stunned but otherwise unharmed.

<Gene, how are you doing?>

<Pissed off but Albert is free and sleeping. I'm ready to help, what do you need?>

<Emergency services would probably be a good idea, and I’ll need your help in here. One of them is awake and I don’t want to leave him in his cell alone while I free the others.>

<I'll be there in a second.>

A few moments later, Gene was in the hallway with Colin as he opened the door to Sam’s cell. He caught sight of the badges and gloves immediately as soon as he practically flew out the door. His face was covered in his own blood, and his forehead was one giant weeping contusion.

“Sam, this is my partner Gene” Colin said as he walked to the next cell.

“Hey Sam. Don’t worry, the motherfuckers outside have been rendered...harmless.” Gene followed up.

“Wait… you’re both Psi Cops?” he asked, somewhat suspiciously.

“Yup!” Gene said disarmingly and pulled out his credentials to show him. “You can scan me to confirm if you want.”

“The... the guy who did this to me said he was a Psi Cop when he took me out of school a year ago. He was lying though, he was working with a Centauri and a bunch of raiders I think.”

“We took them out last week. The guy who hurt you is dead. Colin over there killed him.” Gene informed him.

“So very glad I did now, no more guilt for me!” Colin responded almost chipper as he pulled open the window on the next one. It contained a girl, also asleep and much quicker and easier to free
than Sam had been.

When he reached the porthole to the next cell, Colin’s heart sank. The room was dark, and there was no living mind inside.

"She... Polina's dead." Sam said "She killed herself..." He tried to keep track of day and night but there were no windows so he reverted to when he slept "Two sleeps ago." The young man's hands were shaking and he was desperately trying to hold back tears, knowing that if he didn't hold that emotion back it would hurt the other three. They'd feel his hurt and pain and all he'd do is cause more. That, Colin realized, was why he was hurting himself. To distract himself with physical pain that he could contain inside his own mind.

"Sam, I need you to wake the other two up in their cells and get them outside. Emergency services are on the way, Albert is fine, he's under a table in the front room unconscious." Gene said to try to distract him. He glanced over at Colin and projected his mental voice.

<He doesn't need to see this...>

<No. No he doesn't. None of them do.> Colin agreed.

"I know." Sam replied "I can sense him. I was blocking him out before... I didn't want to feel him die but now..."

"Think you can wake him up?"

"Yeah, I think so." Sam replied, then closed his eyes and breathed out slowly. Without line of sight, Colin would have a hard time doing what Sam was accomplishing easily. "I've woken Machteld and Fatima. I'll get Albert on our way out. If you give me the keys, I'll open their cells?" Colin handed Sam the keys and the young men went about unlocking each cell.

<He-He shouldn't able to do that. He's what, a P5 to maybe P7?> Gene was dumbfounded.

<Remember what I said about it being hard to pin down limits and rules? And what the Centauri do with their court telepaths? This is one of those cases. They're...> Colin struggled to describe it. <They're basically in a partial gestalt at all times. Separate but connected.> Gene's eyes widened as he realized what was going on and how terrible life must have been for that to happen; not that he was surprised looking at the surroundings, but that it had happened at all.

Sam opened each of the other two cells and got the girls out, when he did that he felt the over-spill, an outpouring of an emotion that had no description other than Unification, seeing each other for the first time with their eyes. All they'd had was each other's self-image which could differ wildly from what they actually looked like. It was such an incredibly intimate thing that Colin didn't feel comfortable intruding and turned away, reinforcing his blocks to respect their collective privacy. Gene did the same thing until someone tapped on his shoulder.

"Colin, Gene, this is Machteld and this is Fatima." Sam said indicating each of the others. Fatima had dark hair and olive tones, while Machteld was a brunette with hazel eyes. Both of them felt numb, Sam was holding them up physically and mentally but he was running on pure stubbornness and was ready to psychologically collapse.

"It's a pleasure to meet you both." Gene said. "We'll catch up once you're all safe. Get Albert and get outside, okay?"

They waited until the teens were outside the building. Sirens were on rapid approach, maybe three minutes distant in traffic. Then Gene opened the door, and something slid with it.
Colin was right behind Gene and looked around his shoulder to see a young women, perhaps sixteen years old, dangling from the door and dragging along the floor. She’d had enough, and managed to reach the light, pull out the electrical, and hang herself by tying the wire around the porthole grating. Rigor mortis had worn off and she was entering early decomposition. Her blood had pooled in her legs and her skin was starting to gray, but she hadn’t started to bloat, which meant she had been dead for a day, two at the most. Sam had been spot on.

Almost reflexively, both Gene and Colin reached out with their minds, performing a death trace, scanning for the remnants of a mind left on its surroundings after death, the after-image of the soul of the departed. They caught it, a brief portrait of a mind that once was. She had been a bright and kind young woman named Polina Stravinski. For a brief moment, they felt the abject misery, the complete desolation of hope that caused Polina to take her own life, and then it passed.

Gene was quivering with rage and sorrow, tears streaming down his face. Colin was only doing marginally better.

<I am going to kill him.> Gene growled to Colin in his mind, referring to Gordon.

<No you’re not, Gene> he sent back <We’re going to do better than kill him. We’re going to erase him. We’re going to let the forensics guys do their work, and we’re going to get the mercenary we left alive to spill the beans. We’re going to make sure that fucker’s mind gets wiped.> then he thought for a moment about how likely that was. Fifty percent at best. The prosecutor would probably plea him down, or the jury wouldn’t convict because the victims were telepaths. There were better odds of getting him on the white-collar crimes and he’d only serve soft time. The only justice they’d get was likely what they took. But killing him would be wrong, and worse, detectable. Making anyone willing to confess their crimes would also be a giant red-flag in the mundane justice system.

<Gene, Gordon is yours for about a minute, just don’t kill, maim, or leave obvious damage in his mind. I would recommend...creativity.>

Gene sighed “I’ll make it good then.” He stayed there for another ten seconds, thinking, Colin supposed, then stalked into the main room.

By the time the medics and Earth Force arrived, Gene had finished, and Colin was pulling Gordon up by his chained hands. It was, Colin reflected, a bit like using the strappado, and the act of lifting him that way strained Gordon’s shoulders almost to the point of dislocation. He took a certain satisfaction from the man’s pitiful protests.

“Well Gordon” he said, as Gene made sure the kids were taken care of “I suppose I should go through the formality. You are under arrest for the murder of Polina Stravinski and a whole host of other crimes including criminal conspiracy. You know what the sentence for even a fraction of that will be? That’s right! Death of Personality. The you that is here is going to die, and some other you will take your place.” Gordon moaned piteously in response and turned pale, though perhaps partially from the fact that his shoulders were threatening to cast off their bonds and liberate themselves from the prison of their sockets.

“You have the right to remain silent and anything you say may be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney, if you cannot afford an attorney one will be appointed to you. If you wish to waive that right and answer questions without consulting an attorney, you can of course stop at any time. Do you understand these rights as I have informed you?” Gordon nodded pathetically.

“Fantastic!”
After the sun fell a little while later; after their prisoners had been taken away in chains and the kids sent to the hospital, forensics techs swarmed the building looking for physical evidence and packing up Polina’s body for transport to the medical examiner’s office. Colin was sitting on the trunk of his groundcar shivering slightly in the cold and staring up at the stars. He felt a familiar presence, and then a thump right next to him; then a leather coat slid over his shoulders, it was nice and warm from body heat.

“Cold?” Gene asked. Colin smiled tightly

“Not anymore, thank you. What about you? Without your jacket won't you be cold? I have my pea-coat in the trunk...” he didn't like wearing it because if his standard uniform made him look like a vaguely fascist, his standard issue pea-coat made him look positively Waffen-SS. Formal occassions only that one, but if him not wearing it made Gene feel the need to be uncomfortably cold, he'd make an exception.

“Nah. Grew up in Montana, remember?”

“That’s not much colder than Geneva…” Colin remind him.

“Yeah, but liked to walk to school in freezing temperatures and TeepTown is fully climate controlled in a geodesic dome.”

“Heh. True.”

“Something bothering you? Other than the obvious.” Gene asked and clarified, sweeping his right hand in an all-encompassing gesture.

Colin sighed heavily and by way of encouragement Gene wrapped his left arm around Colin’s lower back. Several emotions warred in Colin’s head. Gene made his heart race and understand again what butterflies in the stomach meant as an expression. Part of him wanted to fully embrace that feeling and go for broke. Another part of his mind sent him into a guilt trip. A third reminded him that trying and failing might make Gene uncomfortable and he never wanted to do that. On top of that, was what was bothering him. Throughout that little deliberation, he was blocking Gene out.

“Come on, let it out. I can’t help if you don’t talk to me.” Gene chided.

“It’s pretty tangential”

“Try me.” It was practically a command. Of course, if anyone could draw the connection it would be him..

“This whole thing reminds me of my own parents. They died in the Dilgar War while I was still in the creche.” All he had of them were two charred badges in his desk, and a few memories his mother had planted in his mind, knowing she might not come back to help the Corps raise him. He used to call them up sometimes, death-tracing the badges and projecting their own implanted memories back into his own mind, just to talk to them. Or himself. However that worked. He didn't even know if he was actually doing a death-trace or just remembering one.

“You’re right, that is pretty tangential, work it back for me?” Gene asked him, not unkindly.

“Director Johnson issued a directive that drafted them. That order conscripted a lot of other high-rating telepaths. Not into formal military service of course.”
"No one wants that, treats us too much like actual citizens. It would imply mundanes taking orders from teeps, and telepaths being subject to the laws and protections that govern soldiers.” Gene replied, and Colin felt a wave of bitterness and old pain wash across his friend’s mind.

He knew Gene wouldn’t talk about it, but Colin wanted to let him know he cared anyway so he leaned his head over onto Gene’s shoulder and sent a pulse of affection into his mind, just to snap him out of it so he wouldn’t dwell on bad memories. Gene didn’t say anything, but he did mirror that affection back and run his hand up Colin’s spine and down again. That more than the jacket made Colin feel a lot warmer.

“Did the same thing during the Earth-Minbari war, actually.” Colin followed up. “You might think ‘Sure, that make sense. Human annihilation was on the line, all hands on deck.’ but then..." he trailed off, knowing Gene knew where he was headed.

“They left us all to die. We weren't considered people enough to save. Now I get you. I remember my mundane relatives” Gene didn’t use the word family to describe them very pointedly “putting in for that lottery. We didn’t make it. No one in our town did, so we all just kinda gathered in the various churches and waited for orbital bombardment to start, but at least we had a chance of salvation. Same odds as everyone else. But I can imagine what he felt like in the Corps. They use us, then abandon us.”

"Yep! Like disposable forks. Use, discard, use discard. The only difference between the Earth Alliance and that fuckstick over there is the rate at which his victims die and compliance with Earth Alliance privacy and intellectual property laws. Trapped in a cage feeling your friend commit suicide on the one hand, trapped on a planet feeling a planetary mock-execution on the other..."

“Ugh. One person was bad enough…” Gene let slip and immediately noticed “Ignore that.” though Colin hardly could.

“Something you need to get off your chest?” That verbal slip had given him a terrible glimpse at what Gene couldn't talk about and he had absolutely no choice but to ask about it.

“Colin I…” he hesitated “I want to. But most of it is classified up to the gills. I physically can, but...Fuck it.” Gene switched to using his mental voice so ensure no one overheard, and a combination of fear of rejection, shame, and the overwhelming need to confess oozed from his skull.

<I've seen a mock execution, and a lot more than that. The average Earth Force marine is a decent person Colin, but I was working with the ones who point on those damned Night Watch arm bands and applied into Special Operations units within Earth Force Intelligence. You can imagine what they got up to...>"

'Holy fuck...' Colin thought internally. Gene had been working for Clark's secret police. The term 'war crime' popped into his head and Gene must have noticed or seen what was undoubtedly a horrified look on his face.

<Yeah. They couldn't... they couldn't make me get my hands dirty. Not like that. But sometimes I had to watch. It was either that or Clark might have concluded the Psi Corps wasn't loyal enough to keep alive. I did what I could to help their victims Colin I swear...> Colin believed him. How could he not? By then, Gene had withdrawn into himself both mentally and physically. He was sitting the the car, but holding himself around the chest both to comfort and defend. Colin guessed he was half expecting repudiation and bracing for it.

'That's not fucking happening.' Colin thought. He braced himself a little bit so he wouldn't slide off
the smooth surface of the ground car and drew Gene into a sideways half-hug, it was the best he
could do given the physical arrangement and didn't want Gene to feel physically isolated for as
little as the two seconds it would take to move. With his other hand, he gently gripped Gene's chin
and guided his head up so he could look Gene in the eyes, then spoke directly into his mind.

<You are a good person. Remember what you told me last week? Mundanes can't take that from
you unless you let them, and you haven't let them. I trust you, and I believe you didn't help them
willingly. I also know you tried to help their victims because the man before me right now,
reacting the way he is right now, would do that.>

Colin released Gene's chin and gripped his forearm instead, holding onto him as Gene sat there in
silence, unable to find words or even coherent thoughts. He couldn't p'see or p'hear Gene's
thoughts, but he could feel turmoil, like Gene was stacking sandbags against a flood of memories
he didn't want to relive and it was creating a feedback loop that threatened to become a panic
attack. Colin knew he'd seen psychotherapists, and he knew the standard treatment protocols for
PTSD, but there was stuff Gene wasn't permitted to discuss with them, that he'd just partially
disclosed. Calling them up like that might well have triggered flashbacks or threatened to. Colin
wanted to help and there was something he could do.

<Gene, I need you to open your mind. I promise not to look, but I can help you. It might hurt a
little bit though.> Gene nodded and the walls around his consciousness and unconscious processes
dropped. It was the later Colin went for. He knew the structure of the human mind like the back
of his hand and rode Gene's mounting fear of his own memories straight to his amygdala. There,
Colin's mind reinforced Gene's providing the overriding cognitive veto that his own prefrontal
cortex was incapable of sending, and he made it stop it signaling the rest of Gene's brain with
alarm signals, ending the panic response and letting Gene think about something else. Anything
else. As Colin broke contact with Gene's mind, he p'heard what Gene refocused himself on.

\[\int u dv = uv - \int v du. \quad \int \frac{1}{ax+b} \, dx = \frac{1}{a} \ln |ax+b|. \quad \int \frac{1}{(x+a)^2} \, dx = \frac{1}{x+a}.\]

It took a few moments for Gene to bring himself back, and all the while Colin bathed his mind in
familial love and acceptance, the kind all the other kids gave him as a child during nightmares.
Anything to drive the fear away and help Gene feel safe. Slowly, Gene's body and mind both
started to relax and he unwound.

"Sorry." Gene said, slightly ashamed.

"Don't be." Colin replied. "I should be the one apologizing to you. I shouldn't have asked."

"No, you should have. I'm the one who suggested this mutual-support pact, remember? It goes
both ways. You can't help unless I talk to you it's just... hard. At least now you know what you're
dealing with."

"Yeah, I do...and whenever you need to talk, you know where I live." Colin replied, squeezing
Gene's shoulder and forearm for emphasis.

"Of course, I know where you live. I’ve been spending the night with you and Zara the past few
nights. If I don’t know where you live, something’s off.” Gene replied, reverting to wry into
humor. Colin couldn't help but chuckle but then...

<God I’m going to miss her when she goes.> Colin ‘cast to Gene, having two conversations at
once.

"Out of curiosity, what did you do to that putain d’merde?" Colin asked, spitting out the French
invective.

<Same here. Want to just start up a cadre right in our backyard?> Gene asked.

“I implanted night-terrors of having his mind wiped and existential anxiety when he’s awake. He won’t get a night’s peaceful sleep until they erase his mind and build a new one. It could be months. Years even. If ever.” Gene replied. “You did recommend I get creative.”

<If only we could just...do that. But we can always call. Parental visits are every Sunday and that can include long-range communications.> Colin suggested.

“And you certainly did.” Colin replied. “It’s only fitting. His victims were telepaths and we’re unlikely to get justice through mundane courts. So...teep justice.”

<I see what you did there.> Gene replied <It’s okay I’m starting to think of her like that too.>

“True. I mean, we’d use action blocks and shunning, but it’s close enough. Still, it might not be a bad idea to put some sort of internal check on that sort of thing.” Gene suggested. “I don’t want to be the guy who started with good intentions but ends up implanting someone with a compulsion to claw out their own eyes.”

<Heh. Yeah. It’s funny, I knew this would happen I just didn’t expect it so fast...At least she’s making good progress. Doctor Cavanaugh says she might be ready to try sleeping on her own in the next couple days.>

<Well that’s good! And I know exactly what you mean.> Gene ‘cast back at him, but something in it made him think maybe Gene’s was conflicted about it. Colin certainly was.

“Good point. Veto power if we think the other will or is going too far?” Colin suggested.

“Works for me.” Gene said, nodding his head in the affirmative, paused, thinking only to himself. “I need a distraction I think.” Colin had a few ideas about that, but only one he could voice or let leak when Gene might notice.

“I think I can help you with that.” He said.

“What did you have in mind?” Gene asked, assurances of cold tolerance aside, he was starting to shiver.

“First, we go home out of the cold. Raised in Montana or not, you’re starting to shiver and that just won’t do. Second, we curl up on the couch and watch a ridiculous old vid. I’m thinking...Scanners.”

“Hold on, is that about what I think it’s about?”

“Oh-ho Yes. From the nineteen eighties.” Colin beamed.

“You, sir, are a monster. A retrograde pop-culture monster.” Gene replied, but there was no venom in it “Alright, let’s get back. We’re late on Zara’s lesson too.”

“I could be worse, you know. I could be obsessed with the avatar of egoistic frustration: Daffy Duck. And yeah, we are. Probably too late, she’ll likely be winding down for bed, I left her a copy of Princess Mononoke, if I’m right she’ll be watching that when we get back.” Colin said.

“I have no idea what that is, but we’ll go ahead with that until she falls asleep. Then Scanners.”
Gene sipped his coffee, blonde and very sweet. Colin’s was black like the void of intergalactic space. Colin pressed a command and sent the Earth Alliance records for their quarry over to the monitor on the other side of the desk. “Daniel Nissenbaum, twenty year old student at John Carter University, tested P5 on Wednesday, missed his appointment for transport to Earth, which was scheduled for this morning.” Gene said, repeating back the basic information on file.

“So, next step?” Colin asked. “Walk me through your reasoning.”

“Well, he’s a kid who’s life just got turned upside down. We don’t know how his family will react, but chances are he’s nervous about the Corps. He’s likely to try to anchor himself in something familiar and safe. He’s studying biology so he might go to a zoo or botanical garden or something, but he can’t stay there. His roommate might have some information on where he likes to go or if he has a significant other.”

“Seems like a reasonable first step. Let’s go.”

An hour later, they were standing outside of room 524 on the fifth floor of a large dormitory building, knocking on the door without answer. Some of the other doors were locked tight, others were open and the curious heads of undergraduates peered out, staring at them; some like they were a freak show, others simply curious, yet others were reveling in the Psi Cops coming for a monster in their midst. Colin rolled his eyes, he didn't want to be there a minute longer than he had to be. University dorms reminded him of the major academy with all the warmth and companionship stripped away.

“Open the door, please. We can feel you in there, you're not fooling anyone. We just need to ask a few questions and we don’t want to force the lock.” Gene shouted into the wooden portal. No answer.

“Fuck this” Colin said. “We’re cracking the lock.” and pulled a little electronic device from his pocket. He popped open a small tab on the door’s alpha-numeric keypad and inserted two prongs, then input the emergency services code bypassing the normal security protocols. The magnetic lock disengaged with an audible clank, and the door popped open. No one was plainly visible inside until he heard something shift in the closet and felt a spike of fear from the same.

Gene opened the closet door and found the roommate, a rather thin young man of african ancestry.

“Hello. You must be Robert. I’m Mr. Hendriks, and this is my associate Dr. Meier.” Gene said, taking the lead and using the title for Colin most likely to garner respect from a university student. "We’re looking for your roommate, Daniel Nissenbaum.” Gene said as cheerfully and non-threateningly as he could, which wasn’t very considering the severe black uniform and hand-to-hand ready physique.

“I-I’m not saying anything! He’s a nice guy, I’m not giving him to you fascists!” Colin couldn’t help but be impressed. This kid didn’t care that his roommate was a telepath, he wasn’t going to throw him under a bus even if he was terrified. The fascist comment though, got under his skin.

“Uniform notwithstanding, we’re not fascists, Robert.” Colin replied. “Every minute he’s a manifested telepath out in the world he’s in danger. We won’t hurt Daniel, can you say the same
for someone he accidentally scans? What if some slaver takes him, or he gets picked up by rogues and indoctrinated into a suicide arsonist?” That gave Robert pause. He hadn’t considered that. "A third of your colleagues outside think he’s a monster. Some of them would hurt him if they could. What do you think his chances are on his own?"

Colin paid attention to Robert's surface thoughts as he considered his options. On the one hand, he thought Colin made sense. On the other, he was weighing that against the reputation of Psi Cops everywhere. Deserved or not, Colin knew the reputation existed. He couldn't not know. Eventually, Robert reached the conclusion that with the Psi Cops, his friend might be okay, but without them, he definitely wouldn't be.

“He didn’t tell me where he was going. He just left earlier this morning.” He was telling the truth.

“Ok. Is there somewhere he might go? Girlfriend’s place, maybe?” Gene asked.

“N-No.” he said, still terrified but willing to cooperate “Jessica dumped him when he told her. His parents don’t know.” Robert thought for a second. “Synagogue? He’s an observant Jew, but not Orthodox. Tries to keep the sabbath, doesn’t eat bacon, but doesn’t stress over wool-cotton blends? Uh, Temple beth Zion, I think that’s where he goes.”

“Thank you.” Colin said, mentally kicking himself, a last name like Nissenbaum was a dead giveaway.

<The Jewish community on this planet is pretty small and Temple beth Zion is where Max goes to services. I’ll give him a call and have him meet us there.>

<Why not just go pick Daniel up?> Gene asked.

<Max was raised in a Jewish cadre, and it’s his synagogue. Chances are he knows Daniel and can help us talk to him. I’d rather not arrest him if he just had a breakdown or something.>

<Yeah, I’d rather not do that either. I mean, he can’t possibly actually be running if he ‘flees’ to a synagogue where he knows a telepath goes to worship.>

They exited the dorm room and were met by campus security and a hallway filled with the heads of mundane college students poking out their doors. The mental susurrus of fear was palpable, and suspicion radiated off the security officers, whose hands were near their weapons.

“Just looking for one of ours.” Colin said “We’ll show ourselves out.”

…

When they arrived at the Temple beth Zion, Colin was struck by the beauty of the architecture. It was laid in local sandstone and granite using architecture that looked medievally inspired; all pillars, buttresses, pointed archways and absolutely gorgeous stained glass. The huge doors looked like oak, but were instead ceramic patterned and stained to look like it. Above the arches’ keystone was a stylized star of david with two tablets inset in its center.

“Colin, Gene.” Max said on approach with a bit of a sardonic grin. He was wearing his best suit instead of any sort of uniform, and a kippah covered his greying hair like the gloves covered his hands; his Psi Corps badge was pinned to the front of his coat for all to see.

“Evening, Max. Thanks for coming. So, what can you tell us about our prodigal P5?” Gene asked.

“Nice boy, can’t speak for his family, they’re on the other side of the colony. This is a…
reasonably welcoming congregation, by mundane standards. No open hostility, the Rabbi wouldn’t
tolerate it.”

“It may not be the ‘I’m suddenly a telepath I’m supposed to fear’ thing, but the ‘life-trajectory has
changed’ thing?” Colin replied, questioning.

“Yeah, I know what that’s like. You grow up with ideas about what you want to be and who you
are, and suddenly it gets cut out from under you.” Gene said “It doesn’t shock me that sometimes
they run, even if they’re not really running so much as trying to cope with the shock of it all.”

“Maybe, but it could be something else.” Max said. Gene gave him a quizzical look. Max just
tapped on his badge. “We’ve worn these before.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Gene replied, rubbing the back of his neck. “I should have considered that.”

“Hah! Taken to Schul!” Max said, grinning, but then looked at Gene, appraisingly “You haven’t
spent much time with Jews, have you? In or out of the Corps.” Gene shook his head.

“No. Can’t say I have; I grew up in a little town in Montana I don’t think there were any and after
that it was all in the Corps and… you know you’d think there’d be some in Vancouver where I did
my early training, but no. Colin said you were raised in a Jewish cadre?”

“In Jerusalem, yeah. And let’s fix that. Come on. Let’s get this done before sundown, I’d like to
actually observe Shabbat and this sort of thing probably counts as work.” Max said, but spoke into
both their minds as he turned around.

<It's like that with a lot of insular minority groups. You guys are white Euro-American Gentiles so
you might not notice, but there are provisions that help people maintain their cultural identities as a
part of the Corps.>

<Oh!> Gene instantly grasped why <It's better to have sub-groups with their own traditions
incorporated into the Corps than it is to basically be like North American protestant residential
schools. That's why, isn't it?>

<Exactly that.> Max replied <Better to have Jewish Telepaths than to have every Jewish parent
ever trying to hide their kids. Same with American Natives, Aborigines in Australia and New
Zealand, Sami, Romani. You name it. Not everyone gets their own cadres, but there are particular
curricula and special allowances get made for cultural observances and making damn sure
everyone learns and keeps using the native language of their respective people. Every geographic
region has its own regional flavor too, because staff is drawn from those areas.>

Thinking about it, it occurred to Colin that Max was absolutely right. Erika was raised in the
Corps but she spoke Spanish instead of French and German like he did because she was raised in a
cadre in Mexico City, and she was catholic. Standard Psi Corps curriculum didn't include religion
as a cultural practice, but as an academic subject. She got it both ways. Franklin was raised in a
Nairobi and while he didn't break it out often, he spoke Swahili.

Colin opened the doors with surprising ease given their mass and figured there must be a magnetic
assist, and held it open for the other two. The inside was every bit as beautiful as the outside; the
sun shone through the stained glass windows, leaving dappled light in many colors playing across
the floor.

The pews were empty, save for one lone figure sitting in the center of the right hand column who
Colin surmised was Daniel. He couldn't see the young man's face, but he felt another telepathic
mind in that seat. An older gentleman who looked like he was in his energetic seventies strode confidently up the center aisle wearing a black suit, kippah, and a blue and white Tallit around his shoulders. Max went up to meet him, his posture showing a degree of deference Colin didn’t usually see from the man.

“Rabbi Liebgott, Shabbat Shalom” Max said, extending his hand. The rabbi took it and they shook.

“Shalom. It’s good to see you early, but…” he pitched his voice a bit quieter “why’d you bring the goyim Psi Cops? Not that they’re unwelcome but…”.

“He’s one of us Rabbi.” Max said, nodding toward Daniel. “He was supposed to take a transport to Earth this morning, but missed it.” Max replied.

“So, they’re here to take him then? Max, I’ll be damned if I let anyone…” Max politely cut him off by gently putting a hand on his shoulder before he could say ‘lock Daniel in the ghetto’. Colin noticed something in that moment when the elderly rabbi looked at him and he caught a glimpse of his thoughts through his own filters. Rabbi Liebgott would fight like a lion to protect Daniel from any harm whatsoever. He knew he didn’t stand a chance, but it wouldn’t stop him from trying. He had to smile inside, even if that defensiveness was directed toward him.

“Rabbi...Isaac, we don’t have a choice. But no one’s dragging or throwing him anywhere.” Max looked back at the two Psi Cops standing by the doors “Those two?” Then Max said something in a language Colin didn’t understand but that he guessed was Hebrew because he could understand a lot of Yiddish by way of German. He could have translated it telepathically, but if they switched languages it was meant to be private. After a quick back and forth the rabbi nodded and they switched back to english.

“Okay, okay. Talk to him.”

“Thank you Rabbi” Max replied, patting the rabbi’s shoulder as he passed by and walked toward Daniel’s pew. He motioned for Colin and Gene to join him, but to sit a few rows back. They followed and Max sat down next to Daniel, who had his head bowed. Colin thought he might be praying, but the kid had every barrier up that he could erect, and they successfully kept everything but his emotional state in. He was anxious and confused, a little angry. Everything Colin might expect from a twenty year old whose life had just been irrevocably altered by forces beyond his kenn.

<What do you think he’s saying?> Colin asked Gene.

<If it were me in his shoes? ‘God, why have you done this to me?’; but then again I’m an atheist.> he replied.

“Shabbat Shalom, Daniel.” Max said

“Mr. Cohen? What are you doing here?” Daniel asked, then turned around to see Gene and Colin, who waved politely. “Oh. Are they here to take me?”

“Eh, we’re both telepaths and you’re an adult. You can call me Max. I’m surprised you didn’t notice us come in. The Rabbi was pretty upset for a minute there.”

“I’ve been doing organic synthesis problems in my head. Daniel blanked a word that Colin figured might be God "I just wanted to be a physiologist...”

“I know, and I’m sorry, but there’s nothing stopping you from going for something like that in the
Corps. Colin back there is a forensic neuropsychologist.”

“Seriously? And he’s a Psi Cop?”

“Yeah, profiles the telepaths who go really bad. But to answer your other question they want to make sure you’re safe and that you’re not actually trying to run, but they’re not going to drag you out of here and send you to prison.”

“Wait, you mean they’re not even going to arrest me?” Daniel asked incredulously.

“That depends on you. You did such a bad job of running they figure you weren’t really running just… had an existential crisis. Bit of a nudnik, but not a criminal nudnik.” Max shrugged. “If you intended to actually run, yeah, they’d do it because it’s the way most likely to save your life. They’d rather not get you in trouble though. As far as they’re concerned, you missed your train to the spaceport and panicked.”

“Okay… that isn’t what I expected.” Daniel allowed.

Max chuckled “What’d you expect? Fascists? Can’t say I blame you if you did, what with those uniforms, mundane pop culture, and whatever bits of rogue propaganda you picked up…”

“Well, yeah. I suppose I did. I mean…”Daniel looked back and appraised the two Psi Cops. “the uniforms look they were designed by Hugo Boss.”

“Well, we didn’t pick the dress code. The Psi Cops are tasked with keeping telepaths controlled. If they didn’t do that, the mundanes would dissolve the Corps and do it for them, with extreme prejudice.”

“Wouldn’t that be a good thing though? You--we I suppose--wouldn’t be torn from our families, or have our dreams shattered and lives circumscribed…”

“Daniel, all those things would still happen. The Crawford-Tokash act… have you read it?”

“Uh, no. No I haven’t.”

“I’m not surprised. Mundane schools don’t teach about this, at best they gloss over it. But you read the Nuremberg Laws in school, right?” Max asked.

“Yeah of course. Did one of my history papers on them.”

“Good. Because Crawford-Tokash is pretty much the same thing. Written by mundanes to keep us from marrying mundanes, preventing us from holding most jobs, legalizing discrimination across the board and requiring us to register with the state. We could still vote back then but…yeah. Not anymore.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Daniel hissed “That got passed in the Earth Alliance?”

“Yes, does that shock you? This is the Earth Alliance, former home of the Neue Sturmabteilung er I mean Night Watch. It didn’t pass unanimously. India, Germany, and Israel most notably opposed it for obvious reasons. New Zealand held out on joining until first contact with the Centauri.”

“When did the killings start?” Daniel asked with a flat affect, as if he understood that the passage of laws like that always preceded crimes against humanity.

“Before passage of Crawford-Tokash” Max said, and Daniel’s eyebrows raised. “In 2115 when
Colin had been listening without interruption as Max delivered his history lesson. Something was off. He’d never seen this sort of… he didn’t know what from Max before. It was a quiet thing, it wasn’t vehement or loud. He used words like ‘us’ and ‘we’ in a way like he was testifying rather than reporting history, all in the affect, not the words. The sorrow in his voice and the surface of his mind wasn’t abstract either. It was a wound that had been plastered over by years of healing. It’s edges had been sanded down and smoothed, covered in layer after layer of positive memories, but still there, like scar tissue.

His House Father Mike Chastain had been the same when Colin was ten. He’d told a story about how his ancestor’s family and friends in New Zealand were bound together and weigh down with cinderblocks before being thrown into a river to drown together. Mike's own great great grandmother only survived because she managed to hide. She was just a little girl, younger than Zara was at the time; she watched--felt--everyone she’d ever known die. And she felt the mundanes exalt in their slaughter. Colin was too little to make the connection then, but he was older now.

<Gene, I think he remembers.>

<What?>

<My House Father once spoke like he is now. I'm not sure, but I think he's carrying memories passed down to him from that period.> Colin clarified.

<Who would...why? Who would want to remember that, or inflict it on someone else? Just knowing about it and knowing a lot of mundanes wouldn’t mind a repeat is bad enough. Wait. No. I know exactly why. The word we use to describe shit like that is derived from what happened to Jews.> to Colin's surprise, Gene started to mentally list dozens of anti-Jewish pogroms and expulsions from ancient times forward. From the Babylonian Exile to the Second Diaspora after the temple fell to the Romans; through the Rheinland Massacres to the Black Death; the Hep Hep Riots in Bayern; the anti-Jewish riots and organized repressions in Imperial Russia. The Shoah. <Humanity forgot about the Shoah and it happened to them again. Of course they'll pass the memories down in a desperate attempt to prevent a third occurrence. I wouldn't be shocked if Native Americans do the same thing.>

Colin almost found that sort of informational recall intimidating. He wore his academic tendencies on his sleeve, complete with three letters after his name. Gene didn't, but that didn't have those tendencies, and apparently they were of a historical and mathematical twist.

“If the Psi Corps were ever dissolved… at best the mundanes would inflict diaspora on us.” Max continued. "Our culture would be erased, and we’d be isolated, unable to protect ourselves. It’d be open-season on us for extermination, enslavement, or sleepers.” then he pointedly kept something from the eavesdropping rabbi, but broadcast it so Max and Colin could p'hear.

<There have been...multiple instances of the telepaths being disappeared in large numbers by EarthGov, rumors of the Psi Cops stopping whatever they were doing.>

<Is that true? Do you know?> Gene asked Colin. The direct question put Colin in a bind, he still hadn’t been able to get a secure communication to who he would need to talk to get the action
block cleared, but he could always say he couldn’t talk about it, which was as good as confirmation.

<You know those things I can’t talk about?> Colin replied.

<Holy shit. Okay, I see why that shit would be secret to all fuck.>

<No comment.> Colin all-but-confirmed, skirting the boundaries of his own security measures.

“…” Daniel didn’t have much for a moment as he processed everything he just heard “Max, I believe you that all that happened; but it can’t really be that bad now, can it? I mean, you’ve been coming here for years except for during the civil war.”

"We were expelled during the Civil War, Daniel." Max said flatly. Daniel blanched and looked like he wanted to vomit into his mouth at the ignorance of what he’d just said. Disgusted by his own blindness to what colonial policy was during that period.

“Mind if I take this one, Max?” Gene asked

“Sure, sure. You’re on the sharp end.” he replied.

“Daniel, I know we’re laying it on a little thick, but take it from someone who’s been in your shoes; the sooner you know and understand this, the easier the rest of your life is gonna be. On this planet, fully half of the children--innocent little kids--who manifested telepathy during the civil war were kidnapped and enslaved. You don’t want to know what happens to them. But that's what mundanes do to us when the Psi Corps isn't around.”

Colin considered interjecting with what happened to the ones who the slavers missed. Most were okay physically, but having to keep what they were a secret for months or years outside their families had taken a toll on a lot them. A few were too young to have much choice in the matter, they were often withdrawn from school and kept by loving parents in isolation. Then there were the ones who weren’t okay physically. Colin rejected the idea.

“The sleeper drugs?” Gene continued “I’ve been on them, they’re a living death. The mundanes know they’re a living death, and make us promote and use them anyway. It’s also standard practice to inflict them on us if we find ourselves needing medical care outside a Psi Corps facility, barring a few exceptions.” Gene shuddered at the memory, Colin reached over and sympathetically stroked his forearm.

“What do you mean by ‘Living Death’, exactly?” Daniel asked.

Gene took a deep breath and described it. “The world became two-dimensional and all my senses except taste became...flattened. I felt like I was disconnected from the world and dissociated from my own body--like I was an outsider driving a biodrone instead of just being me.”

This time, Colin did interject.

“Clinically, it’s called dislocation and depersonalization. Other side effects include insomnia and clinical depression. Ultimately, the suicide risk averages to between one and two percent per year. Not total. Per year. They used to be worse, but even those got through regulatory approval because the risks were deemed ‘acceptable’.”

“And none of you have problems being in the Psi Corps? Not...everything I’ve heard is lies, there has to be a grain of truth in some of it, right?” the young man asked.
“You’ll forgive me if I’m perfectly blunt?” Max asked them both.

"Of course. I’d have a harder time if you lied." Colin answered him.

"Psi Cops have to enforce oppressive laws against their own people. But they do it to protect all of us, as individuals and as a group. Protecting telepaths is their job, as they see it. No matter what mundanes might have to say about that. But some Psi Cops see too much, do too much, and it changes them. Makes them brutal, sometimes.” Max said truthfully. “And there are always Quislings in our ranks who betray their own people for whatever scraps of power the mundanes deign to give them. Or maybe just to save their own skins. That doesn’t change. There’s always someone willing to sell out for personal gain. We're still humans and humans are flawed. Always.”

“At the end of the day, the Corps is what we’ve got." Colin followed up. "It isn’t paradise, but it’s home. The only one we've got. We could let you go and you could run… even if no one chases you you’ll never have a home anywhere else, the mundanes won’t let you.”

“So, what do you say Daniel? Gonna make your next flight?” Gene asked.”"We’ll make sure it’s not on Shabbat. We can probably cram you onto next Wednesday’s flight, if you don’t mind traveling with a bunch of kids.”

Daniel let out a small chuff of laughter and shook his head. “Yeah. Still don’t know what the hell I’ll do with my life but… okay.” Colin could tell he was was being honest.

“Excellent. Oh! I almost forgot. Seeing as you are registered with the Corps.” Colin fished through his pockets and took out a very no-thrills pair of black leather gloves and a badge. “These are yours. I know they might mean something different to you than the two of us, and Max I’m pretty sure has a complicated relationship with his but…” Daniel took them.

“Thanks. I think. This is going to take some getting used to.” he said.

“I wear mine like a defiant statement. This is me, I’m a telepath, and you can’t take that or my humanity away from me... But that doesn’t change what it is, don’t forget that either.” Max told him. “And we can talk about that whole ‘what do you with your life’ thing. I have some ideas I think you might like.”

“Gentlemen” Rabbi Liebgott said, standing up from his inconspicuous position a few rows forward “It’s about twenty minutes until I start services, you’re welcome to stay if you like.” and he absolutely meant it.

“It’s alright, we’ll get out of your hair.” Gene replied.

“Yeah, we have some things we need to do. But thank you for offering, Rabbi.” Colin said

“Please, call my Isaac. And thank you, you too Max.”

“For what?” Colin asked.

“Giving me a different perspective. I had… assumptions. They were unjust.” Colin stopped him before he could ask for forgiveness.

“Isaac, there’s nothing to forgive.” Colin replied. “We know you’re a good person, we could see that in your soul when we talked in the door.”

“Yeah man, don’t sweat it. Anyone who’s willing to go toe to toe with the two of us because he
thinks he might have to protect a telepath is cool with us. Your heart was in a good place, and that’s what matters.” Gene followed up.

Max said something in Hebrew as they left, it was short and had an inflection that Colin could tell was something like ‘I told you.’

…

It was the last rep of the last set of squats and Colin wasn’t sure how he was still standing. He didn’t even know how much he was lifting, lately Gene just put things on the bar and made him do it. Maybe deep down, as much as he hated leg day, Colin knew it was good for him. That’s what he told himself when he decided to rationalize. He knew this. Today he wasn’t rationalizing. He just liked it when Gene was proud of him when he fought through the discomfort and finished.

“Hmmppph” Colin tried to lift the thing, inching upward from having his femur parallel with the floor, shaking the whole time. Every muscle in his legs felt like they were about to snap and his knees hated him. They hated him so much.

<Come on Colin, you can do it. PAIN IS WEAKNESS LEAVING THE BODY!> Gene shouted into his mind. The mind-tone on the last bit was almost ironic, he was aping the mannerisms of the real meatheads he knew.

<Check your Broscience at the door. Pain is your body’s way of saying ‘stop before you injure yourself you maniac!’>.

“I.Hate.Leg.Day.You.Sadistic.Bastard.” Colin gritted out through his teeth, half-way up. His legs felt like they were about to buckle and Gene’s hands were holding him steady just under his arms to keep him from falling over, but pointedly not lightening the load at all.

“Come on. Just a little more…”

“Fuck.Squats.And.The.Monster.What.Invented...Them!” with a loud clanking sound he levered the however-many-kilogram bar back onto it’s bracket and only managed to avoid collapsing because Gene caught him and lowered him gently to the floor. It was Gene’s upper body day and his arms were bigger than they usually were and quivering from the strain of holding Colin up, but Gene managed to not drop him.

“See? Knew you could do it! Good job!” Colin couldn’t see that face Gene made when he was happy for and proud of him, but he felt it. Between that and the endorphin rush he felt all warm and fuzzy inside.

'Worth it.'

“Ow. Why do I let you do this to me? How much did you put on that thing?” Colin grumbled.

“No peeking! I told you, it’s part of the plan. Knowing might scare you.” Gene said. “One day, I’ll show you. As for why you let me torture you… I don’t know. I figure some part of you enjoys it.”

Before Colin could articulate a reply and maybe go down that rabbit hole, Zara popped her head in, derailing the thought-train completely.

“If I come in early you’re not gonna make me get ripped, are you?”

“I don’t know. How much do you think you can lift in fifteen minutes?” Gene asked with a fake-
predatory grin. Zara looked to Colin with a ‘help me’ look on her face.

“He’s just kidding. I think. Come on in, we’re stinky but we can start.” Colin reassured her. “Not sure I can actually walk though.” Colin’s legs felt like jelly. Jelly made from lactic acid. He pushed himself to his feet and somehow managed to stand and walk over to the little table by the door, which had a small cage with two rats inside doing rat things. One of them, the albino, ran on the wheel. The brown one was chewing on some hard seeds.

When Zara looked over and noticed them she squeaked with excitement and dropped her jaw in an open-mouthed grin.

“They’re so cute! Do they have names?”

“Not yet.” Gene said “We figured you should name them. If it matters, the albino’s a girl.”

“Hmmm.” She stroked her chin. “Well I’m gonna be using them as spies, and they’re lab rats so they’re not gonna last long. The girl is Ethel and the boy is Julius.”. Colin started to giggle and Gene suppressed his laughter into machinegun snickering.

<She’s nine, that’s way too dark.> Gene said into Colin’s mind.

<Sometimes kids are like that but...Where...how? That was three hundred years ago.>

“Those are… strangely appropriate names.” Colin said.

Zara looked at them like they were going crazy for a second, feeling out their emotional state and why they were laughing.

“That was a little creepy wasn’t it?” she asked, feeling a little weird about it. Gene wouldn’t have that.

“No, it wasn’t creepy, just kind of out of nowhere. Having a dark sense of humor is actually pretty normal, but it sometimes surprises adults. We’re more curious about how you know about the Rosenbergs.” She brightened right back up.

“Oh! Well Max and Erika decided to team up this morning and sort of compare how mundanes do trials versus how we do them in the Corps. So they talked about the Rosenbergs and how in the early twenty first century, police in the United States could get away with murder, and how LOTS of innocent people got executed.”

“Okay, that makes perfect sense.” Colin agreed. “We collect all the evidence, but that’s mostly to find out who might have done it, then scan them. Finds the truth really fast.”

“That’s what Erika said, yeah.” Zara nodded her head, then she thought for a second “Aren’t there ways to beat a scan though?”

“There are.” Colin replied truthfully “But it’s hard and someone who knows what they’re doing can usually find the memories anyway. It’s easier if you know what you’re looking for. That’s another reason we collect forensic evidence, in order to get a good idea what happened before the scan.” Zara nodded thoughtfully.

“Anyway. Rat spies.” She said. “Want to start?”

“ Heck yeah.” Colin replied, picking Julius up out of the cage. He’d picked them because they were the friendliest rats in the store that morning, and Julius seemed to like being handled.
“Okay, so you remember how to do a thorough surface scan, right?” he asked.

“Yes!” she bobbed her head up and down enthusiastically.

“Good. Surface scan Julius and tell me how it’s different from a person.” she looked at the rodent and focused on it’s mind.

“It’s all a jumble. Everything. Sight, sound, what he feels, what he wants, he wants to scratch his ear... And… I don’t know how to describe it. It doesn’t...he isn’t separate.”

“What do you mean?” Gene asked. “What does a human mind look like?”

“A human mind feels like there’s a wall between the person and the outside. Julius doesn’t think of himself as separate from everything else, but part of it. Oh!” Zara got it “He isn’t self-aware.”

“Right. But he’s still conscious. If you tried this on a cockroach or a grasshopper, it would be like scanning a computer. You’d get the raw sensory feed, but no emotional reaction at all, no intent.” Colin confirmed and explained.

“So if the cockroach was about to start walking, I wouldn’t know until it started to walk?” Zara asked for clarification.

“Exactly.” Gene affirmed for her. "Or it might be like reading out computer code. Stimulus and response, stimulus and response. They don't have event-based memories either like a rat does but associative memories."

“Neat!” Zara exclaimed. Colin could tell she wanted to try that at some point, which would actually be a good idea because the mind is so alien that it's good practice for dealing with other sapient species that think differently.

“I know, right?” Gene agreed.

“Now, I want you to focus on his vision. It helps if you can visualize where everything is in his mind.” Colin said.

“And that’s why you had me dissect a sheep brain. Pretty close to a rat or human?”

“That’s exactly it. Go on, give it a try.” he replied. She did.

“Woah! This is so weird…”

“What?” Gene asked, grinning.

“Everything’s in black and...wait no. I see patches of color it’s just really gray and blurry. And his eyes keep moving around like crazy and don’t focus on anything.” she broke contact and shook her head.

“Too weird?” Gene asked, chuckling.

“Yeah I was getting dizzy. What was that?” Zara asked.

“Every animal sees differently. Rats have bad eyesight and have eyes on the sides of their head. They move them independently to constantly search for predators.” Colin answered

“Oh, so they live in fear of hawks and stuff?” Zara wondered.
“Yup!” Gene agreed “But looking inside the heads of animals is good practice for looking inside alien minds too.” Zara and Colin gave him a look, given the way he put it. “Nothing like that!” he protested “It’s just that they’re so different it can be disorienting. You have to teach yourself to get used to the weirdness.”

“Huh.” Zara looked over at Ethel and tried again, but immediately shut her own eyes and broke off all mental contact “Too bright!”

“Oh. Should have warned you.” Colin self-chastised “Albinos are like that. See how her eyes are red?”

“Yeah. Like the Russians she served…” Zara said with a sly tone and expression. Colin groaned and Gene wallowed in pun-loving schadenfreude.

“Anyway” Colin tried to get back on track “Their red irises don’t block light. It’s like over-exposing a photo. You know how sometimes there’s so much light that the picture ends up being white?”

“Oh yeah, I’ve seen that happen before. My dad once took a family photo during the day but left the flash on.”

“That’ll do it. Want to try eavesdropping on their hearing? It’s waaaay better than ours.”

“Oh this should be good…” Gene remarked.

“What do you take me for?” Zara said, pretending to be offended “Some kinda quitter?”

...

Zara was in her own bed after being put through her paces. She was becoming a rodent AWACS. Colin and Gene were sprawled out on the couch watching Fiddler on the Roof when Max came in.

“Are you two seriously watching Fiddler?” he said, looking kind of annoyed. Gene hit the pause button immediately.

“I didn’t realize it would be offensive it just kinda popped into my head. We’re sorry…” Gene replied apologetically. Then the frown turned into a smirk.

“Oy, you are way too gullible, but look so pathetic when you feel guilty. Make some room, I love this movie. It speaks to me. I know it’s a stereotype, but for fuck’s sake I’m totally-not-a-lawyer, speak Hebrew and Yiddish, and was basically raised in a properly Jewish Kibbutz for telepaths. The goy cadres are just pale imitations of our design!”

“Hey we’re not judging. We’re enjoying it and yeah, speaks to us too.” Gene replied, scooting over toward Colin so Max could take a seat with an arm to lean on. He propped himself upright on Colin’s shoulder instead.

“For a couple different reasons I imagine” Max said with a sly grin.

“Hm?” Gene asked.

“Ah nothin’.” Max said, waving his hand in a dismissive gesture.

“Actually, there is something we wanted to ask you about. If you don’t want to answer there’s no pressure, I just… noticed something.” Colin said.
“You’re wondering if I actually remember the days before the Psi Corps because Jews in the Corps have been passing memories down for a hundred and fifty years?” That stopped Colin dead in his tracks. He’d expected to have to coax it out.

“Well, yes.” he replied, more than a bit caught out.

“Of course I do. Less than half of all Jewish telepaths survived to the foundation of the Corps. We collectively decided to carry the memories with us and pass them down to those willing to carry them. We won’t allow anyone to diminish, erase, or conveniently forget what they did to our people.” he paused “Twice.”

“That’s…” Gene paused, searching for words to express his thoughts “a commitment. I definitely understand why, and you’re probably using memory vaults, but how do you recall them without reliving that?” Gene finished, almost at a loss. Colin could relate.

One horrible memory was what Mr. Chastain carried, Max might very well have dozens, from as many people. A parent watching helplessly as their child’s brain got bashed in, another one of surviving being shot and buried alive in a pile of bodies. Still, he didn’t know how he felt about it. On the one hand, it was terrifying and disconcerting that it was necessary--and he definitely felt it was necessary--and it had to be stressful for those who did it. Yet, it was also strangely beautiful.

“No. No memory vaults. They’re too much for that. I’m fifty-eight years old; I’ve carried them since I was twenty and had enough social and medical support that I can remember them without reliving them as if they were mine. I actually think of them like the souls of the departed, residing in me.” Max pulled a handkerchief out of a pocket and dried his eyes. Colin and Gene pretended not to notice. “Most of the time, anyway. The rest of the time, I’m well-medicatet.”

“Thank you, Max.” It was all Colin could think to say. Max had basically volunteered for PTSD. Colin was still flabbergasted that someone, let alone a group of someones, would do that.

“Yeah, well, someone has to do it. Might as well be me.” Max replied nonchalantly. Looks like the movie’s coming up on Matchmaker though if you don’t mind un-pausing. I’d like to finish it before I go to bed.”

“Yeah sure, no problem.” Gene replied and hit the unpause button.

**Sunday January 18th, 2263**

Sunday was, barring sudden calls, a day off. No Psi Cop ever really had one because they were on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Sunday was just a day not to do paperwork or train, and Colin was taking full advantage of it by not doing a damned thing. Zara got to pick what they did, and she wanted to see a bit more Fullmetal Alchemist so they were binging their way through the first season. There was plenty of space on the couch, but Colin found himself sandwiched between the other two. Gene was using his shoulder as a back rest, sprawled with his legs over one of the arms, and Zara decided that his thigh was a better pillow-brace than the other couch arm. Colin didn’t mind one bit; the opposite really.

Alfons Elrik was having an identity crisis when Max walked in holding three small slips of paper.

“Hey, I’ve got something you might like.”

“Oh?” Gene asked, hitting pause.
“Yeah! We finally got a venue for our production of Erik Lehnsherr” Max replied.

“Sweet!” Colin exclaimed “It sucked that you weren’t able to find a venue for that, who finally gave you the nod?”

“Well, wouldn’t you know it, a certain synagogue’s rabbi had an illuminating experience and thought it would be a good idea to build bridges.” Max supplied.

“Did he turn you down before?” Gene asked.

“Heaven’s no. I never asked. He would have said yes because I was the one asking, but I’ve never been comfortable using personal influence like that. When he asked me if there was anything he could do to help us out, I let him know that with our facilities confiscated there were some little quality of life things. Space for weddings, community events, that sort of thing. He’s a Reform Rabbi. He’s all about that sort of thing.”

“Ah. Well that’s awesome!” Colin said enthusiastically “So… wait, are those tickets? You have tickets printed already?”

“Well yeah, it’s not like we need to build a set or anything. We have all the props we need, for the rest there’s projection. Production is Tuesday night, I reserved a few seats for you if you want them. If not I’ll give them to Erika, Su, and Eduardo. I know it’s a bit impromptu and people might not have notice, but we’ve all been chomping at the bit.”

“What do you say Zara? You in?” Gene asked, which meant Gene was interested and Colin already wanted to go.

“What’s it about?” she asked “and who are you playing Mr. Cohen?”

“Just call me uncle Max little Oytzer; but it’s our adaptation of a mundane comic book called the X-Men, about the life of Erik Lehnsherr, otherwise known as Magneto. I play him when he’s an older man.”

“Oh! I know that one! Wait, isn’t he the villain?” Zara asked.

“Mundanes sometimes write him that way. But the comic books go back a long way, back before the Earth Alliance was formed, and he’s often been more complex than that. We mix and match.” Max supplied “But I won’t spoil the plot.”

“In that case, sure! Sounds like it could be good. I’ve never actually been to a stage-theater.” Zara answered. She was liking this idea more and more by the second.

“Oh, it’s a blast!” Max assured her “Of course I’m biased, I’ve been acting in state productions since I was twelve.”

**Tuesday January 20th, 2263**

Temple beth Zion was deceptive. Colin hadn’t noticed it before, but there was a side gate that lead around the synagogue proper, behind it to another set of buildings that included a small primary school and community center that housed, among other things, a small auditorium. The stage was empty save for a few props, mostly wooden boxes and wheeled pallets.

“Shouldn’t there be a set?” Zara asked as the three of them made their way down the aisle toward
the seats near the center of the middle block of seats. Colin gave her a grin.

“Nope. We don’t need sets, everything in the scene is projected into the minds of the audience by the stage crew.”

“Really? How? There can’t be that many, and from what you were telling me, not even you could do that with so many.”

“Not alone no.” Gene confirmed “But by joining our minds together, we can be greater than the sum of the parts.” Zara looked around, and in the rest of the audience, saw some mundanes.

Colin noticed that she wasn’t afraid like she had been, she wasn’t precisely comfortable, but she felt safe because she was holding his and Gene’s hands and could get a sense of the room as well as he could.

There weren’t many mundanes, but the ones that were there were striking up friendly conversation with his own people, who themselves weren’t anxious or feeling put upon. Of course, he reasoned, the ones who would come to a telepath stage production would be the least likely to have problems with the Psi Corps.

They found their seats and sat down, Gene on the left and Colin on the right with Zara between them. Others were starting to find their own places, mundanes interspersed between telepaths. After a few minutes the curtain dropped, the house lights dimmed, and a single stage light illuminated front-center stage. A Hispanic man in his fifties wearing the badge and gloves that marked him out as a telepath.

“Good evening” he greeted the audience. “Most of you know me, but some of you don’t. My name is Carlos Rivera and I am the director of the Psi Corps Community Theater Company here on Omega VII, and also this production. I would like to take a moment, on behalf of our cast and the rest of Psi Corps to thank Rabbi Liebgott and the Temple beth Zion for being gracious enough to host us tonight. We’ve been wanting to put this on for months, and when he contacted me I was absolutely stunned, so let’s give him and the congregation a round of applause.” He paused, and the assembled telepaths clapped, the sound was flattened due to the gloves, but it was loud despite that.

“Now, a number of you might be wondering about the lack of set. We don’t use them. Instead, scenery and special effects are provided by our stage crew by way of telepathic projection. I would recommend that everyone here drop their surface blocks if they wish to enjoy the full experience. To the normal humans in the audience, we won’t be scanning you, we’ll be sending, not receiving. So with that, enjoy tonight’s production of Erik Lehnsherr.”

Chapter End Notes

I would absolutely love to actually write that stage production, but having an entire play within a story of this size would both become extremely meta, and it would actually be beyond me to do, I think.
Wednesday January 21st, 2263

“Alright, you should probably go and get your stuff packed up.” Colin told Zara after she finished the last of the pancakes. He and Gene had pointedly saved the last one for her, knowing she’d want seconds. His suggestion though made the fact that she was having to leave real, for everyone in the room. Pangs of sadness reverberated through him and contributed to his own. They all had things they shielded, but not that.

“Do I have to?” Zara asked “I don’t really want to go and I know you don’t want me to either, but I know I have to. I just feel like if I pack up everything…” She couldn’t articulate it but let Gene and Colin into her thought-loop; she didn’t even know what she was worried about, she just was. Then it occurred to her, she was worried that if she didn’t leave something behind she had to come get, she couldn’t be back and wouldn’t see them again. Colin would never let that happen, neither would Gene, and they projected that loving-denial back at her.

“Then don’t pack up everything.” Gene suggested verbally “That way, you have to come back to get it or we have to come give it back. Hide whatever it is somewhere so we don’t find it before you board the shuttle.”

“We love you Zara. We’re not going to be apart forever.” Colin reassured her “But if doing that makes you feel a little better, do it. We’ll make sure we get whatever it is you leave behind back to you in person.” Colin rounded the counter-top and caught Zara in a hug sandwich with Gene.

“Oh okay, can’t breathe” she finally said, able to laugh a little “I’ll go pack and…arrange an easter egg hunt for you.”

“Oh dear.” Gene faux-worried and let her go at the same time Colin did “Look what we’ve done. We haven’t taught Zara where to put her stuff.”

“I know, it’s awful, all those terrible trips to Earth we’re going to have to arrange because Zara is so very forgetful.” Colin replied with a wry grin.

“Yeah, laugh all you want dads, you’re gonna spend a lot of time in hyperspace!” and Zara left the room at a pace Colin could only call a scamper to get her stuff packed up and some belongings hidden. She didn’t even realize she’d call them both dad.

“I am so damn proud of her.” Colin said, his voice cracked a little.

“Yeah.” Gene replied, “Funny how a kid can just… take over your heart like that.”

“Well, we did deliberately choose it.” Colin reminded him. “Though, I don’t think I ever considered what today would be like.”
“Would you do it again?” Gene asked.

“In a heartbeat. No regrets at all, and I’m not breaking that promise. I won’t bounce out of her life. I can’t.”

“Neither can I.” Gene assured him, stroking his back and sending a shiver up Colin’s spine he dared not show. “Anyway, I need to head over to my quarters, get dressed, and shower. You okay?”

“Yeah. Go on, I’ll be out for the festivities, I got a bulletin while we were eating I should read.”

“Okay, see you in a few minutes.” Gene said and exited to his own quarters. Colin could feel the other man’s distress, it mirrored his own and Gene was fighting back tears, he didn’t want to start crying yet.

Colin for his part managed to distract himself during his own shower contemplating Gene’s departure. He never showered, brushed his teeth, or kept spare clothes in Colin’s quarters despite eating and sleeping there, as well as spending leisure time. Of course, Colin had never even been in Gene’s quarters, Colin’s just sort of became the place to be by mutual consensus. Still, Colin wondered why. Maybe it was some sort of reminder to him that he wasn’t moving in? That the arrangement was temporary? Colin didn’t really like that line of thought because he’d gotten used to both Zara and Gene. Their smell, their breath-sounds as they slept, the feeling of their minds permeating everything.

He knew if he kept going down that line of thought he’d lose it, so he got dressed and sat down to read that bulletin. It made him completely numb.

There’d been a suicide bombing at a Psi Corps school on Orion VII, they’d hit a cluster of cadre houses. He paged through the report straight to the casualty counts. Fifteen dead, all but three of them children. Another twenty kids and three adults injured. Backtracking the tunnel the bomber used to bypass security, Psi Cops found a rundown basement in an abandoned warehouse and a note that said ‘Remember Byron’. Bloodhounds were already out in force, doing mass surface scans on the civilian population of the colony to track down the bastard’s terrorist cell. If there was one.

It wasn’t the first time in the past few months that he’d read reports like this and it wouldn’t be the last, but Colin still didn’t know how to feel. Rage? Despair? Fear? Some deranged nutbar strapped homemade claymores to himself and blew up a school full his own people, how was he supposed to process that?

Colin’s brain decided it was simply going to feel all those emotions at once, and the end result was that he just felt numb. He looked down at his computer’s clock and realized he’d spent ten minutes just staring past the wall. He looked at the page and shuddered.

“Talk about emotional rollercoasters…” he muttered to himself. Then he got up, composed himself, grabbed a paper-wrapped package from its hiding place in a disused drawer and headed into the hallway.

There was a pile of stuff outside Zara’s door that wasn’t there when she went in. No one wanted to see her go, it didn’t take a telepath to determine that, but they did want to give her a good send off. Particularly because the Education telepath who went to her house to pick up her personal belongings had been refused entry.

Colin had something for Gene, too. He’d found it Monday and it screamed ‘Gene’ so loudly he
couldn’t help himself. Colin stood outside the door to Gene’s quarters and knocked.

<Hold on, let me throw something on.>

<Take your time. No rush.> in his private thoughts, a mental image flashed through Colin’s mind that he had to force himself to bury.

About thirty seconds later, Gene was at the door and fully dressed--more or less; he was in grey and black workout clothes, and his short hair was still wet, badge and gloves hastily put on. Clearly, he had jumped out of the shower and put on whatever came to hand.

“What’s up?” he asked. Colin just held out a large rectangular object covered in cat-themed wrapping paper.

“I saw it while I was out the other day, thought you might like it.” Colin informed him. For his part, Gene was somewhat dumbstruck, even as he reached out and grabbed the package. Colin suspected no one had just gotten him something because he might like it in a while. Maybe years.

Gene carefully unwrapped the package; there was no tearing, he delicately detached the tape and unfolded the brightly colored paper to reveal a thick hard-copy Thai cookbook. Gene tilted his head and looked at it quizzically, but slowly his happy smirk widened into a bright toothy smile

“You know, I’ve been wanting to take up cooking for a while but haven’t lived anywhere with a kitchen since I was a kid. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” Colin wanted to say a hell of a lot more than he did but left it there “And I know I’ve been monopolizing the kitchen. But now, you even have test subjects.” Gene laughed.

“Right, because they’ll all volunteer, huh?” he replied. Colin shrugged.

“Well, I know I will. I can’t speak for the rest, but unless they’ve had a bad experience, free food.”

“Heh.” Gene chuckled “A bit like university students?”

“Something like that, yeah.” Colin replied. “And you can do longitudinal study with the same subjects if you were so inclined.”

“Hmm. I like that idea. Hold on, is that your way of saying you want me to stay on after my internship is done?” Gene asked. Colin could tell there was a weight behind the question and that it was far more important to Gene than simply wondering if he’d move on from Omega VII in his career by choice or whether he’d have to. His phrasing and tone were neutral, but Gene wanted to stay a great deal. What Colin didn't get was why it was even a question in Gene's mind.

Colin wanted Gene to stay with every fiber of his being, and thankfully had an entirely professional justification as well. He was a superlative candidate Psi Cop, and an excellent partner. The fact that Colin knew he was or had already fallen in love didn’t change that fact, in Colin’s estimation. It was his duty to the Corps to find the best candidate for the job, and he had. Or, he knew, he could be rationalizing and his pretentious at compartmentalization were bullshit. He didn’t think they were, but he wasn’t infallible.

“Well that convenient opening has your name on it if you want it.” Colin felt a surge of happiness well up through Gene’s blocks and heard his voice crack a little bit.

“Haven’t had a real home for as long as I haven’t had a kitchen.” Gene said softly. He was still holding something back behind his walls though.
He wouldn’t, would he? Colin thought to himself. Military division had someone moving constantly and being a student in the academy had been like being in boarding school for him rather than being a home; that wouldn’t change even in retrospect. Acting on impulse Colin stepped forward and slid his arms around Gene’s shoulders and around his back into a hug. He felt Gene’s body tense for a moment, then relax and return the hug by wrapping his arms around Colin’s lower back.

“Welcome home” was all Colin said before he heard the sounds of a door opening and by mutual unspoken agreement they released each other. Hoshi had emerged. Gene slipped back into his quarters briefly to dry his hair and dress properly. Over the next few minutes, everyone filed out of their apartments into the hallway and waited. It didn’t take long; soon a certain door belonging to a particular young telepath opened up and she stared at what had transpired while she was packing with a mix of utter disbelief, gratitude, and the unbridled joy that only children could really express.

“Are these for me?” Zara asked.

“Well we did set them by your door. We couldn’t let you head to Geneva with just the clothes on your back and what we got out of the supply closet.” Gene replied to her.

“Go ahead, think of it like a somewhat-delayed Christmas” Colin followed up.

“Or Hanukkah. I should have brought the dreidel.” Max said in riposte.

The first one she opened was a group project. Franklin, Eduardo, Su, and Max had set up a very large chest. Inside the chest were all the basic essentials: some nice clothes, a few toys, games, age appropriate fiction like The Hobbit, and functional items like a backpack. Everyone also stacked some personalized gifts around the chest.

The first one she unwrapped was a big flattened square, inside was a reproduction of Friedrich’s ‘Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer’; which had to have been from Gerald.

She smiled and looked over at Gerald, who pointed to his temple and motioned for her to look closer. She did; she stared at it for a moment pensively, from a few different angles judging every brush stroke. Her blocks were good enough that Colin could casually perceive a feeling like gears turning coming from her, but nothing else without actually scanning her defenses.

“He’s standing on a mountain he had to climb and where he needs to go is hidden in fog. The future? Maybe?”

“That’s one way of looking at it.” Gerald replied he kept his trademark stiff upper lift, but he was leaking a mixture of pride and sadness. Zara looked straight at him, and whatever it was she sent him seemed to cheer him up a bit. Colin blocked it out to respect their privacy.

What she opened next was a somewhat large package containing various electronic devices like multimeters, circuit boards, control boards and various components. That was probably from Hoshi. The next was the series of mathematics textbooks up through multivariate calculus, along with a really nice calculator. Definitely from Hassan and Franklin. Max got her a copy of History of the Psi Corps by J.G. Keyes. Erika pitched in with a collection of unabridged folklore for telepath children. Morality tales mostly.

“There is one more thing, but it’s something I couldn’t wrap up like that” Gene told her and something in his tone indicated that it was something Significant. Gene reached behind him to his entryway table and handed something off to Colin, who held it behind him as he strode toward the
nine-year-old with a certain calm solemnitude.

It could have been the way he moved, it could have been everyone else’s silence and posture, it could have been any number of other things, but Colin felt her grasp some of what was going on and she stood at attention. He got down on a knee and presented two objects to her. One in his right hand, one in his left.

As he held them out, he projected all the love and unconditional acceptance he had to give directly into her mind, without any kind of verbal or tactile intermediaries, and Gene did the same. A few seconds later, everyone else did too; Erika, Max, Hoshi, Eduardo, Franklin, Su, Hassan, and Gerald, though he was a little bit shaky.

In his right, he held a little hexagonal piece of shiny copper, embossed in silver was a greek letter Psi, stylized to perhaps resemble a depiction of Odin’s blind eye. Whether it was a reference to the omniscient eye of a Norse god or not, it marked her out as a telepath. In his left hand was a pair of black gloves: more than the badge the true symbol of their isolation from mundanes, but also their restraint.

Zara wouldn’t understand any of that yet, it had taken Colin growing up within the Corps to understand. What she could understand, and did, was that this was an induction rite, though Colin figured she didn’t know the term. She was one of them: part of a family of twelve million telepaths, in addition to the smaller one she’d gained. The little seed of hope he and Gene had planted in her the night Colin first found her crying on the couch had blossomed. She had a family again, people who cared, and she knew she had a future. Fourteen days prior, she couldn’t have imagined it.

She gently plucked the badge from Colin’s hand and solemnly pinned it to her pajama shirt, then took up the gloves. Slipping them onto her hands with as much dignity as she could muster.

“The Academy on earth can be hard, they’ll challenge you to your breaking point and then some. But you have a good head on your shoulders and you’re tough as nails. Just remember that everything is a lesson and you’ll do just fine. If it ever gets to be too much, you can always call us.” Colin said, then spoke into her mind.

<The Corps may be Mother and Father, but Gene and I love you to pieces and we’ll always be your dads. That won’t change. Not ever.>

The expression on her face was a mixture of gratitude, happiness, sadness, pride, and a sense of belonging. Her brain was just sort of...stuck, overwhelmed, it didn’t know what to do with it all. After a moment she decided that all of the above were perfectly compatible and she threw her arms around Colin’s shoulders, crying a mixture of different types of tears for a moment. Once she sorted out which emotions went where she let go and wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

“Love you too dad” she said, then tried the familiar motto on to see how it fit, now fully grasping what it meant “The Corps is Mother, The Corps is Father.”

Colin leaned forward and kissed Zara on the forehead just before Gene showed up next to him and scooped her into a hug of his own.

“Love you sweetheart. We’re both so proud of you.” He told her as she hugged him back. When they both let go, Zara attempted to bear hug the life out of everyone else, without success; though Gerald did his comedic best to pretend.

“You know” Gene said, “A little bird told me there is cake in the common kitchen.” that perked
Zara’s interest and she headed down stairs nattering away with Gerald.

<Hold up a moment Colin, there’s something I want you to see. Just give me a minute to get something in order and I’ll be back out.>

<Alright> Colin replied

Colin waited in the hallway for about a minute and a half. When Gene opened the door, he was carrying a very much book-shaped package, in the very wrapping paper he’d used. Before he could open his mouth, Gene cut him off.

“Had to… no. Wanted to...yes. I couldn’t not-reciprocate, even if it’s a little spur of the moment.”

Colin was a bit surprised, but on a second’s reflection he knew he shouldn’t have been.

He took the obvious book and opened it carefully. What he saw floored him. A copy of Jung’s last book “Der Mensch und seine Symbole”. He was flabbergasted. It wasn’t a first or even early edition, those were only ever going to be in the hands of private collectors who would not part with them for anything he could afford. Hundreds of thousands of credits in all probability. Yet, it was a print run. Less expensive because it didn’t command the same book-collector fervor, but hard to find. Colin didn’t know what his facial expression was, but Gene must have caught it.

“I found it in a little bookstore in Berlin, picked it up as a German learning goal, but never actually found the time to learn the language. I remembered the empty spot on your own shelves and figure you’ll get more use out of it than me.”

Colin didn’t know what to say. He’d been looking for a copy for years, he’d even spurned electronic copies, holding off on reading the text altogether until he had it in print. He read everything modern electronically, but there was just something about old books. So he said the first thing that came to mind.

“Didn’t know you spent enough time in bookstores to find something like this at random.” Colin said. Gene gave a faux-offended expression and put his hand to his heart.

“Colin, you wound me! You haven’t actually been in my quarters yet, have you?”

“No, we’re always in mine for some reason…” Colin trailed off, remembering his musings from earlier.

“Force of habit and it’s what Zara expected. Come on in, I’ll show you.” He motioned for Colin to step inside. It was like any of the other living quarters: a small apartment with a slightly separate bedroom, a minimalist kitchen and enough floor to act as a living room; a bathroom of course. But an entire wall was filled floor to ceiling with books. Most of them were on military history and strategy, some political history, and of course philosophy. Grossman, Nietzsche, Singer, Bentham, Mill, Kant, Clausewitz, Voltaire, Bacon, Hobbes, Nussbacher, General Franklin, Tzu, Keegan, Tuchman, Thucydides, both Plinys, Plato, Aristotle, Livy, Tacitus. He even had a section devoted to holy texts including the Books of G’Quan and G’Kar. They weren’t in any particular condition or edition so there wasn’t the collection aspect to it, Gene just liked to read. There was also a giant and extremely comfortable looking armchair.

Colin looked at the empty space on the shelf that was formerly occupied by Jung. “Thank you Gene, this means a lot to me.” the truth was, it was taking every ounce of Colin’s composure not to kiss him.

...
That evening, everyone piled into groundcars to see Zara to the spaceport. Fourteen of the twenty other kids were filing in and saying tearful goodbyes to their parents. Several parents chose to deny their children their birthright, and put them on sleepers against everyone’s advice. That decision infuriated Colin, but he would re-extend the offer once a year until they hit the age of majority and could choose for themselves. All of his telepaths were in their full dress-uniforms, and Zara was decked out in a black and red flower print skirt with a black top, Psi Corps badge and gloves worn proudly.

“Excuse me.” he said to the Education division telepath who exited the transport to greet everyone. A very librariansque woman in middle age with curly brown hair, but a genuinely warm smile.

“Yes?”

“Would I be able to trouble you with a request? We’d like a group photo and need someone to actually take it.” he briefly explained the situation to her, and she nodded in understanding.

“Well, it is a little unusual, but this situation is also unusual, and the regulations don’t specifically prohibit it. So sure, why not?” she replied with French accent.

“Thank you” he told her.

“No problem.”

He handed her a camera from a backpack and gathered everyone together into a double line. They all tried to look as happy as possible for the camera, but most were fighting back tears, a sort of bittersweet emotional state permeated the area. The picture was taken and uploaded to a data crystal after the camera was returned. When that was done, and the Education telepath went around introducing herself to children and parents, Zara went around saying tearful goodbyes to everyone. Max, Eduardo, Franklin, Su, Hoshi, Erika, Hassan, Gerald; they all got to say goodbye in their own way, some verbally, some just inside their minds.

While she was doing that, Colin got the data crystal and uploaded the image as well as a few other things into an electronic picture frame from the same backpack.

Zara had left him and Gene for last, and everyone else backed off to give them some space. Colin got down on one knee to be at her eye level and Gene followed him down, right next to him. Zara didn’t say anything, she just threw her arms around both their shoulders and cried. Colin couldn’t help himself, he cried too and so did Gene. Their tears mixed in with the sad goodbyes of every natural and step-parent, all thirty of them.

They couldn’t speak, so instead they sent their thoughts, joining them into one voice inside Zara’s head.

<Consensus: We love you sweety>  
<I love you too. I’m gonna miss you.>

<Consensus: We’ll miss you too. But this isn’t goodbye, it’s ‘see you later’. Parents visit every Sunday, and while we can’t do that as often as we’d like, we will video call. And we WILL visit whenever we can.>

<You better.> she replied in a sassy mental tone. It was enough to break both their sadness for a second, the quiet vehemence of the thought was just too funny. But they sensed her fear too.

<Consensus: Remember, it’s okay to be scared. But there’s nothing to be afraid of.> from there,
Colin took over.

<Remember those memories I sent you? The ones from where I grew up?> He asked.

<Yeah.>

<It’s going to be just like that, same cadre house actually. My House Father. In a way, you'll be living with your grandpa.> He paused <Bet you didn't expect you got one of those too, did you?> She laughed a little bit in response. <You’ll be safe, the grins can be a little scary sometimes but they’re not so bad, once you get to know them.>

<Yeah, you’ve told me who they are and why they show up, I remember dad.> she paused and Colin could tell it was the first time she really contemplated how that happened and self-examined just how fast that happened. It wasn’t at all what she expected getting a new family would be like. <That’s so weird.>

<What is?> Colin asked <Spell it out for us, we’re dumb.> in fatherly-teacher-mode, Colin wanted her to work through the strangeness.

<I don’t know really. I just never thought that… I don’t really know the word.>

<That you’d ever become someone's family so fast?> Gene supplied.

<Yeah! That! I had a friend in school who was in foster care. She liked her foster parents but it wasn’t this.>

<Kiddo, those are mundanes. They can’t share emotions and memories, dream together, or know they can trust someone with absolute certainty. We can. We can see each other's souls.> Gene said. Zara nodded, seeing how that changed the equation.

<I accept that logic.> she replied, which a few weeks ago might have thrown Colin off, but not after her jokes about the Rosenbergs.

<Consensus: Yeah you do. The Corps is Mother, the Corps is Father, but we’ll always be dad.>

<I told you> Gene ‘cast by himself <Whole new family, all twelve million of us. But some are closer than others.>

They both leaned in and kissed both sides of her head as she let go. Colin sent a number directly into Zara’s mind.

“What was that?” she asked.

“A coded sequence.” he handed her the picture frame. “Take this, there’s a small keypad hidden in the back panel.” he whispered “If something ever does happen and you need help--like, you could die--type in that code. The picture will give you everything you need to send a secure transmission to us, we’ll get it, and we’ll come get you.”

“We don’t think anything will happen” Gene followed up “But the galaxy is a rough place. But no matter how bad it gets, we’ll always be there.”

Zara nodded “I understand. Not the little stuff, but the big stuff. So… if someone attacks Geneva or something like that?” and took the frame, putting it in her backpack.

“You got it.” Colin said.
They both gave her one final big hug and then the Education department functionary came over.

“Hello! You must be Zara!” she exclaimed with her warm smile and French accent “I’m Mrs. Beauchamp.”

“Hi Mrs. Beauchamp, pleased to meet you!” Zara said, putting out her hand to be shook. Mrs. Beauchamp took her hand and shook, then gently shepherded her onto the transport. Zara looked back and waved. Everyone waved back, while Colin choked back more tears. Gene wasn’t bothering to hold them back.

“Hey Colin,” came a voice that Colin registered as Daniel. He turned, putting on his best happy face.

“Hey Daniel, glad you made it.” he said, offering his hand to shake. Daniel took it.

“Wouldn’t miss it. Otherwise you’d come looking for me again. I do want to say thank you though. I did something dumb and after talking to Max, I feel like… well, it’s not so bad. I’m heading to the training center in Jerusalem. They have a good neurophysiology program, and I’ll go into research I think. Plus… the other thing.”

“Yeah, Max told us.” Colin replied “Don’t make any decisions on that yet, but I’m glad you’re considering it.”

“I know, Max told me about the uh, emotional side effects, but someone has to do it. If everyone assumed someone else will do it, it won’t get done so I’ll cut the Gordian Knot. Anyway, if I don’t get on that transport, it’ll leave without me and that would be unfortunate.”

“Yeah. Good luck, Daniel.”

“You too Colin.” he paused, not sure what to say but he looked concerned “You two okay?”

“Kinda?” Gene replied, finally getting himself under control “It’s… it’s not easy giving up our kids.” Colin reached over and took Gene’s hand in his and squeezed for no other reason than it felt right. Gene squeezed back.

As the transport lifted off to take its precious cargo into low orbit, Colin watched it go at minimum safe distance from the torch drive. He put on a confident face for everyone--especially Zara--because he had to, but he didn’t feel it. His station hadn’t been hit by terrorist attacks yet, but they were a target. Plus, if things escalated, Geneva itself could fall into terrorist crosshairs. That’s why he’d given her emergency contacts. She’d managed to sense that fear in him too. He didn’t leak it, but there were other ways to read minds.

“You read something this morning, didn’t you? I rolled with it, but something spooked you.” Gene asked, he’d never let go of Colin’s hand and Colin hadn’t been in a hurry to let go either.

“Yeah.”

<What was it?> Gene asked. Instead of answering, Colin showed him. Casualty counts from Orion VII, photos of children torn asunder by ball-bearings, the report on the mode of entry.

<Jesus.> Gene sent back with a physical shudder <You’re worried about Geneva then?> Colin didn’t say anything. <It’s not the bad old days when TeepTown only had a fence. It’s under a dome, it has sensors above and below ground, and its own defense grid. They’re better protected.>
than we are.>

<It’s also juicier, and EarthGov is dragging its heels on a response. They’re being funded from somewhere, but no one cares where or by whom. They’ll hit Geneva sooner or later, and they like killing children. Plus, there’s everyone here. We’re small. Understaffed for a colony of this size. Our headquarters is basically an overdressed villa with no defenses but sturdy walls and a thick door. We have a panic room with an escape hatch in the basement. That’s about it. Someone could wipe us out completely with a fertilizer bomb.>

<Not much we can do about Geneva...I’m afraid. Here, we can do something about.> Gene concluded. <Bringing in some Bloodhounds for security and surveillance would be my first option. That would help with our mundane-reliance issue too.>

<I’ll need to get the local government on-side for a larger permanent presence first. I’ll have to justify it to them.> he mentally spat with all the contempt he could muster without actually hurting his friend.

<‘The Psi Corps doesn’t have the resources to protect you from The Bad Telepaths’. You’ll have to make it about them, even though they’re not the ones doing the dying.> Gene said what they were both thinking.

<That old song and dance, yeah. I’ll have to smile and pretend Mundanes are the victims.>

<Yep. And the way things are going, when this bullshit with the rogues finally comes to a head, we’ll be the bad guys in everyone’s minds.>

<There might be another way...> Colin considered <I could find a way to discredit and humiliate Captain Roach...> Colin voiced the thought to Gene, but let it hang. He had no idea how he’d actually do that.

…

The rest of the day passed much like any other Wednesday working out with Gene. He wasn’t sure if Gene increased the weight, the man had taken to covering the ends of the squat bar with butcher paper to prevent him from looking. Like always he hated the exercises themselves, but thoroughly enjoyed the aftermath. In the end, he had to use the lift normally reserved for disability access to get to his quarters. The stairs were simply not happening after that.

The difference was, Colin entered his quarters alone. After he showered he made and ate a nutritionally balanced dinner that got him all his macronutrients alone. He did his evening reading without either Gene or Zara there, and even though he got more reading done, he missed them both to the point that his insides clenched into knots. While Colin read Carl Jung he found himself entertaining a fantasy of knocking on Gene’s door and asking if he wanted to move in permanently, and his brain refused to even give him the resolution to his question inside a voluntary fantasy. He just couldn’t envision it, it was like the place the Bene Gesserit couldn’t see in Dune.

That thought broke him out of his reverie as he found a bit of mirth in it.

“You cannot go there Jessica! That is the place only the Kwizatz Haderach may go!” he muttered, then remembered Alia’s meeting with the emperor and his reaction to Bene Gesserit not-telepathy and started chuckling. Colin shook his head.

“Now that was a tangent.” To no one in particular. It was getting late and he knew he needed to turn in. He crawled into bed and it just felt wrong.
Gene shut the door and looked around. The room had his stuff in it, there was his chair, his books, his kitchen. The space wasn’t his home. Gene had done everything he could to keep from feeling like this, to remind him that it was temporary; he’d not moved his clothes or kept a toothbrush in Colin’s room, he always did his leisure reading in his official quarters. It didn’t work. The room next door was home. The first real home he’d had since he was seventeen. The Corps tried, it really did try to replace the family he’d lost but it wasn’t the same.

It was like being an orphan taken in by relatives. You loved them, and they loved you, but that deep bond wasn’t there. Part of that he knew was his fault, he was too hurt to let anyone in for a while and by the time he was ready to do that he was in the major academy and too busy with physical training, telepathic training, combat, and tactical instruction to bond with anyone like that.

Then he was on a ship and learned why Military telepaths wept when receiving assignments.

Colin had gone from his superior, to his friend inside twenty-four hours, his brother just after that, then… their relationship was significant and classified as other? He wasn’t sure when it happened except that Serena hadn’t been wrong, it wasn’t as if his brain woke up one day and he’d fallen madly in love with the man. The intensity of it crept up on him like the rising waters of the Amazon in flood; completely inexorable and deaf to the protests of his good sense. To top it all off, they’d all-but-adopted a daughter who he found himself absolutely adoring, and now missed terribly after only a few hours apart. The speed of it was dizzying. He had a family. A slightly janky ad hoc and now separated family, but a family nonetheless.

The only problem was, he didn’t know if Colin felt the same way. Normally if he liked someone, rare enough as it was, he’d just go for broke. But Colin was important enough to him that he didn’t want to jeopardize what he did have for what he could.

“I won’t let perfect be the enemy of good. I won’t. That would be fucking stupid. Yes Gene, I know that would be stupid, that’s why I’m talking to myself trying to convince myself that it’s true. You’ve never had it this good. Don’t fuck it up.”

As he was thinking about all that and talking to himself, he was shucking off his clothes and adjusting the water for his post-workout shower. He stepped in once the temperature was properly near-scalding and stood there, letting his muscles unwind and the sweat of the day wash off his body. Eventually, after washing properly, he sat down at the bottom of the shower in a half-lotus to meditate and clear his mind. If he didn’t he was so mentally distracted he’d never get to sleep.

Then something occurred to him, it hit him like a duck slamming into a window.

Gene knew that Colin hated squats with a passion. He didn’t mind everything else, but squats he loathed. And yet, he enjoyed being done with squats more than he hated squats, and Gene hadn’t figured out why until just then, sitting in his shower.

“Well fuck me sideways…” he muttered to himself, realizing that when he finished his sets, Colin was read in the ears. He never got that way from simple exertion. He was blushing like a schoolboy who just got asked out to prom. Every time. Colin didn't even know he was doing it. The realization set his mind racing.

“Okay, that isn’t enough confirmation. What else have we got?” Gene asked the shower wall and started from the most recent memories on back. His first instinct was the hand-holding, but he discarded that. So long as the gloves were on, hand-holding and even spooning weren’t unusual in
platonic friendships for telepaths. That had been one of the first things he’d learned as a young man and he’d taken to it instantly, but it still popped up as a fossil from his mundane teens every so often.

He’d felt something from Colin that morning though. It wasn’t a feeling or emotion or even a thought. It was internal pressure. It was like watching a gate get rammed, barely holding back what was trying to break through.

“Holy shit. Okay. The magic eight ball says that signs are good. You need more information though before you do anything. But it is hope. You have a starting point.”

He thought about what he’d need to do for a few minutes before continuing to talk to himself. The irony that Colin would be the one he asked for advice if he were interested in anyone else did not escape him.

“All right Gene, here’s what you’re gonna do. Confirm your suspicion, but don’t do anything. Not yet. Hell, even once you’ve confirmed it, you know him. The teacher-thing is going to be an issue so your internship has to be over which means you need to hold him off telepathically for an hour or more. Something is holding him back too. You need to figure out what that thing is or it might break your heart.”

Buoyed by that he stood up and turned the hot water off. He slipped his pajama pants on doing a little happy dance to music that existed only in his head and then crawled into bed.

**Thursday January 22**nd **, 2263**

Gene was woken up by a knock on his door. He wasn’t ready to get up, but he could feel the mind on the other side of the door, and it was definitely Colin. He focused on that mental imprint and sent his words outward toward it.

*Come on in, I’m half-conscious but not nude.* Gene told him.

*Alright.* Gene heard the key slide into the physical lock, turn, and then the handle of the door turned and Colin entered. Gene hadn’t bothered to get out of bed, he was still wrapped up in the blankets with only his head showing.

“I woke you up, didn’t I?” Colin asked. “If you want to get some more sleep I understand, I am here a bit earlier than our normal training session.” Colin seemed a bit the worse for wear. He seemed vaguely sad and looked like he hadn’t slept very well.

“You did, it’s alright.” Gene said “What brings you over?” Gene tried to give Colin an opening to discuss whatever was clearly bothering him. He kept the thought very private, but he had certain hopes about what it would be.

*That’s a bit fucked...* ‘he thought to himself behind every barrier he had.

“I might have made extra coffee. And extra toast. There might be a couple sausages left and enough scrambled egg for an adult human male...” Colin was... apprehensive? He had layers of internally directed barriers up, but he couldn’t hide his body language. Gene decided to test something. He sat up in bed, letting his duvet slide off his torso. Gene worked hard to look as good as he did, beyond it merely being functional. Anyone would look, but Colin’s eyes lingered and now that he knew to look for it, he felt that same pressure. The psionic reverberation of a
powerful thought or emotion being kept in by Colin’s cognitive barriers. Part of him wanted to leap out of bed and plant a kiss on Colin’s lips right there. The other smarter part of him beat that naughty mental homunculus back and locked it in a cage.

Gene felt a little bit guilty for reading Colin like this, using the older method of mind-reading that Colin never had to practice based on subtle cues of body language. Colin could do it, he wasn’t an autist, but telepathy had always been more reliable for him and it had become something of a crutch, Gene realized.

“Of course I’ll join you for breakfast.” Gene paused “I missed you too.”

“Yeah. It feels wrong not having you and Zara around. I can’t do anything about Zara not being here, at least not for now…” Colin replied

“But you can see if I want to come over for breakfast from time to time?”

“That’s pretty much it, yeah.” Colin confirmed. Gene gave him soft smile, and had an idea.

“I’ll tell you what. We’re partners, we should alternate the cooking. I know I’m new at it, so what I start with for dinner will be pretty basic but…”

The giant shit-eating grin that wound its way across Colin’s face was enough to make Gene’s heart sublimate.

…

Omega VII had many things wrong with it, but an open-air farmers market was not among those things. There was a lot of megacorp agribusiness on-world, but a lot of the farming was done by small-holder botanists and university researchers experimenting with new plant traits; both genetically engineered and conventionally bred in small greenhouses and then transitioning them to plots in planet-native soil. They supported their research and development process by selling the results.

Neither Colin nor Gene were in uniform. He’d been wary about it at first because the uniforms were protective in a lot of ways, but Gene had won him over. Besides, he finally got to wear a maroon knit sweater he liked with a button-up turtle neck and khakis. Gene he would drool over if could, rocking a tight-fitting navy-blue turtle-neck and black jeans. Both wore backpacks to avoid having their hands full of groceries.

It was nice to just be a person, even if it was just in his head. It didn’t hurt that the trip to a farmer’s market felt almost like a date rather than a utilitarian shopping trip. It wasn’t, he knew that, but it felt that way.

“Colin. There are too many types of rice.” Gene said, staring at sack after sack of different types of rice. Beyond all the experimental varieties, there was the usual variety of rice: Jasmine, Basmati, Arborio, Black. They ran the gamut. “How on earth do I pick which one I want to use?”

Luckily, they were grouped by grain type.

“Well, as a rule, if you want the rice to clump, go with short grains; if you want them separated go with long grains. What do you plan to make?” Colin asked.

“Hmm. Well, I’m learning the mysteries of rice-cooker, wok, and crockpot; I was thinking a soldier fly stir-fry. Long grain. Brown rice then, better than white rice and I want something flavor neutral.”

“I hope so.” Gene said “I’ll be really embarrassed if it isn’t.” Gene replied a little nervously.

“Hey, it’s your first time.” Colin encouraged “If you impress me, great! If not, there’s always the next time.” After he said it, he realized how that could be taken a different way and mentally kicked himself.

“What if I want to impress you?” Gene replied and Colin was floored. He knew if he were living in an old Japanese cartoon he would have literally fallen over stylistically. He couldn’t resist returning a crooked grin, there were so many flirty ways he could take and respond to that which were all completely blatant, but he decided to play it ambiguously; particularly because he couldn’t tell if Gene was joke-flirting or actually flirting. Guys did that, and one couldn’t be too careful about wishful thinking.

“Well, I’m sure you do, but the first time is going to be something of a learning experience.” Completely deadpan.

“I’ll try not to fumble around too much, and I do have a pretty good idea of what you like.” Gene riposted as he handed the woman manning the stall his credit chit and took a kilogram of rice.

‘Do I need to re-evaluate my assumptions here?’ Colin thought to himself. ‘Because if that wasn’t joking I have some serious fucking questions to consider...’

It took about an hour to find and pick up everything that Gene would need; the rice of course, broccoli, a few sweet peppers, shitake and cremini mushrooms, snap peas, and black soldier fly larvae. All of it spread out between their two backpacks and they headed toward the maglev station for the trip back to the annex. They left the pedestrian only section of street and onto the wide sidewalk that flanked the main thoroughfare. Small businesses lined the sides of the street; everything from small restaurants and cafes to shoe shops; and small bars with outdoor seating.

Coming up on one of those bars, a little tropical themed placed called The Sloshing Coconut, Colin felt the agitation at the same time he heard it. Six men, four white, one hispanic, another black and looking like they were in their early twenties were being forcibly removed by a pair of bouncers, and they weren’t going quietly.

“Don’t come back!” the lead bouncer, a Samoan guy who was over two meters tall and built like a refrigerator shouted at them as he physically blocked the door. None of the younger men were nearly as large, but they were all as tall or taller than Gene and Colin. They yelled obscenities and jeered the bouncer, but none of them felt brave enough to try and attack someone twice their mass. Colin stopped.

“Gene, hold up.” Colin said, and looked to see if crossing the street was safe. Traffic was too heavy, it was approaching rush hour and while most people used public transportation, not everyone did and it was a dense urban area.

“Yeah, I see it. Hold here, see if they go in the opposite direction?” Gene replied. “I don’t really feel like dealing with them if they get stroppy and they haven’t noticed us.”

“That was my thought, yes.” It wasn’t that they were in much danger. Dealing with belligerent mundanes just meant a mess they might have to clean up. ISN getting their hands on CCTV footage and selectively editing it to make them look like the aggressors, making the Corps look bad.
Colin looked around and found a spot where they’d be out of the way; next to the waist high fence of a little café, there they could stand and look like they were talking without appearing avoidant. Gene followed his logic and him, and they stood there doing their best attempt at acting casual.

It didn’t work. Colin felt six pairs of angry eyes lock onto him, Gene, and their gloves. He felt their piggy little minds classify them as Other, and assess that the telepaths were outnumbered and smaller than they were; their executive function was not in the driver’s seat anymore, alcohol having silenced it in favor of the raging man-child of their amygdala. Their egos and masculinity had been wounded and they were looking to lash out at someone to assuage their wounded pride. Colin knew what was coming.

<Is this your first hate-crime?> he asked Gene with a thought.

<No, though I was seventeen and still in a mundane school the last time.> Gene replied, his body tensing and his mind open. Colin knew he was looking through the eyes of a series of passersby, tracking the sextuple on approach.

<It’s my third. Try not to hurt them too badly. Minimum force, there are security cameras everywhere and ISN will get hold of the footage.> Options were restricted, they couldn’t make the men behave other than how they were going to, because everything was being recorded and doing fine manipulation to six people without being noticed was risky. They legally could use telepathy to defend themselves if they identified themselves, but it would still look bad and could lead to ‘spontaneous’ reprisals against other telepaths.

He slipped his backpack off and set it down just behind the fence. Gene did the same, and they both turned to face the men.

“Look what we have here!” the one in the lead said. The largest of them, both in height and muscle mass; he was wearing two shirts, one long sleeved and dark, the other short sleeved and depicting a woman in a bikini. He had a chinstrap beard, and Colin couldn’t tell if his hair was stylishly unkempt, or just unkempt. “A couple of p-phreaks. Out for a stroll?” he asked them.

Colin picked up his name was Chaz.


Before Colin could say anything though, Gene put himself slightly forward. Colin didn’t need to ask why. Gene had a protective instinct that ran deep, and he’d rather take the first punch himself than see someone else get hurt. Colin thought it was sweet, even if he was every bit as capable of killing them all as Gene was.

“Grocery shopping. Look guys, we don’t want trouble with you, and we’re both Psi Cops so you don’t want trouble with us.” Gene said in an attempt at giving them pause. They were starting to arrange themselves in a semicircle to cut off lines of retreat, and the big one was just looking for a pretext. Other mundanes were keeping their distance and not saying anything. Just giving the upcoming confrontation a wide berth. A few looked on concerned, but none of them were brave enough in the face of a six people to do anything. Unfortunately, Gene had accidentally given Chaz the pretext.

Chaz’s brain didn’t get the memo about Psi Cops, and the other five were in follow-the-leader mode.

“Who said anything about trouble? You read my mind, asshole? Huh Mindfucker!?” and Chaz
shoved Gene against the fence while his friends cheered him on. Gene put his hands out in front of himself with open palms in a placating gesture that Colin also knew was good for self-defense.

“Dude, I didn’t scan you, calm down and think for a second.”

Chaz tried a right haymaker, but it was wide and clumsy. Gene knew it was coming and blocked with his left arm throwing in a simultaneous punch to Chaz’s solar plexus and a follow-up jab to his throat, sending him staggering back struggling to breath.

Colin wasn’t left alone though. The hispanic guy was over to his right and threw his own haymaker, the most common punch in a street fight. Colin brought his right arm up to cover his face and took the blow on his bicep. The impact hurt, but it let him wrap and trap his attacker’s arm against his own body. With his left hand, Colin punched him in the solar plexus, stepped in to knee him in the balls, then twisted his body and threw the guy into his friends.

By then, Gene had already put his second assailant down with a knockout punch to the face and both telepaths had entered into a proper fighting position; knees bent like they were fencing, hands out with open palms, still trying to de-escalate for the benefit of anyone watching. Simply holding their ground because they couldn’t retreat.

“Guys, cut your losses and go.” Colin said “We’ve been training our entire adult lives for this, and you’re drunk. Pick your friends up and go.”

“The next person who touches either of us is going to intensive care.” Gene followed up. "Or the fucking morgue.”

Chaz regained the capacity to speak, rasping through a damaged trachea while the other two were picked up off the pavement. He weighed his options. He believed that Gene would happily put him in the hospital, but that knowledge warred with his own anger and wounded ego. Eventually some sense won out as his prefrontal cortex broke through the fog of booze.

“Sons of bitches…” but croaked, but he motioned for his friends to follow him and move on up the street Colin and Gene had come down toward the pedestrian only area.

The bouncer down the street started to clap and cheer them on as both telepaths mentally recovered, coming down off adrenaline.

<You okay?> Gene asked, worry and anger both written all over his face and oozing from his thoughts.

<Yeah, you?> Colin replied, pulling up his sleeve to check his bicep. Nasty bruise but nothing worse than that.

<Physically yes…fucking pissed though. All I wanted was to have a nice afternoon out wearing something I fucking chose. The one time I do that in years? This. Fucking mundanes. How does anyone else even stand it?> Gene ranted a little, paused, and answered his own rhetorical question before Colin could. <They don’t. Everyone else just structures their lives to avoid attack.>

<Yeah. And it fucking sucks. A trained P5 could have just ended Chaz Brennan…> Colin replied, shaking his head in frustration at the state of the world while picking up his backpack.

“Hey! You guys alright?” the big Samoan bouncer asked, coming up the sidewalk. “I didn’t think they’d actually throw a punch otherwise I’d have been up here sooner.” Colin and Gene both knew he was telling the truth.
“Yeah.” Colin said. “Nasty bruise on my arm, but none the worse for wear.”

“They hardly touched me.” Gene confirmed “It uh, helps when you know how they’re going to hit you before they throw the punch.” He grinned.

“Heh. If you’re gonna get in a fight, fight dirty.” The guy replied. “Need me to call in Metapol so you can file a report?” he asked. Gene just cracked up laughing and the bouncer was contemplating whether to be confused or offended. Colin raised a hand in a placating gesture.

“Sorry, he’s laughing because we are Metapol.”

“… I thought you looked familiar, just without the uniform…”

“Yeah. It was an experiment in just being people that we’re unlikely to repeat.” Colin responded.

“I fought in the Minbari war as a ground-pounder. I’ve seen you guys in action. You could have killed those guys.”

“Easily.” Gene said “But they were just being stupid, and besides… public relations nightmare. Not worth it.” Gene picked up his backpack while they spoke and put it back on.

“Well can’t say I’m not disappointed at the restraint.” The man replied. Colin raised an eyebrow “They were getting grabby with my waitresses.”

“Ah.” Colin nodded “Fucking shitbags then. Well, we better get going. It’s a nice dinner in for us. Let your waitresses know some passing Psi Cops have their backs.” He grinned.

“Will do. You have a good night.”


…

Gene watched as Colin devoured the stir fry with an unexpected gusto. He knew Colin liked insects, as was proper, but he didn’t expect what he saw or felt from Colin’s mind. Colin took his first bite, his eyes rolled into the back his head, and the shoveling happened.

“Jesus Christ Colin.” Gene said in near-disbelief “That good huh?”

“What can I say… you impressed me.” Colin replied, leaning into the back of his chair in contentment.

Gene wasn’t sure how. Sure he’d followed the recipe he looked up but it wasn’t as if stir-fry was hard. The hardest part was making sure the veggies didn’t get overcooked. He’d certainly enjoyed his own cooking, but there wasn’t anything special about it. But then, maybe Colin felt the same way when he cooked, not understanding why he and Zara went nuts?

Colin’s comm unit chimed at him, and he answered.

“This is Lieutenant Meier. Yeah. Shit. Alliance Arms you say? What’s his condition? Thank you doctor, we’ll be there as fast as possible.”

Gene felt his stomach sink. Even with the fracas earlier, he’d been looking forward to a night in. Just him, Colin, and whoever else wanted to stop by the lounge for the high-budget Dilgar War naval drama he had picked out. From the reviews it even had a telepath character who did something other than be vaguely unsettling before redeeming herself by dying for mundanes only
to be forgotten about a scene later.

Now someone was in the hospital, and if they were being called, it was because of something
criminal.

“What happened?” Gene asked.

“Xun Yang, commercial telepath. He was buying groceries shortly after we were. He was found
badly beaten in a public lavatory and he’s in intensive care”

Gene could connect the dots of inference and felt a wave of guilt and anger emanating from Colin
that he also shared. Words simply failed him and Gene sat there running through every curse,
expletive, and remark about questionable breeding in his vocabulary across six languages, at a loss
for how to string something together.

“We’ll have to confirm it was them…but…yeah.” Colin replied, agreeing with the sentiment.

“Send Hoshi to the crime scene?” Gene asked.

“Yeah.”

...

Alliance arms was a much friendlier place than Omega Mercy; It didn’t have a level one trauma
facility but it’s level two facility was capable. They also had medical telepaths on staff including
the two psychiatrists and a neurosurgeon. It was the neurosurgeon, Lindesizwe Hegebe, who met
them in the ICU. He was obsidian-black and came up to Gene’s cheek.

“Dr. Hegebe, how is he?” Colin asked.

“Not good.” The surgeon replied in a South African accent. “Xun was… he might as well have
been hit by a bus.”

“Oh God.” Colin croaked.

“Flail chest, tension pneumothorax, severe cranial trauma including a broken jaw and multiple skull
fractures; his brain is swelling, and we’ve had to trepanate to relieve the pressure. He has internal
bleeding into his abdominal cavity and massive blunt-force trauma to his liver and kidneys. His
carpals and metacarpals are shattered...”

The doctor continued to rattle off injuries and Gene mentally envisioned how he could have gotten
each one and could only reach one reasonable conclusion: Xun Yang got stomped. A bunch of
guys beat him to the ground and then stomped on him. He sent that conclusion over to Colin, who
mentally acknowledged and concurred.

“Will he live?” Gene asked.

“Fifty-fifty. We’ll know by morning. Also, yes, he’s conscious right now and you can talk to him,
but only if one of you speaks mandarin. His secondary Broca’s Area is so damaged he can’t speak
English anymore. I wouldn’t risk mind-casting him anything, but he can hear and he can think.”

“Alright. I speak Mandarin, I’ll talk to him.” Gene replied.

“Alright Gene. Want me to come in?” Colin asked, putting a hand to his shoulder. Was he really
that distressed? He asked himself, and discovered that he was. He knew Xun’s injuries were
terrible and he could feel the poor man’s pain, even dulled by powerful drugs, through the walls. Gene had just detached himself so he could work. He reached up and took Colin’s hand and squeezed.

“I’d appreciate that, yeah.” Gene replied, and went to scrub in.

…

It wasn’t a big space. Just large enough for a bed, medical monitors, and for a bunch of people to perform emergency surgery if necessary. The lights were low and red-shifted except for the constant and ever-shifting glow of monitors displaying heartbeat, blood oxygenation, and brain activity patterns. The EKG beeped in a steady rhythm that Gene found almost comforting.

Xun was a mess. His neck and back were in a brace and he had drainage tubes in his chest and skull in addition to the piece of skull they’d taken out to relieve pressure; both his arms were in traction awaiting reconstructive surgery, but for that he’d have to be transferred to Omega Mercy. There was a massive closed incision down his abdomen where trauma surgeons had to open him up to control abdominal bleeds. Xun’s jaw had been wired back into place to repair several breaks and he’d need dental implants or dentures to replace numerous missing teeth. His eyes were swollen shut.

And he was conscious. Somehow. Even through the best pain killers available he could still feel some of what happened to him, and beyond that there was fear, shame, isolation, despair.

For his part, Gene was torn between rage, compassion, and a well of sympathetic sadness. Xun wasn’t a big person, he was all of 167 cm tall and couldn’t be more than 55 kilos. The brutality of the attack was staggering and it reminded Gene of things he’d seen before in the tunnels underneath Mars Dome One. He remembered the screams of Free Mars insurgents in his mind, recalling their agony and terror for a brief moment before he took a deep breath and refused to relive that experience. Not there. Not then. He told himself that he was in a better place, not working for mundanes anymore; that he was safe, and there were people—his people—who needed him. He banished those memories back to their hiding places deep in his mind.

’This wasn’t an attack’ he thought. ’It was fucking torture.’

<Gene? Are you okay?> Colin asked, he didn’t make physical contact, but he may as well have and Gene felt the warm presence of Colin’s mind embracing his own. Gene returned the psionic hug before responding.

<Yeah. For now. Seeing this just brought up some bad memories. I’m good.>

Gene approached the hospital bed and started talking to Xun.


’Nǐ shì shuí?’ Xun replied, asking who was speaking to him.

“Wǒ shì Jīn. Zhè shì Kē lín. Wǒmen shì yuán chuángānqí jǐngchá.” Gene introduced himself and Colin, letting Xun know they were with Metapol and followed up “Nǐ néng bāng wǒ zhǎodào shuí shānwǎile nǐ ma?”, asking if Xun could help them find the perpetrators.

Tā chuānle liǎng jiàn chènshān. Tā de míngzì jiào Chá zī.’ Xun replied, letting Gene know that there were four Caucasians, one with a beard and two shirts named Chaz.

<Bingo> Gene sent over to Colin. <We have confirmation, but only four of the guys, we might be able to flip the other two into testifying if they refused to go along with it.>

<Actual convictions would be nice.> Colin replied, sending approval in his direction in a telepathic attaboy that Gene couldn’t help but feel bolstered by.

“Xièxiè nǐ, xiōngdì. Xiànzài dédào yīxiē xiūxí. Bīngtuán shì mǔqīn, bīngtuán shì fùqīn.” Gene told Xun, thanking him and telling him that it was okay to sleep. He finished by reminding Xun of the absolute solidarity of the Corps, that it was Mother and Father, and that it protected and avenged its own. Gene wanted to reach out to provide some comfort, but there was no way for him to do that safety, so instead he stepped back and rejoined Colin near the door.

“Let’s get to the crime scene and check in on Hoshi.” He said.

“Before you go, take this.” The surgeon said, putting a sample tube into Colin’s hands “Fingernail scrapings. May contain DNA from the perp or perps.”

“Thanks Doctor.” Colin replied.

Outside the hospital Colin felt Gene’s mental composure finally slip a little bit. He was upset by what he’d seen in there; both sad and angry at once, also obscurely guilty. His gait, normally purposeful, was heavy and his face was set in an almost blank mask like if he expressed anything he’d explode. He’d said it had drawn up some unpleasant memories, but Gene kept them shielded. There were only a few things that could possibly be so bad that seeing someone beaten within an inch of their lives would bring them up. Torture. Brutal and primitive torture.

He also knew that Gene was never given a choice and he’d somehow come out of it with his humanity intact. His soul hadn’t been stained by it and he knew Gene had found some way to resist or subvert whatever he’d been forced to participate in or witness. Gene got to the car first and as he opened the door, Colin put a hand out to stop him. Gene wheeled around, not forcefully but angrily to tell Colin off.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Gene said Colin just locked eyes with him. 

“I know, and you don’t have to.” After saying that, Colin pulled him in close and held him. Gene didn’t say anything, and Colin didn’t know how long they stood there in the parking lot and he didn’t give a damn.

“It’s been… a day.” Gene finally said, “So many tonal shifts.”

“Yeah.” Colin agreed, and that was a good way of putting it.

“Colin but you’re a smart man. You can… infer some things.” Gene said.

“I know.” Colin replied, giving Gene a chaste kiss to the top of his head out of pure affectionate impulse.

“Did you just kiss the top of my head?” Gene asked.

“I did. Sorry if it…bothered you it just seemed like the thing to do” Colin replied, immediately
worried that he’d just fucked up massively, but there was no angry emotional response from Gene. Just the opposite.

“Not at all. Just wanted to make sure I didn’t imagine it.” Gene reassured him, and Colin felt a lot better about that impulsive decision.

“Come on. Let’s go catch those rat-fuckers.” Colin suggested “You’ll feel a bit better.”

“Sounds good to me.” Gene agreed, contracting his arms in a final squeeze before they mutually released the other.

…

The public lavatory Xun had been attacked in wasn’t far from the rice stand and was plastered over in crime scene ribbons and warmed by mundane forensic technicians; illuminated by massive flood lights against the night. A crowd of people thronged just outside the perimeter trying to sneak a peak at the goings on and gawking at Hoshi, who stood rail-straight just inside the ribbon in her full black Metapol uniform, barking orders to the mundane technicians.

“Hi Hoshi.” Gene greeted them both. “What have we got?”

“The inside looks… it’s bad.” Hoshi said “Based on blood spatter and physical damage to the tile and fixtures, it looks like the victim was blitz attacked, then stomped and kicked with heavy work-boots. Steel toed and shod would be my guess.”

“Damage to the fixtures?” Colin asked.

“Yeah.” Hoshi confirmed “He was urinating, and they came up behind him, cracked the urinal with his skull. Piss everywhere. He was still moving and maybe tried to fight after that because some of the tile on the wall was knocked loose at about his head height, but then… then there’s just a bloody smear on the floor by the far wall, except where they missed and cracked more tile. We’ve got some tracks in blood so if we find the boots we can get a positive match.”

“We can confirm he fought back. There was blood and skin under Xun’s fingernails, might be able to get confirmation of the perp if we can find them.” Colin told her. Hoshi squeed. She actually made a high-pitched squeaking sound and bounced, before doing her best to regain her composure before God and everyone.

“Gimme!” Hoshi commanded, holding out her hand, and Colin complied, passing the vial over to her. She immediately took the vial over to a cooler, made sure it was given an accession number and all relevant details were recorded, then put it into the cooler to be flash-frozen by liquid nitrogen. “You know what I want to know?”


“Why? Xun’s a P3, he can’t actually scan anyone if he tried, just pick up surface thoughts. He’s tiny, he couldn’t be a threat to anyone. Roughing up a telepath I could see. I’ve been punched and shoved before but…”

“That’s… something we share some causal responsibility for.” Colin said. “Not moral, just causative.” Gene hung his head in sorrow while Hoshi cocked an eyebrow.

“They attacked us first. We didn’t permit ourselves to be roughed up. They left with bruised bodies and wounded pride. Took their emasculation out on Xun.” Colin clarified.
“So, what? You should have let them beat you? That’s a load of crap Colin.” Hoshi retorted.

“No. That isn’t what he’s saying.” Gene countered. “He’s saying we should have broken them. Or at least, that’s what I’m saying.”

“It would have been a public relations nightmare,” Colin agreed “but at least Xun wouldn’t be fighting for his life. By letting them walk away sore about the whole thing, we failed to protect everyone else. That won’t happen again.”

Hoshi looked at them both and Colin could tell that for the first time since he’d known her, he made her nervous. That was the second to last thing he wanted.

“Hoshi… don’t look at us like that.” Colin implored her, “We’re not going to go all Judge Dredd on the mundanes. Just incapacitate them without permanent injury so they don’t storm off and hurt someone. As it stands now…”

“Oh. Thank God! Just don’t go too far, okay? That puts us all at just as much risk; if not more so.”

“We know. We don’t want that either.” Gene assured her “We just don’t want” he gestured toward the lavatory “this to happen again. Do you happen to have the surveillance footage?”

“I do. I’ve reviewed it. Four white guys, one hispanic guy, one black guy. The two non-whites argued with the other four and then left before the attack. Looked like they had a change of heart after following Xun for a bit. Unfortunately, none of the cameras available could see their faces.”

“That’s… surprisingly good news.” Colin said, “We might be able to get them to testify.”

<Or make them testify…> Gene suggested.

<That is the plan.> Colin replied <But first we need to know who they are other than Chaz.>

<Bar owner?> Gene asked.

<Bar owner. Did we catch his name?>

<I don’t think so…>

<That’s what business records are for.> Colin concluded. Then a thought occurred to him.

“Hoshi?” Colin asked.

“Yeah boss?” Hoshi replied.

“When you run that tissue, use Earth Force facilities and personnel. Just supervise. I want to maintain chain of custody but don’t want some defense attorney to claim that we fabricated the sample. They’ll do it anyway, but I don’t want anyone rational to believe it.” Colin instructed.

“Can do. That’s bullshit, but I’ll do it.” Hoshi replied.

“Thanks.”

…

At nine PM, the Sloshing Coconut was doing a brisk business; in fact, it was outright busy as Gene and Colin opened the gate and went onto the patio deck in full uniform. Tiki torches lit up the
tables that looked like they were made by hand and had large umbrellas over them to shield the patrons from the elements. There was indoor seating as well, but even the bar was outside and covered by a roof that looked like it was thatched; but that was likely an affectation. There were fruity drinks and hawaiian themed bar food. Happy patrons chattering amiably among themselves.

When the two Psi Cops walked in the chatter stopped. The typical mental chorus of fear, suspicion, hatred, curiosity, and schadenfreude directed at whomever had pissed them off assailed Colin’s mind as he looked around for Sid Malala, the proprietor. He ignored it.

Gene was the first to find him, coming out of the kitchens to investigate the sudden drop in ambient noise level. Colin got a little mental notification of direction and turned as Sid approached.

“Hey guys!” Sid greeted them cheerfully, and got the side-eye from several of his patrons. “What can I do for you?” In the background one of the waitresses waved, and Gene waved back.

“Unfortunately Sid, we’re here in our official capacity. Mind if we talk privately?” Colin asked. He felt little exclamation marks above the heads of several customers and several people’s thoughts turned to mentally begging Sid not to be alone with them. Colin ignored it as much as he could but everyone’s thoughts were directed at him and it was becoming annoying. “We can talk in public too, it’s just…” Colin made an waving gesture about the bar, “so many minds all directing their thoughts at us.”

“Oh, sure. What’s this about?” Sid asked.

“Those guys from earlier. They weren’t done with us, they beat a commercial telepath into the ICU.” Gene supplied. There were a couple gasps of shock from the peanut gallery, but a few approving mutters as well.

“Jesus. Okay, come on back to my office.”

Sid led them back through the kitchen to a small office that basically contained a desk, two chairs, and a computer system. Very bare bones but functional.

“What do you guys need?” Sid asked.

“We need to know who they are for one. Face recognition’s a bust.” Gene told him.

“Yeah, we were hoping you either knew their names because they used to be regulars, or maybe had transaction or ID records.” Colin followed up.

“I card everyone who buys a drink, lets me keep track of who likes what and how much they’ve had. Let me get you those records.” Sid sat down and with a few quick commands called up all their records, then transferred them to the data crystal Colin handed him.

“Thanks Sid. There is one other thing: would you be willing to testify to what you saw this afternoon? We can’t, and while there’s security camera footage a live witness always works better.”

“Sure thing. How’s the telepath who got beat?” Sid asked.

“He might make it. We’ll know tomorrow if he makes it through the night.” Gene answered.

“And thank you. It’s usually harder to get people to testify.” Colin continued where Gene left off.

“No problem man. I don’t care who you are, no one deserves to be put in the ICU for existing. Just let me know when.”
“Yeah, we’ll keep in touch. Thanks again. We appreciate the help.” Gene said Colin turned around to leave.

“Good hunting!” Sid called behind them. They made their way through the kitchen and bar and out back onto the street. As soon as they were gone, conversation seemed to pick up

Back at their car, Colin put the data crystal into it’s port and transferred the information to the vehicle’s computer. A few quick database queries against the ID numbers and he had names and current addresses.

“So.” Gene started “How do you want to handle this?”

“Go after the ones we don’t need to arrest. That’ll get us the warrants on the other four.”

...  

Dallas Moore lived in a seventh-floor apartment in a building without an elevator. Even at lower gravity it was a pain in the ass to walk up all those stairs.

“What the hell did this guy do to deserve this every day?” Colin asked. Gene was taking the stairs like a champ, but then, he was some sort of leg-day masochist.

“He became a non-union construction worker.” Gene replied, finally finishing the last of them. Colin surmounted the summit a few seconds later and scanned down the hall with his eyes for the apartment number.

“There we go, 712. Oh look, no peephole. Jesus the slumlord here is extra slummy.” Colin said as he knocked on the door. A moment later, a chain rattled and the door unlocked, then opened. Dallas Moore stood in the portal, silhouetted against his hall light, but even backlit Colin could appreciate a good looking man. Construction work did have certain advantages.

“Good evening!” Gene said cheerfully.

“Oh Fuck!” Dallas exclaimed and tried to shut the door in their face. That’s where clad boots came in handy, and Gene just blocked the door with his foot. He tried shoving the door open but Dallas was doing a good job holding it mostly shut.

Colin looked through Dallas’ eyes for a moment and scanned his surface thoughts.

<No use Gene. He has himself wedged in there pretty good, but he’s mostly worried about us wanting revenge for his assault on us. He knows he’s not legally culpable for what happened to Xun.>

“Dallas, we’re not here about our little spat earlier. We’re here to talk to you as a witness, not a suspect. Though if you keep blocking the door, you’re very literally obstructing justice and we could stretch that into an accessory charge and charge you in our own assault. Do you want that? We have witnesses, dead to rights. You’d do hard time.” Gene told the man calmly through the door, playing good cop. Colin decided to play bad cop.

“And if you don’t let us in, don’t think for a minute we can’t get in anyway.” He said, cutting off Dallas’ vision for a split second to emphasize the point.

“Gah! What the shit!?!” Dallas screamed.

“We’re Psi Cops man, if we want, we can get real mean. We don’t want that but you’re seriously

“Alright. Alright. Jesus.” The momentary loss of his ability to see had him a step below blubbering incoherence, but he got up and let them in.

“Thank you.” Colin said politely, and stepped inside after Gene, and gave the man a moment to calm down before he started asking questions. “Now, we need to talk to you about an attack on another telepath by your friends.”

“I-I don’t know nothing ’bout that.” Dallas stammered. He was lying of course, and Colin rolled his eyes. Gene shook his head scornfully and tsked.

“Don’t lie to us Dallas, you know you can’t.” Gene warned him. “My partner here really doesn’t like it when people insult our competence by lying to us. What flavor do you hate most in the world?”

The mere question caused German black licorice to flash into the poor man’s head. The licorice hockey pucks that were bitter and had the consistency of a used tire.

“I can make your entire existence the taste of licorice, Dallas. Forever.” Colin told him with a predatory grin. “And that’s if I’m feeling nice. I’m not feeling nice right now Dallas.”

Dallas’s thoughts were a jumble. He didn’t want to rat out his friends, but he didn’t want to go to prison or experience the rest of his life never able to get the taste of licorice out of his entire sensory experience either.

“Dallas, you’re the lucky one. Mateo wasn’t home, and we only need one of you. You don’t talk and we leave… we find him, we don’t need you. You’ll be fucking sideways instead of him.” Gene said. That tipped it. Dallas didn’t think Mateo would show much solidarity in the face of prison time. He’d already been in, along with Chaz and Derrick. Mateo didn’t want to go back. The concept of going to prison terrified Dallas, from everything he’d heard.

Colin opened up the application on his datapad that would take a statement and construct an affidavit of cause from it and started recording.

“Fuck! They was all real mad about y’all mindfu-” he stopped the use of the slur at a nasty look from Gene “fine upstanding telepaths humiliating them like that. Mateo and I was just fine letting it go. We get worked up easy and calm down easy ya know?”

“Yeah, we understand that.” Gene said, nodding encouragingly.

“But Chaz? Kept going on and on about it, and talking about how he’s gonna get y’all back. Worked the other white boys up real good.”

“And you work with these guys? Go out for drinks with them after a shift sometimes or something?” Gene asked.

“Yeah. They alright most of the time. Just don’t get ’em too drunk; they got too drunk. Anyways, they see the little Chinese dude in the badge and gloves and they just go apeshit, but they ain’t stupid. Wait until he goes someplace private.”

“And I take it you and Mateo didn’t want anything to do with that?” Colin asked. He’d told the truth from his perspective thus far, so there was that at least.

“Aww hell naw. That little dude? That just ain’t fair. Not that six on two’s fair but we were
sobering up and there’s no way that little dude stood a chance, might kill him, y’all know I mean?”
Dallas replied.

“Yeah. We do.” Colin replied coolly. “In fact, he still might die.”

“Shit. Look. I tried to talk Chaz and the other guys outa it, but they weren’t having it. Wasn’t about manly posturing at that point, just hate. I ain’t down with that.”

That last part was a lie. He did hate telepaths, just not enough to kill. Colin glanced over at Gene, who also caught it, and by mutual consent decided to ignore the dishonesty.

“So you and Mateo split after they went into the lavatory after Xun?” Gene asked as a follow up.

“Yeah. Didn’t wanna mess with no Psi Cops later. Lotta good that did me.”

“Thank you for your cooperation. Read this over and sign if you would?” Colin said, passing Dallas the datapad.

“What is it?” Dallas asked skeptically.

“Your sworn statement, as well as an agreement to testify in exchange for transactional immunity. You won’t be charged in your assault on us, or in obstructing justice. If and only if you testify in court.”

“Uh. I don’t know if I can do that…”

“You can and you will. Otherwise you get charged along with your friends, which you can damn well bet we’ll be hitting them with the entire legal code. Literally if we can get away with it. We won’t be able to use this document against you in court if you don’t sign it, but we can totally get you anyway.” Colin warned him happily. “We’ve got you on camera and have other witnesses.”

Dallas signed. Colin took the pad back and hit send on his affidavit. Shortly thereafter, both Psi Cops left Dallas to his own devices. As soon as they left, he shut his door, locked it, and put the chain over the entrance.

“That went well.” Colin said jocularly.

“I expected to have to use more…coercion.” Gene remarked. Colin leaned over and tapped Gene’s shoulder with his head.

“Prisoner’s dilemma works pretty often with disorganized offenders. No need to go that route unless we have no other choice. Makes things easier. Legally, anyway.”

**Friday, January 23rd, 2263**

Colin woke up to the smell of coffee and eggs. It was all of six AM, the court opened at eight and he’d probably have his warrants by eight thirty. Colin stretched, yawned, and saw Gene dozing on his couch. The beeping sound of the pressure cooker finishing its cycle was followed by a release of steam; the sound woke Gene up.

“You’re up early.” Colin remarked. “For certain definitions.”

“Everything okay? I know last night was hard on you…” Colin asked, sliding out of bed “

“Yeah I’m alright. No nightmares or anything I just couldn’t get my brain to stop thinking and rest; and when I did, the dreams were just strange. Like, being lost in the mushroom kingdom strange.”

“I hate nights like that.” Colin sympathized as he poured himself a cup of coffee. “For me, usually happens when the day ends with a lack of closure, or being worried about what’s going to happen the next day.” He walked over to the couch and tapped Gene’s legs. Gene scooted his legs up a bit from his sprawling position to give Colin some room to sit. Colin sat down and pulled a datapad off the coffee table to check his messages.

He had two messages that dismayed and enraged him.

“Xun didn’t make it.” He said.


“Deep vein thrombosis. Trauma was too severe to put him on blood thinners. He threw clots into his lungs.” Anger and sadness played across both of their minds until Colin settled on one productive emotional state that he’d let himself indulge. Iron resolve.

“They’re not getting away with it. I don’t care what the mundane excuse for a court has to say about it. We scan them and they’re guilty, they get wrecked.”

“I’m down, you know that. How do you want to do it?” Gene asked.

“We arrest them like fucking wraiths, right out from under their co-workers’ noses.” Colin said.

“Then what? Bring them back here for an… attitude readjustment?”

“No. We play it straight after that.” Colin replied “Unless the courts acquit. Then we make them wish they’d been aborted in the womb.”

Gene raised an eyebrow.

“We have a good case. I want to actually test the local courts and see if justice is even possible here. But they’re not getting off scott-free for murder. If the mundanes don’t see fit to let us have legal justice, well… they brought the results on themselves. We’ll go full Dante Alighieri.”

“What, so… scan them, find out their other sins, and direct them to an appropriate circle of a living hell?” Gene asked, evidently liking the idea.

“That’s the idea. Anything you’d like to add?

“No, sounds like a good plan to me. Bit surprised though. I expect you might let me do something like this if we caught someone without admissible evidence, but a planned contingency…”

“There was a second message Gene.”

“What was it?”

“Judge dismissed most of the case against Gordon Chandler on the grounds that he couldn’t be held liable for an unregistered telepath committing suicide, and we couldn’t prove those teenagers were being trafficked against their will. The best Serena is going to get is harboring blips.”
“The locked cells weren’t a tipoff?” Gene asked through gritted teeth, clenching his hands into fists.

“Apparently, rogue telepaths live in terrible conditions and perform illegal scans all the time in order to avoid being forced into the Corps.” Colin answered contemptuously. “Looks like they’ll get him on the industrial espionage though. The crime against mundanes.” Colin spat. Gene, if I hadn’t let you indulge yourself he would have gotten off with a slap on the wrist.” Gene reached over and pulled Colin into a sideways hug on the couch.

“Okay, I’m with you. So… coffee, breakfast, then rendition planning?” Gene asked.

…

“This is going to give me a massive headache” Gene said as they pulled their windowless black van just out of sight to a vertical farm construction site several kilometers outside the city. It was all concrete, steel beams, glass, and humans crawling over and under scaffolding. Gene wasn’t looking forward to actually doing the work. It would be awesome and satisfying, but it wasn’t going to be easy or fun.

“Nothing for it. I was serious about being like wraiths. Take these.” Colin said, passing him a pair of extra strength ibuprofen. Gene looked at him ruefully but swallowed the pills.

“Alright. Let’s do this fast.” Gene said and set off for the front gate. With a small effort of will from Colin, the two guys watching the gate didn’t notice them. Their brains just slid right past them and took no notice, even though they’d technically been seen. Gene knew it would be impossible for them to keep that up for all the construction workers, so they reduced their threat surface as much as possible, using construction equipment and materials as cover from as many pairs of eyes as possible. It wasn’t long before they spotted their first victim. Hans Müller was busy positioning steel beams into a still-wet concrete slab.

He had seven people around him though, and it took Colin’s full attention to keep them from noticing Gene as he ghosted up behind the man and put him in a sleeper hold.

Surprise, realization, panic, struggling for air, brain screaming for oxygen. Unconscious. It didn’t take much effort to keep him that way as Colin dragged him by his wrists back into cover so Colin could relax a bit. The other construction workers noticed Hans’ absence then, but didn’t see him leave.

“Where’s Hans?” one of them asked.

“I dunno.” One of the others replied “Took a quick smoke break maybe?”

“Probably. Whatever man let’s get back to work.”

Back safely behind the wall of cinderblock Gene hoisted Hans into a fireman’s carry and followed Colin back to the van. Once there, he strapped Hans’ unconscious form into one of the passenger seats in the back and shackled his hands and feet to the floor. Then for good measure, he put a gag in his mouth and a black bag over his head.

“That’s one down. Four more to go. Mind switching off?” Colin asked. “That’s fucking exhausting. Any one of them is easy but…”

“Yeah sure.” Gene replied, giving Colin a fist-bump for a job well done. “You rest your neurons.”

They stealthed back in the same way, only this time it was Colin affecting capture, and Gene
keeping both of them unseen. It was a strange sensation to Gene, a bit like masking his own telepathic presence only it wasn’t from telepathy it was from sight. The only way he could conceptualize it was creating a null sensor field around himself and Colin, but that wasn’t what he was actually doing at all. What he was actually doing was giving a little nudge to the anterior cingulate cortex every time someone looked in their general direction and made them simply fail to notice them.

'But that's more Colin's department...''

The pressure inside his own mind grew, his brain not accustomed to processing that much information but doing it anyway. Mercifully, it wasn’t long before Colin came back carrying Derrick Maxwell in a fireman’s carry just like he had done. Gene breathed a sigh of relief when they were finally out of the security guard’s line of sight and had Derrick safely buckled, shackled, and black-bagged.

“Colin, there has to be an easier way of doing this. One slip up and we’ll have a lot of explaining to do.” Gene suggested as well as cautioned as soon as the door was shut.

Colin sighed. “You’re right. It’s Mateo and Martin who’re left, right?”

“Other than Chaz, yeah. And we should take him last.” Gene confirmed. He had special plans for Chaz that would be best to make good on when they weren’t worried about catching someone else.

“Okay. We’re gonna have to go in the same way, but I think we can probably get away with not separating.” Colin replied.

“Okay that might make things a little easier. Hmm.” Then Gene thought of something “Oh! We can make them somnambulate.” Gene declared triumphantly.

“Jesus Christ that’s so simple I think I just embarrassed myself that I didn’t think of it sooner.” Colin replied, castigating himself. “That’s what I get for over-thinking.”

“Don’t beat yourself up over it. Going in like demons in the night during broad daylight was so conceptually awesome I tunnel-visioned too.” Gene told him. “It’s just too hard to maintain for two entirely different threat-surfaces. Too many minds to cover.”

Back in they went, switching back to Colin as the living cloaking device. Gene looked around for Mateo and Martin. He found Martin first, on his way to the portable lavatory. He reached out and entered his mind, putting him into REM sleep without allowing the release of the endogenous paralytic. A little push to his dream state and he was heading out the gate with a wave to the guards like his shift was over.

Mateo was a bit harder to find, but Gene eventually found him welding two pieces of steel pipe together to begin the process of rigging water into one of the mostly-finished building modules. Gene let him finish that job for safety’s sake before putting him into a sleep-walking state as well, and sending him toward the van.

That left Chaz. Gene couldn’t find him on the ground and Colin was starting to get exhausted.

<Colin, take a break. I’ve got this.>

<You sure?>

<Yeah. Get out of sight the old-fashioned way, I’ll need you in a minute...> Gene assured him.
Colin didn’t need to be told twice. Gene reached out and took over cloaking duties for Colin, who promptly dropped his own efforts and vanished behind some pallets. That left Gene on a solo search for an obnoxious murdering douchebag. He could handle conventional stealth better than Colin could, and didn’t let anyone get line of sight on him as he searched. After about ten minutes, he had the good sense to look up and saw Chaz helping to put a giant pane of glass into a window.

Gene would have to wait. He wasn’t about to jeopardize the occupational health and safety of the other mundanes just to get at one guy. It wasn’t terribly long before he came down though, perhaps five minutes. The moment he was out of his safety harness and grabbing a drink of water from one of the many coolers scattered all over the site he sent a telepathic message to Colin.

<Colin, think you can make him into your personal Pinocchio?>

<Oh, I see what you have in mind. Yeah, give me a second.> Colin replied. After about a minute, he was in position. <Okay. I have line of sight…and control.>

Gene assumed direct command over Chaz’s sensory system and fabricated a new reality where one didn’t exist before, sending his mind careening into a desolate hellscape. The air roared around him with the sound of a volcanic eruption, the air reeked of sulfur. The ground shook under him and the entire landscape was covered in the red-orange of a fresh lava flow and geysers of freshly liberated magma.

“JESUS FUCKING CHRIST!” Chaz screamed inside his own head, but no signal reached the rest of his body to move, even as he tried to cower away from what his panicked mind thought was certain death. Outside in reality, he’d turned and started walking toward the entrance. Then Chaz noticed something was off.

One of the volcanic cinder-cones erupting in the distance wasn’t a volcano at all, but a giant floating sombrero, and the ash it belched forth from it’s maw wasn’t ash, it was a pyroclastic cloud made of millions of Chinese sky lanterns. The countless smaller vents unleashing torrents of liquid fire weren’t gaping holes in rock rent in it’s structure by high pressure, but angry jagged-toothed vulva and other bodily orifices that also ejected corks with every eruption. Even the ground wasn’t the ground but a sea of shifting tessellated hockey pucks that went as far as they eye could see.

“What? What the fuck is this? I… did I have a stroke? Am I dead? Is this hell?” Chaz asked in stuttering anxiety.

Gene formed an avatar of himself and appeared before the man.

“Hello Chaz. You must be so confused right now.” Chaz froze. Or thought he did. “My associate and I are very upset with you.”

“What the fuck!? How the hell did I get here?!” Chaz tried to say, but no words came out. Gene only p’heard his thoughts.

“Oh this? You’re not anywhere but your job site. Other than walking off the job, anyway. This is just in your head.” Gene told him, gesturing with his illusion toward Salvador Dali’s inferno.

At that point, Chaz transitioned from being confused and angry to existential terror. He knew why Gene was there, and he was terrified that the mindfuckers were there for revenge. His fight or flight response however was switched to fight, and he rushed forward, trying to hit Gene in the face. However, his fists weren’t real, and they were trying to connect with something that wasn’t
“Come on now Chaz, what did I tell you? This is all in your head.” Gene said as he shut down the man’s fight or flight response entirely stopping him in his cognitive tracks.

“What the fuck? What the shit?!” Chaz asked no one in particular, incredulously at first, then with dawning fear as he realized just how much control Gene had over him. Gene couldn’t resist a surge of predatory glee.

“Improve your vocabulary. Read a book.” Gene suggested. "See, my partner and I were really nice to you yesterday. We were willing to let that whole thing go, even though we could have legally killed you. Then you fucked it up. The guy you beat up because you couldn’t stand the idea of a telepath making you feel weak? His name was Xun Yang, and he died last night from the injuries you caused. By the way you’re under arrest for murder. I’ll see you in a few minutes, my partner and I need to exfiltrate.”

"What do you mean, exfiltrate?” Chaz asked into the void after Gene disappeared, only to have Gene’s thoughts emanate from nowhere.

"Your coworkers never saw us. No one will know you’re gone for a while, or have any idea where you went."

Then Gene turned out the lights.

…

“Good morning gentlemen.” Colin said with as much false cheer as he could muster. Gene was driving and Colin was sitting in the back with the prisoners. Chaz had pissed himself as soon as he regained consciousness. It was not a pleasant smell.

"Some of you might remember a sleeper hold, a few of you are missing time."

The only verbal response was muffled cries through the gags. Colin had considered ball-gags, but that would have been too much, instead they were just bandanas; the chains clanked as they struggled, futile against their bonds. He blocked out their mental cries, but imagined they were along the lines of ‘Oh Shit!’ and ‘God, help me!’

“Don’t worry. We’re not going to kill you. Chaz already knows this, but you’re all under arrest for murder. Well, not you Mateo. You’re just under arrest for assaulting a pair of Psi Cops.” This time he did listen in and picked out one thought: ‘But he was alive when we left him.’

“Yes. He was alive when you left. He isn’t anymore. Though I don’t really think attempted murder is that much different morally from actual murder. You know, I’ve never actually understood that distinction. Try to murder someone and you’re still a terrible person. Why does the law reward incompetence?” Colin paused “Rhetorical question. Anyway, I got sidetracked. Where was I? Right. Anyway, we were able to walk unto a construction site in broad daylight and take you without being noticed, and without you even knowing it was happening. I’ll give you a minute to let that sink in while I advise you of your rights.”

Colin did exactly that as he droned on with the familiar boiler-plate legal statement. He let them stew in that knowledge and felt them realize exactly how profound their mistake had been when they decided to attack two people who identified themselves as Psi Cops.
“Excellent. Now, I’d sit here and moralize at you the whole trip to Earth Force lockup for booking, but honestly, you’re not worth my time. You’re too collectively pathetic for that. So, it’s nap-time for the lot of you again.”

One by one, Colin sent them into REM sleep, but made sure they’d have nothing but nightmares. Nightmares involving being beaten in various ways from which they could not wake.

**Sunday, January 25th, 2263**

Colin hadn’t been up for ten minutes, and had barely managed to get out of the shower and dress before Gene was in his quarters practically bouncing up and down. Either he was really excited to talk to Zara, or he’d taken his morning coffee intravenously. Colin thought it was adorable.

“Gene, did you enjoy your cocaine this morning?” he teased.

“Hell yeah! You can call me Party Shark from now on!” Gene replied.

“Why do I get the feeling there’s a story behind that particular nickname?”

“There is. Kind of. Guy I know in Military division had a college roommate from before he manifested… he did all the drugs. That was his name.”

“Now I have a mental image of a guy in a popped collar cruising around some raucous university party with a fin on his back, trying to sniff out who has what drugs in their pockets. Thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome!” Gene replied cheerfully. Colin figured he could get Gene back for that.

“Well, you have a lot of nervous energy to work off, and we have a few hours before our call. So, what do you say we polish off last night’s leftovers for breakfast and head down into the basement? You were all of two minutes away from passing certification yesterday.”

…

‘Fifty-nine minutes. Fifty-nine fucking minutes!’

Gene was both extremely happy with that, and disappointed in himself. Steady improvement was good, but he was so close to being fully field certified that the last minute bugged the hell out of him. He kicked Colin’s ass fencing though, so there was that. Though he did consider the notion that ass-kicking wasn’t the proper way to describe it. Colin was getting better, and almost had him a few times. There would come a time when it came down to a coin toss. Until then though, Gene was taking his victories where he could get them.

All that passed through Gene’s head while he and Colin waited for the call to connect. They were on Colin’s couch holding a datapad between them, it’s integrated camera and microphone made it a good platform for video calls. Eventually, tachyon relays got their timelines synced up and the call connected. A few rings later, and Zara was on the other end, beaming at them through a wide-angle lens.

“Hi!” She greeted them. In the background, Gene could hear the possibly insane sounds of a bunch of other kids doing child-things in a room that echoed like a school gym, and behind Zara were several rows of bunk beds.
“Hey Zara!” Gene replied

“Hey there sweetheart, how’s it going?” Colin greeted her and asked.

“Pretty good. Kinda feels like the barracks for Kermit the Frog’s Revolutionary Army in here though.”

Colin tried to suppress laughter. Gene couldn’t. A mental image danced across his head of the frog puppet training children to take up arms and overthrow the landlords of Sesame Street, and he giggled like a crazy person. He shot the mental image over to Colin, but Colin wasn’t having it. He actually blocked it out with a mental ‘Nope!’

For her part, Zara gave them a knowing smirk, and Gene was curious as to whether or not she constructed that particular reference intentionally. He figured the answer was in fact ‘yes’.

“Yeah, it’s gonna be like that until tomorrow probably. They like to introduce new kids on the first day of the week.” Colin told her.

“Yeah, that’s what Mrs. Shima said. Also tests. Lots of tests. They need to figure out where I am with school stuff so they can make sure I’m not behind and if I’m ahead I don’t get too bored.”

“Sounds about right.” Gene said “When I first went into the Corps they gave me all kinds of exams. Math, science, history, literature. All of it. Then I got put in the right classes. Are the other kids treating you okay?” Zara shrugged.

“They’re okay. Most don’t have their psi yet though. If they weren’t here I’d think they were mundanes. How does that even work?”

“Well” Colin started “Remember when you went into Kindergarten and they lined everyone up and took a cheek swab?”

“Uh, yeah! Never heard back on that…” Zara replied.

“Well, we did.” Colin followed up, “You tested positive for one of several different genetic markers that mean someone is probably a telepath. Other kids test positive for markers that mean they definitely are; they’re the ones the Corps brings home right away.”

Gene listened while Colin explained how testing worked and how the Corps sorted kids into different types of cadres. Some, like the one she was going to, had kids who’d all manifested before the Corps took them in. Others were for kids who’d develop their abilities over time. While he did that though, he mused over the wild violation of expectations in his life. Gene never thought he’d be a parent. A father certainly, but that was a strictly biological thing. He’d already been informed of several children who had half his genome. A parent was something else entirely; and suddenly nine-year-old. When he thought about it, it was strange, but not some sort of hard-to-swallow pill. He did, after all, actively choose it.

But, something did occur to him, looking back on the last week. He couldn’t protect Xun, and even if he’d been strong enough to do it, Xun never would have been trained to protect himself. Not by the Corps, though not because the Corps didn’t want it’s children to be able to defend themselves, but rather because the mundanes didn’t. He was tired of kowtowing to the mundanes, and he’d be damned if his daughter ever found herself helpless again.

He and Colin had given her the tools to be good at avoiding trouble. Now she needed to learn how to end it.
“Colin, I think it’s time Zara learns incapacitating attack probes.”

“One second Zara.” Colin said, then turned to him.

“That was sudden. I mean, we did give her the option to learn them first but then he got it. Oh. Yeah. Okay. You want to teach her?”

“Yes I do.”

“Sorry about that.” Colin told Zara after the few seconds it took to have that mental conversation. “Gene’s been… worried about something.”

“Oh? Is everything okay, dad?” she asked. For a second, Gene didn’t know how to answer that. He didn’t want to make her more afraid of mundanes than she already was, but she’d asked the question and he would never lie to her. It was just a matter of the wording.

“We uh, we got attacked by a bunch of mundanes while grocery shopping the other day. They didn’t hurt us, but after they left they hurt someone else really bad. He…didn’t make it.”

“…” Zara was silent for a moment and when she did speak it was quietly “Did you catch them?”

“Yeah, we did. But… the man they murdered couldn’t fight back. He did everything he could to avoid trouble, but trouble found him anyway, and neither of us ever want that to happen to you. So, we figure we might be able to get you started on some of the ways you can get yourself out of trouble without permanently hurting anyone.”

Zara didn’t even take three seconds to deliberate on that subject.

“Sure! But… how would I practice? I don’t exactly have the Rosenbergs here, and I wouldn’t want to do that to them anyway.

“Once you’re in a cadre we’ll talk to Mr. Chastain and see what we can do about that. Knowing how is the most important part; having to try it without practicing is better than having no clue.” Gene said.

“But I won’t be able to hurt anyone, right? Not even by accident?” Zara asked.

“Not if you know what you’re doing. If you were just lashing out with your mind you easily could. But I’ll teach you how to do things like blind someone, make them puke, force them to trip, or go into a sneezing fit. We won’t teach you the dangerous stuff until you’re a bit older.”

“Why are you going to teach me all this stuff when I can deep scan someone?” came the natural and perfectly innocent question.

“A couple reasons. The first is that the other stuff gives you options. A deep scan is all or nothing. You either scan someone into the hospital, or nothing. The second is that a deep scan isn’t fast, and you can’t do much else. If there are multiple people…”

“Oh I get it. If there are a lot of mundanes trying to hurt me, I can only scan them one at a time, and when I’m doing that, someone else can grab me, hit me, or lots of other things. This other stuff I can do to a lot of people or one at a time really fast?”

“You got it.” Gene gave her a thumbs up. “There are going to be some ground rules. No practicing on the other kids unless they are okay with it, you teach them too, and you get Mr. Chastain’s permission and supervision.”
Zara gave him a look like he was dumb. “Dad, that just makes sense. I’m not gonna mess around in another kid’s brain without an adult and without getting their permission first. It felt pretty bad when I accidentally deep scanned Ethel…”

“I have to be sure.” Gene replied. “But I’m glad we’re on the same page. The first thing we’re going to teach you how to do is how to make someone dizzy.”

“So dizzy they fall over or puke?” Zara asked.

“Yup! There are other ways to make someone puke too.”

“The smell of Durian fruit.” She said flatly “It tastes really good, but you have to use clothespins to survive the stink. So, how do I do it?”

“There are a couple different approaches.” Gene said. “I don’t know the brain as well as Colin does, so I tend to do it remembering vertigo and then projecting that at the person I want to be dizzy. Colin does it by specifically activating the parts of their brains responsible.”

“Which way is better?” Zara asked.

“That depends. If you have a lot of experiences to work with, you can use my method pretty well for all kinds of things and it can be quick and dirty. The problem is, it’s not always very specific, and you might end up trying to affect a deep-mind process and that’s more like a deep scan than you might want. If you know exactly what you need to do with a surface process, you can do it just as fast without that risk.”

Zara thought about her options. Gene couldn’t tell what she was thinking which was going to take some getting used to. He’d grown accustomed to always being inside her decision loop, not because he ever forced his way in, but because she was comfortable enough with him to not shield it. It took her a minute before she decided.

“I think what Colin does is probably better if I can manage it, but is there a way to do it without needing to become a doctor?”

“Sure there is, but it means homework.” Gene replied. She gave him the side-eye.

“What kind of homework?” She asked.

“Watch a kid spin in a swivel chair. Pay close attention to his or her brain, just make sure you get their permission first.” Gene answered.

“That way I can p’see the pattern of brain activity?” Zara asked, her expression bright and curious to the point that even though she didn’t emote it as far as Gene could tell, he could practically see the lightbulb above her head.

“Got it in one.” Gene confirmed.

“And if you want…” Colin piped in after having listened patiently for the past few minutes “I can make sure some books on applied neuroscience and telepathy get into your greedy little fingers.”

“Really!?” Zara looked like it was christmas. She might not have necessarily wanted to be a doctor, but it was still a fascinating subject for her that she unreservedly loved.

“Zara, that’s what having a dad with a doctorate is for.” Colin assured her.
Tuesday January 27th, 2263

Even through inertial dampening Colin experienced nine Gs, taking desperate evasive maneuvers using his lateral and vertical thrusters. He could feel the tortured malevolent consciousness of the Shadow fighter behind him shooting whatever the fuck those energy blobs that could annihilate him were. The only think keeping him alive was the fact that he knew it was going to fire just before it did so and was able to change his net thrust vector. He couldn’t take acceleration like that for long.

He needed line of sight.

He went from nine Gs forward to nine Gs in reverse, nine-hundred gravities without inertial dampening, and thrust down at what he experienced as three Gs. Colin’s eyes felt like they were going to pop out of their sockets and his heart wanted to explode out of his chest. The Shadow fighter couldn’t react fast enough and overshot him. Looking at it, it looked like some sort of demonic sea urchin larva, but he could see it.

The pulse cannons on an aurora class starfury were too weak to damage a Shadow fighter, unlike the thunderbolts; but he didn’t need his guns. He grabbed hold of the living being wired into the central processing core of the fighter. It squirmed in his thoughts in a frenzied but futile attempt to escape him. He wasn’t a P5 who would have trouble immobilizing it; Colin could kill it with his mind. He tore its very anima to pieces and p’heard it’s mind scream as it died, but there was no soul left to draw him into a necroscan.

Colin felt the intent of the attack before it happened and gunned his engines to maximum power, narrowly avoiding the molecular-slicing beam of the fighter’s mothership, a multi-kilometer wide echinoderm straight out of his gehennic nightmares. Colin braced for the psionic wail, but instead all he heard was a ringing sound. He checked his instruments even though the sound didn’t match any of his cockpit alarms, all it did was increase in decibels.

Colin woke up from his somnolent memory to the sound of his comm unit and an incoming call. He wasn’t entirely unhappy to be woken up from one of those, but he still wasn’t in a fit state. He clumsily threw his arm over to his nightstand and after some fumbling, answered the call.

“Yes?” he mumbled.

“Lieutenant Meier?” a female voice on the other end said.

“It is, what can I do for you?” Colin tried for polite but he was pretty sure he just came off as tired and surly.

“Hi, this is Dr. Leeuwenhoek at Omega Mercy hospital. I have a young woman here named Adriana Nicolescue. She’s a registered telepath, rating P5.”

“You’ve got my attention, what’s the problem?” Colin asked, banishing the fatigue from his brain as best he could without coffee. He hoped and prayed it wasn’t another hate crime.

“Well, she says she fell down a flight of stairs. Lots of blunt force trauma: bruising, a broken arm, we’re keeping her overnight to treat a minor subdural hematoma.”

“So, she ‘fell’ pretty hard. You suspect abuse?” Colin asked.

“I do. X rays show old breaks. Her other forearm, and several fingers.”
“Defensive injuries. Fuck. Alright Doctor, I’ll wake up my partner and come over as soon as possible. Thank you for reporting this.”

“Why wouldn’t I? She’s my patient.” Dr. Leeuwenhoek replied.

“Because no one at your hospital has before and this has been going on a while. So, thank you. I’ll see you in about an hour.”

“See you then.” And she hung up.

Colin hauled himself out of bed and glanced at a clock. Three AM. He put a pot of cold-extract coffee on, took a two-minute shower and got dressed. When he got to the kitchen he initially thought his breakfast would be granola. Then he thought better of the granola. If he was going to start the day at three AM, he’d be damned if he didn’t have something hot. He pulled his skillet from its rack and heated it up on the stove. That would take a minute and while the skillet got to temperature he could go wake Gene up.

Colin used his key and walked on in. Gene was muttering something unintelligible in his sleep and didn’t look like he was fully paralyzed. Colin found it interesting that he never did that before moving into his own quarters. But then, he hadn’t been having his recurring memories at the time either. Still, he didn’t pry. He just touched Gene’s mind and coaxed his brain from REM sleep up into full wakefulness.

“Huh, what, where?” Gene realized he was awake and looked at his clock, then noticed Colin there. “What the fuck? It’s three in the morning. Did something happen?”

“Yeah. Domestic violence call, I’ve got coffee brewing. I’ll probably do something for breakfast too. You are, as always, welcome to join.”

Gene gave him a lazy grin and yawned in that contagious way that made Colin yawn in sympathetic response.

“Alright. I’ll shower really quick and then I’ll join you. Thanks.”

“My pleasure. It’s going to be a long day. We need to start it right.” Colin replied

“God, I can see the motivational poster. Ever considered modeling for one of those?” Gene chuckled. Colin had a mental image of himself, Gene, and Zara as soviet-stylized paintings sitting around a kitchen table for breakfast with the caption ‘Start the day strong: eat a balanced breakfast!’ and laughed.

“No, but I have now.”

... 

When Gene came in ten minutes later using his own key, breakfast was done. Bagels with egg, Jarlsberg cheese, and sausage.

“That smells delicious.” Gene said, pouring himself a cup of coffee and sitting down.

“Tastes just as good. Though there isn’t anything resembling a vertebrate in the sausage.” Colin said, already having devoured his, “Though I’m looking forward to your Thai cooking to spice things up. I’ve smelt your…initial forays…” Colin worded it one way, but his voice was inflected to let Gene know he wasn’t actually being critical.
“It’s… not ready for the public yet.” Gene replied.

“I’m hardly public…”

“True. But I… I want to make sure you’ll like it and I’m not there yet.” Gene took a bite, and Colin got the reaction he was hoping for. Genes eyes rolled back like those of a shark and he groaned in pleasure. What Colin wouldn’t give to see that reaction in some other context, but culinary would have to do. Once Gene finished that first bite he asked: “What’s in the sausage?”

“Mushroom and various insects. I think there’s black soldier fly larvae, a few other things.”

“Nice. Works with the Jarlsberg.” Gene took another bite.

<Care to brief me? Ohmygod this is so good…>

“So. Omega Mercy has a commercial telepath. Adriana Nicolescu, rated P5. She says she fell down some stairs but her medical records say she was probably pushed. There’s cranial involvement, subdural hematoma.”

<Fuck.>

“Mmhmm. Her husband is Luca Nicolescu. He’s a P7 and works in administration. Marriage was arranged by the Corps. Apparently, they’re likely to produce kids of P8 or higher. They’ve been married for five years; injury pattern goes back three.”

<So, something happened three years ago. Could be a few things. Infidelity, job loss, something like that?> Gene asked, still eating and slurping down water of life.

“Not necessarily. That could just be when he started physical abuse. Emotional and telepathic abuse might have been going on before then.” Colin replied. Gene mentally wretched.

<Ugh. Right. The difference in psi-rating. It’s a world of difference in the mid-range.>

“Yeah. It can get nasty. We’ll find out when we get there.”

…

The hospital was less busy than Colin expected, on the other hand it was four AM and the emergency ward had probably cleared out the midnight crazies by then. He approached the desk and found none other than Mr. Patel on his night shift.

“Hello Mr. Patel” Colin said as cheerfully as he could despite feeling the now-personal hatred radiating off the low-level administrator. Colin hated him right back, and internally noted the symmetry.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“Woah there, is there some personal history here?” Gene asked.

“Be right with you Mr. Patel.” Colin said and turned to Gene. “This is Mr. Patel.” He turned back to the mundane, “Mr. Patel, this is Mr. Hendriks, the partner you tried to deny me visitation with while your hospital’s policies had him stripped and on sleepers. We’re here to investigate a possible crime. Do I need to carefully explain what regulations and sections of criminal law and more importantly hospital policy you’ll violate if you impede me in any way?”

“No.” Mr. Patel replied, and thrust the datapad used for sign-in at him contemptuously. Colin and
Gene both signed and dated it, and Colin dotted the I’s in his name with tiny little greek psi’s, out of pure spite, grinning cheekily at Mr. Patel the whole while.

On approach to the staff lift, Colin turned around and moon-walked the last few paces, just to rub it in.

“Damn, Colin. I get not liking the guy, but that sort of cheerful loathing is new.” Gene said. “I’m… not sure it suits you.”

“He tried to keep me from helping you.” Colin replied with a bit more of an edge to it than he expected, “I took it personally at the time, and this pit of a hospital’s internal culture didn’t make it any better.”

The lift doors closed right after Gene hit the button for the sixth-floor neuro ward.

“Okay, I’ll admit, I think the anger on my behalf is kinda sweet, but the grudge isn’t healthy. Just mundanes being assholes. You deal with that every day.”

“I do, and you’re right.” Colin replied. He was going to add a ‘but’ at the end but Gene interrupted.

“I know why, you’re the type of person who can deal with anything the world throws at him. Hurt or endanger someone you care about though…had it been you Colin, I’d be carrying the same grudge.”

Gene ran a hand up Colin’s back in the sort of protective display of affection he was rapidly growing too accustomed to, and he sensed Gene’s mind trying to decide something when the lift door opened to the sixth floor and both had to put their game-faces back on.

The floor wasn’t terribly busy, just a few doctors and nurses making rounds. One stood out though; a woman of middle eastern extraction wearing a lab coat and the hijab. She noticed them came to intercept them at a brisk pace.

“Which one of you is Lieutenant Meier?” she asked. Colin raised his index and middle fingers in a ‘that would be me’ gesture.

“Morning Doctor. This is my associate Mr. Hendriks. Before we see Mrs. Nicolescu, I’m going to want to see any neural imaging you have.” Colin replied, requesting medical documents.

“A woman would be better for this.” She replied flatly, motioning for them to follow. They did.

“A woman would be better for this.” She replied flatly, motioning for them to follow. They did.

“I know. Take it up with your planetary government, they’ll only allow two of us on planet.” Colin informed her “On top of that, there aren’t that many P12s to train into Psi Cops, there are other departments that need telepaths of that rating, and not everyone has the temperament for Metapol.”

“And what would that be? Moral flexibility?” She asked pointedly.

The physician’s loaded question felt like a slap on the face and Colin mentally reeled from it. He didn’t physically show it, but Gene responded as if he had. Not violently, but he was angry and about to say something particularly nasty and his body tensed like a spring. Colin put a hand to his shoulder to stop him.

<Look at her, she’s exhausted. She didn’t mean that. She might not like the Corps, but she has no hatred for telepaths.> It took the wind out of Gene’s sails and he relaxed.

<Wasn’t I just telling you about grudges?> Gene asked, emoting sheepishly on their telepathic
"That was uncalled for, Doctor." Gene told her in clipped tones. Dr. Leeuwenhoek looked chastened and took a moment to collect herself.

"You’re right. I’m sorry. I’m at the tail end of a twenty-four-hour shift and thus a little testy. It was a serious question though.” Colin sighed, but decided to answer it.

"Psi Cops require a certain... drive, to do what we do. The occupational stress is high. Dealing with it requires an internal locus of control, intrinsic motivation, and a high degree of psychological resilience. We have to be able to see and experience the absolute worst humanity has in store and bounce back the next day.” Colin informed her as if nothing happened.

“So, what, half cop half social worker?” Dr. Leeuwenhoek followed up.

“Something like that.” Gene said. “Only, more. We’ll put it to you this way. Commercial telepaths charge an extra fee for reliving traumatic events, and if they are informed in advance can turn down those assignments, even if they're contracted.”

“We call those traumatic memories that aren’t our own ‘mental shrapnel’, Doctor.” Colin followed up “Most telepaths have some lodged in their minds. We have to talk across no-mans land as it’s being shelled.”

Dr. Leeuwenhoek didn’t exactly blanch. She was too tired to really contemplate what that meant, but the mental gearbox in her head could still understand the ground-truth and asked a follow up question.

“So, what you’re saying is, there’s a good chance one of you or both is going to know exactly what being an abused spouse is like?” she asked.

“Yes.” Gene replied.

"I do." Colin followed up in confirmation.

They arrived in the imaging suite a moment later and the neurologist called up Adriana’s images on the display.

“Out of curiosity, why do you need to see these?” Dr. Leeuwenhoek asked.

“I’m a forensic psychologist.” Colin said “Dual-studies program. I want to see if she’s been telepathically abused as well as physically. It’ll affect how we approach certain subjects.”

“People do that?” she asked, this time she did blanch.

“Yes. If some mundanes could do it, they would. We have less domestic violence for a number of reasons. But when it does happen it’s bad. Really bad.”

“Bullshit. How do you have less? It’s not like you’re better people.”

“We’re not.” Gene responded while Colin looked over the images “We live communally, so isolating one’s spouse from friends and family is harder. We also have a pretty good chance of being able to tell if someone is afraid of their spouse no matter how much they smile in public.”

Colin saw a pattern of microhemorrhage all over the brain. Nothing that would really be
considered strokes or bleeding, just more leakage from capillary walls than was normal because of higher blood pressure and repeated stress.

“Shit.” Colin spat. “She’s been scanned, repeatedly. We’re not scanning her. Makes our job harder, but I’m not putting her through that if her husband’s been doing it as punishment.”

“You can just…scan her? What about her privacy?”

<Privacy? What’s privacy?> Colin asked Gene sarcastically in response to Dr. Leeuwenhoek’s question.

<Oh! I remember this from before I manifested. It’s a magic word mundanes invoke to justify all kinds of bullshit, like treating us like garbage, and ignoring both implicating and exculpatory evidence of crimes.>

“All telepaths are required to submit to an information retrieval scan by a Psi Cop. We’re held to account only by Internal Affairs and our own conscience. In this case however, we’re going to forego that because it might traumatize her, and we want Mrs. Nicolescu to trust us.” Colin replied verbally. “Shall we see to your patient, Dr. Leeuwenhoek?”

“Sure. Sooner I have you out of here the better.”

Adriana Nicolescu would have likely been a friendly looking brunette if her head wasn’t bandaged up with a drainage tube running out of her skull and if she wasn’t covered in contusions. As it was, she looked like she’d been run through a clothes dryer.

“Adriana Nicolescu?” Colin asked. He didn’t exactly mince into the room, but he didn’t walk like a tiger either. His stance and body position were neutral and non-threatening. She looked at him with fear writhing across her mind, she thought she was in trouble, like Luca said she would be if she ever jeopardized the Corps’ desire for more P8s. “You’re not in any trouble Adriana.”

“I fell down the stairs.” She repeated the lie she told the doctors but the truth flashed before Colin’s eyes. She wasn’t just pushed, she was thrown and hit the wall at the bottom of the stairs when she landed. That’s what knocked her out and caused the hematoma. She was trying to shield her thoughts but couldn’t with her injuries. Her head hurt too much for her keep her blocks up casually but didn’t hurt enough for potentially addictive narcotics.

“Adriana, I need you to trust me if I’m going to help you.” Colin thought about projecting a desire to trust into her mind, it was wide open; but he thought better of it. Adriana wasn’t in a context where her mind was already inclined to trust, so she’d be able to tell it was external and shut down. Instead, he projected his own very genuine compassion. He reached across to take her hand, the one on her unbroken arm, and offered her just a little bit of human contact. She was free to accept or reject it. She moved her hand away but did speak.

“It was my fault. He woke up and caught me packing my things. It made him so angry that… well…I can’t even leave him without fucking it up.”

“No. It wasn’t your fault. You didn’t make him do anything. He chose to hit you, he chose to throw you down the stairs, he chose to batter down your defenses and scan you. Nothing you ever did warranted that.” And her surface thoughts when he mentioned everything bore that out. He was paranoid about her cheating on him or leaving him for someone else. She never had, she just met up with her mundane high school boyfriend once for coffee. Now, he waged a constant war
against her self-esteem and her person, punctuated with honeymoon periods and plenty of
gaslighting; the classic abuse cycle.

“Well, what am I supposed to do? It’s an arranged marriage I can’t divorce him.” She said. Colin
knew exactly where she got that false belief. Luca worked in administration, and she didn’t come
into the Corps until her early twenties. She knew the regulations and expectations for her day to
day life and job, but she didn’t know the culture or the ins and outs of its laws. Not really.
Especially because he kept her isolated from other telepaths. He could spin all kinds of lies and
she’d believe him.

“Sure, you can!” Colin replied with a smile “Arranged marriages aren’t mandatory, they’re
suggestions, and we can divorce just as easily as mundanes; more easily actually. In abuse cases
we can have that drawn up and done in an afternoon and a restraining order can be served right
now. Is that something you want?”

She wasn’t sure. The restraining order was going to happen no matter what, but the divorce was up
to her.

“Maybe?” she replied. She thought about it a bit more. She was already packing her bags to leave,
but that was spur of the moment and she wasn’t sure about her finances either.

“If it’s the financial entanglements, we can take care of that too. The Corps doesn’t tolerate abuse
Adriana.”

Her final reservation was inflicting her husband on some other unknowing young woman. That
made Colin smile inside. She voiced that one even as she made her decision and saw light at the
end of a tunnel.

“Is there something we can do to protect other women? I don’t want anyone else going through
what I did.”

“No need to worry about that, the restraining order is all-inclusive, and we’ll be pulling him from
the matching database. Know where he is?”

“If he’s not in the waiting room, he’s probably at home.” She answered.

“Okay. Gene, you got all that?”

“Yeah. I know where the waiting room is, and I’ve got the home address.” Gene replied from just
outside the door. “If you want to stay with her, I’ll go serve the restraining order.”

…

Gene prowled down the hall toward the waiting room, getting into the right mental headspace for
dealing with another telepath. He had to project absolute unquestionable authority and
invulnerability. It wouldn’t do to have someone think they could win. He knew a P7 realistically
couldn’t but getting into an even slightly drawn out fight wouldn’t be good.

He reached the waiting room, and there were three people there: one old woman he could sense
was waiting to hear about her husband’s stroke; another young man who was worried about his
mom who was in for surgery; and another man who’s face he couldn’t see who wasn’t projecting
much in the way of surface thoughts, broad in the shoulders and large. He definitely spent time in
a gym. To confirm, he borrowed the old woman’s eyes. Black gloves, badge partially hidden
behind a bouquet of flowers, and the face matched the photo from Psi Corps records; black hair,
brown eyes, squared features.
He used the fact that Luca’s back was turned to get close and stepped just in front of the man, who looked up to see who was standing in front of him and turned as white as a sheet.

“Mr. Nicolescu, come with me please.” Gene ordered in a tone that brooked no dispute despite being perfectly polite.

“Uh. Okay.” Luca replied, shielding his thoughts as hard as he could, but it wasn’t enough to block out the neural patterns of concealment or to hide the surge of aggression through his mind just before he tried a right hook. Gene caught his hand at the wrist mid punch and twisted Luca’s arm behind his back with a quick sidestep into a position where all Gene had to do was press forward to cause excruciating pain.

“GACKH! Fuck! Asshole! Let me the fuck go, I didn’t do anything! Did that miserable cunt send you!? She’s fucking you, isn’t she?!” Luca screamed.

<I’m more likely to be interested in you than your wife, but toxic masculinity is a huge turnoff.>

<Fucking faggot-ass fascist!>

Gene was not impressed with the ancient disused slur and thought about breaking a rib but decided against it. Instead he kicked Luca’s knee out from under him and forced his face into the carpeted floor.

<Ha! Ass-up. This must be awkward for you.> Gene sent, but blocked the response.

“Are you done?” Gene asked “Or do I have to get nasty?” No answer but carpet-munching invective as Luca tried to scoot away from the horrible pressure that felt like it was about to break his wrist. With a quick probe, Gene shattered the paltry and chaotic defenses around Luca’s surface thoughts and wormed his way inside, without being detected.

By then, the mundanes had taken notice. Doctors and nurses he come to the sound of the commotion, and the two people in the waiting room looked on aghast. Some of them were contemplating calling the authorities, not realizing he was the authority. Gene looked up.

“This man is under arrest for throwing his wife down a flight of stairs and assaulting a Psi Cop. Don’t be alarmed.” He reassured them. Then they noticed his uniform and badge, and their concerns for public disorder were allayed, though they stuck around for the spectacle.

Luca had other ideas. He tried to get line of sight on one of the nurses. Gene still refrained from breaking one of his ribs, but did send a stab of pain through him like he’d actually done so; Luca responded to that with a new round of incoherent screaming into the carpet.

<Try that again, and your brain forgets how to smell.> Gene said into his mind, then started to telepathically jam the entire room, just in case Luca did do something that stupid again. Luca was flailing around trying in vain to escape or strike back in some way, so Gene took the cuffs off his belt and waited for an opportune moment. When that moment came he cuffed Luca’s free hand and hauled it next to the other one and got them shackled together.

“There we go. Nice and secure!” Gene informed him jovially. “Oh, one last thing.” He pressed his knee down on the small of Luca’s back and took an occlusive hood out from one of his pockets. “Can’t have you trying to inflict yourself on these nice people, can I? And I don’t want to jam forever.” He slipped the hood over Luca’s face and tied the synch in place.

Gene hauled Luca up by his hands, straining his shoulder joints until Luca got his legs back under himself, then frog-marched him to the lift. He pressed the up button and waited. When the doors
opened, he forced Luca inside. Luca was still rattling off vulgar abuse in English and Romanian as fast as his tongue could spit it out but wasn’t offering physical resistance anymore.

Gene told the lift to head for the roof and spent the trip in silence. When the door opened, he shoved Luca out, but not so forcefully that he’d fall while cuffed and blindfolded. He didn’t hate the bastard enough to actually injure him.

“Sit” Gene commanded, taking off the hood so Luca could see where he was and find a place to sit. “I have your surface thoughts so don’t do anything stupid.”

Alone, isolated on a tenth story rooftop, Luca was terrified; that fear compelled his compliance and he sat down on the ground whimpering. Gene casually shattered his inner defenses and deep-scanned him, not ungently. He didn’t want to do any damage, he just needed to know why.

When he was done, Gene stood there staring at a man who hated himself, he hated what he was. He never thought he was good enough and reacted to that with fear and anger. He thought he was shit so became convinced that his wife would cheat on or leave him. He thought he’d always be at the bottom of the social totem pole, so he found someone he could force to be beneath him to give himself some sense of self-worth. Both lines of thought collided and lead to a feedback loop of abuse, fear of loss, and further abuse. Now Luca was just weeping, everything he had that even resembled power or control, even his ability to posture, stripped away.

“You need fucking therapy, dude.” Gene finally said. “I want so much to actually hate you, but I just…fucking can’t. You’re too pathetic to hate.”

“What are you gonna do to me?” Luca asked between sobs. Gene walked up to him and knelt down, patting him on the shoulder.

“Brother, I have to make you safe around others, but there’s also some stuff I’m going to do for you. First, there’s going to be some action blocks and compulsions. You’re not going to be able to knowingly be within five hundred meters of your soon-to-be-ex-wife or contact her in any way. You’re not going to be able to stomach the thought of hurting anyone ever again, unless it’s in self-defense. You’ll have to disclose to every telepath you talk to that you’re serving a sentence for abusing your wife, telepathically and only on the first meeting. They get to decide if they want anything to do with you.”

The thought of all that made him sob.

“But” Gene continued “Mandatory therapy. You’re going to be motivated to get treatment for your… fucking bullshit. Once a properly qualified medical telepath is satisfied that you’re a functioning human being who wouldn’t abuse others even if you were able, they’ll remove the compulsion to disclose except for sexual or romantic relationships. Understand?”

Luca nodded. Gene got to work.

Thursday, January 29th, 2263

“Incoming Encrypted Transmission. Encryption key: Four Gamma” the computer’s inflectionless feminine voice chimed at Colin while he did paperwork at his desk.

“Fucking finally. No more transmission tag. Accept.” he replied, pressing a button on his desk that turned on electronic jammers, locked his office door and flashed a red ‘do not disturb’ light
next to the handle. “Private Key: Meier C. Twelve dash eighty-six dash alpha tango cerulean zebra ausgezeichnet”

“Code and voice print confirmed. The code phrase is: Tiny.” Colin couldn’t remember the response for a split second, then the screen flashed to a psychedelic array of colors and numeric sequences that triggered the unlocking of a series of carefully constructed memory vaults in his mind he had implanted years before as a security precaution. The response surged into Colin’s consciousness and he was able to speak it.

“Until we make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.” he replied, before the phrase vanished back into the vault hidden and encoded into his delicate childhood memories, and he forgot it again.

“Subjective integrity confirmed.” the voice finished, before the screen faded to reveal a familiar face. A man of indeterminate late middle age with piercing foxlike eyes, bushy eyebrows, and thick black hair.

“Al, it’s good to hear from you. To what do I owe the pleasure?” Colin asked Alfred Bester. Bester smiled in a way that he reserved only for his fellow telepaths. Genuinely. Of course, there was a reason for the call. Intelligence exchange.

“Well, I finally had time to see your interview and I thought ‘I haven’t talked to Colin in a while. I should catch up with him’.” Bester replied.

“Thank you, Al. I appreciate that, I’ve been ridiculously busy and it’s always good to see a friendly face out here.” Bester never called just to talk. They weren’t friends, Bester didn’t have friends. He had allies with whom he shared goals. Some of those allies liked him, but they still weren’t friends. Bester gave Colin the willies most of the time.

Bester believed that telepaths were the future of human evolution, and it was hard for Colin to tell whether he meant that in the fullness of evolutionary time, or the more immediate sense. He wasn’t quite a monster, but the abyss had clearly been looking back at him too long and the shape of his mind always felt empty somehow. There were thoughts, feelings, emotions, but they almost felt like echoes, or sound that had the dynamic range artificially compressed and flattened. He ran smack into the uncanny valley and was just unsettling.

But both wanted telepaths safe from mundanes, and that made them allies of convenience and necessity; so, Colin worked with him and didn’t run screaming from the room.

“How’s Mr. Hendriks working out?” Bester asked casually “It’s not common for military teeps to transfer into Metapol.” Colin could figure out what he was asking. Rates of burnout in military telepaths were high. Occupational stress tended to lead to transfer requests to Commercial Division or Transport of all places. Someone who’d made allies in the Director’s Office tended to be offered positions in Internal Affairs or Administration. Metapol was rare because the stress and mortality rate were even higher in many respects. Bester was asking if he could be trusted. Colin was almost offended on Gene’s behalf, but Bester didn’t know Gene, and they were all playing a dangerous game.

“He thought he could do more good in Metapol than he could in Military, and from what I’ve seen, someone with his disposition was wasted in there. I honestly don’t know how I’d be handling this mess without him.” Colin replied. Bester grinned that perfectly sincere but still disconcerting grin and nodded. “Also, I remember you having a stockpile of training scenarios that I wouldn’t mind running him through. First student and all that.” Colin was asking for clearance to fill Gene in on Everything.
I’m glad. I’ll dig through my files and find some things that you’ll find useful. Speaking of files, I never did get you that photo I took at your graduation from the academy. It just slipped my mind.” Colin allowed himself a laugh. He knew something would be hidden in the file, but if it was the one he was thinking of, he gave his adviser bunny ears. The console beeped, and sure enough Bester had sent the file, and it was the picture in question. Complete with Colin’s goofy smirk and Machiavelli look-alike robes. He downloaded it to a non-networked datapad and entered a decryption key that only he and Bester knew.

“Oh wow” he said “I don’t think I’ve been that happy for a while.” Colin said. It didn’t matter that there was a document coded into its pixels, it was still a good picture.

“Given what you’re dealing with, I thought you might like a reminder of happier times. This is your first time dealing with this degree of abject misery, isn’t it?” Bester asked, referring of course to large-scale human trafficking. “It’s going to get worse. If you need to talk to someone, you can always call on an unencrypted line.” Bester sounded like he meant it too, which was uncharacteristic, but no matter what else he was, he wasn’t a sociopath. Not quite.

“I appreciate it Al, but I think I’ll be alright. Gene is very good at keeping me sane. We uh, form a bit of a bipod.”

“Glad to hear it.” Bester replied with a smile that told Colin that he knew more than he was letting on.

'Does he know I'm gay? Wouldn't shock me... his vetting is extreme.'

“Anyway, it’s late here and I should get to bed. Be seeing you Colin.” Bester finished the call with that little tipping of a phantom cap he liked to use as a greeting.

“You too Al. Good night.” and Bester cut the connection.

“Alright, let’s see what you are…” Colin said to himself and checked the document embedded in the image.

I don’t have anything actionable now, but about thirty psych patients have been transferred out of various Psi Corps medical facilities and vanishing into a bureaucratic black hole. Those who supposedly signed off on the transfer orders have no recollection of doing so, even with computer records indicating that proper procedures were followed. Take care with any human trafficking victims who need extensive in-patient psychiatric care; the bogus transfers have all been to “long-term care facilities” that are themselves above board, but the patients aren’t there. It’s up to you who you trust with this information but be careful. I’d expect a few weeks or even months of latency between hospital admission and any attempt to transfer them out, so you have time to plan and get your ducks in a row in a way that won’t let whoever is arranging this know we’re onto them.

'Well... shit. As if I don’t have enough on my plate already...' he kept the document on his datapad, he couldn’t delete it just yet.

…”
A few hours later, Colin got another call and did the same challenge-response protocol he had before, but there was no Bester on the other end. Just another kaleidoscope of light. He felt the action blocks clear in his head, and Colin knew that if he wanted to, he’d be able to go on ISN news and break Opsec to his heart’s content. Then a document came through: the training scenarios Bester had promised, and he ran them through decryption protocols. A few hidden sentences came out.

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We talked. You’re far enough out and in a better position to vet your people than any of us. We concluded that you should be directing your own operations and handling your own information security. Congratulations Colin, you’ve been promoted to cell leader. I’d send you a fruit basket, but it would spoil.

Best wishes,

Bester

---

“Well… that’s a bit more than I expected.” Colin muttered to himself and tried to figure out when and how to brief Gene.
Revelation and Synthesis.

Friday January 30th, 2263

Gene was trying something new. Instead of protecting his mind with layers of emotional states and embedded feedback loop triggers, his outer layer was an abstract concept: long division with roman numerals, otherwise known as sorcery. He held a math problem in his head, and the way through it was for Colin to brute force his way through or solve the problem.

The issue was, brute force would work, but it wouldn’t work efficiently; so Colin decided to try solving the problem. First he converted the roman numerals to arabic numerals, complete with a concept of zero. Then he visualized the problem in his mind and did his best to keep track of everything without paper and pencil. It took him several tries, but eventually he got the answer only to be rewarded for his efforts with a splitting headache.

For a moment, he thought Gene was a monster. He was going to have to solve that problem with roman numerals unless he wanted to power his way through with sheer will, which would exhaust him.

The problem was MMCDXVII divided by XVII. Colin multiplied XVII by C to get MDCC. He subtracted that from MMDCXVII to get DCCXVII, and a XVII count of C. The second step was to take the DCCXVII that was left and subtract CLXX from it, which he could do IV times, with a remainder of XXXVII, which he could subtract XVII from II times, with a final answer of CXLII and a remainder of III.

That answer, with more losing his place and forgetting or fucking up than he cared to admit, all of which cost him time, finally got him through Gene’s first layer of defenses.

The next layer was anger; everything Gene had built up over the last several weeks. Colin knew that would be a tough nut to crack because realistically there wasn’t much that could be done about it. The anger was justified, it wasn’t as if he could deconstruct irrational anger with reason or anything like that. Maybe something like reason could work: context.

He tried seeing things from the perspective of mundanes. The reality was, telepaths were scary. Colin tried to imagine going through life knowing that there were people out there who could alter his memory and very identity without there being much of anything he could do about it. He took that helplessness and tried to find a context in which he felt helpless, where he could own it. He found it in the Battle of the Line where he’d been outside watching as the last defenses of Earth crumbled in a sky full of new and ephemeral stars. He’d fought back, but at the end the inexorability of the Minbari War Machine had ground everything Earth had into dust and he awaited his conversion from matter into energy under a tree.

Colin harnessed that and rather than slamming into Gene’s defenses with it, he treated it more like a hose, eroding the anger, chewing through it with understanding the cause of its source.

The next layer of defense, and Colin had no idea how many there would be and could sense further bulwarks forming beyond his p’sight, was Gene’s will to resist. The most basic of all defenses, and one he could only match with power. He focused his own desire to read the thought Gene carried into a tightly focused beam and started to drill inside, but he didn’t have the time. His body was coming up against its own limits and his head was pounding. he could feel his knees going weak, his body being drained of blood sugar to feed a hungry brain.
He stopped his scan and disengaged before he risked blowing a blood vessel in his brain and the real world resolved back into focus.

“Christ you’re a fast study, I am going to have to switch tactics just to avoid a stroke. Roman numerals? Really?” Colin complained as he picked himself up off the floor. He felt a trickle down his face and wiped a bit off to see what it was “Fucker. You made me weep my own blood.” Gene groaned in weariness as he did the same, his nose also sporting a good bleed.

“Welcome to my world for the last few weeks. I thought the roman numerals were clever! Glad you agree.” Gene wiped his own nose and noticed his leak “If this makes you feel better?”

“It does actually!” Colin looked at the clock “You held me off for sixty-two minutes. Congratulations.” his annoyed and pained grimace transformed itself to a genuine smile “I can fully certify you for field duty!”

“Sweet. How is that different from what I’ve been doing though?” Gene asked, the casual way he asked belied by the fact that his own happiness felt like a supernova going off in Colin's face.

“Lower insurance premiums for the Corps I think?” Colin speculated.

“Ah, excellent. Mother and Father will be very happy to hear that.” Gene replied sardonically.

“Anything you want to do to celebrate?”

“Well…hookers and blow are right out.” Gene said contemplatively

“I should think so…” Colin’s comm unit chirped at him “Hold that thought, you’re officially good at it now.” he answered “Yes?”

“Hey Colin, it’s Steve”

“Hi Steve, what can I do for you?”

“Well, I have good news and bad news and then good news again.” Steve informed him.

“Defense grid active. Hit me.”

“Good news is, my Captain gave in and you have jurisdiction over that murder load. The bad news is, there's another body and you’re needed at autopsy in about an hour. The other actual good news is that my wife Liz wants to meet you and Gene and asked me to ask you over for dinner and a few drinks--for us anyway, Liz is eatin’ for two.”

“Well, that sounds like a lovely post-mortem to a post-mortem. Let me talk to Gene though, he just met some certification requirements and so celebration plans are his choice. One second.” He muted the device. “Gene, Steve is inviting us over for dinner, but it’s your choice. Actual certification will get in tomorrow, and no one here is going to blame you for waiting until after the documents are filed before we all go out for a night on the town or something.”

“Hey, that totally works for me. I like Steve, wouldn’t mind meeting Liz either. If it were a dinner party with a bunch of mundanes I’d say no but Steve is cool, and… presumably his wife knows we’re teeps?”

Colin un-muted his comm “Alright Steve, we’re in, provided Liz knows we’re teeps. I know what I’m looking for at autopsy, so that shouldn’t take forever, what time were you thinking and what should we bring?”
“Oh don’t worry, she knows. We’re thinkin’ around seven over on our end, bring some wine and yourselves in civilian clothes if you think you can do that safely.”

“We’ll make it work. What’s the address?” Colin copied it down as Steve rattled it off. “Yeah, you too Steve. I’ll see you tonight. Bye.”

“What time?” Gene asked

“Seven, and civilian clothes. Call it an informal dress code. I figure we should be alright if we use public transport. However, I have a date with a corpse in about an hour. You want to come along?” Gene winced but shook his head.

“Wish I could. I’m going to be sitting in on a call with our attorneys about warrants with Max. Besides, I’d be somewhat supernumerary.”

“That’s fair. Never piss off the Totally-Not-A-Lawyer.” he replied, though he was a bit disappointed. “Meet you at Steve’s at around seven? I’ll leave the address in your messages for easy retrieval.”

“Absolutely. Go, do what you need to do. I’ll hold down the fort here. I can do that. I am fully certificated now. I’ll pick up some wine when I finish the call, I need to do some grocery shopping anyway. I think I might be ready for test subjects tomorrow.”

An hour later, Colin was wearing scrubs, an apron, surgical mask, and a full face-shield inside a surgical theater staring down at the corpse of a middle aged man of mixed African and Asian ancestry named Iroh Mugabe. He’d changed out his black leather gloves for black nitrile.

“Fuck. So much for pattern. Alright, Dr. Shine, shall we begin?” Colin asked.

“I’ve already done vascular imaging, how’s your gross anatomy?” she replied.

“I was cross-trained between Metapol and Medical, so… let’s just say I’m a skilled dissectionist. I’ve done these before.”

“Good enough for me.”

They performed skin scrapings, collected samples from under the fingernails, hair samples, performed a rape kit, and checked the body over exhaustively for injection marks and impact trauma. After that they took blood samples and opened Mr. Mugabe’s body by way of a Y incision. They began with the GI tract checking each organ for disease or injury, taking samples, and weighing each of them. In contrast to seeing crime scene photos, and even morgue photos, inside the slabs Colin was able to completely detach from the fact that he was looking at a murder victim. For most people it was the other way around, but he’d been around so many cadavers that they were a special thing in his mind.

Here, Mr. Mugabe was a specimen, a puzzle to be solved, and no different from the dozens of other bodies he’d examined over the years.

“Alright, if you want to finish up the fine dissection, I’ll crack open the skull and take a look at his brain.” Colin suggested.

“Be my guest.” For some reason, a Disney song popped into her head that she modified on the fly.
'Be our guest, be our guest put our saw blades to the test, run the dremel 'round his head
Cherie and we'll provide the rest...'

As if on cue, and laughing inside, Colin grabbed his favorite instrument off the cart; a dremel saw.

“I assume the earlier victim is on ice? And do you have a M-DOW imager?”

“Yeah, and… sort of. They have one upstairs in the main part of the hospital.” Colin gently scanned her surface thoughts, he got the room number and found out she was mentally hitting herself for not thinking to use it earlier. He wasn’t going to say anything, such a fine-grained view of neural trauma was not a typical use for the machine and didn’t normally have diagnostic value in post-mortem.

“It’s alright. I’ll just take Mr. Mugabe’s brain up there and see about squeezing in time between neurology patients.”. He spun up the dremel and got to work, the buzzing sound was music to his ears; Mr. Mugabe was definitely going to have a closed-casket funeral.

A bit of sawing and some scalpel work later, and he was holding everything important about Mr. Mugabe in his hands. It was always a somewhat profound experience for him, every time he looked at a fresh brain. In that lump of jelly with the consistency of fungus was every thought, every personality trait, every petty jealousy and aspiration that Iroh Mugabe had ever had. A blob of tissue capable of contemplating the staggering immensity of the universe. And written in damage done to his neurons was the secret to unraveling his death. The agony of his final moments could be found etched into his neural pathways. The wonder this induced in Colin was never diminished by the fact that he could easily read the man’s thoughts or reprogram his personality in real time, were he still alive.

Colin slid the brain into a cooler bag, grabbed a plastic tray, and headed upstairs to the imaging suite. Unfortunately when he got there another patient was having their brain exhaustively examined and Colin ghosted into the control room to wait. It took a minute, but one of the techs noticed him and tapped the attending neurologist’s shoulder to alert her.

“What the hell are you doing in here?” she asked.

“Hello Dr. Colins. I am Dr. Meier” he held up the brain in a bag and pointed to the Psi Corps patch on his apron and scrubs “murder case, here to use the imager.”

“Well you can’t just walk in and demand the machine” the physician said incredulously.

“I’ve not demanded anything. I’m waiting. Here.” he looked at the clipboard and found an hour long gap between living patients and penciled himself in. “I’ve just scheduled time. I can wait, it’s not like my patient is going anywhere or possibly dying or anything. That ship has sailed.” the neurologist shrugged and motioned for him to take a seat, somewhat mollified. A gentle scan indicated the indignation was professional officiousness, not anything personal.

Colin waited for a few minutes, chatting with the doctor. He was idle for the first time since leaving the annex, and with his brain mostly free he started to feel uneasy; like something was missing. His stomach churned with something other than hunger and his thoughts cast back and forth, almost like his mind felt naked and searching for clothes. To try and distract himself he looked over the neurologist’s shoulder at the images. Degenerative demyelination disorder of some sort. There were a few of those, but this one was in the end-stage. Got misdiagnosed for long enough that the treatment window was closed.

‘Poor sap, he or she is screwed.’ Colin thought.
It wasn’t long before they’d finished and Colin was free to use the machine.

He waited for everyone but the tech to clear out and then put the victim’s brain on the tray in the middle of the imaging machine.

“So, what do you need?” the technician asked, wanting to get the machine programmed and be away from the telepath as soon as possible.

“Well Mr. Huang I need a complete three dimensional scan with a connectome overlay. This murder victim died from a series of strokes, but there is also antemortem cellular damage to the neurons, I need to be able to see what pathways that’s in.”

“Alright, we can do that. Imaging itself should take about forty-five minutes, but the full model is going to take a day for the computer to iterate.”

“Yes. Lots of permutations to get through and you don’t have a quantum computer.” Colin replied, nodding in understanding. He would need to stay and supervise the process to make sure he got what he needed during the scan itself, so Colin settled in for examining layer after layer as a virtual brain built itself. Mr. Huang was out the door almost faster than Colin could blink.

With forty-five minutes to kill and his attention only somewhat occupied, he had some time to think in a place where he didn’t have to shield his thoughts or suppress them. He knew exactly what that feeling of unease was; he felt it every night when he went to sleep. He missed his partner, best friend, and co-parent. It was just that simple. He was crazy about the man. Not pathological crazy but over-the-moon crazy, and it wasn’t something he could ignore or try to work around at that point. He’d fuck up and make it weird by accident at some point.

If nothing else, he felt he was ethically obligated to tell Gene how he felt now that he could do so without prejudicing Gene’s career if things went badly. Would it go badly? Two weeks prior if Colin had asked that question he’d have been certain that the answer would be yes, but he was starting to suspect that the answer would be no. If he broached that topic, he didn’t necessarily think he’d get the answer he hoped for, but it wouldn’t be bad. In fact, he was starting to think chances were good that Gene just might feel the same way. Nothing he could nail down really, no dead giveaways. Just a subtle change in affect going back until just after Zara left for Earth. It wasn’t even subtle sometimes. Gene had been flirting with him, hard.

If he did, why hadn’t Gene said anything? Asking that question inside his own head, Colin knew the answer: most likely the same reasons he hadn’t. Professional ethics, fear of rejection, shame at his selfish lack of solidarity with the rest of the Corps; to one extent or another those might affect Gene as much as they did him. And yet… were they really reasons not to say anything?

Colin considered, turning it over in his head and examining the question. But eventually, at about the time the brain scan finished and he could wrap up his examination, he concluded that they weren’t. He’d need to talk things over with Gene, as soon as he built up the courage to do it. That was completely unknown territory for Colin. He'd never had that talk with anyone else before. Ever.

…

Colin walked down the street away from the maglev station, having changed into a pair of cargo pants, a black turtle neck, with a comfortable set of sneakers. His badge was displayed with high contrast against the shirt and was readily identifiable. He was acutely aware, then more than ever, that his lack of uniform invited trouble more than it might diffuse it, so he compensated for it by walking like a jaguar patrolling it’s territory, trusting in his body language to persuade and
intimidate rather than the color of law.

Steve lived in an apartment building in a moderately busy urban area with lots of foot traffic in the early evening. Without the black and grey of his own uniform, finding Gene was difficult to do by sight. However, Colin knew the signature of Gene’s mind and was able to find him easily and send a mental handshake through their mirror neurons.

Gene was casually leaning up against a wall by the front entrance to Steve’s apartment building, managing to pull off civilian clothes much better than he did, Colin noticed. Blue denim, grey t-shirt over a long-sleeved black shirt of the same shade as his gloves, a brown leather jacket was slung over his shoulder. The shirts were tight enough that they even managed to catch in all the right places on his frame without seeming small. He was looking good and Colin found a smile creeping across his face and his heartbeat quickened perceptibly.

Yet something about Gene seemed a bit antsy. Gene noticed the light mental contact and established a two-way connection. His fretful affect disappeared and was replaced with a warm smile that reached up to his eyes, one that Colin could not help but return with a similar brightening of his own mood; and the contrast was stark. He realized Gene missed him as much as he’d missed Gene.

'So this is what romantic optimism feels like? Sign me up for more.'

“How was the autopsy?” Gene asked.

“I’ll find out tomorrow, processing the images is going to take a while. Hopefully it will be enlightening, if not we have to wait until the next victim.”

“Any pattern to them thus far?”

“Hell no. Middle aged man, African and Japanese ancestry. Nothing to connect them thus far.” Colin replied, voicing his disappointment.

“Well… shit.”

“How did the shopping go?” Gene grinned evilly at the question as they headed toward the lift, and held up the bag with the wine bottles.

“I bring Pino Grigio and Merlot; and stand ready to use the rest of our stable of telepaths as culinary guinea pigs tomorrow evening.”

“Oh no we’re all going to die!” Colin said in a jocular fashion as they stepped into the lift and closed the door.

“Keep talking like that and I’ll be force-feeding you Scoville units.” Gene replied in complete and total deadpan. Colin for his part feigned terrorized supplication.

“I...I...Great One of the Kitchen! Verily I would never besmirch thy cooking prowess, a pox upon the vile demon what made me speak thusly! Pray thee not punish poor wretched Colin!”

“That’s better, worm!” the other man replied haughtily before an involuntary smirk wound across his face and he started to snicker. The lift door opened and they both headed down the hall to Steve and Liz’s apartment “Did you do bad theater as a hobby?”

“Hey, Psi Corps amateur theater in the cadres isn’t bad! Okay that is a lie, it is objectively bad, but the nostalgia is strong.” Colin confirmed.
“Well I can’t argue with what they turn out as adults…” Gene replied, referring to the Erik Lenhsherr production.

They knocked on the door and Steve answered about twenty seconds later.

“Hey there guys!” came Steve’s resonant basso, he was grinning and had a sauce stain on his shirt.

“Hi Steve!” the two telepaths said in unison before Gene added “We bring gifts.” holding up two wine bottles.

“Fantastic! Come on in, you need to meet the missus.” He stepped aside to let them in and escorted them to the kitchen where she had just finished setting the table ware. She was a caucasian brunette, and tiny. Okay maybe not actually tiny, she was somewhere around 167 cm, but compared to her husband she was diminutive. She was also very pregnant, and the maternity clothes were mandatory at this point.

<How do they make tha...how?> Gene sent to Colin

<Do you really want me to answer that question?> Colin replied, glyphing him an image of a playground swing-set.

<...Now I can’t unsee that. Thanks>

<I live to serve.>

“Honey, this is Gene” motioning toward Gene “and Colin.” likewise motioning toward Colin “Guys, this is my wife Liz”

“Hi Liz, pleasure to meet you” Colin said, extending his hand and smiling with genuine friendliness “That man worships you, you know that right?”

“I do now” she said, giving her husband a faux glare

“Just because I don’t sacrifice a goat every mornin’…” Steve grumbled before grinning at his wife. She grinned back and made a little heart symbol with her hands. He returned it.

“A relationship built on mutual shit-giving. Those are always the most stable” Gene commented while and chuckling extending his own hand. She took it.

“If you can’t joke about yourself or your loved ones, what can you joke about?” she asked.

“Nothing I suspect, because at that point you’re dead.” Gene replied. “Is there anything we can help you two with in the kitchen? We are both really good at setting up tables for informal dinner parties.”

“Oh you need not trouble yourselves, we’ve got it.” Liz replied dismissively.

“We insist” Colin replied to her “You are in no condition to lift heavy...from the smell of it lasagna pans, and Steve has been in the kitchen all day.”

“Wait, how…”

“You have a sauce stain on your shirt Steve” Gene pointed out.

“I do?” he looked down “Oh. I should go change that then.” he scampered off to change his shirt, if someone that size could be said to scamper.
“Seriously, it’s no trouble for us. And… you can’t really stop us, now can you?” Gene told her, and before she could object they both scooted over to the kitchen to move lasagna to the table, finish preparing the salad, remove garlic bread from the oven, and uncork the wine. All with the perfect coordination in such a small kitchen that only two people who know each other’s intentions with crystal clarity could achieve. It was part of the ritual; the eternal clash of the rules of hospitality wherein the guest is supposed to assist the host, and the gracious host is supposed to feign refusal.

For their part, Steve and Liz took a load off at the dinner table. It wasn’t huge, but it was rectangular and had two chairs on each of the long sides. Steve and Liz took up position on the window side, Gene and Colin on the interior. They dished up, poured the wine, and dug in.

“So, Colin said this mornin’ that you passed some certification process?” Steve asked between bites of salad. Gene swallowed some lasagna and answered.

“First thing first, the lasagna is delicious. But yes. Combat telepathy. I am now a fully certified and invested Psi Cop.”

“Wait, you weren’t before?” Steve followed up.

“No, but he was a very high-grade intern” Colin supplied. “Seconded on the lasagna. He transferred in, and we have our own requirements. Basically he had to prove he can hold off a brute force scan from me for longer than an hour. Normally that’s a year long process, but he didn’t come in cold, and I haven’t been treating him like an intern.”

“Yeah, in our military branch we get a lot of the same training, we’re just not expected to go up against other P12s. They’re even rarer among the other races than they are for us.” Gene said, finishing the thought, which allowed Colin to take another bite of the lasagna, which he did in fact think was heavenly.

“Yeah but” bite, chew, swallow “why an hour specifically?” Steve asked. Gene responded again.

“Because unless a telepath goes through training like that, no one can sustain a deep scan or any other form of telepathic attack for more than half an hour to forty-five minutes. They either have to break contact, or they push themselves so hard they black out, blood vessels burst in their brains, or they stroke out.”

“Oh I get it. So you train against other powerful telepaths who have been through the same training you have.”

“Right. It makes absolutely sure that the amount of damage a rogue telepath can do to us is limited, and lets us focus on other things, like bringing them in alive. And we keep that training up continuously so we don’t get complacent. I have plans for you in the morning Gene. I want my revenge.” And Colin did have plans. He really did. Horrifying plans drawn up from the collective nightmares of humankind. They had not even started on really playing around in battles of Imago.

‘Ah, constructive sadomasochism...’ he mused privately.

“We’ll see” Gene replied, sipping the wine. They went back to mostly eating and chatting amicably about the less-terrifying aspects of their work. This was where Liz really shined, she was a xenoarcheologist working for IPX, so her work was interesting but only ever involved people who had died a long long time ago. Eventually the plates were cleared and they were just chatting at the table.

“So how did you two meet, anyway, if you don’t mind my asking?” Gene said
“Oh, we met in the library during an Old English Beowulf reading. We hit it off.” Liz answered, blushing a bit.

“Yeah, three years together. Pregnancy was unexpected though, pushed our marriage timetable forward a bit.” Steve followed up while Liz’s blush deepened.

“Ah, so it was definitely going to happen anyway. I figured, you two are too besotted with each other to have been how shall we say… reluctant partners. Seriously, we can feel it over here. It’s so saccharine I’m worried about diabetes.” Gene added, Steve and Liz both chuckled.

“Besotted is right.” Liz said “You should see him dote over me…it’s almost ridiculous; not that it’s not appreciated dear.” she patted Steve’s arm while his skin darkened in his own blush.

“It’s cute.” Gene said “It isn’t something we see very often.” Liz looked perplexed by that and asked the obvious follow up question before Colin could say anything.

“Why not?” It was perfectly and innocently earnest, to the point that Colin hardly knew how to respond. Thankfully, Steve rescued him.

“Most of their marriages are arranged, Liz.” Steve said.

“What? In this day and age?” she was clearly aghast, and Gene was visibly mortified at his slip of the tongue. Colin felt extremely uncomfortable. Painful memories he did his best to ignore were being dredged up, but he also felt the need to explain things to Liz as best he could. So, he forced down his discomfort and decided to soldier on.

“Christ this is awkward.” Colin said, rubbing the back of his neck in a nervous gesture. He would have to be very careful to only state facts and not take any opinion on those facts.

<Sorry for the slip.> Gene sent to him.

<Not your fault.> Colin sent back.

“But yes. Earth alliance law requires that our marriages be likely to produce children of at least the psi-rating of the highest-rating parent. Sometimes two people are in a relationship and compatible and can get married. Sometimes, they’re not, and can’t. In the end, the Psi Corps arranges most marriages. They’re suggestions, no one is ever forced to get married to someone in particular, but most people go along with one of them.”

“I...see.” Liz said, clearly put off by Colin’s pointedly neutral affect.

“No telepaths were ever given a say in these laws, Liz.” Steve helpfully filled in so neither of the two telepaths would have to. “They were imposed on them so the Alliance can get stronger telepaths.” Liz winced, and her eyes widened in understanding.

“Oh god. The Charter, I forgot about that. You can’t tell me what you think about this, can you?” she asked.

“Correct.” Gene replied. "We talk among ourselves of course, but among normals... strict neutrality."

<Do we want to put an end to this or let her keep going?> Gene asked.

<I really don’t want to talk about this, not with them. It’s important that they know. I just can’t maintain any kind of objectivity, hits close to home.> Colin replied.
Gene felt like a bolt of lightning struck him in the head and he immediately knew what an epiphany felt like. He’d been wondering just why Colin seemed married to his work, why he’d been in the closet. The very concept was almost a relic to mundanes and laters, but for someone raised in the Corps, he could see it. The mundanes imposed a eugenics program on telepaths. Telepaths had to adapt to that somehow, so they’d made it theirs just like they did everything else and planned to use it in the collective multi-generational struggle for independence.

A society couldn’t have a system like that and not pass certain messages to those who had variant genders and sexual orientations. If everyone else had to sacrifice of themselves for the good of the collective, it would feel like a betrayal for a gay or transgender telepath to dodge that same sacrifice on a technicality. Even if no one would ever dream of thinking less of them.

Gene could see it: Colin growing up in a cadre as a P12, and even seeing gay laters be loved and accepted, not thinking that he could be too because he had to be the example to others of what being in the Corps meant.

'Jesus... Poor guy.'

< I’ll take it from here but… we really should talk the second we get out of here.> Gene suggested.

It was sooner than Colin had wanted, but Gene had long since earned his trust and deserved to know. He’d just have to bite the bullet, be honest, and accept the consequences, good or bad. He took a deep breath and exhaled it.

<Yes of course.>

<I understand. You just hang out there and drink some wine, I’ve got this. And Colin?>

<Yeah?>

<It’s going to go well. You have absolutely nothing to worry about.> Gene said and Colin blushed.

'Gene knew? For how long? Did he just pick it up now?'

“I can discuss the generalities of sociology, however.” Gene finished “So if you want to ask questions, feel free to do so. I can’t guarantee I can answer everything directly”

“Okay, so long as you’re okay with it.” She didn’t notice Colin going silent and drinking an extra large sip of wine, but Steve did. Colin shook his head ever so slightly and waved him off with his hand. He clearly didn’t like it, but he went along with it. “I’ll try to only ask what I think you can answer…” she thought over her question for a moment, then asked “How do telepaths actually handle that culturally?”

“These laws have been in place for over one hundred years. There’ve been enough generations that those raised in the Corps think of it as normal.” And normal was fucked up and always felt wrong. Always. “Cultural importance is attached to running a potential spouse’s genetics against your own. Those who come in later in life might already be married so it’s moot because the Alliance can’t annul an existing marriage like that. However, those who aren’t… can have difficulty adjusting.”
“What about love? You said that it wasn’t something you saw very often.”

“It isn’t.” Gene replied, and spun furiously to avoid imparting an opinion or showing any problem within the Corps. “Statistically speaking young men and women tend to rush to get married to someone they like and are a genetic match with before they’re really ready for that commitment. Once they graduate from the Major Academy and get scattered all over the Alliance, there’s a good chance they won’t see their girlfriend or boyfriend again, so they have an incentive. I suppose it’s a lot like young soldiers getting married just before a long deployment.”

“I’ve seen that before.” Steve chimed in helpfully “Or they get married to a stripper. It almost never works out.”

“Arranged marriage at a slightly later age have better odds of not ending in divorce. The most common result is a sort of...friends with benefits arrangement.” Which was a lie. Scratch the benefits part, she didn’t need to know about the demographic problems. "It isn’t like they’re getting married sight-unseen. The Corps makes suggestions, not commands.”

“I guess I never thought of it like that before. I dated some real jerks before I met Steve, so I can see how rolling the dice when you’re a little older might not seem so bad.” both telepaths shrugged as noncommittally as humanly possible, but the line of questioning seemed to mollify her curiosity. Colin was privately very happy she didn’t think of the obvious follow-up questions about how people who aren’t straight or cisgender deal with the arranged marriage issue.

“So Colin, how’s the trafficking case comin’?” Steve asked, trying to steer the topic to something a bit more comfortable for him.

“Defense attorneys are fighting like demons, but the scanning warrants look like they might go through.”

“I didn’t think scans were admissible.” Steve replied.

“They’re not” Colin corrected “But the evidentiary fruits are if I have the proper warrants. We have to use parallel construction and hope. Unless the courts rule against us, parallel construction in cases like this are an instrument of the… former regime.”

“Ah I see.” Steve replied, he was clearly uncomfortable, but he also knew Colin wasn’t in the position to look a gift legal doctrine in the mouth. Colin didn’t like it either, but for the opposite reason. He didn’t like having to play a game of legal charades to gather evidence. But mundanes placed a high value on a form of ‘due process’ that was the best they could do, but terrible at finding out the truth. “Well, good luck to you man, hopefully things work out.”

“Yeah. Hopefully so.”

…

As soon as they were back in the elevator three hours later, Colin leaned against the back wall with his head tilted back and let out an exhausted breath.

“Fuck, Liz is a nice lady, and I normally like it when mundanes ask questions, but her curiosity is exhausting. I finally understand why commercial telepaths just clam up.” Colin was talking to fill the space. Gene wanted to talk and Colin wasn't sure whether he wanted to delay it, get it over with, or throw caution out the airlock right there in the elevator. He was so nervous he was leaning back against the elevator to disguise the fact that his hands were trembling.

“Yeah, though she is a xenoarchaeologist, what do you expect?” Gene asked. “She’s got a real-live
alien culture right in her house that she doesn’t have to sift through midden-piles to interrogate.”

“That’s true.” Colin made up his mind and broached the subject. "I’m just glad she didn’t get to the really awkward questions on her first pass.”

“Yeah, about that… I’ve been trying to figure out why an otherwise warm, open, and confident man would hide his sexuality.” Gene said. Colin’s heart went into his throat and his hands trembled against his will. The reaction was entirely irrational, but it was there anyway.

Colin didn’t have time to answer it before the elevator opened with an audible ding into the lobby and they stepped out into it. It was late, and no one was around. It was as private and secluded as they were going to get until they were home.

“How long have you known?” Colin asked.

“Since Zara left. Had an epiphany that night.” Then Gene switched over to mental communication. <It’s the breeding program isn’t it? Solidarity with everyone else?> He asked.

<Yeah. But not just that. It’s the one real problem I have being raised in the Corps. We’re expected to be… I suppose the examples for everyone else to follow; teach the laters the ropes, show them what it means to put the Corps ahead of yourself and how fulfilling that can be… but I can’t do that and be true to myself at the same time. I can’t and won’t live a lie, but I can’t be who am and...with whom I want still look everyone else in the eye. So I'm stuck like this...> <They never had anything when you were growing up about how it was okay to be gay in the Corps so long as you jerked off in a cup? Not once?>

<No. Never.> Colin replied. <Everything just sort of assumed straightness and… I never knew anyone who was raised in the Corps who was open. Oh sure some laters, but…different standards. There’s culture shock and sometimes laters don’t assimilate, but that’s one way you guys are better off. The bar isn’t as high.> Colin got the distinct impression from Gene that he thought that was very strange, not the second part, but the first about a lack of queer-affirming curriculum. It didn’t seem like the Psi Corps he knew and loved.

<Colin, I think your impression of the Corp’s standards is… too high. I’ve never gotten the impression that I’m supposed to be straight, or that my being gay is somehow selfish. Yeah, it’s a technicality, but we’re not betraying the Corps.>

"We huh?" Colin asked, switching back to speech because he didn't think he'd be able be coherent otherwise. "I was starting to suspect but why didn't you say anything?"

"At first, force of habit." Gene replied. "Just didn’t seem relevant. My personal life was need-to-know for almost ten years and there weren’t any other telepaths around for most of that. After that, a couple reasons. I knew I couldn't be too forward with you until I was field-certified for starters."

'Holy shit, this is actually happening but... No. No I'm not going to do this to myself anymore.'

"That's certainly a good reason... Everything else aside that would be unethical and you do know me...pretty damn well." Colin voiced "The others?"

"Well, it also seemed that you had other things going on too. Which is true, clearly." Gene replied with what Colin could only describe as affectionate sarcasm "Sooo I tried to be flirty give you a taste of what you could have if you just let yourself. Of course, I didn't count on your impressively over-active wishful-thinking auto-correct."
'How does he know about tha-' Gene cut off his thought by closing the narrow gap between them and cupping Colin's face in his hands "And before you ask, you're not nearly as good at masking your body language as you are at shielding your mind. As you said, I know you pretty damn well."

Then he kissed Colin ever-so-lightly, almost as if asking permission to do more. Colin didn’t use words or even thoughts to give that permission; instead he slid one hand around Gene’s waist and the other around the back of his head and drew him in, deepening the kiss in the process. Yet they refrained from exploring each other’s minds; not in public. They couldn’t risk losing themselves that way in a public lobby. When it did finally end, they didn’t pull apart, but held each other for a moment.

…

By the time they got back, it was late enough that everyone else was asleep, and some semblance of courteous propriety kept both Colin and Gene from making a sound as they ascended the stairs to the living quarters. By silent consensus, they picked Colin’s room, and he got the door open despite nervously fumbling fingers at the lock.

Colin got in first, with Gene shutting the door behind him as he followed behind. Colin turned and saw Gene’s eyes. He saw in them what he felt in his own soul; an indescribable cacophony of emotions ranging from relief and joy to unshackled primal need. For a brief moment before their lips collided they were lost in a sea of recursive theory of mind. Then they were adrift in touch, reveling in the mutually-shared sensation of each other’s lips, and tongues, and gloved hands roving over each other’s bodies, Gene pinned against the door.

Eventually, they both had to come up for air, physically and mentally, pressing their foreheads and noses together in complete darkness.

“I love you, you know that right?” Gene said, and asked. Colin did know, with absolute certainty.

“I love you too, Gene.” he replied, kissing the tip of his lover’s nose and sliding his hands underneath Gene’s shirts, he wanted to feel Gene’s skin, to learn every ripple of muscle and every scar with the same level of intimate detail that he knew the signature of Gene’s mind. But he couldn’t, so he paused and removed his hands from under Gene’s clothes.

“Lights, twenty percent intensity. Gene, these need to go.” Colin said as the lights slowly brightened to a level resembling twilight. Enough to see each other by.

“God, yes. Yes they do.” Gene replied.

Colin crossed his wrists and undid the clasps, Gene did the same, and they both slipped the gloves off. A feeling of profound intimacy struck Colin as Gene took his hands in his. Two minds that had to become hypersensitive to the slightest stimulation to enable such basic tasks as writing or separating sheets of paper were given unfiltered access to the full sensory capability of the human hand. The one truly active sense that a normal person had; touch beckoned, forbade, caressed, broke, and discovered. In that instant, Colin knew, He understood why telepaths wore gloves, and why a telepath left without the gloves felt naked and vulnerable, but with Gene he didn’t. He felt inviolate. Even the mundane chorus of the city outside started to fade from his conscious perception, hedged out as his personal universe became restricted to himself and the man he loved standing before him holding his hands.

They slid up each other's arms and their lips met again, this time they weren’t in a hurry. They kissed slowly, languidly, savoring every second, pausing only long enough to remove their shirts and slip off pants and shoes, and began exploring each other's arms, chest, back. Running their
fingers over bump, memorizing every square centimeter of skin. They both crawled over each other’s surface thoughts, experiencing every sensation twice from each other’s perspective as their minds began to slowly but inexorably come together in a way that neither of them had ever experienced before and neither of them wanted to stop.

They didn't know exactly how, but they made it to Colin's bed with socks and underwear removed and cast to the floor. Gene started off supine, trailing his fingers down Colin's spine, but one little thought from Colin and they switched positions by silent agreement. Deeper and deeper into everything the other was until where once there were two minds, and two wills, there was only the one.

The voices of the world fell away completely.
Colin woke up. The local star was high in his window and was immediately obvious to him that he’d slept in. However, he found the idea of getting out of bed distasteful. Gene has his right arm wrapped around his waist and his left arm cradled Colin’s head. He nestled backward a little bit and Gene pulled him in closer.

“Good morning” Gene said softly into his ear, lightly kissing a line down the juncture between jaw and throat. Their defenses had snapped back up and they weren’t going to go back into their lovers’ gestalt unless they both wanted to. The familiar choir of mundane minds whispered and chattered in Colin's head again.

“Morning, I didn’t wake you, did I?” Colin asked, reaching a hand back to run his fingers through Gene’s hair. He remembered the texture, those had been his hands.

“No, I’ve been awake for about twenty minutes. Couldn’t get up without having to gnaw off my arm. I can feel the scratches on my back by the way.”

“Sorry…” Colin replied, sheepishly

“Don’t be. About either thing. I don’t think you could have done that without me wanting you to; and I like waking up like this. I could get used to it.” There was a faint questioning in Gene's voice that Colin wouldn’t let sit there.

“Gene, if things go how I want them to, we can wake up like this for the rest of our lives. As for the other thing, I honestly have no idea how that works but that...feels correct.” Colin could feel Gene’s love surge through his blocks and returned it, never having to say anything.

“Are you saying that if I asked you to marry me right now, you’d say yes?” To that Colin grinned and made sure Gene could feel it, he removed his fingers from Gene’s hair and intertwined it with the fingers that were lightly playing across his chest.

“I am saying that, yes.” Colin replied and realized he was serious. If Gene asked, he’d do it. Devil take whatever legal, administrative, or social complications that might bring.

“Bit sudden, don’t you think?” Gene asked, his voice had gone husky.

“Eh. We already have a kid.” Colin replied, nonchalant in stark contrast to earlier attitudes. 'I'm not going back. Fuck that.' he thought.

“Point. Won’t she be excited that her dads are finally together! But I’m not asking. Not yet.” Gene replied, leaving Colin a little disappointed “Mostly because I don’t have a matching set of rings picked out, and I’m too cautious to rush into that. Plus I’m not sure how family law and Crawford-Tokash interact there.” That brought Colin’s smile back.

“Reasonable caution I suppose. Thankfully, I have a certain angry Dromaeosaurid on speed dial for when the time comes.” Gene chuckled.

“You hungry?” Gene asked.

“...Is that a euphemism, or do you mean actual food?” A surge of strong emotion meant that Gene
had not considered the other possibility but had now.

“...Yes?” he replied, sliding a hand down Colin's side down toward his now-rapidly-growing manhood.

“Alright then. Well, we do need to shower so…” Colin suggested, letting the implication hang between them to see what Gene wanted to do with it.

“Kill two birds with one stone?” Gene asked speculatively. Colin could feel Gene's blood flow shift, a promising sign.

“That’s what I was thinking, yeah.” Colin confirmed.

... They finished their shower about thirty minutes later, and Colin could not help but be thankful he'd possessed the foresight to pick up that no-slip floor pad. Then they set about making pancakes and coffee in nothing but towels.

“So, what’s your plan for the day?” Gene asked.

“Regarding? Things have changed a bit...” Colin replied.

“A few things” mouth-full of pancake, chew, swallow “You had a brain scan coming in, culinary experimentation etcetera.”

“I'm expecting a full three-dimensional model of a human brain sometime between noon and four PM, human trials are scheduled for seven, after which…” Colin considered for a moment, sipping his coffee “I want to brief you fully on...a few things.”

“Stuff you couldn’t talk about? You got clearance?” Gene asked earnestly.

“Yeah I did. More than that, as far as anyone on this planet goes, I'm the one who vets and gives clearance now..”

“Okay. Congratulations on your promotion?” Gene answered tentatively “How much booze, you think?”

“Thanks! Play it by ear?” Colin replied before taking a bite of his own pancakes.

“So the hard stuff, but no commitment on amount. Gotcha.” They finished up breakfast and then Gene headed back to his quarters to get properly dressed while Colin got ready for work. When Colin got downstairs, most of the others were out and about their day running personal errands or enjoying a day off. He sorted through his messages and looked over his case notes. By one PM he had fully refreshed his memory of the serial killer case, just in time for the files to show up in his message box.

Colin opened a drawer on his desk to pull out a set of goggles and some tight-fitting mesh nets he put over his gloves, then he called up the file. It opened into a virtual reality space; a perfectly rendered three-dimensional model of Mr. Mugabe’s brain that was accurate down to the connections between neurons. He used the motion-tracking mesh on his gloves to interact with the model’s user interface; zooming in on the insular cortex and calling up two overlays. The first mapped the damage done directly to neurons via burnout from over-stimulation within the insula, the other was a layout of the neurons involved in the subjective perception of pain in the parieto-
insular cortex. High overlap, but it wasn’t complete.

“I was thinking too narrowly before…” he muttered and expanded his view. Damaged neurons were also located throughout the entirety of the right frontal and anterior insula responsible for empathy, emotional processing, and interoceptive awareness. There was no damage to the neurons responsible for homeostatic regulation, or motor control. Colin’s mind started to race. Why those regions? Why wasn’t hyperstimulation localized only to the parieto-insula? He expanded his view out and zoomed back on the anterior cingulate cortex. Only Area 24 was affected, responsible for the emotional reaction to pain.

“Ok, first principles. Assume a progression. First victims were exploratory, he’s trying to find out what he needs to do later, but it’s not just torture. He was doing other things to them we can’t detect from the less-advanced images. It isn't as if the victim's connectome is typically useful in autopsies…”

He was wracking his brain about the second stage thalamus involvement when he heard Gene’s voice.

“Hey, dinner’s in the crockpot, I was wondering if you needed some company.” Colin felt Gene caress his surface thoughts “and I was right, you do, you need to relax or you’re not going to get anywhere.” Gene stepped behind him and Colin felt Gene’s fingers gently but firmly massaging his scalp.

“Oh my god...that is. Amazing.” the sensation was indescribable, but immensely pleasurable and relaxing.

“No one’s ever done this?” Gene asked “barring feeling yourself doing it through me, anyway.”

“Not in a long time, and don’t you dare stop now!”

“Don’t worry, I won’t” Gene replied, much like a cat might if trying to reassure its rodent prey. “Open your thoughts. There’s something I want to try.” Colin did, dropping the walls around his mind and let Gene in. Then his sensorium transitioned to one not his own, dissolving and reformulating itself into something else.

Colin found himself standing on a ridge, grass under his feet, shrubbery on the slope in front of him were swaying back and forth in a stiff and bitterly cold breeze. It was dark and the cloudless sky was awash in stars. He could look around and see all of them, easily making out the great gaseous disk of the milky way in the southern sky. Water below reflected the stars and gave the impression that he was blanketed in the great firmament of the heavens. It wasn’t a simulacra or fabricated reality, but one of Gene’s memories.

"This is gorgeous…”

"It gets better" came Gene’s reply.

The sky started to brighten, and the stars began to wash out in the pink and blue of sunrise. Mountains that had been obscured by darkness illuminated in the background, sunlight reflected off the the mirror-like cerulean waters of a river running into the foreground. The water’s surface created a mirror-image of their snow-capped peaks that bounced back into his--Gene’s--eyes; their rocky faces transitioning from grey outlines to pink and orange as the sun rose behind them and began to banish the cold. The entire landscape gradually saturated with the green of conifers, spruce, willows, prairie grasses and an orgy of flowering plants. It was one of the most beautiful things Colin had ever witnessed, and he grew up surrounded by the swiss alps.
"What is this place?" he asked.

"Grand Teton National Park, in Wyoming. I went there when I was ten. And yeah, it is the second most beautiful place I’ve ever been. Only Alaska really compares." Gene replied in his thoughts. Then an idea struck Colin in an Archimedes’ Bathtub sort of way and Gene caught the thought.

"See? Relax and a solution will arise bubbling forth from your mind." Colin could feel outside his mind as Gene squeezed his shoulders and slowly, very gently, broke mental contact. Colin came back to reality in a slow comfortable transition and was staring at a model of Mr. Mugabe’s brain again.

“Care to bring me up to speed? You can always bounce ideas off me.” Gene asked.

“Sure. Mind if I project my sensorium?”

“Go ahead.” With Gene’s affirmative consent, Colin projected his own senses into Gene’s occipital lobe, simulating sensory input in a way far more comfortable than direct thalamic stimulation. He showed him the model and the pattern of neural disruption.

<The pattern of neural disruption in Mr. Mugabe here isn’t consistent with what I originally thought. Pain perception is just the most obvious role of the insular cortex that might be relevant in a murder. He--and I am increasingly sure it is a He--also hit pathways responsible for sense of self, interoception, and empathy. Which makes me think that in his Stage One he was doing other things. He might have elicited empathy by torturing a cat, or showed the victim films. He may have induced interoceptive sensations by starving and feeding them--which he definitely did do--or depriving them of and over-saturating oxygen, using medications to fuck with their heartbeat we wouldn’t look for on a toxin screen. That sort of thing.> Colin explained, narrating each affected region as he focused on it in his own sight.

<Okay, I am with you so far> Gene said, following along.

<What was tripping me up was the thalamic involvement in Stage Two, but I think I have it: Reality Fabrication. He was replicating what he did in Stage 1, but he didn’t get what he wanted out of it, so moved on to Stage 3.>

<How do you know he didn’t get exactly what it was he wanted from each victim?> Gene asked.

<You can tell a lot from how a killer disposes of his victims. If he leaves them where he killed them, he is typically confident he won’t be caught. If he disposes of the corpses with some sort of reverence it means he values them in some way.> He felt Gene grasp the concept and run with it.

<So by disposing of them in dumpsters scattered all over the place, it’s either a forensic countermeasure, or he views them as trash.>

<Probably both, because it’s always a public dumpster, and not some other heavily contaminated place that would obscure forensic evidence like a sewer or something.> Colin agreed. <But if causing intense pain and profound self-awareness and bodily perception are what he’s after, he’s certainly getting it with this pattern of damage. So…> then Colin took an intuitive leap <what if what he’s not getting out of his victims has something to do with himself? He’s scanning them while he does this, so what if he’s stimulating these experiences in his victims so he can experience them himself, but can’t? What if he lacks the anatomy for it? He’d know what they’re experiencing, but he can’t experience it unless he has his own functional neuroanatomy. He’d need a telepath for that.>
<Like he can’t feel pain, his own body, or empathy? And he’s what, desperately trying to get something like that back?> Gene, asked. Colin shivered at the thought, and glyphed an image of Gene in the hospital unable to hear the inchoate thoughts of those around him, combined with a dial being turned up so hard it snapped off. Gene shuddered inside and outside his own mind as he got it.

<Something like that would send anyone not born with that defect spiraling into madness> Gene concluded.

<If they were not already crazy, yeah. He could be a homeless schizophrenic who ate contaminated pork and picked up a tapeworm, it could be a tumor, syphilis, traumatic injury, drug use.>

“Dust?” Gene questioned out loud. Colin did a mental spit-take. An idea he really didn’t like was taking form in his brain. He kept transmitting his sensorium to Gene while he dove into another area of Mr. Mugabe’s brain. The hippocampus. There it was, the pattern of subtle neural disruption characteristic of someone victimized by a Dust user. It was easy to miss, but Colin mentally hit himself for his stupidity, missing something like that was such an elementary mistake. He should have done a survey of the whole brain as a first step instead of tunnel-visioning.

<Stop that.> Gene sent at him <A telepath on Dust is an outside context problem, don’t beat yourself up over it. How much does it matter?>.

<Hard to say. If he’s a natural telepath, Dust will just drive him insane. Someone on Dust can relive the experiential memories of someone else but not the subjective perception. The only way that will work is if the victim is a telepath who can project their subjective perceptions into their attacker’s consciousness.>

<How did that shit get on the market anyway? I always assumed it was some mundane black project to artificially induce telepathy in mundanes and replace us, honestly.>

<Nah, they’re not that clever. It was Department Sigma. They were working on a telepathy enhancing drug. Didn’t work, but it temporarily semi-activated telepathy in mundanes. It got leaked and there are those who’ve been using it as a sort of natural experiment ever since. If it produces permanent telepathy in mundanes we might be able to refine it and avoid a war we’d lose.> Colin replied, shrugging about that last part.

< Hmm. I take it you are… ambivalent?> Gene followed up.

<That’s one way of putting it. I can approve of the motivation and not the ethics, and it opened up a whole new bag of worms for us. Either way I have Need to Know on their trial data.> Colin replied.

<That should be… fun reading. Trying to see if the neurological side effects on telepaths match up with what you think our perp’s mental issues are?>

<Got it in one! If it does, well, it won’t confirm the profile, but it definitely makes it more likely he will eventually start targeting telepaths.>

<And we stand out like a sore thumb, by law.> Gene followed up bitterly <Should we warn the others?>

<Every telepath on planet. I’ll send the request to Sigma for that trial data, it might take them a
few days to get back to me. After that, do you need help in the kitchen? > the smells were starting
to waft in and they were forcing Colin to admit to his own hunger and need to take a break from
virtual reality space. Gene switched back to vocal communications as they disentangled their
sensory fields.

“Theh, it’s mostly just waiting now. However I could use some company while I wait.” he looked at
the clock “We still have about an hour and a half I think, and I do need to watch it to make sure
things don’t overcook.”

“Alright, I’ll be in after a few minutes.” Colin took off the VR goggles and set them on the desk as
Gene was turning to get back to the kitchen “but before you go” Colin said, reaching out to lightly
gasp Gene’s arm and rising to his feet. “I did need to relax, and I would not have thought of the
Dust angle. At least not that fast. Even if I wasn’t crazy about you, you’d be invaluable.”

“But you are crazy about me?” Gene inquired with a cocky grin right before Colin gave him a
smooch on the lips

“Yes, absolutely put-me-in-a-straightjacket-and-shoot-me-up-with-Haloperidol batshit.”

“They better put us in the same cell then.” Gene replied before pulling Colin into a deep kiss,
letting their worlds collapse into each other for a moment.

When they did break contact, they lingered there, not wanting to let reality reassert itself but
knowing they had to. Otherwise six hours of dinner could burn, and delays in message
transmission might kill telepaths.

“We should probably…” said Gene

“Yeah.”

...

To: All Registered Telepaths, Omega VII Colony

Subject: Serial Killer, Urgent Read Immediately

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Corps,

Over the past few years, a serial killer has been preying upon the mundane population of this
colony. Local authorities turned jurisdiction over to this office once convinced that their suspect
was killing via telepathic torture. I have reason to believe that he is using Dust, and may escalate
to attacking telepaths. The unknown subject is incapable of experiencing pain, empathy, or
remorse, and may experience long periods of or continuous dissociation. We do not yet know how
he is acquiring victims, but may be using reality fabrication which makes him at least a P8, so if
you think your environment is a bit unusual, assume it is and call for help immediately. We will
be holding refresher courses in telepathic self-defense this week here at the annex, for your own
safety, please avail yourselves of them.

It is imperative for your own safety that you Do Not:
Go anywhere with an unregistered telepath.
Take shortcuts that bring you out of public surveillance (preferably electronic)
Let ANYONE unknown to you scan you.

It is equally imperative that you DO:

- Keep your blocks up, as strong as you can manage, at all times when in public
- Use a buddy system where practicable.
- Report any sightings of emotionally disturbed persons exhibiting signs of telepathy to this office

Maternis, Paternis,
Lt. Colin Meier Ph.D.
Station Chief, Metapol, Omega VII Colony

After writing his warning, Colin also typed out a requisition for information from his secure terminal. He knew he wouldn't have access to full reports because those would be classified lightyears above his own clearance, however, he could get summary reports for specific lines of inquiry.

He filled out the form until he got to the bottom where he was required to write in his reason for request.

...  

Reason For Request (Required): Criminal Investigation

I have a telepathic serial killer on the loose and his victims show evidence of being the victims of a telepath who is taking Dust. To complete my profile and hunt him down, I require information regarding the known side effects of Dust use in telepaths, as well as the capacity for enhancement of abilities related to shared-cognition between user and target under those conditions. Mundanes and telepaths are at risk without this information.

The Corps is Mother, The Corps is Father,
Lt. Colin Meier Ph.D.
Station Chief, Metapol, Omega VII Colony
He signed both the reason for request, and the form so they could match his signature against their litany of known writing samples, typed in his authentication codes including the challenge-response system, and then sent the document via a heavily encrypted Gold channel to Syria Planum on Mars.

“Alright. Forty-five minutes to spare” he sighed heavily, got up, and went to the common kitchen.

... 

Gene poured his heart and soul into what ended up being multiple crockpots borrowed from the other residents arrayed in the center of the circular table, and it showed. Or rather, it tasted. He had a range of spice levels for each of a yellow and red curry. None of them were sophisticated or presented in an artistic fashion, but they all had a rich and varied flavor profile that didn’t overwhelm the palate or scorch anyone.

“Two words: Fusion Cuisine” Hoshi said when everyone had finished devouring dinner “I think we could do wonderful things with raw fish…”

“Want me to see about getting a refrigerated case imported?” Colin asked. It had been a long time since he had actual sushi, or fish of any kind other than surimi for that matter.

“It absolutely is.” she replied “Actually, I really like the idea of sharing a meal once a week or so. We all just kinda do our own thing most of the time, we live together and have a common kitchen for things like this. So… who’s in?”

“I’m in” Gene threw in “No way to improve without human test subjects, and I like you guys.”

“I can do deserts every now and again, sure. Colin, Customs Enforcement Sorcery?” Eduardo cut in.

“I can do that from time to time, sure.” Colin replied, relishing the idea of bringing in fresh fruit and the like.

“Muy Bueno” Eduardo said with an excited luster in his eyes.

“I make my own mead, willing to share…” came Gerald

“Seriously?” Gene asked

“Yeah mate, takes a year to age, but the batches are pretty large. I just rotate the bottles on my cabinet shelves”

“Where do you get the honey?” Gene asked as a follow up question.

“People still use bees for pollination, even on this planet. They sell the honey. Costs a pretty penny, but they sell it.” At that Gene nodded and performed a royal navy salute.

“Huh. That’s actually kind of awesome.” Hassan responded. "Not that I can partake, just conceptually."

Hassan, Erika, Franklin and Su conferred telepathically for a moment and seemed to select Hassan as a spokesperson.

“He uh… we have no skill in the kitchen between us. At all. But Franklin wouldn’t mind contributing with music sometimes.”
“That’s fine.” Colin said “It’s all about the group bonding, chip in for ingredients or brute kitchen labor or whatever and it’s fine” the chef volunteers nodded in response. “Max?”

“Are you kidding? You think my house parents would have let go to the academy without being able to make every traditional dish in Jewry? I’ve got Borscht, I’ve got Knish, and I make the best hummus you’ll ever try. Israeli hummus.” Max said, with no small amount of smug boastfulness in his tone. Hassan coughed.

“What?” Max asked.

“Syrian hummus is the best hummus…” Hassan replied, a light smirk on his face.


“No…” Hassan replied using mock-sheepish tones that Max didn’t notice.

“Then Israeli hummus is the best by default, now isn’t it, given that we don’t have Syrian on offer.”

“That isn’t entirely correct, Max.” Colin cut in, and Hassan grinned wickedly. “I can.” and everyone looked at him. “What? I like middle eastern food.” then Colin paused and looked at Hassan who was smiling from ear to ear, happy his little trap worked. "Wait, Hassan, how did you know?”

“I might have stolen some of the batch you made three months ago… I couldn’t resist the temptation.” he pantomimed tears “Allah forgive me! I’m a terrible muslim….”

“I was wondering where that went…” Colin gave Hassan a mock stink-eye “So, Max… Hummus competition?”

“Chickpeas at dawn.” Max replied.

“Excellent. Get me ingredient lists everyone. I will engage in the vile nilotic rites of beureucromancy and get things on a fast courier and bypass customs inspection.”

“Okay, I need to know, how do you do that?” Hoshi asked seriously.

“Do you really want to know?” Colin asked. Everyone else responded with an emphatic “YES!”

“Well, there are two parts. My authorization on shipments is enough to get things through customs without having to declare what’s inside or face inspection. No one wants to look in something with a big greek Psi stamped on the side. So that helps avoid spoilage on this end. The other part is paying truly exorbitant shipping fees. I either use a private courier or pay the premium to slip a crate onto a bulk transport doing a direct run.”

“Oh.” She replied. Colin felt everyone conferring telepathically, but didn’t pry. Then Su was selected as spokesperson.

“We’re not going to let you eat that cost by yourself.” Su said flatly “I’m the accountant, I know how much you make and how much all that costs, we’re not going to let you bankrupt yourself with well-meaning largesse.” Colin wanted to protest, but he could feel they wouldn’t budge. And it was sweet anyway.

“Alright alright, I’ll spare you all the noblesse oblige. I just figured I have the highest pay-grade and can afford to be generous.”
"Please." Su replied waving a hand dismissively "It's not like you extract your money by alienating us from the value of our labor."

"So, we’re just gonna say ‘fuck it’ and start singing the Internationale?" Colin asked.

"Pretty much." Gene replied.

"Alright. Vive la révolution télépathe!" Colin said. Everyone else replied back in French after a very brief mental back and forth.

"Le corps est la mère, le corps est le père. Vive la révolution." Every telepath spoke it because anyone could wind up in Geneva, and there the local population spoke French. Thus English and French were the lingua franca of the Corps, no matter what other languages people spoke.

"How the shite did we go from family dinner, to communism, to the bloody French Revolution?" Gerald asked the group.

"I don’t know… just seemed funny at the time I guess?" Erika replied. "But really though, are we communists? Is that what we are?"

"What she said." Franklin followed up. "I've never given politics much thought because we can't so much as vote, but uh...yeah."

"Guys, guys, no. We're not communists." Max informed them. "We're ethno-syndicalists."

"...What in the hell is an ethno-syndicalist? In fact, what the hell is a syndicalist?" Su asked the collective. Colin knew, and Gene's snickering said he knew; but Colin refused to say anything because he wanted to hear Max explain the concept in his very Max-like way.

"Syndicalism is a replacement for capitalism in which the ownership and management of the means of production is transferred to the workers. In Ethno-Syndicalism, well I just made up the term. We're our own ethnic group so..."

"Okay, so how are we syndicalists?" Su followed up.

"Well, the overwhelming majority of telepaths are commercial telepaths. They literally are the means of production. Everything else we do trains, protects, and supports them." Max explained. "We even take it a step further and when left to self-govern do so through consensus and live in a giant distributed Kibbutz. In fact the Psi Corps is literally modeled after Israeli Kibbutzim, which are run on syndicalist principles."

"Wait wait wait!" Hassan faux-protested "You mean to tell me that the Psi Corps, the Psi Corps I love and that loves me right back is... a thing of Jews?! Israeli Jews?!" Hassan affected shock and horror, but it was just an affectation.

"It's okay Hassan," Max said, getting up and walking around the table to give his Syrian friend a half-hug "Islamic Socialism is absolutely a historical thing." Hassan patted Max's arm in return and fake-cried.

"But it's mostly Shia and I'm Sunni!"

"But you're bad at it. You can cross the streams." Max replied, and Hussan gave him a petulant frowny-face. Max just patted him affectionately on the cheek and scampered back to his seat, leaving Hussan to pretend to stew where he sat.
"If anyone ever films these two, Syria and Israel are going to war again..." Hoshi remarked. "But I'm sold. We're syndicalists. Gerald, care to draft the memo?"

"I'll get right on that as soon as mundanes let us self-govern and have political parties..." Gerald replied "Eduardo can even bake the cake."

“There’s another question I’ve been meaning to ask.” Erika broke into the conversation again “You two have gotten really close and I was awake when you got home last night, are you two?” she asked, splitting her index and middle fingers to point at Colin and Gene, then crossing them.

“An item?” Gene asked with raised eyebrows.

“Yeah… I mean, some of us have been saying” and she put her two index fingers together “’now kiss’ for the last couple weeks whenever you weren’t looking.” Hoshi, Max, and Gerald nodded in affirmation.

“I have no idea what they’re talking about. But then again, I don’t pay much attention.” Franklin said.

“Accountant. Head is buried in spreadsheets, but now that Erika mentions it...yeah. I mean, physical affection between telepaths is normal, but you two dial it up to twelve. Comforting someone when they're upset is one thing but you two cuddle while watching action movies.” Su ventured. "And really bad Cronenberg films."

“I’m about as oblivious as Franklin is, but… programmers, what do you want?” Hassan rounded out the roster.

<We should oblige them, I think. Cat’s out of the bag anyway.> Colin sent over to Gene.

<You sure?> Gene asked, not wanting Colin to feel pressured. In reply, Colin glyphed him an image of a closet door exploding in a lethal rain of grapeshot and wood splinters.

<Far be it from me to turn down kissing you...> Gene replied.

“This should answer your question.” Colin replied, reaching over to grab Gene by the shirt collar and pulled him into a deep kiss that lasted for just long enough for everyone to get the picture.

“So… who else here thinks that was kinda hot?” Hoshi asked, looking around at everyone. Colin and Gene raised their hands, no one else did, they just gave her a look.

There was no recrimination, no feeling in the room like he was doing anything wrong or betraying the Corps in any way. Some of them already had him and Gene pegged before he did, the others were caught blind sided. But every last telepath in the room was happy for him and Gene both, projecting that happiness toward them in silent congratulation.

'Why didn't I do this years ago?'

...

Gene and Colin eventually migrated up to Gene’s quarters and took up residence on opposite sides of the bar in Gene’s kitchen. Gene had better stools, they actually had arms, chair backs, and padding. A bottle of rum, another of cola, and two full tumblers sat between them.

“So, I’m here to be briefed.” Gene said.
“Ugh. Yeah.” Colin replied stretching the skin on his face with his hands. “On top of everything else, I’m a cell leader now. As in, espionage and disruption.” That stopped Gene dead in his tracks for a second and it took him a moment to respond.

“For whom?” Gene asked.


“Against whom?” came Gene’s even follow-up.

“The Earth Alliance and quislings within the Psi Corps.” Colin replied. “Specifically the Director’s office.” Gene didn’t say anything for a moment, he just looked at his tumbler, picked it up, and downed half the glass. Colin went ahead and did the same with his.

“Well.” Gene coughed “Now I understand the action blocks. But that’s a stupidly dangerous game, please tell me you have a really good reason.” Gene kept his voice calm, but his left hand was trembling. Colin reached across the bar and took his hand.

"I do." Colin said, he'd yet to really get this far in his own head 'Where do I even start? Bester just approached me and told me about what the Shadows were up to and then I was at war...’ Colin figured that maybe that was the best approach to take. 'But how to word it?'

“Gene, you and I both know the Director doesn’t work in our best interests.” he started, but Gene cut him off before I could finish the line of thought.

“Well, yeah. He’s a mundane. He uses his power to keep us under control and there was his endorsement of Clark which violated the charter, and... rumors I’ve heard over the years, but given the risk that hardly justifies an insurgency.” Gene replied. His tone was clipped but he didn’t raise his voice. He was scared and a little angry. "I... I don't want to risk losing you Colin. Not unless the reason is very very good."

"In 2260 we had to go to war with the shadows after we found out that Director York ordered a re-education camp emptied out so EarthGov could wire the inmates into mind-machine interfaces and sell them to the shadows in exchange for technology.” Colin replied coolly.

"Okay, I’ll admit that’s a pretty good reason” Gene said before the full implication hit him and Colin felt a memory percolate up into Gene's head. “Wait, what? You can confirm that?” Gene sent Colin an image. A memory from someone he mentally tagged as Frantisek, of dead telepaths who had the wiring of Earth Force ships entangled around and within their bodies.

"Yeah, they were rigged into a mind-machine interface to serve as the central core of Shadow ships.” Colin replied. "It drove them all insane. What your...friend there saw were some of the results.”

“Okay, but why?” Gene asked, “And then why go to war after you freed them? I mean, it was done, why risk exposure? Hell, what happened to those ones?”

“Because Shadow vessels use living beings as a central core, which makes them vulnerable to telepathic attack. Hell, they genetically annihilated Narn telepaths a thousand years ago, as far as anyone can tell, for exactly that reason.”

“Holy fuck you mean that part of the Book of G’Quan was literally true?!” Gene exclaimed, but then his brain started working through the logic. If they did it once out of revenge for one war, they’d do it again and they’d finish the job galaxy-wide.
“Yes. That exactly.” Colin confirmed for him.

“And it’s why you said you’ve killed...things.” Gene said, putting those pieces together.

<‘I’m surprised you’re taking this so well’> Colin said mentally.

<‘I’ve heard enough rumors that I figured something was going on. The mass mobilization of telepaths during Sheridan’s war with the Shadows didn’t go unnoticed by EarthGov. I just didn’t think it was that or connected to Earth in any direct way’> Gene replied. <‘Plus... there is Frantisek. I figured that was the sort of shit rebellions were made of and if it were one of the things you had to keep quiet, it was for good reason. But they were in the hands of Sheridan's forces. What happened?’>

<‘Sheridan was just doing what mundanes always do. He helped us rescue our people and keep them safe until the going got rough. Then he betrayed us and used them as weapons.’> Colin replied, unable to keep the contempt from his mental voice before switching back to actual speech.

“Yes. That exactly.” Colin confirmed for him.

“‘I’m surprised you’re taking this so well’” Colin said mentally.

“I did a ‘Black Omega rotation’ inside Sheridan’s ‘Amy of Light’ along with a bunch of other Psi Cops and Bloodhounds. Unfortunately, we’re still dealing with some of the...aftereffects.”

“What do you mean? Both the Shadows and Vorlons are gone.” Gene asked.

“The Shadows helped raise the fortunes of people who hate telepaths, hate the Corps; as well as generalized fascists. The executive branch didn’t De-Clarkify at the end of the civil war, they’re still there. Scheming.”

Gene’s eyes widened as the logic chain assembled itself in his brain. “Some of the shit the Shadows convinced EarthGov to do is still ongoing, isn’t it?”

“From the looks of it, yeah. We don’t know how much.” Colin shook his head in dismay.

Gene took in a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “And the Director has his own loyalists and catspaws within the Corps. Some who likely don’t even know what it is they’re helping with. Hence the cell structure and, what, cold-war-esque operations? We couldn’t keep a shooting war quiet...”

“Exactly. You in?” Colin asked “I... I wasn't counting on us being a couple when we had this talk. That does complicate things.”

In reply, Gene put his free hand on top of Colin's. “Colin, how could I not be? I love my people and if someone’s putting all of us at risk, of course I’m going to do what I can to stop them. More importantly, I love you, and I’ve got your back. I’m not letting you put yourself in danger by yourself.”

“I love you too. And I’m glad to hear you say that; I don’t think I can do what I need to do on my own, and I certainly couldn’t maintain operational security...” Gene chuckled in response to that, right before Colin leaned across the bar and kissed him. They both let their defenses drop for just a moment and brushed each other’s surface thoughts. When they broke it a moment later, Gene actually replied.

“Yeah, operational security would be difficult. I caught a fragment there, something about fallout from Edgars Industries?”

“Yeah.” Colin replied. “We stopped them from engineering a telepath-killing virus during the war. We thought we got the only samples of it and the antiviral countermeasure, but they might...”
have sent samples to EarthGov too, they were working with government sanction. Now… severely mentally ill and disabled telepaths are being transferred, disappearing into a black hole.” Gene blanched and nodded in horrified understanding as he replied.

“And you think they might be used as test subjects; and we have a few telepaths who’ve been severely abused in psychiatric care…”

“Yes.” Colin replied “The best we can do here is protect our charges, they like to falsify documents, so we’re going to have to alert Dr. Cavanaugh to the danger and take steps to intercept whoever it is they send. If they send anyone, we have to be reactive to this one.” After fighting a war, Colin didn't like being reactive or able to influence operational tempo. It felt too much like being in a siege, which was the anti-thesis of how he liked to fight.

“I think we can make that work, and not leave any sort of trail. Think she’ll show up at the self-defense refresher?” Gene asked.

“Probably.” Colin answered. "In all the years I’ve known her, she’s never missed a professional development opportunity.”

"And you trust her? Not in general, but with this specifically?” Gene asked.

“Yeah. She won’t let anyone or anything fuck with her patients, and she has no love for the past two directors.”

“Alright. Then I’d recommend doing it in person at the refresher, on one of the breaks. No paper or transmission trail that way, I can make sure no one else is in the room or able to eavesdrop.”

“Then that sounds like as good a plan as we'll get.” Colin agreed.

Gene looked pensive for a minute. Colin gave him his mental privacy so he could think things over.

“Colin, it’s high time I leveled with you too.” Gene said after a minute or so "I should have talked to you sooner it's just... I don't know how much I can say without breaking and it's dangerous to know. But then, we're both fucked now anyway if Internal Affairs scans us."

“I can help on that last part. They've scanned me and found nothing.” Colin replied. “I can teach you how to encrypt memories.” Gene gave him a look that Colin couldn't place, like Colin had just told him the impossible. Which Colin could understand because encrypting memories was not widely known in the Corps.

“That is damned impressive… you guys don’t fuck around, do you?”

“No, we don’t” Colin said "If it makes you feel more comfortable, you can always skip operation names and dates... Those aren't the important parts anyway and I've already inferred a hell of a lot.” at that, Gene considered for a moment.

“Want to transition to the chair?” he asked, motioning toward his huge arm chair “I caught you eyeing it when you first came in here, and I kinda feel like I might need to sit on the therapist’s couch, by which I mean your lap.”

“We can do whatever you feel most comfortable with.” Colin replied “This is all about you, love.”

They made it over to the chair, a large luxuriously cushioned monster with a detached leg rest and adjustable back. Colin sank into it and groaned in undisguised pleasure. It was almost perfectly
comfortable, soft, but under the soft layer was a supportive material that cradled his body.

“My god, it’s like being born in reverse.”

“I know, right?” Gene confirmed, then fell across and between the arms of the chair like a collapsed bridge into Colin’s lap, propping his legs and back up with the arms

“Welcome to the therapy couch. I remind you though, I am not a licensed therapist.” He winked and supported Gene’s head with his hands and ran his fingers through the hair at the back of his head and neck.

“That’s fine, best friend and boyfriend is just as good.” Gene sighed loudly “Did you know that military telepaths who’ve been in long enough weep when they get new assignments?” he said softly.

“I’ve…heard that, yeah. It’s that bad?”

“Imagine for a moment that after years of being surrounding by a society that values you, you’re suddenly thrust back into mundane society. The people you’re with don’t trust you. They view you as a device, not a person, let alone one of their own. Like you’re an alien or spy in their midst that they must tolerate: which in some cases you are if your assignment involves loyalty checks or whatever other Orwellian bullshit Earth Force is engaging in that week. Even the ones who might reach out to you can’t integrate you with the unit because the others don’t want you. So, you end up as an outsider looking in on a group bond you don’t get to share. If you’re posted on a colony or based out of a civilian station, there’s other people. You can find a commercial telepath to spend time with, or just develop external friendships. But if you’re posted to a ship on deep-range patrol or a team with long-term deniable mission profiles…”

“They’re all you have.” to which Gene nodded.

“And they’re all broken inside. People on those ships spend months cooped together without access to a security cleared therapist, reliving psychological trauma from the Earth-Minbari war or their most recent mission in their dreams. It isn’t a healthy place for a telepath. There’s nowhere to go to escape it. The Corps rotates people out of those assignments for that exact reason.”

“How’d you handle it?” Colin asked.

“The Corps had good security cleared psychiatrists when I was off rotation. I was prescribed anti-anxiety medications and antidepressants; periodic ketamine injections to ward off depression. I dealt with that part. What got me was the moral injury. I didn’t really develop bonds with those in my unit, so when they died… I didn’t have survivor’s guilt. No, what we were ordered to do got to me. That shit required guided meditation under MDMA to really process.”

“Give a few examples?” there wasn’t much for Colin to do other than be a sounding board. He had taken enough clinical psych to know that. “Within the bounds of what you’re comfortable saying.” he leaned in and kissed Gene’s forehead. It seemed like the thing to do.

“Some things I could feel good about. That civil war on Akdor? I got to shield marines against telepathic attack; protecting people is alright. Half my platoon got shot, but no one got their brains scragged. Other shit.” Gene shook his head. “Our civil war was brutal. We’re not supposed to be fucking around in mundane politics, but try telling the Director that! They fucking made me violate the charter. Inserted me on Mars. Had me hunting Free Mars and Sheridan’s Anla’Shok through the god damn tunnels like a foxhound and the guys they had me working with were some sadistic Night Watch motherfuckers; decorated and promoted now. Just scanning those poor
‘That explains his particularly strong reaction to Xun...’ Colin thought. Colin figured it had been something like that. Mundane soldiers could refuse those orders so of course they picked the ones who wouldn’t, but telepaths weren’t allowed to refuse orders at all. A P12 couldn’t necessarily block out the sadistic glee or agony completely. Not if he wasn’t allowed to break line of sight, not if it went on for hours or days. Gene shuddered just thinking about it and Colin caught a memory fragment of a Minbari’s toenails being ripped out with pliers, another of a human being subject to electric shock while hanging on a makeshift strappado.

“I refused to participate in that. I forced the victims to dissociate or shut down their pain centers when I could. Mercy killed more than a couple; just...quiet cardiac arrest at an opportune moment at their silent request. Fuck. Everything I could do to not be like Them.”

“You put in for a transfer right after that?” Colin asked.

“Yeah. As soon as the damn peace treaty was signed. Six times before that.” Colin took off his gloves and casually stroked Gene’s scalp and gently scanned him. He wasn’t suffering from the acute effects of trauma, between therapists and medication he’d processed it all enough that he could remember and talk about his experiences without reliving them. At least without an external stressor like seeing Xun had been. But Colin still felt that Gene thought his soul was stained, that beneath the surface, he sometimes felt like a monster. It wasn’t, and he wasn’t, but Gene still felt that way.

“Gene, you had a gun to your head; hell, to all our heads. I can’t say I would have done differently and most of our own people wouldn’t even have done that much. They’d have dissociated and cooperated.” Colin reminded him. “You’re not a monster. Far from it.”

“Then the standards for ‘not being a monster’ have slipped. And I still feel like one, because I still helped them kill or worse-than-kill a lot of innocent people.”

“Well, what do you think will help? I mean, the past can’t exactly be erased, but if there is anything I can do to help, you’ve got me.” Colin told him, reaching over with his free hand to take hold of Gene’s and squeeze gently by way of encouragement.

“Talking about it helps. But ultimately? Closure? Atonement? Fuck, I don’t know.” Colin thought for a moment, putting the proverbial hamster in his head on amphetamines. He wanted to give Gene that closure and maybe a chance to atone even if it only mattered to Gene, but he also realized it went well beyond one man. He knew it was probably bad in Military division just because of the obvious occupational stress, but he hadn’t looked at the problem from the perspective of someone who was inside.

He knew what being a Psi Cop could do to someone, and they had latitude in how they worked, Military teeps didn’t even have that level of choice, so Earth Force chewed them up and spit them out. He imagined what it’d be like for him, isolated among normals and forced to do or witness the unspeakable, and he shuddered.

Then he remembered something Dr. Cavanaugh had said to him in his first clinical psych course. ‘No telepath who’s been outside TeepTown is whole, not one.’ He wanted to make it stop; for Gene, for himself, Zara, every commercial and legal telepath, every medical telepath who had not just their own problems to deal with but everyone else’s too. The only problem was that he didn’t know how.

“I don’t know how to do that, but if I think of anything, I’ll let you know.” Colin said.
"We could always try overthrowing the government?" Gene suggested. Colin leaned forward and kissed him.

<Don't tempt me. For you, I'd do it.> Colin wasn't even joking.

**Sunday February 1st, 2263**

Colin typed the address codes into his datapad that would link the annex’s tachyon communication array to Zara’s cadre in Geneva, and waited for the uplink. He was sitting on Gene’s lap on that massive chair, and the datapad was set on a tripod to leave both their hands free. It took a moment for the link to be established, but after that there wouldn’t be any message delays; once it was connected a kindly older man wearing bifocals answered.

“Hey Mike.” Colin said happily. Beaming at the man who raised him as if to see 'I'm doing alright'.

“Colin, Gene, it’s good to see you! Calling for Zara? You’re a little early.”

“Well, we figured we’d talk to you first and see if anything’s going on she might not tell us.” Colin replied “And it’s good to see you too.”

“Uh no, nothing bad, anyway. Zara broke the math placement test she took this past week. Nine years old and doing trig, we actually have to send her to the minor academy for math.”

“Sounds about right. I wish we could take credit for that, but she was like that when she got here.” Gene replied

“It’s not so much that she’s a prodigy or anything, but her birth parents are both academics and instilled a love of learning early. That doesn’t go away even if they're...” Mike trailed off, searching for a term and visibly having it on the tip of his tongue.

“Miserable garbage people?” Gene ventured.

“Well, I’d use the term ‘assholes’ because they can have redeeming qualities.” Mike replied. “Speaking of which, have one of you considered formalizing adoption? I’m bending the rules for now, but if someone were to find out and care, there isn’t much we could do at that point and I couldn’t take your calls. Plus, should you find your way back to Earth on leave, only a legal parent or godparent could sign her out for a museum trip or holidays. We might all be family, but mundane law doesn’t see it that way. I’d be pretty easy given that her birth parents’ rights have been severed.”

“We have, yeah. We need to look into whether we need to be married to file jointly and ask Zara about it of course. Otherwise a month seems a bit fast. For both things.” Colin informed him. Mike looked astonished for a second then his smile broadened.

“Colin, I remember when you were twelve and you had a massive crush on Marcel Szewcyk. I'm glad to see you finally found someone.”

“How the hell did you know about that?” Colin asked. "He knew, no one else did as far as I know."

“Remember that time you broke the common room window?” Mike asked.

“That was you?” Colin asked. He'd been scanned and punished by a grin for that little
misadventure.

<Wait what?> Gene asked <You got in trouble?>

<I was twelve. Of course I got in trouble.> Colin replied. 'As if I've always been the perfectly behaved member of a super-secret telepath conspiracy within the Psi Corps... as if!'

<I p'heard that.> Gene replied, and kissed Colin's shoulder.

“Yeah, it came up when I scanned you but it was… private and I didn’t say anything. Maybe I should have, but it's a tough needle to thread. And Gene?”

“Yeah Mike?” Gene asked.

“He’s one of my babies. Just because I’ve helped raise hundreds of kids doesn’t mean I love any of them any less. Hurt him, and I’ll hunt you down.”

“Uh… yes sir!” Gene replied, rubbing the back of his neck nervously.

“Love you too Mike.” Colin said warmly, inflecting Mike’s name to mean 'Dad'. The Corps tried to separate those roles out from individuals, but it never really succeeded, especially not with orphans. “But I don’t think you need to worry about that.”

“I know, I know. But I have to say it anyway.” Mike replied. “Anyway, academically Zara is ahead, she’s starting to make friends. I only have the highlight reel from therapy, but Dr. Niehuis says she’s got a good start and making progress. She’s perfectly comfortable among telepaths, but…” he trailed off a bit.

“What?” Gene asked.

“Well, she’s definitely afraid of mundane men, and shows an abnormal interest in combat telepathy and remote sensing.” Mike replied, a concerned look on his face.

“We encouraged the second one. We figure the more confident she feels in her ability to defend herself and sense danger, the better she’ll do out in the world later. As for her and mundanes, well, you read the case file.” Colin replied.

“I did.” Mike shook his head in dismay “I suppose I’ll let her continue training in advanced self-defense then, now that I know why. It isn’t like we could really stop her anyway, she practices on squirrels and small birds. Nothing harmful, she just uses them to see around corners and things.” Both Colin and Gene snickered.

“Oh you should have seen her when we told her we were going to teach her how to do that. I could almost see the lightning flash in the background.” Gene said. Mike laughed.

“Graduate school then?” Mike replied.

“Probably.” Colin confirmed.

“Well, there she is, I can feel her lurking behind my office door. I’ll leave you three alone.”

“Thanks Mike.” Gene said while the older man set his tablet down and opened the door. No words were exchanged verbally when he opened the door but soon enough Zara’s face was gracing the screen.

“Hi!” She said, beaming into the tablet’s camera.
“Hey sweetheart, how have you been?” Colin replied grinning right back.

“Yeah, you settling in okay?” Gene added.

“It’s kinda weird here to be honest. It’s not like other schools.” Zara replied, though not unhappily.

“Not in a bad way just different. Teacher Chastain is nice, but there’s twelve of us in this house so a lot of the time we take care of each other. I like it. I still have nightmares sometimes. But they go away and become good dreams, and when I wake up, all the other kids are piled on my bed with me...you two were right.”

“Eighteen million strong.” Gene said and Colin could feel the warmth in his heart, wishing he’d been raised in a cadre, even if he hadn’t manifested until later.

“We’d never steer you wrong Zara.” Colin replied “So you’re making friends, I take it?”

“Oh yeah! At first I was the New Kid and I know how that goes. Then I figured out that all I needed to do was tell them my parents are Psi Cops.” Neither of the two men could suppress laughter.

“Yeah.” Gene said between breaths “Kids.” Colin managed to calm himself down enough to speak a second later.

“That was clever of you. You’re not teaching them any of our tricks, are you? I would absolutely disapprove of you doing that, they’re too young.” Colin said in a tone that indicated that he would absolutely approve.

“No dad, I’m totally not teaching Brandon how to use pigeons as spies during constructive playtime.” Zara replied in a tone that indicated she absolutely was. “I haven’t started practicing the other stuff yet though, but I’ll always have a teacher supervise when I do. I know the rules.”

“Uh Oh.” Gene said “We’ve created a monster.” he winked in the direction of the camera. Zara giggled, composed herself and stared back at the camera with faux dead-eyes.

“Soon.” was all she said, propelling all three of them into guffaws again.

“You do that too well.” Gene told her when he got himself under control again.

“Thanks!” Zara replied still grinning from ear to ear “So how have you been doing?”

“Well, other than missing you, we’ve both been doing really well. I’m a little closer to catching a murderer, Gene passed his certification.”

“Well that’s good!” Zara replied “Any closer on...the other thing?”

“Yep!” Gene replied excitedly “We should be hearing back from the courts soon. It’s looking like the judge is going to give us scanning warrants. They’ll probably be a bit limited, but we should be able to find everyone at least.”

<Then we can hunt everyone involved down like dogs.> Gene said into Colin’s mind.

<What I wouldn’t give for a pack of Bloodhounds…> Colin replied <Actually that’s not a bad idea… I’ll make some calls.>

“Speaking of judges and legal things…” Colin said in the most awkward segway he could imagine.

“Gene and I have been talking and well… we love you like you were our own. And while the
Corps is Mother and the Corps is Father, everyone else, you know... has parents. They come visit and they’re in everyone’s life. We... we want to be that for you, officially, if you want us.”

Zara just looked at him like he was dumb, but the way her eyes went moist told a different story.

“I already call you both dad, duh.”

“Okay.” Gene replied “That settles that then. Now we have to figure out if we need to be married to adopt jointly.” Zara gave them both a look after drying the tears that leaked down her cheek.

“I love you too, but isn’t that a little... much?” she said.

“Oh, well” Colin started “It’s not a matter of ‘if’ with that we think. But ‘when’. We’re getting married for us. We just haven’t formally gotten engaged or agreed on the time and place. But we know what the answer is gonna be when the time is right. But, you you know, officially only been together a couple days. We’re ridiculous, but not that ridiculous.” she looked at them quizzically for a moment and then Colin could swear the saw the light bulb turn on over her head.

“Wait a minute, you mean you weren’t already?” Zara scrunched her nose and looked positively perplexed “How didn’t I notice that? Or maybe I just assumed because...huh.”

<She's not entirely wrong...> Colin mused, but didn't really feel like doing it.

<I'm willing to go retroactive if you are.> Gene replied. Colin thought it over, and from a certain point of view it was true.

<I'm absolutely okay with post-dating our relationship, but I think she should know we're doing that and why.>

<Hmm.> Gene considered. <Yeah. That seems more-right to me.>

"Strictly speaking, we'll probably back-date the anniversary because we just kinda fell into being a couple without being a couple. We knew how we felt, but not how the other did. Sure we were cuddly but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything romantic, right?"

Zara thought about it for a second.

“No. It’s different for teeps.” she said after a minute. “Mundanes aren’t like that. But why didn’t you say anything?”

“I had Colin figured out for a while, but didn’t want to make things awkward for him until I knew why he wasn’t open with his feelings.” Gene replied

“For me, well...People get wrapped up in other things and lose track of who they are and what they want.”

“And that happened to you?” Zara asked.

“Yeah. We raise our kids in cadres, but most still have parents to help with what they need as individuals. The Psi Corps is a great place to grow up Zara but because there are a lot of kids it’s a bit one-size-fits-all, you know? We try, but if there’s something like being gay or transgender, or something otherwise out of the ordinary, we don’t always catch it.”

“Yeah. And your mom and dad were killed fighting the Dilgar...” Zara said “Anything I can do to help?”
“I think we’re good here” Gene told her, then considered for a second before continuing “But you know what you can do? Watch out for the other kids. Especially if they don’t have anyone else. Try to be safe for them to talk to. A lot of the time, that’s all it takes.”

“And tell everyone about us. Not just that we’re Psi Cops, but that we’re gay Psi Cops, and the Corps loves us anyway.” Colin followed up. “That was my biggest problem. I felt like I was failing the Corps somehow by being who I am, that couldn’t be further from the truth, but no one ever told me that.”

“That’s easy. I can do that.” Zara thought for a moment "Now that I know that's a problem, anyway. I wouldn't have thought to do it otherwise, and that's kinda the problem I guess.”

“Awesome.” Gene replied, Colin could hear and feel his beaming smile “And remember, you can always talk to us if you’re having a rough time.”

“Speaking of which…What have you been learning in class?” Colin asked.

“Well, they put me in trigonometry in the minor academy, so right now it’s mostly identities and imaginary numbers.” Zara replied “It’s hard, I still don’t really ‘get’ imaginary numbers, but I can do it. Just have to work at it!” she followed up with determination before switching to something more contemplative “It isn’t what I’m used to though. Teacher Xiang talks and everyone else is pretty much quiet, if you have question…” she tapped her head “and she’s good enough to answer it, while continuing her lecture. The recitation section is more…” she was clearly searching for a term.


“Yes! That! Teacher Linden poses pretty complicated problems and we split into groups to solve it. He just makes sure everyone contributes. The group that solves the problem first gets a point of extra credit, but the groups get shuffled between problems.”

“Do you know why?” Colin asked. Zara put her thinking cap in, scrunching her nose, but shook her head.

“I’m not sure.” she finally said.

“Everything’s a lesson kiddo. Even if it’s between the lines and real subtle” Colin said. She gave him a look.

“You’re not gonna tell me, are you?” Zara asked dryly.

“Nope! It’s best if you figure it out on your own. Or failing that, asking one of the other kids. If they have it figured out, they’ll probably give you a hint. If they don’t you can work together to find the answer.” which was, Colin mused, itself a hint. “I’ll tell you what. If you don’t have it figured out by next week, I’ll give you another hint.”

“You’re on!” was Zara’s only reply

“This is gonna be a thing, isn’t it? Watch out Zara, he’s gonna Socrates you through your education.” Gene chided and nuzzled Colin's neck affectionately.

“Hey, I was raised by teachers. I’m a product of my environment!” Colin faux protested to much giggling from the other end of the call.

“It’s okay.” Gene said comfortingly, taking a second to kiss the side of Colin’s head “I guess that
just means I have to be the one delivering dad jokes.”

“What have I gotten myself into?” Zara said, bracing for impact. Colin groaned.

“Knock knock…”

"NO!” Colin and Zara yelled.

**Monday February 2nd, 2263**

After giving the morning self-defense refresher and reaching his own couch, Colin called up his favorite theropod and got through the secretariat with minimal fuss. Gene was sitting next to him, and he put the call on speaker so Gene could join in.

“Hey Serena.” Colin said.

“Hello!” Gene added.

“Colin, Gene, hi. This about the case? Should be getting the court’s decision soon. Don’t know when, could be anywhere from a few days to a few weeks.” Serena said in a rapid staccato.

“No, no. Personal legal matter, kinda.” Colin said.

“Oh this should be good. So send my bill to you, not the Corps, gotcha. Hold on, let me pour myself some tea.” a brief pause and the sound of liquid being poured. “Okay, hit me.”

“Colin and I are looking to formally adopt.” Gene said, letting that shoe drop without fanfare or prevarication.

“... Okay that’s unusual.” Serena said "Wait a minute. Does that mean you two are?"

"Yep!” Gene replied. "And before you say it, you were half right and half wrong. I most definitely did have feelings for Colin then, but clearly you were wrong about him being gay."

"All I heard was 'you were right'. CALLED IT! BOOYAH!” Serena replied, projecting her voice loudly but not actually yelling. Colin rolled his eyes.

<She noticed that early?> 'She’s way too perceptive...' Colin privately thought, but then also thought that maybe he was just jealous that she knew before he did. His life may well have been a bit easier for a few weeks. *Or I may have put the breaks on out of professional ethics...* he conceded to himself.

<She hit on me, kinda had to out myself. From there I was high on metazine and might not have been as guarded as I usually would have been.>

<Sure. Sure. Blame it on the drugs...> Colin gently teased.

"But congrats! I'm sure you two are adorable. I guess I'll find out when I next see you. That said, I’ll have to transfer you to our family law specialist, but honestly I kinda want to hear the background on this.”

“Alright. So you know that warehouse raid a few weeks back?” Colin asked.

“How could I forget? So many billable hours.” she replied.
“Right, well, one of the kids we rescued, Zara Tam, lost her parents.” Colin said.

“More to the point, her birth parents hate telepaths enough to disown their own daughter, so we took her in while we waited for the Corps to send a ship to pick everyone up.” Gene clarified.

“I see where this is going… you bonded?” Serena asked.

“That about sums it up.” Gene replied. “Somewhere along the line…yeah. She started thinking of us as her dads and well…it was mutual. Of course, we knew that would probably happen going in.”

“That’s sweet. Pretty fast for that kind of bond to form though.” Serana remarked.

“Is it?” Colin asked. “Emotional bonds form pretty fast for us if they’re going to. Start taking on the role of a parent and…well…”

“Hmm.” the lawyer considered "It's a bit different for us, but we’re not inside each other’s heads.”

“Right” Colin confirmed.

“Let me transfer to Sumeet van der Vliert, he specializes in family law, he should be able to help you out.”

“Thank you.” they both said in unison.

“I’m not sure I’m ever gonna get used to that; but you’re welcome.”

The line clicked over and chimed for a moment before someone picked it up.

“This is Sumeet van der Vliert” said the voice on the other line. Colin wasn’t sure he’d ever heard someone with a combined Dutch and Hindi accent, but there it was. “What can I help you with?”

Gene and Colin took turns explaining it to him while he listened patiently.

“Oh this will be an interesting case. I don’t think there’s any need to litigate or anything like that. What being a parent means is a little different in the Corps as I understand it, but the Earth Alliance didn’t actually change any of the process. Adoption is just rare in the Corps for obvious reasons. The only stumbling block is if the Corps opposes it for some reason, but they’d only have a leg to stand on if you were somehow unfit parents. Which, given that you’re working Psi Cops, they wouldn’t ever claim in open court. I assume you’ve talked to Zara about it?”

“We have, yeah.” Gene answered.

“Good. Makes it easy. I can draw up the paperwork, you sign, her legal guardian signs” he paused “Who is her legal guardian right now?”

“That would be Michael Chastain, cadre house parent.” Colin said.

“Right, right. Then we send it off to a judge and it should be pretty pro-forma from there. Um, you are unmarried, correct?”

“For now. That’s likely to change soon, which is the other question we had. We’re pretty sure we can but want to make sure.” Gene said.

“Ah, the legality of that. Right.” Sumeet typed something into a computer terminal, and Colin figured he was looking up relevant case law. He was strangely nervous. So many rights had been stripped from telepaths that there was always the chance that same-sex marriage had been too.
“Fantastic. There is relevant case law.” Sumeet said after an amount of time that Colin felt dragged on for ages.

“Seriously?” Colin asked. That was news to him. Good news. He really didn’t want to be that kind of trailblazer. Trodden ground was far more comfortable.

“Indeed! So, the Earth Alliance, notably not the Psi Corps, tried to oppose a marriage between two lesbian telepaths back in 2180. They weren’t genetically compatible. The court ruled that because the question of them bearing children was moot, and discrimination based on sexual orientation falls under strict scrutiny, provided any children they produced were with genetically compatible sperm donors...a marriage was perfectly legal. There have been a few other cases too. Some attempts to change the underlying law that never went anywhere. It won’t stop administrative arm-twisting of course, but it does mean no one can say no, or overtly punish you.”

“That’s really good news. Thank you, Counselor.” Colin said.

“My pleasure.” Sumeet replied, and after exchanging some pleasantries, they disconnected the call. Colin twisted around to look into Gene’s eyes.

'I'm still not proposing yet...” Gene informed him, before pulling Colin into a deep and passionate kiss.
Gene and Colin descended the stairs into the basement training room. The weightlifting equipment, treadmill, and other machines had been moved to the far side to provide enough room on the padded floor for about a dozen commercial and medical telepaths who were all standing and milling about waiting for the self-defense refresher to start. They were a motley bunch of various skin colors, ages, sizes, all of them wearing business-casual except for the two medical telepaths who were in Psi Corps issued scrubs, and Carlos Rivera who was in a knit sweater and jeans, but he was in the Education division and had somewhat looser requirements in terms of personal appearance. Social worker, not office worker.

Colin was particularly pleased to see Dr. Nishita Cavanaugh. Colin wasn’t especially happy to be increasing her workload, but he knew he didn’t really have much choice.

She used to have dual postings as a professor in the major academy and in Psi Corps Medical, which always made Colin wonder why she was posted out here in the middle of nowhere. Administratively sidelined? Just wanted to treat patients and didn’t care how or where? Colin didn’t know.

He gave her a smile and a nod as he passed, and she nodded back. When Colin got to into position and Gene settled in beside him, he switched his mind over to teacher mode; a remnant still hard-wired into his memory from teaching undergraduates in the major academy while he was in graduate school.

“Good morning!” he said chipperly “You all know me by now, but you may not have met my partner Gene. He’ll be helping out with today’s refresher course.” Gene waved and happily said hello, they said hello back with nowhere near as much enthusiasm; except for the two medical telepaths, they were evidently very comfortable with early mornings.

“Did you not drink your coffee this morning?” Gene asked. One of the commercial telepaths, an Australian whose name was Robert answered with half lidded eyes

“Yes, we did, but it is still seven AM ya shitcunts” he said bitterly.

“Well, every so often we’ll take a break so you can grab extra coffee, a smoke, or just use the bathroom. I know it’s early, but we have a lot to cover and this was the only time that fit with people’s schedules.” Colin replied. Half-day seminars were always like this.

“Doesn’t mean we have to like it!” Carlos blurted out, most of the others laughed at least a little bit and nodded in agreement.

“That’s fair. Okay, here's the plan for the day. We have three topics.” he held out his thumb for one “The first is passive defense” thumb and index for two “the second is brute force defense and probes” he then added his middle finger to the mix for three “lastly, battles of imago useful against more powerful opponents. Any questions?” None were forthcoming.

“Alright, let’s get started then. Passive defenses take two forms. The first is your awareness of your surroundings. Accessing your sensory systems is very easy because most of you won’t notice a surface scan, and your sensory inputs are right there on the surface of your thoughts. Messing with them is one of the best ways to compromise a telepath if you can pull it off.” with that, he
reached out with his mind and gently touched the surface thoughts of one of the P5s, a middle aged white guy with brown hair named Tom, and made him smell smoke. He sniffed and looked around.

“Hold on, does anyone else smell that?” Tom asked. When everyone shook their heads, he calmed down. Then, only in his mind, Colin made him hear the sound of a fire alarm. Tom jumped up with a start and left the pack, who for their part simply stared at him like he'd gone mad. He walked toward the door in a reasonably calm and orderly fashion barely fighting down panic; but Colin had moved the apparent location of the door according to his senses. He walked straight into the wall with a thud and an ‘oof’ sound as he knocked the air out of his own lungs, Tom ungracefully fell flat on his ass.

“What the hell, Tom?” one of the P7s named Johannes asked derisively

“Are you okay?” a P6 named Indiri asked, walking over to help him off the floor, but Carlos was there first, picking him up off the floor.

Then Gene forced them all to smell smoke, he tried to get them all to hear the alarm and succeeded with all but Carlos, Nishita and the other medical telepath Dmitry Petrovich; who noticed the ruse and clamped down on their minds. Everyone else scurried toward the door, even while Carlos tried to wave them off. Nishita and Dmitry started to pump out telepathic static just well enough that the commercial telepaths could tell they were being gaslit. They all clamped down on their thoughts, and Gene was excluded from their minds.

“Excellent!” Colin exclaimed “Sorry about that Tom, I basically picked you at random.”

“Uh… it’s okay. What just happened?” Tom asked Gene picked up from there

“I tried the same trick on all of them that Colin did on you. Distorted your sensory inputs, so you thought the building was on fire. If we were looking to hurt you or lure you somewhere, we could have played you like a fiddle.” Gene told him, and Colin cut back in.

“You did alright to start with Tom. You asked if anyone else smelled it. Your mistake was not shoring up your defenses to make sure if it was an external suggestion, or if you were about to have a seizure.” the rest of the class chuckled at that particular form of dark humor. “Nishita, Dmitry, Carlos what tipped you off?”

"I figured out what you did to Tom and guarded myself. Trying to get that many people means your probe has to be pretty casual, which means I can block it out.” Carlos replied.

“Timing.” came the Russian's response, his accent fairly pronounced “Everyone picked up on the smoke at the same time. Plus, I thought I felt someone lightly brush against my mind and didn’t see any smoke or flames.”

“Same here.” confirmed Nishita. “That and I know you Colin. You're predictable that way.”

“Then you started jamming to protect the others and warning them off the door. Good work.” Colin replied with a smile. “We know our friendly neighborhood serial killer can fabricate realities, but even I can’t completely take over the sensorium of multiple people. Not because I’m not strong enough--I am--but because I can’t keep track of what that many people should be seeing, hearing, or smelling. It’s too much input for me to process, and vision is the hardest due to perspective and the level of detail required. Chances are, he’ll use smaller tricks like the one we just used. But he can’t get everyone in an area unless he’s a P11 or P12. So, you can use other people as a guidepost. If you perceive something that other people don’t, chances are it isn’t
there. If something seems distorted, chances are it is not real.”

The other telepaths nodded soberly.

“The other passive defense you have is the buddy system.” Gene told them “I know, Colin harps on it all the time and you brush him off because he was raised in the Corps and they hold hands while frolicking around William Karges’ statue on Psi Corps Birthday”

“Hey!” came Nishita’s voice in protestation, before it trailed off to something softer “... you’re not wrong...” the rest of the class laughed, including Colin because it was actually kind of true.

“But there’s a reason they do that.” Gene continued “We’re stronger together than we are separately. If someone takes control of your sensorium, chances are they can’t do it to the second telepath and that person can help you. If you have to, you can join your minds into a Gestalt and fight off someone more powerful than you are, and every last one of you knows how to do that.”

“We realize you can’t always be attached at the hip” Colin followed up “You have contracts, some of you even live alone and away from others; however, do what you can to reduce your threat surface. Carpool, meet up and take public transit together, however you make it to your contracts, spend as little time alone as possible.” he thought for a second “Hell, it’s a good habit to get into anyway. If mundanes want to mess with you, two telepaths are more intimidating than one.”

Colin passed everyone a mental image of Xun Yang as he’d been in life, then him in the hospital, then the simple clay urn containing his ashes that was sent to his next of kin.

<I mean that. Xun died because he was alone. I don’t want anymore funerals, and you don’t want it to be yours.>

The rest of the telepaths caught the mental image and his message, and replied back with a mix of grim nods, sorrow, and anger. Tom raised his hand to speak, Colin nodded at him.

“Do you two bother with it, I mean, is this something that is just useful for us of lower Psi-rating or do you take your own advice?” Colin grinned at the question and answered.

“Absolutely. Barring times when we cannot physically occupy the same space due to separate commitments, we’re never more than ten meters apart. Often much less than that.” Colin winked “If there was a statue of William Karges, we might even dance around it together, but we’ll settle for a maypole in a few months.”

“Do we really need to wait a few months? And do we really need the maypole to dance?” Gene asked casually.

“I suppose not. Even without involving Franklin I have a few good waltzes in my library, and there’s always the Tango.” Colin answered in a casual but speculative manner.

“Hmm” Gene gave him a thoughtful expression “I’ve always enjoyed a waltz. We should probably get back on topic though.” most of the other telepaths in the room looked confused, unable to tell if they were joking. Colin was not. Gene probably not either. Every telepath but Nishita and Carlos were murmuring either vocally or telepathically at that point. Colin caught snippets either with his ears or his mind and it summed up as ‘Clearly it's more than the buddy system for these two.’

“Yes, apologies everyone, we lost ourselves for a moment. But yes, we do utilize the buddy system. If we didn’t, mundanes would have killed me last month. Any other relevant questions?” No one seemed to have anything relevant to the topic. “Alright, let’s take a five-minute break and
grab some coffee or something. The next section is going to be longer and you're going to want fresh minds. Oh, and Nishita, can I talk to you for a second?"

“Oh, sure” she responded “Mind if I grab some coffee first? Late night.”

“By all means.” She poured herself a cup of coffee--she even brought her own mug--and garnished it with creamer and a sugar substitute, then joined Colin just inside the door while everyone else filed upstairs.

“It’s good to see you. “Colin said.

“Likewise.” she said with a radiant smile and they exchanged a quick hug. Then she became a bit more diffident “I have to ask, just to be sure are you and...”

“Yes.” Colin answered, knowing the question before she finished asking it, and he had a huge shit-eating grin on his face while saying it.

“That’s great! You seem much happier today than you were a year ago”

“You can partially blame Gene for that.” he grinned “Neither of us care who knows either. The opposite actually.” Nishita chuckled at that one

“So I noticed. That’s good. There are a lot of closet cases in the Corps, I’ve treated more than my fair share, I'm glad you didn't end up one of them. How is Zara doing?” she asked.

“That’s what we figured. Zara is doing well. Gene and I are formally adopting her actually.”

“Oh my God!” she started enthusiastically, but then thought better of it “Wait. Is that even a thing, can you do that?” she asked.

“We talked to a lawyer. There isn’t any law or regulation that says we can’t. So we’re going to.” Colin said, shrugging. Nishita looked a bit confused.

“I guess maybe I’m missing something but she’s being raised in the Corps. I’d absolutely get it if you were raising her or even if you were on Earth but...”

“Ah, I see. Well, leaving aside the fact that it’s probably going to be good for her in the long run, we… found ourselves loving her like she was our own daughter, and she loves us right back. Plus there are practical reasons, visitation for one.”

“Oh.” she smiled a bit “You have my blessing.”

“Glad to hear it. I... respect and value your advice. Always have. However that's not exactly what I needed to talk to you about; don’t get me wrong, we need to catch up, but there are pressing concerns.”

“You mean the teenagers you brought in a few weeks ago?” her facial expression got markedly less happy.

“That bad huh?” he asked. Her expression became guarded

“They’re doing surprisingly okay. Given what they’ve been through I’d expect worse. Had they been through it alone, I might expect at least one to have tried to commit suicide. As it is, they support each other.” She informed him, and Colin knew she was holding back medical details that were more private. He even had a good idea what it was she wasn't discussing, which was their
parapsychological bond.

“I figured they would, what’s your treatment approach?”

“Antidepressants and lots of telepathy and MDMA assisted cognitive-behavioral therapy.” She said. "I’m basically walking them through their memories, helping them process them and develop better modes of thought about them. It’s going to take a while. You know how I feel about psychosurgery if it can be avoided."

“Easy way out.” Colin agreed wholeheartedly. “It’s the one technique I’m licensed to use and I don’t use it for a reason outside emergencies.”

“Yeah. Unless you’re trying to keep someone from killing themselves as soon as you turn your back, it’s not worth changing who someone fundamentally is. Thankfully, none of my patients are at risk for that.”

“Good” Colin said, nodding sagely. It was a good treatment plan. Telepathy made psychiatry much easier in a lot of ways, even before one got into more invasive methods. “Are their parents… supportive?”

“They show up for family therapy and don’t hate their children, telepaths in general and the Corps are another matter. They’re leaning leaning toward Sleepers. They’re in contact with each other and Sam’s mum bombards the others with conspiracy theories, so that isn’t helping. I’m going to try group-therapy this week.”

“Fuck. We can’t let that happen.” Colin replied, recoiling from the thought. Doubtless their parents just wanted the whole thing to go away and wanted their children to be normal again. Well-meaning though it was, Colin knew it would be a disaster.

“I agree, but there isn’t much I can do unless we want to take the parents to court. I’ve explained the side effects, but I’ve never been on Sleepers I’m not sure I can really get it across. Wait a second; Gene’s been on them right?”

“Gene has. Want us to come by? We can come in see how they’re doing then talk to the parents in group session.”

“Visitors break up the monotony of hospital stays, and it… would be useful.” Nishita answered.

“When?” Colin asked.

“Friday at two PM.” She supplied.

“Consider it done. But there is one more thing…How much do you trust Dmitry?” Colin asked, making sure no one else had a line of sight. Nishita got it and shifted over to her mental voice on a high band no one below a P10 would detect.

<He’s alright. He has a conscience or seems to. Why?>

'Not good enough.' Colin thought.

<One second, security precautions.> Colin cautioned.

<Alright> she replied. Colin focused his mind and reached out with it, looking for the familiar signature of Gene’s mind. Even without line of sight and with walls in the way they were so intimately familiar that he was easy find, though actual contact took a lot of effort. He was out in
the atrium getting to know some of the commercial telepaths. He contacted Gene on that same high-range band.

<Hey Gene>

<Yeah?>

<Where is Dmitry Petrovich right now?>

<Out on the street with Tom. They’re both smokers.>

<Thanks love.> Colin sent and he switched back over to Nishita

<Sorry about that. I’m trying to be rather careful with who I trust at the moment. I trust you, but without your own unreserved trust in Dmitry, I’m not about to take chances.> She nodded, her face pensive and uncertain.<I won’t ask you to do anything unethical.> that seemed to mollify her concerns somewhat.

<What is it?> she asked him, looking him directly in the eyes.

<I’ve been notified that psych patients in Corps custody have been going missing. They get transferred on bogus orders and disappear into a black hole of paperwork and people who haven’t seen them.> Nishita froze, dead cold, and Colin could feel her mind working through the implications of that.

<Are you talking about a rogue department within the Corps?> She asked.

<Or the director feeding mundanes test subjects again.> Colin answered, pointedly dropping in the ‘again’ to see what she knew.

<Wait, again? This has happened before? How do you know?>

<Yes it has, and I know because I helped stop it.> He said.

<Bleeding Christ! And psych patients are excellent ‘disappearing’ candidates. I follow you. What do you need done?>

<Just draw up the paperwork to contest any attempt to move them. I had to report their recovery, but I did not request pickup, citing their psychiatric condition. I have to authorize any transfers out unless someone very high-ranking over-rules me, or they forge the documents. Which they might try. I’ll draw up a memorandum for you stating that no such transfer will ever be authorized without your sign off. That will buy you time and give you cover to inform us if someone tries anything fishy. If they don’t send anyone, that’s great. If they do...>

<Got it. I’ll let you know if something happens.>

<Likewise, and thank you.> People started filing down the stairs and into the hallway, Gene came up behind them jabbering with Dmitry about nothing in particular, just keeping him occupied

<No need to thank me. Protecting my patients is part of my job. The Corps is Mother, The Corps is Father> Nishita pledged.

<It is both those things. But it looks like our time is up.>

Colin gave everyone a few minutes to get into the ersatz classroom and settle down on the floor before he stood in front of them again.
“Welcome back everyone. I hope you enjoyed the break, this next section is going to be somewhat more difficult and covers our second major item. We will need to take a break mid-section to permit you all to recover.” he told them, and exactly no one liked that idea. Gene cut in to complete the statement.

“No human telepath can sustain a brute force probe for more than thirty to forty-five minutes unless they undergo training sessions like Psi Cops do, and most can’t maintain such a scan for more than five to ten minutes unless they go through Psi Corps training. They’re too taxing; they’ll have strokes, aneurysms, pass out. If you can hold a blip or rogue off for even ten minutes you are giving yourself an advantage.” Indiri raised her hand to as a question.

“Shoot” Colin said.

“All that is good in theory, but this guy is a P8 at least, how does a P6 like me hold him off at all.”

“Good question.” Colin told him “Simply put you’re more than your rating.”

“That’s easy for a P12 to say…” Indiri retorted ruefully, rolling her eyes.

“It is, yes.” Colin admitted. “But it’s also true.” Colin had planned for this. It happened like clockwork in every class. He could take the route of the boiler plate speech about how training mattered, or he could combine that with something more subversive. Every telepath might have to fight for their lives against mundanes, or Byronite terrorists, possibly even EarthGov itself someday, so he'd chosen the latter.

“Look, the Psi-Rating system is useful, but it’s also oppressive.” That earned him a few sideways glances. “We didn’t invent it, the mundanes did so they can sort us into what jobs they’ll let us do. Every single one of you has as one of your senses and manipulator appendages something that was considered impossible two hundred years ago. Indiri, how many times per day do you think you’re asked to determine whether someone’s telling the truth?”

“I lose count after the first hour of my workday.” Indiri replied. There weren't enough commercial telepaths on Omega VII for it's population. All of them were at least a little bit over-worked.

“Think about that. For hundreds of years, humans invented machines and bullshit bunk-science tyring to do that. You just have to look at someone. Have you ever tried really stretching to see what you can do?” Colin asked.

“Well, no…” Indiri admitted with a shrug.

“Maybe you should. Skill matters Indiri. Believe me, it matters. Sure, a P12 might be the telepathic equivalent of bigger and stronger than you; but if you know psychic kung fu and they don’t you can beat one, or at least hold them off long enough to get help.”

That’s when Gene piped up telepathically, catching what Colin was trying to do.

<Every single one of you can kill a mundane with your mind if you have to. All you need is line of sight. Did you know that?>

Drs Cavanaugh and Petrovich replied yes, so did Carlos the others with no. Most didn't believe him. Not fully.

<I've seen it.> Carlos informed everyone. <Every so often, a teenager does it by accident. They take enough abuse before someone in authority catches on that they're a telepath, and the P5 just... snaps. Pours out their anger or fear on his or her tormentor, and that person ends up in the hospital
or dead. If you can do it by accident you can do it on purpose.> They did believe Carlos. He wasn't a P12, he was a P8 and didn't have the same privilege of self-defense that Gene and Colin did.

<You can.> Gene continued <And there may come a time when you have to. To say nothing of terrorist attacks. That's where he's going with this. It's about more than a serial killer.>

<And no matter what the law says, I will never Ever punish you in any way for defending yourselves against mundanes.> Colin made abundantly clear. <No open season on my family. Not on this planet. No more funerals.>

“We all have knacks and little talents that can transcend our rating if we explore them. Hell, someone with Dissociative Personality Disorder can have multiple ratings, so how much of that is unchangeable? We. Don’t. Know.” Colin said, and Gene spoke telepathically to the room.

<And hey, look where you are. You're in a gym, and neural plasticity is a thing just like rebuilding muscle stronger than it was prior to damage is a thing.>

“For instance, I don’t need line of sight to talk to people. I might be able to do more than that, I’ve never tried. Maybe I should.” Colin continued.

“We also know a nine-year-old girl, who happens to also be a P6, who’s really good at borrowing the senses of animals. Think she might be able to scan someone by proxy? She doesn’t know. Neither do we.” Gene said out loud.

“So… what was the point of that rant Colin? Don’t get me wrong, I like knowing I can kill mundanes and want to know more, but I don’t see the relevance in terms of a serial killer. I’m a P6 right now, no matter what I might be after 20 years of practice.” Indiri replied. Colin sighed.

“So much of telepathy… we don’t understand it and so much is conceptual, so many of the limitations we think are iron clad are actually psychosomatic or can be overcome with practice. So stretch the bounds of what you think you can do, practice, and believe in yourself. Do that, and you might just be able to fight off a P9, Indiri. For instance, I can tell you right now that I can shatter your standard block, but with a bit of effort on your part, I’ll have a harder time.”

That was met with a mental cacophony of surprise from every non-medical telepath in the room, but Indiri was talking so all the other telepaths elected her as a spokesperson to voice that shock.

“Seriously?” she asked, for the others as well as herself.

“Yeah. When you learned how to scan a defended target and protect yourself, you were supposed to simply will yourself inside their head, against their will to resist. Let me guess, your block manifested as some sort of spherical construct in the mindscape, while your probes as some sort of projection? A tentacle, a claw, something like that?” Gene asked.

“A scanning laser for me.” she added.

“Nice.” Colin nodded appreciatively, switching off with Gene. "Thing is, you can use other emotions and even abstract concepts, and you can layer the defense. Sure they'll eventually break through each layer, but each one buys you time. You have to make sure that the emotions you use are going to work. It’s a bit like a game of rock-paper-scissors that way. Open up your minds; Gene and I will demonstrate.”
Colin threw up his full mind-shield, layering emotional state upon emotional state. The outer layer was his pride, inward of that his fear of failure, then his unshakable faith in his own power, then the innermost layer; the pure obdurate will to resist invasion of his mind that had been drilled into him from early childhood. The layers wrapped around his mind like the spherical layers of an armored gobstopper, scintillating with power.

Gene came at him with his usual deep umbral construct, but as an additional flare he added little hungry mouths to it. They folded around Colin’s outer layer of pride and began chewing away at it, gnawing off chunks until it became weaker and weaker and Colin began to slip into self-doubt and malaise. It wasn’t long before the outer layer of Colin’s shield collapsed and dissipated in little motes of light around the next layer of defense: fear. Gnawing at fear with self-doubt was ineffective, worse, it was actively undermining Gene’s attack and reinforcing that layer of Colin’s defense.

A sense of smug satisfaction grew within Colin, and as Gene pulled back to change to a different mode of attack, Colin was able to throw that into his defenses as his a new inner-most defensive barrier. At which point, Gene decided on his best form of attack. The shadowy darkness of his earlier probe was transformed into a transcendent nimbus that radiated blue light and warmth. The form of the construct was not important, that was just how Colin perceived it in his visual system, everyone else would see something somewhat different. What was important was the thought process it represented.

Leave it to a Psi Cop to weaponize his own love, Colin thought, and it did work. His fear completely sublimated into nothing. Colin was psychologically incapable of being afraid of failure or anything else in the face of that, but that same lack of fear translated into confidence that reinforced his next line of defense. At which point Gene broke off contact.

The rest of the class shook their heads to clear the coruscading colors and shapes and whatever else they were seeing inside their minds.

“Good, I timed that right” Gene said “Five minutes. Colin and I could have kept that up for over an hour. Did you see how it worked?” he asked the class. Dmitry raised his hand and spoke in a light Russian accent.

“Other than you two needing to get a room?” About half the class openly chuckled.

“Other than that yes, and we have a room already; we just can’t resist psychic PDA” Gene replied, grinning to his ears.

“It looked like Colin structured his defenses to maximize their efficiency, so that the best form of attack to break his outermost layer would either reinforce an inner one or help him construct a new barrier.” Dmitry added.

“Exactly!” Colin replied “Each layer is an emotion or idea you have to own. You can’t simulate them, you have to hold them in you or believe in them, or they won’t act as a good shield. The same is true for attacks. You’re are not just trying to make them feel despair, you have to feel your own despair and weaponize it for that to work.” Indiri piped up after that

“And it works with positive emotions as well?”

“Any emotional state or abstract concept will work, so long as it’s yours.” Gene answered her. “It’s… a sad commentary that all of us have emotions like despair or fear we can harden into a shield or weapon; but I have a nasty little trick where I’ll make Colin do math in roman numerals. It’s actually really hard to brute force your way through really abstract concepts like math. The
only way through is understanding, which requires solving the problem.” Gene replied. Most of the other telepaths shuddered at the thought of doing division or multiplication in roman numerals.

Colin followed up right on his heels.

“You get taught to build blocks and probes using pure willpower because in a stressful situation it’s something you can always rely on to work, but it’s not the most efficient, and won’t protect you from someone with more raw power. Even so, doing this won’t keep someone who is stronger than you out forever, but it buys you time for them to exhaust themselves.” Tom seemed to get it and nodded.

“Any other questions?” Gene asked. None raised their hands or spoke so he continued “Okay, if you are all so confident, I guess it's time you all put this into practice. I want you to pair off against someone of near or equal rating and do a set of trial runs. One set of really basic blocks using willpower, the other with the technique we just demonstrated. Each partner gets two turns as defender. Once you’re all done, we’ll take a short break, and then the practical exam. You’ll be defending against one of us.” Everyone groaned. "I promise we'll be gentle."

“We’ve allotted a couple hours for this, so if you have to rest between practice runs, feel free.” Colin told them. Then he and Gene walked around the room giving suggestions and coaching the other telepaths as they reluctantly attacked each other’s minds. He didn’t expect too many people to last very long, but Nishita and Dmitry were both well-trained P10s. They were also therapists and masters of emotional manipulation. In each trial they slugged it out in their own mindscapes for fifteen minutes or more, taking only short breaks between each, and never actually breaking through each other’s defenses or being forced to withdraw by exhaustion. If there had been popcorn in the room, Colin would have been tempted to sit down with some. When everyone was finished, he dismissed them for a ten minute break.

The exams went about as well as Colin expected. Save for the P10s, no one else was above a P8, and fairly easy for Colin and Gene to break, but their techniques were good, and he thought that even the P5s could outlast an untrained P8. Nishita and Dmitry could wipe the floor with one, and possibly hold off a P12 who wasn’t trained to Psi Cop standards.

“Alright, you have a fifteen minute break to recover from that. You all did reasonably well. Dmitry, Nishita, top marks. I know they train you for this in the academy, but do you have really combative patients sometimes?”

“It happens.” Dmitry said “Sometimes patients are… difficult. Particularly the ones who have been involuntarily placed in our care.” he continued in a matter of fact tone. 'Occupational hazard then' Colin thought.

“Keep up the practice. Everyone is dismissed for that break.” almost everyone dispersed upstairs into the atrium, lavatory, or street level after grabbing something to drink or munch on. Gene turned to him.

<How did your little chat go?> Gene asked Colin

<Nishita is with us. I dislike putting her at risk, but if it comes to it she can take care of herself on the sharp end.>

<There’s nothing for it I’m afraid, but we’ll be there if things get hot.>

<It’s less that, than retaliation.> Colin worried <and operational security. It’s fine if we risk discovery but someone else…>
<All we can do is be careful and hope our enemy isn’t stupidly brazen. Their need for actual
deniability should keep that risk to a minimum.> Gene reassured him <This shit is absolutely wide-
scale revolution grade if it came out into the light, so they can’t afford to be too open.>

<Well, you’re the expert on that Gene.> Colin sent him. Gene stroked Colin’s thumb with his own
by way of reassurance. <Oh, and Gene?>

<Yeah?>

<I love you too.> then he projected that same warm feeling that Gene had weaponized back
through their hands into Gene’s mind. Gene sent it right back and Colin felt a shiver down his
spine.

“You know…” Gene said, his voice pitched husky and seductive and he leaned in to speak into
Colin’s ear “we do have some time…” Colin laughed

“God, you’re incorrigible. It’s tempting, but I think we’d lose track of time and be late for class.”

“I know. I’ll get you later though.” Gene declared, raising and lowering his eyebrows

“Yes, you will” Colin replied with a smirk “For now though, we should probably get something to
eat and socialize with the others. Bonding is important. You’ll need to be able to recognize all of
these people by sight and mind, after all.”

“True enough.”

…

“Welcome back everyone. This is our final section, then you can all go home.” Colin said when
everyone had taken their positions again, in response there was a sound of quiet exaltation. “Yeah
yeah, no one likes having us up here blathering on like you’re back in the academy. This might
actually be a bit fun though. The Battle of Imago, or a Shaman Battle as it is otherwise known, is
another method for engaging in telepathic combat. Here, you defend yourself yes, but your
defenses are more fluid and this allows you to attack simultaneously.”

“Often times, the best defense is a good offense, but this mode is risky. Your consciousness will
be fully in a mindscape and you won’t be able to do much outside. Also, even a weaker telepath
can beat you if they think well on their feet. Stronger telepaths have more latitude for error and
more options, but it is no substitute for knowing what you’re doing; this is a battle of perceptions.
Any probe or block can be reinterpreted to make its representation easier to deal with and your
counters more efficient. You don’t have to accept what you see even if the fundamental nature of
their probe or block remains the same.” Gene said, cutting in as was their pattern. “Colin and I will
demonstrate.”

“You ready?” Colin asked.

“Always.”

…

Colin and Gene began, slipping into the mindscape as their minds met somewhere in the proverbial
middle. Gene started with a roiling thunderhead, spewing forth lightning that Colin knew was an
attempt at inducing a seizure. He grounded it out by conceptualizing a lightning rod, negating it
entirely before he counterattacked with a multi-tentacled construct meant to grip and squeeze
Gene’s motor cortex and induce a motor seizure of his own. Gene’s own defense consisted of a
rotating net that ensnared the tentacles, rendering them equally impotent.

Their cognitive avatars circled each other for a moment, sending out smell testing probes and simple blocks like wizard children practice dueling before Colin thought of a swarm of bees to attack Gene’s pain receptors. Gene met them with a wall of flames that incinerated them before launching his own assault. He trapped Colin in a bubble that began to contract around him to paralyze him with fear--Gene was going for his fight or flight response. Colin didn’t know how to deal with that construct so he frame-shifted his own perceptions and thought of it as a train barreling down on him because it would produce a similar reaction and leapt out of the way.

They continued for several more exchanges, reaching a standstill, each unwilling to harm or psychologically traumatize the other to win. Eventually, they called it quits and returned to externally focused consciousness.

…

“Well that was bracing.” Colin said to the class. “If you didn’t notice, neither of us were willing to push, but it was a good concept demo. What I want you all to do now is pair off and practice. There is no need to push, just try to make it as weird as possible and try to throw each other off. Honestly it’s something you just have to get used to, and a lot of telepaths just never have much aptitude for it. However, you don’t want to try it in earnest unless you know whether you do or don’t.”

After some grumbling from the commercial telepaths, they got cracking.

**Wednesday February 4th, 2263**

Colin was in his office when his computer beeped at him and sounded off a little verbal alert "Incoming Gold-Channel Transmission”. He minimized what he was working on and accepted it. There was no one on the other end, just the Psi Corps symbol popping up on screen and a file download request. He accepted it, and after checking for malware, opened the file.

“Ah, I was hoping for you.” he said to himself as he looked at the heavily redacted summary report of human trials on Dust using telepaths.

“Fucking hell, who thought leaking this was a good idea?” he said to himself before opening a database management program and typing in a query. Then he sent the file containing the results to Hassan and got out his chair to stroll down to Hassan’s office.

“Hey, Hassan.”

“What’s up boss?” Hassan answered, looking up from the table.

“Hate to interrupt, but I just sent you a file. If I gave you the last known locations for a bunch of victims, dumping locations, building occupancy data, and the coordinates of surveillance cameras, do you think you could combine that with easy walking distance to create a circular overlay map?” Hassan furrowed his brow in response.

“Trying to get a sense of where a killer might take his victims and maybe catch a glimpse of him through street cameras? I have the data, can do all the mapping work in an hour.”

“Seriously, an hour?” Colin asked.
“Yeah. The data is complex, but if you want circular overlap and tagging the location of cameras within the areas of the circles, that’s pretty easy. Software does most of the work, even if the user interface is… bad.” Hassan replied, glyphing Colin a mental image of one of the clunkiest graphical user interfaces imaginable.

‘Clearly UI and UX were not priorities...’ Colin thought.

“If you could get on that A.S.A.P I would appreciate it. I hate interrupting but…”

“I get it. Killer on the loose. May start hitting us, to say nothing of mundanes. I’ll start right now.”

“Thanks Hassan.”

“Yeah no problem. It’s not like you were interrupting much. Really I’m just working on some malware for corporate security penetration in case we have to hack our way into someone’s emails. I don’t know if we’ll ever need to use it but...the real project takes precedence.”

“Understandable. Anyway, I need to go find Gene.” Colin said, then paused. Something occurred to him. "How are you delivering the malware?" he asked. Hassan replied with a wicked toothy grin.

"Social engineering. The Earth Alliance's database give me everything I'll ever need to use machine learning to procedural-generate emails precisely targeted to an individual so they open the message and execute the program."

"Hassan, I feel like there's some social commentary there... maybe something on the hypocrisy of mundane attitudes toward privacy..." Colin speculated. Hassan for his part reverted to his dripping sarcasm.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Why do you always have to impose external meaning on art? Why can't it just be a piece of functional craftsmanship? Don't my intentions matter to you people!?" Colin snorted.

"See you in a bit Hassan."

“Yep. See you in an hour.” Hassan swiveled around in his chair toward his computer as Colin left the room. Gene was not difficult to find. He had his own office after all.

“Hey Gene, I heard back from Sigma, Dust increases effective Psi-rating by two, on average, in telepaths.”

“Huh. Why didn’t the Corps approve it for use then?” Gene asked. Colin made a tisking sound by clicking his tongue against his palate in response to that.

“Side effects include psychosis while under the influence, just like in mundanes. It also tends to unmask any psychiatric conditions that the telepath might be at risk for and causes brain damage in certain areas of the nervous system you might be familiar with.”

“Oh. That’ll do it! Let me guess, the anterior cingulate and insular cortices?” Gene speculated.

“Yep. If our guy wasn’t insane before, he is now.” then Colin had a thought. “You know, serial killers usually target within their own ethnic groups. This guy doesn’t.”

“Right, weren’t you speculating on experimentation?”
“I was, but what if there is a pattern of some other sort? Something that makes sense only to our suspect?” with that, Gene got a befuddled expression on his face. A half-smile as his head turned to the side a bit.

“Ok, now I am confused.”

“Schizophrenics aren’t just hallucinating, they are delusional. They see patterns that aren’t there and develop beliefs about those patterns.” Colin supplied the relevant context.

“So his selection criteria is opaque because we are not batshit?” Gene questioned.

“Pretty much.” Colin replied, and kept working through the implications. The more he thought about it, incorporating all the information at his disposal, he became increasingly certain until he started nodding to himself.

“Colin? Earth to Colin, Gold-Channel!”

“What?”

“You’re nodding like an owl. What’s up?”

“Think I have this guy figured out finally…” Colin replied with a predatory smirk


…

Several hours later, Colin and Gene were in a room full of Earth Alliance security, including other station houses that were watching by way of video links and able to ask questions over the colonial network.

“Good evening everyone!” Colin told them chipperly “I really am sorry about the timing, I know a lot of you guys are day shift and would like to be home with your families right now, or even sleeping. Some of you got called in early. But no matter when I called this, it would be disrupting someone’s schedule, and the faster I get this briefing to you, the better off everyone will be.” he clicked to his first slide, which displayed the brain of Mr. Mugabe, highlighting its damage.

“This is what we are dealing with. A telepath who is using dust. Your briefing documents contain the background information for the summary I am about to give you.” he waited for them to pull out their documents.

“Our killer is organized, so that indicates a certain level of emotional maturity and impulse control, irrespective of whatever else is going on inside his head. That puts him over the age of twenty-five, more likely closer to thirty or just this side of it.” the officers all nodded along, they got that part pretty easily having been in their early twenties at some point in the past.

“Now, here is where things get complicated. Dust does terrible things to telepaths. If he was not a schizophrenic before, he is now. Likely, he was before. His own anterior cingulate cortex and insular cortex are damaged from prolonged use of the stuff. That means he is incapable of direct or emotional responses to pain, can’t feel empathy, and while he is self-aware he is in a depersonalized or dissociative state much of or all the time. He has no sense of whether he is hot or cold, needs to pee, hungry, none of that” Colin watched some of their faces contort as they tried to wrap their heads around what that would be like, and failed.

“I can show you guys, if you want…” he offered.
“No!” came the collective response, some verbal, some merely in the thought leakage that always happened with mundanes. He did detect morbid curiosity from Steve.

“It’s pretty bad, yeah. He likely selects his victims idiosyncratically. There is a pattern of some kind, but he’s insane and I have no idea what it is. What I can tell you is that he dumps them in the trash because he doesn’t value them. He can’t value them as people, and he doesn’t value them as objects, so he probably isn’t getting what he wants out of them.” One of the officers in the back raised his hand and asked a question.

“What does he want?” simple enough question.

“One of two things. Either he is trying to permanently jump-start his own damaged brain, no it doesn’t work that way, but he’s insane so… yeah. The other is that he is trying to temporarily experience what he lost, and he’s failing. He’ll never be able to.” the same inquisitive officer asked a question again

“Can’t you guys like, see through our eyes and shit?” Colin did appreciate that question.

“Yes, but when I do it I’m basically eavesdropping on the raw input and processing it myself. The subjective experience is my own. If my optic lobe were damaged, I couldn’t see shit. A telepath using dust can copy the processing and share the subjective experience of the target, but only if the necessary regions of his brain are still working. He’d basically be running a ‘you-emulator’. Which is why we think he might start targeting telepaths. A telepath can be made to basically take over the processing load and transmit their subjective experience. If I were to suffer brain damage in my optic lobe, Gene here could let me see what he does through his own eyes and perspective. It would be exhausting over time, but he could do it. Or I could take over his brain and make him do it.” The officer nodded, his curiosity settled, though he was somewhat disquieted by the casual way Colin talked about taking over someone’s nervous system.

Then the presentation moved on to Gene’s portion and he started to speak.

“In terms of physical threat, our unknown subject is extremely dangerous. I’ve seen what happens when normals go up against powerful telepaths. I’ve been the telepath. It’s not pretty. So if you see him you back off and call us. We’ll need you to secure a perimeter, but we need to be on point.” There was a bit of a rumble in the audience. Some nodded in agreement, mostly the ones who had seen Gene’s handiwork; but Colin opened his mind to the sense of the room, and didn’t like some of the undercurrents. He paid attention to a few individuals in particular. Captain Roach was fine, he may hate telepaths but he had seen what one of them could do against multiple armed hostiles. There were a few however that Colin thought had a death wish. A younger red-haired man in the middle rows mentally scoffed at him

‘Yeah, bugger off. I know what I’m doin.’ he said to himself inside his head. Colin scanned a few others, and the sentiment, particularly with the younger ones, was largely similar. They thought themselves invincible. Gene waited patiently as they got a bit more disruptive, whispering back and forth, bolstering each other. Steve was in the back, his face was in his palm and he was shaking his head. Then that same red-head actually felt confident enough to speak, though to his credit he was more polite than his thoughts indicated.

“Pardon my saying it sir” he blurted out, his spoken accent distinctly british lower class and the sir was forced. “But what’s he gonna do? None of ‘is victims been armed. I c’d see it if ‘es got em tied up and c’n work ‘em over but…”

“Ah. What’s your name?” Colin asked, holding hand up to forestall Gene’s answer.
“Woolsey sir.”

“Well Mr. Woolsey. I don’t want to frighten you unnecessarily, but do you want to live with yourself after someone makes you murder your partner? Maybe being the sole survivor after he sparks out your entire assault team’s motor cortices and sprays everyone down with automatic weapons?” Woolsey was skeptical. Performing another mass surface scan, he noticed several others. They were used to dealing with commercial telepaths who wouldn’t hurt a fly, with the safe and caged telepaths of the Corps; and this was an outside context problem for them. They might get over their prejudices and trust the Psi Cop, they might not. He wasn’t about to trust to their fellow officers to successfully disabuse them of their ignorance either. Thankfully, Colin prepared for this. He tapped on his comm link.

“Hey Erika, could you come on in. Bring the monkey.” a few moments later Erika came in dressed in a full suit to go with her badge and gloves. She was carrying a cage with an adult male Capuchin monkey wearing a blue diaper.

“So everyone, this is Erika Flores. She’s with the Psi Corps legal department, and has a rating of P9, which is near the lower limit of our unknown subject. Erika, could you introduce your friend?”

“This is Bubbles. We borrowed him from customs because the wealth-befuddled pendejo who bought him didn’t bother with the paperwork.” Erika said, though it was pretty obvious that she’d grown fond of the little guy in the past half hour or so.

Bubbles was looking out of the bars inquisitively at everyone until Erika fed him a grape; Bubbles ate the grape almost instantly and then leaned back chittering to himself in contentment. Colin thought he was adorable, and so did everyone else if the muttering from the audience and their inchoate emotions were any indication. Erika removed a small notepad and a box of crayons from one of her pockets and set them down on a table near the podium. Gene, for his part, provided a small case and opened the cage. Bubbles, exited the cage tentatively, wanting to explore but acting a bit nervous around the large crowd of humans.

“Erika, could you do the thing we discussed?”

“Yes, but under protest.” she replied, and then looked at Bubbles. The little monkey immediately walked over to the notepad and box of crayons, opened the box, and began writing on the notepad with his tiny hands, switching the crayons after each laboriously rendered letter. When he was done, Colin picked it up, showed everyone that the notepad had been written on, and scanned it into the computer while the monkey sat completely motionless. He put the image up on the projector and read the note, which was written all caps in rainbow comic sans.

“EVERYONE I KNOW IS GONE, MY LIFE IS NOT WORTH LIVING ANYMORE. TO ANYONE WHO CARES, I’M SORRY BUT I CAN’T GO ON LIKE THIS. GOODBYE.

YOURS IN SWEET OBLIVION,

BUBBLES THE MONKEY”
Bubbles shuffled listlessly over to the little box Gene had set down and opened it. He dutifully took all the little pieces of metal out and efficiently assembled a PPG. The audience of hardened Earth Force security personnel gazed with eyes fixed in dumbfounded horror as the little monkey put the PPG in his mouth and heated it up with the characteristic whine. Then he froze, completely motionless. Not even his eyes moved in their sockets. While she treated the monkey like a marionette, Erika was also projecting all the reassurance and affection she could into Bubbles’ mind to keep him calm, and visibly shaking from the effort, but the mundanes wouldn’t know that.

“So, ladies and gentlemen” Colin said sternly. “Do we have to take this to its ultimate conclusion? Or can we take it as read that you will NOT approach, confront, or attempt to impede the unknown subject. You will NOT rankle about what you think is and isn’t your jurisdiction, your professional pride, or anything else? That you will let the people who are trained and equipped to handle him do our jobs? Or do I have to order Erika to make that cute little monkey pull the fucking trigger by way of demonstration? I don’t really want to have to do that to her, or Bubbles for that matter, but if you insist on being pig-headed...”

“Jesus Christ, Meier!” Captain Roach shouted from his position back near Steve. “I think you made your point!”

“Maybe. Have I?” he asked everyone else in the room. He thought that maybe he might have gone somewhat overboard, but it was better to go overboard than have a warrant officer shoot his partner in the head and get the Corps raked over the coals on ISN for not briefing hard enough. They nodded collectively. “Alright. Erika.” and Erika made the monkey take the PPG out of his mouth and set it aside, then promptly fell asleep.

“If you’ll give me a moment Colin, I’ll excise the memory.” She said.

“By all means. Wouldn’t want bubbles to develop post-traumatic stress disorder.”

’Because monkeys absolutely can get it...

<I am so sorry I made you do that.> he sent over to her.

<Had to be done, as much as I dislike it. I’m still torn over whether I prefer Bubbles to mundanes. Particularly mundanes stupid enough to require the demonstration.>

<Steve’s a good guy?>

<Sure. He has a clue. The rest of them? They think you’re a weak pathetic sub-human and yet somehow secretly rule the world. They discount you while also being terrified of you. Bubbles just likes grapes, being distracted by shiny things, and being held. Much less complicated.>

<You okay?> Colin asked.

<I’m alright. Really. It isn't like you would have made me do it.>

<Still, comfort vice of choice: Alcohol, Tea, or Chocolate?>

<That’s like asking if I prefer Spanish, German, or French. ¿Por que no los tres? Warum nicht alle drei? Pourquoi pa les trois? Erika glyphed mental image of a very happy monkey. Colin rolled his eyes, but Erika deserved it.

<Alright, all three it is. You drive a hard bargain ma’am>

That conversation took place as an inutteral one between their spoken conversation.
“No. He’s a sweet little guy and I don't know how we'd give a monkey therapy.” Erika replied. It took her a moment, but soon Bubbles was back to his normal self; unable to comprehend why the human was giving him a whole sprig of grapes, but audibly appreciating it nonetheless. Erika managed to coax him back into the cage and left the room, talking to Bubbles the whole way in the monkey’s native Spanish and indulging him shamefully.

“Thank you. Erika likes animals. Especially cute ones. And, I must stress this: she hated that. Pretty much every telepath is like her. She doesn’t want to hurt anyone, neither do we. Neither does the commercial telepath down the street. Just like you, we have a conscience. Our unknown subject doesn’t.” Gene told the audience, now finally able to get back to the presentation.

“P8 is the minimum, he could be as powerful as Colin and I. He can fry your synapses and turn you into vegetables, make you kill each other. Hell, killing that way would be easier to do than what Erika did to that monkey because you have shooting people drilled into muscle memory! So, if you find him, you don’t go after him or anything stupid like that. You call us.” Gene glanced over at Colin who was surveying the room and then nodded at him very slightly. They’d gotten the message.

“As far as finding him is concerned, you will note the map.” Gene called up the next slide which had a map of the colony with numerous colored circles overlaid on each other “Numbered green circles are last known victim locations, red for dump sites. The radius is ten kilometers. Chances are he is actually ‘working’ in the areas of overlap. For now, we need you guys to start checking over several years of security camera feed.” all the security personnel groaned and started to protest.

"Don’t worry, a lot of it can be automated. Facial recognition does a lot of the work. Once the software spits out a possible victim ID, you’ll need to confirm it and see what else is there. Suspicious characters following the victims, sudden changes in behavior, maybe a blitz attack if you’re lucky… After that, maybe we get a perpetrator ID and can start tracking him or narrow down possible kill site locations and get some forensics. Any questions?"

“How long do you expect this to take? I mean, we have other cases, we can’t devote ourselves only to this.” said one clean-shaven rookie in the front. Colin answered him.

"Bluntly, the local government decided on this at your own captain’s urging. He didn't want us to have the manpower to do this ourselves, so it falls to you." Colin said, throwing Captain Roach under a bus as politely as he could. "Honestly, each camera has something like three hundred and forty petabytes of data to go through, but narrowing down dates and times will help with that considerably. Just the searching through image recognition is going to take a while, but manual checks won’t take that much time. We’re briefing all of you, so you can optimally distribute the workload on your own. We’ll be devoting our own man-hours to this as well, but there aren't that many of us.” Colin again pointedly stressed.

'You fuckers asked for this. Time to pay the piper and do some of the work instead of just obstructing and being physically present.'

"Any questions?"

Colin answered a few more questions in person and over video link before he wrapped things up.

“Alright. You guys are dismissed.”
Gene had never seen the inside of an actual psychiatric hospital before, Dr. Cavanaugh’s outpatient office was on the floor below and he’d been in a lot of private practices over the years, but this was something new to him. The pediatric wing of Alliance Arms psychiatric hospital was different from every other hospital space he’d ever seen. Trauma bays, ICUs; they were all professionally sterile, mostly white, grey, and beige with everything at right angles. Even the reception and intake area on this floor felt more alive. Most of the colors were cool blues and greens but arranged in curves and other shapes to attract the eye and comfort a disturbed mind. Bright art colored the walls, and not the soothing landscapes or still life one might find in other wards, but vibrant paintings of cartoon characters and happy murals featuring schools of fish swimming in coral reefs which, Gene reflected, almost none of the kids who would be in this hospital would ever see in person.

“Colin, Gene.” Dr. Cavanaugh greeted them rounding a corner. She wasn’t in a lab coat like Gene might have expected, but was in a dress and turtleneck; typical casual dress within the Corps.

“Nishita, how’re the patients?” Colin replied jovially.

“They’re doing alright, all things considered; better by the day but… it’ll be a while before I can recommend their release.” Beyond merely wanting to keep them safe, Gene was actually curious about the medical reason for that, and decided to ask.

“It isn’t typical PTSD.” Dr. Cavanaugh replied. “They spent a year being emotionally and physically abused and that’s going to cause a more complex form, but worse than that, their volition was straight-jacketed for a prolonged period and they felt their friend die.” She paused, pointedly considering what Gene could only call a medical exposition dump but thought better of it. “It’s better for you to see than to explain…”

“Fair enough.” Gene conceded. He figured she knew what she was doing and talking about. “Shall we?”

“Yeah, lets.” She replied, and led them out of the reception area down a hallway to a central hub. It wasn’t like a secure lockup, not by any stretch. It was more like a dormitory once they got past the reception area. The rotunda was a common area full of toys, games, a vid screen with couches and beanbags, and several computers. There was even a small kitchenette so older kids could prepare meals, and there were a number of mundane children occupying it. Playing with each other and watching vids. All under the watchful eye of a pair of psychiatric nurses. Arrayed off from the sides of the rotunda were individual rooms. The doors were mirrored glass, but Gene figured they were one-way mirrors. Come lights out, the glass would be transparent to infrared light projected from inside the room, allowing observation for suicide watches and the like without disturbing the patients.

Their kids weren’t in there. Instead, Dr. Cavanaugh took them to a door on the far side. It had a big Psi painted onto it, letting everyone know it was telepaths only beyond that point. She opened the door and on the other side was a similar set up. A central common area, this time more specialized for older kids and teenagers: fewer toys and games, more books and an extra computer. The doors to the individual rooms weren’t mirrored glass, instead they were just glass with blinds on the outside to permit telepathic contact while giving the residents some privacy. Three of the four rooms had closed doors and blinds, the fourth door was open, and unlike the mundane section, none of the teens were in the common area. Gene could feel their minds, and they were all in the
single open room; calm, content even, but he could feel an edge of nervousness too.

That struck him as odd. Colin recognized what was going on though. Gene sent him a mental question mark.

<You’ll see.> was all Colin said in reply. Normally Colin would have explained what was going on, but this time he didn’t. Dr. Cavanaugh poked her head in the room and Gene felt the mood brighten

“Hi Doctor!” Came Sam’s voice.

“Colin and Gene are here. Want to come out into the common room, or should we come in here?” Dr. Cavanaugh asked.

<During the day, we have a nurse and a teacher here for supervision and school purposes, but today is a bit different.> Dr. Cavanaugh explained telepathically.

There was silence on the other end of the conversation, but Colin could feel a mental conference take place even if he didn’t eavesdrop on the content.

“Let’s stay in here.” Sam replied, speaking on behalf of everyone else. Again, Gene found that odd. He glanced over at Colin, who gave him a look that said ‘think it through’, even as Colin picked up a chair and moved it into the single occupancy room.

When Gene got into the room following on Colin’s heels, it wasn’t single occupancy. They’d moved all four beds in. Not the frames, just the box springs and mattresses; putting them all together into one single bed. The arrangement of pillows indicated they basically slept in a pile. They’d also been denied all human contact for over a year, only able to talk to each other by straining their minds for telepathic contact beyond line of sight. They’d all felt Polina’s slow descent into despair and felt every agonizing moment of her strangling herself with her own body weight.

Gene shuddered and understood. The only way they felt safe was together, in as enclosed a space as possible. Even their keeping the door open and coming out for lessons was progress. Being willing to leave for family therapy was progress, but there was no way in hell family therapy didn’t include all of them at once, with all their parents.

“Hey guys.” Colin said. “Good to see you’re doing so well.” And visually they were doing better. They weren’t marginally-nourished anymore but were lined up along the wall on their group-bed maintaining physical contact. None of them wore gloves; which both Gene and Colin found somewhat off-putting. It was like being in a room with teenage nudists. Small children like Zara were one thing, teenagers were another matter entirely, but they didn’t say anything about it.

“Good to see you too.” Sam replied for all of them. Gene realized they were gestalting, not just electing Sam as a spokesperson, but acting as a sort of semi-hive mind on matters of group-concern. He knew what a parapsychological bond was, but had never seen one before he’d met this bunch, and then only in a very bad physical place. It was something else entirely to see it when they all felt safe. Colin sat down on the chair and Gene casually took up position on his lap.

“Hey Albert, no hard feelings?” he asked, referring to him having to break into the young man’s mind to free him from compulsion.

“Nah. I mean, it hurt like hell, but it was better than that...state.” Albert replied. “I... wasn’t long for the world at that point.” The other three teens gave him a physical and mental hug.
“Good thing you got caught then.” Gene replied.

“Yeah, I found ways to circumvent…what were they called? Action blocks?” Gene nodded in the affirmative “I couldn’t try to escape, disobey, or seek help; but dropping my name? That I could do.” Albert grinned.

“Clever.” Colin told him.

“Wenn du uns befreit hast, war es das erste Mal, dass wir uns gesehen haben.” Machteld blurted out in her native German. “Bitte lass unsere Eltern uns nicht trennen.”

<Does she not speak English?> Gene asked Dr. Cavanaugh. For her part, she paused and Gene could feel her send a message over to Machteld, who replied back privately.

<She used to, but she’ll talk to you about it herself.>

<Works for me.> Gene replied.

“Wir werden niemals das nie passieren zulassen” Colin replied in the same language. The other three seemed to understand her just fine.

<She said that when we freed them, it was the first time they saw each other, and asked us not to let their parents split them up. I told her we wouldn’t let that happen.>

“Have your parents talked to you about what it is that you want to do?” Gene asked.

“No.” Sam replied, acting as consensus spokesperson again before speaking only for himself “My mom doesn’t mind teeps, but she really doesn’t like the Corps. She believed you stole me and did a deep dive into every anti-Psi Corps conspiracy theory known to human kind. I told her you rescued us…she still believes all the other shit. I don’t know if there’s gonna be much convincing her.”

“And she’s doing a pretty good job convincing the rest of our parents that we’d be better off drugged than mixed up in whatever crazy she printed off the ‘net.” Fatima added. The other two nodded in agreement.


Colin provided the translation. <Her parents are German and think they know fascism when they see it, but don’t because they don’t realize that the Earth Alliance is still a fascist state even after Clark’s deposition. They both don’t understand why she would want to join the Corps which they view as fascist, or listen to her when she tried to explain her reasoning.>

Gene couldn’t help but agree with her central point that her parents were well-meaning idiots, but Colin responded in English, largely for his benefit.

“Well, maybe they’ll listen to us.” Colin assured her “And if they don’t, we have options. Albert, what about you?”

“My mom and dad are white upper middle class suburbanites. The kind that vote for Clark. I turn eighteen in a month. I figure by the time I’m out of here, my parents won’t matter. I’m not leaving these guys. No matter what.” Gene could tell Albert really meant that. They all did. If they got
separated, they’d go rogue to stay together, which he didn’t blame them for. They’d been the only comfort to each other in the City of Dis.

“For me, it’s August.” Sam followed up.

“Next March.” Fatima said.

“Gleich, aber April.” Machteld finished.

“As I said, we have options. You’re all old enough that emancipation is on the table.” Colin supplied.

“What does that mean?” Sam asked, again acting as the spokesperson.

“It means we can argue before a court that you should be considered legal adults and able to make your own decisions. Barring that, we can also argue that your parents are acting in contravention of your medical interests and should have their parental rights stripped, and a guardian ad litem appointed by the court, who would likely be a telepath with the way those cases go.”

“We know how the criminal trial went. They wouldn’t let us testify and the bastards got off. How would that case even go?” Sam asked for the group.

“We… do it fairly often. Usually works. They don’t actually require your testimony, especially for the second one. Tends to be argued by lawyers and expert witnesses. A bit like how courts will intervene if Jehovah’s Witnesses want to deny their child a medically necessary blood transfusion, but the kid is too young to testify.” Colin replied. They were all familiar with cases like that and nodded in understanding.

“But all that is only if we can’t convince your parents to see reason.” Gene followed. His feelings were complicated, which he didn’t expect them to be. He was expecting to go into this talk in ‘fuck the mundanes’ mode, but he couldn’t. Not this time. “Going that route… it’s going to end your relationship with them and I don’t think any of us want that, right?”

“We were… taken from them. They don’t want to lose us again, we get that. But they’re clinging to who and what we were, and we’re not that anymore. It would be like if your parents wanted to un-gay you.” Sam replied, again, for the collective.

<Of course they caught that…> Colin privately remarked.

<They’re teenagers, not blind. What are their ratings anyway?> Gene asked.

<Albert’s a P8, Sam is a P6, Fatima is a P7, Machteld is a P11.>

<Woah. That’s the most powerful we’ve found. No one’s been over a P9 yet.> Gene remarked back, impressed.

<I started lower, somewhere like Sam I think. My abilities…got more powerful while I was captive.> Machteld intruded. Her voice wasn’t actually in English, she bypassed language entirely and directly imparted meaning. She was not only powerful enough to catch the ‘frequency’ they were using, but sensitive enough to eavesdrop on a very private communication. Of course, Gene supposed if she finished manifesting under conditions of imprisonment and could only make contact with others through walls, she would be very sensitive indeed.

<That’s not unheard of. Usually happens with P1s and P2s, they manifest in stages, but sometimes it happens at higher-ratings.> Colin told her in mental English. <Especially under stressful
conditions during adolescence. Machteld, Gene asked Dr. Cavanaugh if you were able to speak English earlier, did you catch that? She glyphed him a nod

<I can still understand obviously, but something happened. I passed out, and now I can’t actively recall English.> again in no language at all.

<That is unusual…I assume you’ve talked to Dr. Cavanaugh about it?>

<Yes. Selective aphasia, she think’s it’s from a mini-stroke or seizure. With time, I should recover English, active recall and word formation are just switched off. For now, I can talk to the others by directly imparting meaning. I… send them the concept, their brain picks the words. It’s hard, but it works; they’re working on learning German.>

The rest of the conversation was on pause during their mental exchange. Machteld was relaying it to the others as it happened. Gene was fascinated; he knew that manifesting in stages was something that happened. What he didn’t know, but supposed he probably should have known, was that manifesting while malnourished might lead to problems like small brain hemorrhages.

“Sorry, we got a little side-tracked.” Colin said sheepishly.

“It’s alright.” Sam replied. Then Fatima spoke on her own.

“I just wish there was a way to help them understand. If we could do that, maybe we wouldn’t have to cut them off. As it stands though, it’s something we’re all willing to do.”

“There is.” Colin replied, glyphing an exclamation mark to show he just thought of it. “I’m not going to like doing it, but there is.” Gene was concerned, he knew about showing the parents what Sleepers were like, but Colin had something else in mind? In addition? He didn’t know. “We can show them what you went through. We were there, we saw it; more importantly, you have memories and current experiences. We can… project that into your parents. Not the memories, that’ll just give them PTSD; but the emotional impression should be fine.”

“And I’ve been on Sleepers. I can show them exactly what those are like.” Gene followed on Colin’s heels. Colin was right, he wasn’t going to like it.

Family therapy did take place in the common room, there was simply no other way to do it. The teenagers hugged their parents, but sat together on one of the couches, their parents arrayed themselves on chairs opposite them. Colin switched on a dictaphone. He wanted an electronic record just in case things got nasty and they had to go to court.

“Welcome everyone.” Nishita said with a warm smile on her face as she sat down off to one side so that a sort of open rectangle of people was formed. There were two chairs on the other end for Colin and Gene, but both of them were standing by the closed bedroom door. “We have a pair of guests with us today. These are Lieutenant Colin Meier, and his partner Gene Hendriks.”

“Warum sind die faschistischen Psi-Politzei hier?” Machteld’s father, muttered to his wife, who was evidently of Mediterranean extraction.

Machteld snickered while Nishita provided a proper nuanced translation, and the other three suppressed laughter, much to the confused chagrin of their parents.

“They’re here because they were the ones responsible for you being able to sit there and call them fascists with your teenage children still alive. They’re here at my request and with the enthusiastic consent of my patients” Nishita said, not giving any fucks. Colin knew he couldn’t afford to take the heat, given what he was going to ask of these mundanes, but Nishita had a rapport and she could. As a result, he remained unphased, visibly. He did not like being called a fascist.

For his own part, Herr Albrecht felt shamed and uncharitable.

“Sorry.” He said in accented English.

“It’s alright.” Colin replied graciously “How about we make a quick round of introductions? It’s nice to be able to put real faces to names.”

“Um, I’m Johann Albrecht” Johann said, followed by Ekin giving her name, evidently an ethnic Turk. He was a little short and of medium build, with circular glasses and a balding patch in his salt and pepper hair. Ekin was about the same height and of slight frame with Mediterranean skin tones and straight black hair. Both were in the stylish but not formal garb of urbane professionals or perhaps academics. Machteld took after her mother, except in the eyes. She had her father’s eye-shape and blue color.

“I’m Tisha Green and this is my husband Tyrone.” Sam’s mother said, giving both Psi Cops the skink-eye. She was taller than Johann and of medium build. She kept her hair naturally frizzy.

“’Sup?” Tyrone asked with what Colin took to be genuine friendliness, as if to compensate for his wife. ‘I’m with her but I’m not like, with her on this, you know?’ is what he pointedly thought in Colin’s direction. Colin nodded very slightly. He was a good-looking man too. His hair was in short dreadlocks, and he looked like he either worked out regularly or worked in construction. Now that he was fed, Colin could see a lot of his father in Sam.

Alberts parents were up next and like Sam’s parents his mother took the lead

“I’m Linda, Linda Lawson, this is my husband Stanley” she said. She screamed ‘fussy soccer mom’. She was a brunette with her hair about shoulder length and curled, on the thin side of medium build. Her blouse and knee-length skirt were of decent quality but not especially creative. The only thing that could complete the ensemble would be a necklace of pearls.

“Just call me Stan.” Stan suggested. Stan was on the tall end, and looked like the sort of guy who did sports in high school but fell out of practice somewhat in middle age. Colin had him pegged for middle management somewhere, and he still wore his collared shirt and tie.

Albert looked nothing like his father at all, and definitely took after his mother except where simply being male made him taller and more heavily built.

Fatima’s parents stumbled for a second over who would introduce themselves first, accidentally interrupting each other until they reached a consensus.

“I’m Zaid Ahmad” her dad said. He was dead average, of medium height and build, wearing square rimmed glasses, but rocked a nice business suit.

“I’m Nina!” her mom followed up cheerfully. “And thank you.” Nina was almost waifish and had a warm and friendly face. She had excellent taste in hijab, wearing one with brilliant gold spiral patterns on a blue background that matched a very colorful outfit. Something about her screamed
elementary teacher to Colin. Fatima took after her father in build, but her mother in facial features.

“You’re welcome” Gene replied with a nod “Our pleasure really. It’s what we do, and they’re good kids.” Colin watched Gene turn back to the group and telepathically tell them that they’re awesome before he turned back “Our job isn’t just to protect you from telepaths. It’s to protect telepaths from non-telepaths, and there’s a lot of that going around lately.”

“Hmph” Tisha grumbled contemptuously “And what about all the shady rancid shit y’all get up to?”

<Oh god. This should be fascinating.> Colin sent to Gene, gritting his teeth.

<Here she goes again.> Sam sent to everyone, rolling his eyes.

“To what might you be referring?” Gene asked politely.

“Killing a man on Sleepers who told the truth, for one!” The rest of the parents, except for her long-suffering husband, nodded along and made approving sounds.

“Oh, that one.” Gene said “So you mean to tell me that the Psi Corps, the evil organization, assassinated someone with their rogue telepath brother in the room watching? No. Sleepers induce suicide. Sometimes people can’t accept their loved one killing themselves and invent murder conspiracies. That scenario is so common that it actually gets recycled with new people from time to time.”

“What about—” she started again, but Tyrone cut her off.

“Baby stop. Just stop. Whatever the Psi Corps does, they don’t have anything to do with it, and neither of them deserves this.”

<Thank God.> Sam sent.

<Is he the reasonable one, or something?> Colin asked.

<N0? They’re just different. He tends to focus on how I treat others. Mom pays more attention to how others treat me.>

<Division of labor. Gotcha.>

“That’s actually why we’re here.” Colin said aloud after giving Tyrone a moment to have a whispered conversation with Tisha. “We’ve been here for a bit, talking to Albert, Fatima, Machteld, and Sam.” Most of the parents, apart from Tyrone and Nina, didn’t like that fact very much, though they didn’t say anything “And they’ve told us you’re leaning toward putting them on Sleepers and not letting them join the Corps, is that correct?”

“Mostly.” Ekin Albrecht said, glancing over at Tyrone and Nina. They shook their heads while everyone else nodded in agreement. Colin could feel the teenagers rankle in anger, but none of them said anything.

“Okay, might I ask why?” Colin asked.

“Well, irregardless what Tisha has to say” Linda started, and her use of that non-word stabbed Colin in the brain, “we just don’t think that being in the Psi Corps is what’s best for them. And honestly I don’t see how it’s any of your business at all, they’re our children and it’s our decision to make. You just wouldn’t understand, you don’t love your children like we do.” She said, while
Stan nodded along in complete agreement.

Even the other mundanes, except for her husband, looked over at her in disgust.

That comment deeply offended Colin, but Gene was a bit more emotionally volatile and beyond pissed. Anger and his surface thoughts radiated off him as he thought of how his own parents and Zara’s birth parents dropped them like hot rocks, and how others were assaulted by their own families. It was only Colin’s hand rapidly gripping his and Albert’s intervention that kept Gene from going apoplectic.

“I can’t fucking believe you just said that to him. Scratch that, I absolutely fucking can.” His voice was calm, but biting, carrying shades of the outrage Colin felt in his thoughts. All their thoughts.

“Albert! Language!” his mother remonstrated.

“No Linda” he said, very purposefully using her name instead of their relationship, causing his mother to blanch and his father’s face to turn red “You just told the man who saved my life and sanity; who was rejected by his own parents; who is adopting a little girl whose parents viciously forgot her, that his people—my people and by extension me—don’t love our children like you do. It was fucking disgusting and you just lost every shred of my respect.”

Colin basked in the Schadenfreude as she tried to backpedal, both Gene and Nishita were stunned into silence. The other teenagers however were lending themselves to Albert, holding him up emotionally with their own minds. He's knees shook and he was close to passing out from anxiety, but he powered through it. His own rage and the support of his cadre-siblings kept him going. And that's what they were, even if they weren't raised in a proper cadre.

“Of course I don’t mean you, you’re my son and I love y—” Albert cut her off.

“Oh, so I’m the exception to your bigotry? Like a racist’s black friend? You don’t love me Linda. You love the idealized memory of me so much that you want to erase who I actually am with drugs and possibly kill me. They love who I actually am.” referring to his compatriots "So do they." referring to Gene, Colin, and Nishita. "The Psi Corps freed me from chains inside my own head, literally picked me up off the floor, and gave my life back. You want to kill me by inches.”

“Son, you know that’s not true.” His father Stan said

“Don’t lie to me Stanley, you were bad at it before I could read your mind, and I can see it in her thoughts.”

“Stay out of my head you little mind-fucker!” Stan growled angrily, rising to his feet with clenched fists. Colin, Gene and Dr. Cavanaugh were up almost as fast as any of the mundanes could blink and had themselves interposed between the angry white suburbanite and his son. The two Psi Cops standing flat footed, with clenched fists staring daggers at him gave him pause and he stopped. The psychiatrist extended her mental defenses over everyone so that no matter what happened her patients wouldn’t perceive pain or negative emotions.

<Albert, do you want them gone?> Colin asked, he was so proud of the kid he could explode, so was Gene. Even staring down Albert’s birth parents and having to be motionless to the point of radiating absolute menace, he projected some of that pride and approval in Albert's direction.

<Yeah. Fuck ‘em> Albert replied <We’re done.> Albert was on the couch, his knees curled up against his chest in a sitting fetal position. Sam and Fatima held him while Machteld was projecting her love and protective aegis over him from the far side of the couch.
<So much for Colin’s plan> Gene remarked, <But for what it’s worth, we’re both damn proud of you.>

<So am I.> Nishita followed up.

<Thanks.>

“Mister and Missus Lawson” Gene said as professionally as he could “get the fuck out. You are no longer welcome.”

If Linda had pearls she would have been clutching them in mortification; embarrassed at being called out, but not actually for her attitudes. Stan stood red in the face with clenched fists that he’d intended to use on his own child.

“And if we won’t?” Stan asked, gritting his teeth “What if I want to withdraw my son from this freak show?” he inched forward.

“Then we bring in security to throw you out and our lawyers bury you. But if you take one more step forward you’ll become a trauma patient. Albert isn’t your son anymore. He’s ours. Get out.” Gene replied coldly. Stan weighed his options. He was taller than Gene, but Gene was much more heavily built, and he wasn’t alone. Gene also carried himself like someone who knew how to kill with his hands and Mr. Lawson wanted nothing to do with that.

“Come on honey, let’s go. We don’t need to put up with these…mutants.” He stormed out, his wife trailing along behind him in a huff. The other parents were stunned. Simply stunned. None of them liked the Corps, but Colin could tell that while the rest were prejudiced, it was of the systemic type instead of the virulent hatred that Albert’s parents had failed to mask. There was hope for them. Albert was in rough shape though.

“Sorry about that.” Colin said to the other parents and relaxed, while Nishita turned around and joined the teens.

<Albert, are you okay?> Nishita asked. He broke down into tears, not sadness, but stress and relief of tension.

<Kinda?> he replied <I’ve been trying to ignore that about them.>

<I know. I’d hoped it wouldn’t come to that.> she replied, and Fatima followed up.

< No matter what happens with your relatives, we’re family and we love you.>

<Damn right> Sam said.

<Lehne dich zurück und enspanne. Wir haben das.> The other three understood her perfectly, Colin had to mentally translate for Gene. <Sit back and relax. We’ve got this.>

The whole thing warmed Colin’s heart, and Gene had to wipe a tear out of his eye but that might just been the emotional overspill. Albert took back his agency and it looked like the others were about to follow suit.

“I think we’ll just sit down and let your kids do the talking.” Gene suggested after a moment and sat back down. Colin sat down on his own chair but scooted it close enough that they could easily intertwine their fingers. After a moment, Machteld straighted up and looked at her parents while Nishita took her own seat back.
“Mutter, Vater… wir sind keine Kinder mehr. Unsere Kindheiten wurden von uns genommen, wenn wir versklavt wurden.” Colin translated for the non-germanophones softly and in a neutral tone, so he didn’t effectively overdub her or project his own emotions. Her inflection was haunting, the emotions she couldn’t shield effectively hit him like a wave, and even as he spoke tears ran down his cheeks. She didn’t cry. The others were helping her maintain a semblance of composure. They fought flashbacks for her.

“Mother, Father…we’re not children anymore. Our childhoods were taken from us, when we were enslaved.”

“Ein Jahr lang wurden unsere Willen eingesperrt. Wir waren halb verhungert, allein, und asgesandt um andere auszuspionieren.”

“For a year our volitions were caged. We were half-starved, alone, and sent out to spy on others.

“Vor dem Anfall wollte ich sterben. Danach habe ich Englisch vergessen, aber ich konnte ihre Gedanken spüren. Das einzige was wir hatten war einander, indem wir unsere Gedanken und Liebe durch die Mauern; sogar ohne jemals die anderen zu sehen.”

“Before the ‘seizure’ I wanted to die. After it, I forgot English, but I could feel their minds. The only thing we had was each other, sending our thoughts and love through the walls; even without ever seeing the others.”

“Können sie sich vorstellen wie das ist? Zu fühlen und zu wissen in deiner Seele dass jamand liebt Sie, nur weil Sie existieren?”

“Can you imagine what that’s like? To feel and know in your soul that someone loves you, just because you exist?

No verbal answer was forthcoming from the mundanes, but an affirmative was physiologically impossible. The adults were in horrified rapt attention. This was the first time they were getting this information, none of their children had told them prior to this moment, and they were too horrified and numb to even cry.

“Wir haben uns ein ganzes Jahr davor bewahrt zu brechen. Für uns es war garade genug. Für Polina, es war nicht…es war nicht.”

“We saved ourselves from breaking for an entire year. For us, it was enough. For Polina, it wasn’t…it wasn’t.”


“She committed suicide. We felt her despair and tried to help her, but she blocked us out. She was…determined to end it. Polina strangled the life out of herself. When she died, we…we felt it. A gate opened and sucked her in. Then she was gone. Two days later, Colin and Gene freed us.”

She stopped. Machteld stopped speaking and stopped even trying to hold back tears. The parents didn’t know how to handle it at all. They wanted to comfort their near-adult children, but their own instincts were being waved off by the hive-mind. On some level they knew they weren’t needed, what physical comfort and verbal platitudes they could offer were superfluous. Colin decided to be useful while Nishita talked to the kids.
“Look. Separating them and putting them on sleepers is a bad idea.” He said. “It’s bad in so many ways, ways that the Psi Corps has nothing to do with. Best case scenario, they run away and either go rogue or show up at our office; and if that happens we will take them in and chances are they will never voluntarily speak to any of you ever again.”

“So I can see…” Tyrone said “Just what the hell is up with that, anyway?” he motioned toward the group who were by that point talking to Nishita. “It doesn’t look like there’s any uh… hanky-panky going on.”

“That’s because there isn’t.” Gene answered “You know the sorts of bonds that happen in military units?”

“Yeah.” Tyrone affirmed. “I’ve got a couple buddies who used to be marines. It’s almost weird.”

“It’s like that but more, just… More. It’s hard to describe if you can’t see it and it’s too intimate for me to feel comfortable showing you without their permission.”

“All they had was profound emotional intimacy for a year. They held each other together with their minds and over the course of that year their souls started to…mix. Not completely, they’re still individuals but…”

“But they’re closer than our brains can wrap our heads around?” Tyrone asked rhetorically.

“Yeah.” Colin replied, then thought of a way to bring it home “Most telepaths who aren’t really powerful need line of sight or close proximity. I’m really strong, I can talk to Dr. Cavanaugh from the other side of the door and down across the hall probably. I just can’t find an individual through the cognitive soup past that. If you haven’t noticed, Gene and I are extremely close—” Gene interjected, grinning from ear to ear.

“We’re completely besotted with each other.”

“Yes we are” Colin confirmed, kissing him on the cheek “We can keep in contact maybe between here and the elevator. Farther, out in space where there aren’t as many minds. Follow me so far?” Tyrone nodded.

<It's increasing you know...> Gene said privately. <Our range. And I'm starting to pick up more of your private thoughts.>

<I know.> Colin replied. <Doesn't bother me one bit.>

<Me either.>

“Sam is the weakest out of all of them. He’s only a P6. On day one he would have strained to send his thoughts through the wall of his cell. Now, he can probably contact the others, and only them, several kilometers away. That distance will increase over time. We don't know what the limits are.” which was technically true, but only because he didn't know of a functional limit on the range of quantum entanglement communications either. Tyrone nodded again, trying to wrap his mind around being able to talk to someone over arbitrary distances. "More than that, they'll be able to defend each other at those ranges too. Machteld will be able to scan someone using Sam's mind as a bridge."

'Holy shit.' Tyrone thought to himself.

“What about you?” His wife Tisha asked, and he could feel Gene grind his teeth. “How can we trust you’ll treat Sam, or any of them, right?”
“Colin I’ll take this one.” Gene said “Ma’am, you remember the Lawsons? That virulent hatred you saw? That’s where the nonsense you read about comes from. People like that. They're going to go home and talk to all their yuppie friends about how the Psi Corps indoctrinated their little boy into a cult. But I won’t lie to you. The Psi Corps has twelve million people in it. Some of those people are bad, some of them have power. We do our best to stop them. That’s all we can promise anyone. That’s all anyone can promise anyone else ever. But I guarantee you, your son’s chances are much worse outside the Corps.”

For the first time since everything started, Mr. Ahmad opened his mouth. “What’s the worst-case. You said running away was best case. What’s the worst?” he asked.

“Suicide.” Colin said flatly, and Nina Ahmad gasped “Partially because the most important thing in their universe will have been taken from them and their autonomy will have been stripped from them again and they won’t be able to handle that very well. Partially because Sleepers are just that bad.”

“How… how bad could they possibly be?” Nina asked, her friendly slightly high-pitched voice taking on the tones of a nervous field mouse.

“Baseline, a person with a middle-class standard of living with no other personal problems or psychiatric conditions has a suicide risk of between one and two percent. Per year. These kids, it would be higher. Much. Higher.” Colin replied. Nina looked confused, she couldn’t wrap her head around why a medication would be that lethal to the people who take it.

“I know it turns off telepathy but… does it do something else?” she asked. Gene decided to handle that question.

“That’s bad enough; but yes. Imagine losing one of your primary senses. Say…touch. Imagine losing your sense of where you are in the world, your sense of what separates you from everything else and being in the driver’s seat of your own body. That’s just the baseline, that’s what losing our telepathy does. Everything else becomes flat.” Gene said. Nina looked at him, trying to turn what that would be like over in her head and drawing a blank.

“I honestly have no idea what that would be like.” She told him, feeling a bit ashamed that her imagination wasn’t up to the task.

“I was forced to take them when I was hospitalized a few weeks ago. I can show you.

“Y’all can do that?” Tisha asked

“Yeah.” Gene replied “In different ways. Sam or Fatima would need to transfer a memory. Except with each other. Albert, Machteld, Dr. Cavanaugh, Colin, and myself can um… reject your reality and substitute our own.”

“Show me. If… if you don’t mind.” Tisha asked. Her own husband interjected.

“Baby, you sure you wanna do that?”

“I need to know Tyrone. I’m sure.” She confirmed. Colin was privately impressed, Gene was too from the feel of him. The same person who might crawl through the recesses of the internet wondering what happened to her child was also the sort of person who would Need to Know everything she could know about what might speculatively happen to that child.

“Any other takers? I can cover all of you, it’s no trouble.” Gene encouraged them.
Tyrone shifted back and forth on his feet for a second before replying. “Fuck it. Me too.” A hasty whispered conversation in Arabic later and Nina spoke up.

“Us too.”

The Albrechts were cautious. Not unwilling, but uneasy given how strange their entire afternoon had been and knowing it was about to get weirder. Peer pressure won them over in the end.

“Ja.” Johann agreed.

“Me too.” Ekin consented.

“Okay. Hold on to your asses.” Gene told them and started.

First, he took away their sense of touch, then ratcheted up the strange. Gene flattened their hearing and dulled color vision, collapsing everything they saw into two dimensions instead of three. Then he disconnected their conscious perception of self entirely dissociating and dislocating them. He held them like that in horrified silence for ten seconds before he slowly reintroduced elements of their own native reality and brought them back to normal.

When they came back to themselves it took them a moment to process the experience, even though the whole thing from start to finish had taken maybe thirty seconds.

“How, by Allah—praise be upon him—did that get through Earth Alliance Health?” Zaid asked no one in particular after taking a moment to process the living nightmare he experienced.

Colin could probably just tell him the facts of history and let everyone draw their own conclusions, but he knew that if he could get one of them invested in digging everything up, he might end up with something he could use. Advocates. Telepaths couldn’t agitate politically or do much more than the dry recitation of non-politicized facts. Mundanes could. If he could harness their drive to defend their own children and make their lives better, he’d have someone he could leak things to…

<Do it.> Gene said <It’s dirty and manipulative as all fuck, but do it.> Colin knew just who to talk to directly.

“Herr und Frau Albrecht, Sie sind Produkte des deutschen Bildungsststems, ja?” he had to make sure they weren’t raised in North America or something.

“Ja, warum?” Ekin confirmed and asked why Colin was asking.

“Kennen sie die acht Stadien des Völkermords?” The two Germans froze at the mention of the eight stages of genocide. The other mundanes, not knowing what was being said in the brief exchange took official notice of that fact.

“What’s going on?” Nina asked.

“One moment.” Johann replied “It’s important but…It’s a German thing.” Then he switched back to German and asking why Colin was beating around the bush. “Bitte sag mir, warum du so Vorsichtig bist…”

“Denn ich darf keine politischen Erklärungen abgeben. Es ist de Preis den wir dafür bezahlen dass wir leben dürfen.” Colin said, giving him the necessary clue that he didn’t have freedom of speech or expression as a condition of life. When he tapped his badge both of their eyes went wide in recognition, then they cast their eyes down and their shame leapt across the intervening distance.
“Wie viele Tote?” Johann asked. He honestly had no idea, and Colin knew he didn't because even the German schools didn't teach about the genocide of telepaths. They'd been complicit in it after the Shoah, they were collectively too ashamed as a nation state.


“Woher wussten wir das nicht? Wir wurden über den Völkermord und den Holocaust in der Schule unterrichtet…” Ekin asked, and everyone knew the word Holocaust.

“Leugnung ist die achte Stufe” Johann reminded his life. Denial was the eighth stage. Johann was starting to get the picture. Obey the laws, do as you’re told, or we’ll do it to you again.

“Seriously, I mean it, what’s going on?” Zaid asked.

“Yeah, what kinda weird German shit is this?” Tyrone followed up.

“He’s trying to figure out how to answer your question Zaid.” Johann replied.

“Okay, but why does that translate to The Holocaust.” Tisha followed up.

“Because the Earth Alliance doesn’t consider telepaths to be fully human. That’s why the Sleepers got through Earth Alliance Health. And there’s… a history we haven’t been taught.” Ekin replied to her and Tisha’s eyes lit up.

“Look up The Tragedy of Telepaths: A History of the Psi Corps. It was written by an Oxford professor named J. Gregory Keyes.” Gene said. “It has everything in it. Fully referenced. We’re just limited in what we can say.”

At that point, Colin could tell that all their minds were off to the races and the Albrechts were explaining the stages of genocide to the other parents.

<That was dirty. We don’t disapprove, but that was dirty.> said the mental voice of the collective.

<I know… but it isn’t like I can go on ISN and talk about it myself.> Colin replied.

<That’s why we don’t disapprove but… we don’t actually know that history. Can you teach us?>

<Of course.> Colin replied.
To Hell and Back

Chapter Summary

This chapter is very long, and it's a slog, not just for the length. This gets... dark. Like, Law and Order: SVU dark. You've been warned. Ends on a high note though.

Sunday Feb 8th, 2263

"Hi Dads!" Zara greeted them excitedly. Given the slight difference in day length between Earth and Omega VII, Colin and Gene were having to get up earlier and earlier to make the call at the scheduled time, and were still drinking coffee when they called.

"Well hi there!" Colin replied right back.

"Hey, how're you doing?" Gene asked.

"I'm doing pretty good. I think I'm finally getting imaginary numbers" Zara replied in a contemplative tone. "I think my confusion was that I was thinking of real numbers like they were necessarily representing real things instead of being logic constructs that we can relate to real things. You can't find the square root of negative apples but that isn't the point. In reality, imaginary numbers are just an extension of the logic that gives us irrational numbers." Colin felt Gene's smile rather than see it. He loved math. For Colin it was a useful problem solving tool, but Gene loved it for its own sake and it was starting to play a more prominent role in their combat telepathy exercises.

"That's awesome!" Gene praised "Before you know it you'll be doing calculus and that's where the fun really starts!" Zara looked at him sideways and Colin found that expression somewhat satisfying.

"The other kids are not as enthusiastic about that..." She said.

"Well, remember when you first started Algebra?" Gene asked "Wasn't it the same?" Zara thought it over for a second. She hadn't been in her age group for math for a long time, Colin knew that much about her early education. And it wasn't like she was some kind of prodigy. She wasn't. She was certainly bright, but this was nurture rather than nature. For all their other faults, her birth parents didn't believe that any knowledge was beyond the reach of a child who was old enough to ask the question, and they put that into practice. What he wasn't sure about was how well she'd know the perceptions of other kids when she was that young.

"Now that I think about it, they were pretty nervous. I think the variables scared them." She said after a few seconds.

'Right. There's two things going on." Gene told her "For starters, people get taught that math is hard and scary, so they walk into math class with that expectation. The second thing is that there are certain rites of passage in math. Algebra is one. It's a big transition away from simple arithmetic and everyday calculations, and into higher concepts and people kind of understand that even without realizing it. They make it a bigger deal than it really is conceptually and it intimidates them."
"And calculus is the same way?" Zara asked, she didn't sound skeptical which is what Colin might have expected, more like that she'd just gotten the answer to a question she never thought to ask, but knew she probably should have thought of.

"Yep! It's big. It's the gate to the really high concepts of math and physics, but it isn't really all that hard." Gene confirmed for her. "It's possible approximate a lot of things without it, like using algebra and summation functions in physics and statistics, but to really understand those things, you need calculus. People look at it, see a lot of new notation and know it's a big deal, they get scared." then Gene gave her a little smirk and a sideways glance "But you're not afraid are you?"

"No!" Zara denied in the vehement way that was typical of posturing children. In some ways, Zara was absolutely one hundred percent nine years old. A smart, perceptive nine year old who'd been through hell and come out the other side, but she was still nine.

"You're gonna own those integrals?!" Gene continued, psyching her up.

"I'm gonna own those integrals! RAAAAH!" Zara gave him her best war face at the end of that and it had Gene grinning from ear to ear.

"That's right!" Gene said, validating her enthusiasm, but then he switched tacks. "You're gonna own those integrals. Just remember, it's not a competition. You're owning the integrals because you have them in front of you and they need to be owned. Try not to humiliate the other kids."

'Sneaky sneaky...' Colin thought privately. If Zara hadn't figured out the answer to his little challenge, Gene had just given her a hint that might nudge her along.

"Speaking of which..." Colin cut in "Have you figured out the answer to the question I posed last week?"

"I think so?" She replied, and Colin could hear the question mark at the end. She wasn't sure but she thought she had something reasonable that might be what he was going for; though if he was honest there were a few ways she could take the whole thing and there wasn't one right answer so much as there was a correct way to think about the question that could lead in a few different directions.

"Hit me with it." he encouraged her "I'm not going to make fun of you if you get it wrong. I wouldn't ever do that."

"I know Dad. I think it has something to do with how we're not really ever competing with each other. It's like Cops and Blips, winning isn't the point, it's how we play that's the point." She said, and Colin nodded along with her. "It's good to do well, and people who do well should be rewarded for that. But it shouldn't hurt everyone else either and we're supposed to help each other. So we get moved around so that the students who get it can help the ones who don't instead of hogging all the extra credit for ourselves."

For Colin's money, she hit the nail on the head. He might have put it differently, but she was right. There was competition within the Corps, there were only so many seats in coveted programs of study, only so many assignments in relatively pleasant locations. 'You should see the number of applicants for jobs in Hawaii there are...' He thought to himself. Still, at the end of the day, the Corps was fundamentally cooperative and success should be shared, and those are are successful should help the ones who aren't.

"You got it right on the money kiddo. Everyone has different strengths and weaknesses, and we all have to make sacrifices sometimes so that everyone
else can move forward, but in return for that the opposite is true. No one gets left behind either. You might not always get that extra credit, but it's worth it if you can help the guy who doesn't understand imaginary numbers. One day, he'll be there to help you with history, or something else. Whatever it is." Colin said the words, and he could tell without being able to perceive her thoughts that she understood.

"So..." Gene interrupted a little "How are other things going?

"Oh! Two things. Mr. Chastain took us out on a field trip today, just showing us all around TeepTown for the benefit of the new kids. Me included. I got to see your telescope, Dad. Okay okay I'd been there before but Mr. Chastain told the story behind it. Some of the other kids didn't believe him when he said we could join our minds together like that. He knew it would be special for me so he had me take lead looking through the scope and we all gestalted and looked up into the sky. It was so cool. There wasn't anyone in the field of view but...wow. It felt like I don't know how to describe it. Like I was so much bigger than me, but yet...smaller too. Is that what it was like?"

"Kinda. It feels a little bit different for everyone. For me it felt like I was an ice cube in a glass of ice water. Bound together with everyone else but yet also me." Colin replied.

"For me, going into a gestalt feels more like it does for you. I feel like I'm just one shining star in the great unified void of the sky. Bigger, and smaller all at once." Gene said, piping in to inform her. "It just kinda depends on your personality and how your brain decides to interpret something that's really very strange when you think about it."

"So kinda like how we sense each other's thoughts? It isn't like we're really seeing anything, but our brains have to process the information somehow so it uses hearing, vision, and smell?"

"Exactly like that" Colin confirmed for her. "I'm glad you got to do that. I didn't learn how to gestalt until I was in the minor academy."

"Yeah, I got the feeling Mr. Chastain as doing it for a particular reason, but he wouldn't say what it was when I asked him." That made Colin's blood run cold. He figured it was on a topical lark, Mike did that sometimes. But the way things were going and with what Zara just said, Colin had the sneaking suspicion that it was because they might have to use it earlier than the minor academy.

<He knows that war is coming just as well as we do, Colin.> Gene said, and Colin felt he was worried too <It's possible he has details we don't. He's in Geneva, he's in contact with telepaths who work in EarthDome.>

<I know. That's what worries me.> Colin replied. <EarthGov might be getting ready to turn on us. Or he just knows more about what's already been going on than he lets on. It's impossible to know for sure from here, it's not like we can ask him on an open channel.>

"It could just be a change in curriculum or something he thought to do at the time." Colin said, but he wouldn't lie to her ever, and he'd already hinted at it when she first left Omega VII. She also knew about the history off telepaths with mundanes. "Or it could be something else. Think about what you do while joined together like that. Reach out into orbit and stop a warship? What about on the ground? Think if something were to happen that was really bad. Think you could go into a gestalt with the other kids, even adults, and defend yourselves more effectively?" She went still for a second as the pieces fit together for her. Colin didn't need telepathy, the realization was written all over her face.
"It's the same reason you gave me that code, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes." he replied truthfully "Just before you left here, terrorists hit a training cadre. I was worried. Mr. Chastain might just be worried too. Plus there are the mundanes. Did Max tell you about the Charter Breach of '58?" Zara nodded.

"It made things... politically difficult. We're just making sure that if things do go bad, we're prepared for it. We hope they don't, but it's better to prepare for something and have it not happen than be caught unprepared, right?"

Zara nodded, slowly. Colin hated scaring her but he was committed to always being honest with her if she asked a question and he wouldn't sugar coat it either. He might leave out the exact details, but she trusted him and he would never betray that trust.

"I think I get it." she said "Just like fire drills. Fire happens. We hope not, but we still have fire extinguishers and an escape plan." She said it more like she was trying to convince herself it was true rather than just getting the logic, and she wasn't wrong to be worried. Max made sure she knew what mundanes had done, and might do again; that she knew the social contract that Corps literally lived by.

"What was the second thing?" Gene asked, trying desperately to shift the mood a little bit.

"Hmm?" Zara mumbled, lost in thought.

"The second thing that happened. What was it?"

"Oh just me having to explain what being gay was to other kids." Zara replied, deciding it was better to talk about better things.

"Oh, I bet that was fun!" Gene replied jovially, but squeezed Colin's hand as much for his reassurance than Colin's just out of frame.

Wednesday February 11th, 2263

"You're joining me in the basement, right? It's your leg day!" Gene asked excitedly. He was standing over Colin in short gym shorts and a tank-top that showed himself off way too well.

"Do I have to?" Colin asked. He didn't mind the cardio, enjoyed his upper body workout, and loved fencing. But he hated leg day. Gene enjoyed it somehow. There was a reason he was slightly better built than Colin was. Lifelong habits borne of school athletics and then Military division. On the other hand, there were certain benefits.

"Of course you do. You remember the motivational posters…” Gene was practically vibrating. Something was up.

"A healthy body makes a healthy mind. I know! But I also keep a supply of swiss chocolate in my desk.” Colin replied.

“That's just self-care sweetheart.” Gene replied before leaning down where Colin was sitting at his desk and kissing him in just the right way to make the message as clear as day. Of course, the flash of interesting imagery didn't hurt.
“Oh I see. It’s gonna be the kind of workout session where we have to lock the door…” Colin said smirking. That, he figured he could get behind. Gene tried his level best to look completely innocent and failed miserably.

“Colin! I have no idea what you’re talking about. I couldn’t possibly have any interest whatsoever in watching you do squats, getting you to spot me on the bench-press, or turning our hand-to-hand combat practice into something else entirely. What do you take me for?” Colin had an idea and got up and slid his hands around Gene’s waste and down to that muscular ass of his.

“My devilishly sexy, compassionate, and funny partner backslash boyfriend who’s lurid gym fantasies and completely unaccountable horniness I will shamelessly indulge at any opportunity that won’t get me brought up on charges.” He tried to brush his lips across Gene’s, but Gene pulled away at the last possible picosecond.

“I see what you’re trying to do. You’re trying to have your cake and eat it by skipping straight to the fun parts right here in your office…”

“Damnit!”

“Naughty. Extra sets for you!” Gene chided. Colin hung his head in defeat. He would have to do leg-day afterall. But in that few seconds, a thought occurred to him and suddenly there was something he didn’t just want to do, but absolutely needed to do.

“Alright. Just give me twenty minutes to finish up a thing, and I’ll be down.” Colin said. Gene raised his eyebrow and sent a wordless query across the intervening space.

“I wasn’t lying about indulging you Gene. I promise. Give me twenty minutes.”

“Alright, alright. I’ll go get everything ready downstairs. Gives me time to add something special…” Gene turned around and strutted out of Colin’s office. Colin for his part really hated to see him go, but the way he was walking made it a pleasure to watch him leave.

When Colin got his train of thought back in order he pulled open his desk drawer. Right next to his supply of chocolate, his stress ball, and fidget-dodecahedron, there were two lumps of heat-warped and blackened metal. He hit the button that shut his door, and took off his gloves, then plucked his birth parent’s badges out of the drawer.

He felt an almost imperceptible buzz from them, an old and familiar presence; the first one he’d ever perceived even though he had no conception of what it was. The imprints of their minds. Or at least it could be. It could also be the memory of a death trace pulled up from deep in his own memories, repeated enough times it was second nature to recall them. He focused on that presence and let memories percolate up into his consciousness. What they looked like, what their mental voices sounded like. What little bit of who Judith Meier and Richard Wilson were in life they’d managed to implant in his head before they left for the war with the Dilgar. He held all of that in his mind and then looked over at a mirror hanging just behind his desk, on a patch of wall that wasn’t covered in books, and projected them there, forming a phantasm in his own mind.

“Hi mom. Hi dad. Been a while. I don’t know if you’re there, but I’ve seen the Door, and I figure maybe that implies something about what happens after we’re gone. Maybe it’s just our own minds playing tricks, but then why would it be consistent between dying people? I have a lot to update you on, don’t I? Christ, have I really not done this since my teens? I made it through both the Psych and Metapol programs. Cool huh? Of course, you figured I’d be an overachiever, manifesting so early. I remember that much. Still, it hasn’t exactly been easy. I’ll spare you the details, but I deal with the worst of what humans can do to each other. It takes a toll. I promise
dad, I do try to be safe.

But uh yeah, I’m gay. Don’t remember if I ever told you. I also met someone. Haven’t been together that long, okay that kinda depends on how you tabulate things because we kinda were from day one but didn’t know it. Eh, even then it still isn’t that long objectively speaking. Sorry I’m babbling. Not that you care, being dead and all that. I think you’d like Gene if you could meet him. Though, I suppose you might…”

He called up his memories of Gene, sanitized a little because they were his parents and didn’t need to see that, and projected them to the mirror. He thought he felt approval, but again, that could just as easily by psychosomatic. He knew that but didn’t care.

“I think I’ve found the person I want to spend the rest of my life with. I know, I know. ‘You’re going too fast’ is what you’d say, mom. But I trust him, I’m crazy about him, we compliment each other well, and keep each other sane. I’ve seen who he is, he’s seen me. We’ll make it work. Hell, we haven’t even made anything official yet other than… hmm. I don’t know how you’ll react to this. Well, you know how I deal with the worst of humanity? Well, as a result of that you’re getting a granddaughter. Her name is Zara. We’re adopting. Long story, complicated. Easier to show than tell I suppose.”

Colin called those memories up, all of them. He figured after everything they’d seen they could handle the reality of his work and its consequences. Into the mirror they went. He wasn’t sure if what he felt right than was his own love reflecting back, or theirs. Ultimately, did it matter?

“Yeah I know, right? I’m so damn proud of her. She’s smart, tough as nails, cares about others, and she has a mischievous streak I never did. And I swear to you right now, I’m not gonna let the mundanes take us from her like they took you from me. I wish you could be in her life too but I suppose Mike has taken on the role of doting grandparent… I’ve digressed a little, haven’t I? Where was I? Right. Anything official. We both know what the answer is if either of us pops that question. We just haven’t done it yet. I don’t know, waiting for the right time I guess. Hell we weren’t even sure it was legal until we checked. Not exactly common, you understand. But… I think when we do get married…”

He gently ran his fingers over both surfaces, committing every curve and pit to memory

"I want to use these for the rings. Maybe something for Zara too now that I think about it. Yeah, definitely something for her too, a locket maybe? They’re the only heirlooms I can pass down, and they’ll have more meaning to the people I love this way than as hunks of half-melted copper. Not sure it matters, I’ll certainly try to talk again, but if what I’m doing is really a deathtrace…This might be the last time I talk to you. I’ll certainly try. You’ve been dead for thirty-two years so it’s better than most people get, right? Of course, it’s more likely that I’ve been talking to myself off and on for three decades.

Love you mom, love you dad.

Goodbye…maybe."

Just before he shook his head and broke off contact with…his parents? Autohypnosis? He thought he might have felt a response, but he wasn’t sure. When was he ever?

Colin whipped up a design for two rings and a locket and printed them out. Then he took a little jewelry case from the bottom drawer of his desk and put the paper along with both badges inside it.

“Alright. I’ll see to the commission tomorrow.” he told himself then realized something. “Shit. I
have to hunt for a jeweler who’ll take a telepath’s commission. Just have to trust to mundane profit motive I guess…”

When he headed downstairs into the practice area after changing into his workout clothes the lights were off, and the room was illuminated by dozens of candles. Some little part of him, maybe not so little the more he stood and stared at the room, melted. It was strangely beautiful the way the flickering light, still perfectly fine to exercise and even fence by there were that many of them, made dancing shadows everywhere. It had taken a lot of work and planning to set up right.

Then there was Gene, wearing nothing but short basketball shorts. No badge, not even gloves. Just standing in the center of the room with that unbelievably sexy grin of his. Colin didn’t bother trying to hide how excited that made him.

“Three things, Gene.” He said.

“And they would be?” Gene asked in an almost come-hither tone.

“I feel incredibly overdressed.” Colin said.

“That is eminently fixable. What’s the second thing?” Gene was standing with his chin in his clenched fist in a thinker pose, waiting.

Colin tossed his shirt off and set his gloves down on a little table by the door.

“You are the hottest man alive, and I love you more than you can imagine.”

“See, I was gonna say the same thing about you… but what’s the third thing?”

“This is… strangely and incredibly romantic, and I’ll admit, I was morally wrong to want to skip leg day.”

“Technically that’s four things. Now lock that door and get your sweet ass over to the squat rack.” Gene commanded.

"Yes sir!" and for once, Colin was enthusiastic about whatever Gene had hidden under the occlusive wrappings on the bar.

**Thursday, February 12th 2263**

Erika looked extremely happy with herself, beaming brightly as she strutted into the common area where Colin, Gene, Max, Gerald, and Hoshi were enjoying lunch.

“I bring gifts!” she announced, holding up a document. Max gasped in mock surprise and winked at her.

“Is that what I think it is?” he asked in his deadpan.

“It is. Scanning warrants!” Erika tried her level best to look like a bright and happy sun.

“Oooh scanning who I think we’re going to scan?” Hoshi asked

“Oh yes. Hoshi, have you ever wanted to brutally scan a mundane slaver in full view of their lawyers and mundane security?” Erika asked.
“I know I have!” Gene enthusiastically got with the program.

“Hmmm. I’ve never really considered it but now that you mention it that would be oddly liberating.” Hoshi replied after a brief moment of contemplation.

“Too bad, you don’t get to.” Erika shattered her newfound dream. “Colin, Gene, Max, and I get to. Not have to, get to.” she said, beaming “We’re all officers of the court so....”

“Oh. Laaame.” Hoshi complained.

“I know, I’m sorry sweety.” she gave Hoshi a shoulder-hug before handing Colin the warrant. He read it. It authorized them to scan the minds of suspects for the sole and specific purpose of finding missing children. Nothing could be used in court, nothing could be construed as probable cause, not even the plain view exception was applicable for sites discovered during telepathic scans. Colin took in a deep breath and exhaled it to help him control the anger boiling in his soul.

“I know.” Erika said “Best we could do. The original warrant was omnibus, but the defense attorneys challenged the Clark era laws underpinning those on appeal and won.” those would have permitted the use of scans for parallel construction of a criminal case, guiding them toward hard evidence. Those laws were out. The courts were basically treating it like a search and rescue. They could arrest the perps because they’d find them in possession of their victims, but no one involved could testify. Video evidence wouldn’t be sufficient for a conviction, so the only option they had was to go fully extrajudicial. Colin thought through it and realized he didn’t have a choice. Somehow, the Earth Alliance had gotten worse. He knew it was a fifty-fifty shot when talked to Erika about it, but now it was real.

“So, Gene, Max, Erika... what say you to going to colonial lockup after breakfast?” Colin asked. Wolfish grins all around. He nodded and grinned right back. “I’ll have EMS on standby then. I’m afraid we’re going to have to take our own justice in this case.”

“Damn straight we are.” Gene replied. Both Max and Erika frowned and nodded grimly. Colin got it. They were both in love with the concept of the law. They wouldn’t be not-lawyers if they weren’t. But they also knew that the law as written explicitly excluded them from its protection and from redress of wrong. He could feel the cognitive dissonance churning in their minds, but it settled. They only really had the one option open to them, and they both knew it. It wasn’t what either of them wanted, but they couldn’t let child trafficking go unpunished either.

... 

Two Hours Later Colin sat in a rather uncomfortable steel folding chair on one side of a card table--Erika, Max, and Gene were in other interview rooms-- as his first prisoner was brought in fully shackled and escorted by a pair of guards, a paramedic, and a defense attorney. He recognized the face immediately from Zara’s night terrors and it took everything he had to restrain himself from making the man claw out his own eyes and eat his tongue. He put his hands on his lap to hide the shaking. Colin wasn’t even going to look at him for now. If he did, he knew he might do something he’d regret.

“A pleasure to see you as always Ms. Trudeau.” Colin said sarcastically “Why do you I always find you representing the scum of the earth?” He knew the answer of course.

“Selection bias.” She replied flatly “Everyone deserves a good defense.” Colin could have accepted that if she were a public defender or if she didn’t show up consistently in this case with her firm. But that wasn’t the case. He also believed Erika.
“Possibly. Speaking of which, I noticed you don’t have a telepath with you. Did something happen?” Colin asked, faking concern.

“I’ve… had difficulty finding the help.” Evelyn replied.

“Shame. I’m sure it’ll pass. There aren’t many teeps rated for legal work on this planet, I’m sure they’re just all booked up.” Colin said in his best false-conciliatory tone. Of course, word had gotten around that she didn’t respect the telepaths in her employ or treat them decently. “I assume you want to give this a final check to make sure everything’s in order?” he asked, pulling the warrant out of his briefcase and handing it to her. She read it over, scowling the whole while.

She didn’t say anything for a moment, he just felt the wheels turning in her head, but he pointedly didn’t pay attention.

“I trust the documents are in order?” he finally asked.

“They are.” He felt her decide on a personal appeal as a last-ditch effort to save her client a scan “Colin, legal or not, this is wrong. My client has an inalienable right to privacy and some fascist bullshit out of President Clark’s office doesn’t change that.” Colin cut her off as her talk of inalienable rights for her client but not his victims caused his rage to boil over.

“Shut the fuck up. I’ve had it up to here.” he said, raising his hand to his eyes “We have to play out the legal fiction that he’s innocent until proven guilty because he has rights and we don’t while you suborn perjury. Okay, fine. But you and I both know he’s guilty as sin, and his victims have an absolute right to be found and rescued from whatever sordid hell he sold them into because, contrary to Earth Alliance law and your own bigotry, they’re human beings. So go fuck yourself. You don’t get to use my first name.”

“Are you done? Got that out of your system?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m done. Are the documents in order?” Colin replied.

“Yeah.”

“Good.” he said unflappably before he reached down and pulled a pen and a little checklist from his case. “Sorry about the diversion Mr. Walker.” he said to the prisoner he was ignoring until then. White, brown hair and eyes, he was clean shaven but the underbite and scar were still present. “Before we begin, there are some questions I need to ask you.” no answer.

“Are you on any medications I should know about?” No answer, Colin looked at the paramedic who briefly studied medical records and shook his head. Colin ticked off the appropriate box.

“Do you have any cardiovascular or neurological issues I should know about? For example, do you have heart trouble or a ticking-bomb aneurysm I should be made aware of?” No answer. Same response from the medic.

“Councilor, I would like you to note for the record that the prisoner was unresponsive to the safety questions and they were answered by a third party with knowledge of his medical history.”

“It is so noted.” she replied in terse tones while jotting that down on a datapad. “I’ve copied you on the affidavit for confirmation purposes.”

“Thank you.” he ticked off the other box. “Now Mr. Walker, I need to advise you of your rights. You have the right not to say anything--not that it will help--and do be aware that I am sworn to confidentiality on anything uncovered by this scan that is of a personal and non-criminal nature.
Also be aware that what is uncovered by this scan cannot be used against you in court. Do you have any questions about what I just told you?"

“Fuck you.” Mr. Walker finally replied, flipping Colin the bird.

“I will take that as a no. Unless you have any reason to think otherwise Councilor?” Colin asked the lawyer in even and perfectly neutral tones.

“No. Proceed.” she said through gritted teeth. Being angry and non-responsive was not a reason to stop a scan.

Colin didn’t waste any time. Deep scanning a mundane wasn’t like trying to do it to another telepath. All he really needed to do was look and concentrate on them and then he could dumpster-dive in them. And Mr. Walker felt like a fucking garbage fire of a human being.

Mr. Walker grew up with loving if poor and somewhat absentee parents. It was a common story; he didn’t have sufficient parental guidance trying to escape poverty, fell in with a bad crowd and turned to crime. Of course, he ended up being brutalized and becoming a brute in turn. What surprised Colin was how interconnected the criminal gangs were across planets. Of course raider fleet’s couldn’t support their operations without extensive logistics, but the scale of it boggled Colin’s mind. Did no one ever scan these people? How the hell did the Earth Alliance just let them continue operations like this?

“Fascinating” he said aloud as Mr. Walker writhed and convulsed under his gaze.

There it was, the human trafficking operations. Most of their larger operations were mundanes. Rich people always wanted to exploit free labor for household or agricultural work. Sometimes it ended up being forced prostitution, or selling off a kid to pedophiles.

On this planet though, they specialized in telepaths due to a ready Civil War era supply and a weakened Psi Corps presence post war. There just weren’t enough Psi Cops and Education division telepaths to protect them. A reality that made Colin’s blood boil. There were the usual suspects of course. Corporate clients looking for off-the-books telepaths for industrial espionage and counter-espionage, or to telepathically manipulate contract negotiators outside the conference rooms where the commercial telepaths kept a watchful eye for such things.

The other avenue was sexual exploitation, but that many? Surely there wasn’t an on-planet demand that high? Not for that particular fetish. No, that was only a few. What were the rest? A few organized criminal operations. They always kept the names of individual clients for later blackmail purposes, should they need fast cash or political cover. Fantastic. Colin filed the information away.

But the rest were going to a single private emigration placement service? The fuck? They’d been shipping telepaths off world in lots at set intervals. How the hell had customs missed that? A fucking monkey couldn’t get through import/export inspection without being found, but almost a hundred and fifty?

Then there was the matter of his individual crimes. He dove deeper and breathed a sigh of relief when he discovered that Zara hadn’t been his victim. Not directly. Instead he’d violated a fourteen year old girl and Zara had been right there, she only Saw, like he was now. She was so horrified that her mind had created night-terrors out of the memories she couldn’t consciously recall. It wasn’t much relief, but it was relief. Colin burned her face into his mind so he could check it against the list of the missing, but she’d been in one of the lots sent off world. Unfortunately, he also had to See. There had been others, not all of them girls. Whoever
Emigration Placement Services was, they didn’t care if their merchandize was ‘unspoiled’ like a lot of the private clients did, and this guy got off on dominating telepaths due to a massive inferiority complex.

Dorian would never face trial or sanction for those crimes, and no one there could stop Colin from exacting some small measure of revenge.

"Don’t bother trying to say anything to your lawyer. I’ve fixed it, so you can’t. Ever." Colin said into his mind while maintaining his scan "I’ve also dissociated you from the unpleasantness of my scan so we can talk. Hope you don’t mind. You’ll be returned to what is at this point a punishment scan in a moment."

"Oh fuck! Please don’t kill me! I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!" the Dorian Walker’s consciousness begged.

"No you’re not. You’re only sorry you got caught. But don’t worry. I won’t kill you. Not with witnesses, what do you think I am, stupid? Also, I don’t like killing people. Though, I’ll admit, not forcing you to mutilate yourself has taken positively herculean restraint on my part. Not enough just to kidnap and enslave children, oh no. You have to rape them too?"

“So… what are you gonna do?” Dorian pissed himself, Colin could feel him lose control of his bladder.

"The Corps is Mother, the Corps is Father; and you’ve pissed off the wrong dad."

Colin put several action blocks in place, with accompanying memory vaults. For the rest of his life, Dorian Walker would be psychologically incapable of asserting himself in any situation but a legal context; he’d be a complete pushover. He’d also feel safe bragging about his sexual abuse of children at exactly the wrong time with the wrong people. He’d be more susceptible to the effects of isolation and fear as well. Colin left him with one small mercy, more for himself than Dorian; with the memory vaults in place, he wouldn’t be aware of any dissonance in his mind. Then Colin excised the memory of their conversation and broke contact.

Colin took a deep cleansing inhalation and clenched his fists in catharsis. Mr. Walker made an agonized croaking sound, then gasped in relief, slumping to the table weeping.

“Not so defiant now, are we?” Colin asked as he took a little pad of paper out of his briefcase and started writing down names. He could feel Ms. Trudeau's silent outrage but was beyond caring about the feelings of just another willing perpetrator.

“This one can go… probably to the infirmary.” Colin said icily. Mr. Walker was in a bad way, barely conscious. “Could you send the next one in please?”

Three hours later all twenty prisoners had been exhaustively scanned, and the four telepaths were arranging the names, writing them down on flash cards to they could be rapidly compared, cross-referenced, and categorized. They had a total of twenty-six individuals and fifteen corporations who, between them, accounted for fifty six missing kids. The remaining hundred and forty-four got snapped up by a single private concern over the past three years.

“Anyone noticing a pattern?” Max asked, the question obviously rhetorical.

“Yeah.” Erika said “Emigration Placement Services LLC gets forty-eight every year, virtually everyone above P8 and a bunch of everyone else. The rest tend to follow the...usual pattern for
cases like this. Higher ratings go to industry, lower to individuals.”

“What the hell do they get out of the P3s? They can barely project thoughts to other telepaths.” Max asked the group. “I know, I know, twisted motherfuckers, but a P3 can’t give those perverts what they want.”

“Imagine you and your friends really hate telepaths.” Colin said. Max nodded along “Imagine you could get one too weak to fight back, and completely in your power. Now remember: there’s a market for everything. Literally everything you can imagine, someone out there will pay for it.” Colin imagined the proverbial hamster in Max’s head spinning, then stop as Max’s face blanched white.

“Oybershter in himmel...you’re talking about snuff films, children?” Max finally replied in horror. “Max…” Gene said, reminding him of his own memories.

“Ich vais... I know.” Max said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I just...my mind refused to even consider the possibility. Then we should start looking for video footage and possibly bodies.”

“Yeah, we should. There’s a...part of the ‘net we could search for that shit. More to the point, I can search for that shit. I won’t inflict it on any of you.” Colin said “Only one of us has to go through seeing...that.

“Nope!” Gene declared “Not letting you suffer through that alone. Not happening.” Colin looked at him sideways.

“Hmm. I seem to recall something about being station chief?” Colin replied, but Gene was having none of it.

“Boyfriend’s prerogative. I appreciate the desire to protect our sanity, but you’re going to need help. Also, remember your Nietzsche.”

“Wer mit Ungeheuern kämpft, mag zusehn, dass er nicht dabei zum Ungeheuer wird. Und wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst, blickt der Abgrund auch in dich hinein.”

“Colin, I don’t speak German, I read him in English.” Colin grinned at him smugly

<The one regarding fighting monsters and the abyss, that the one you were going for?> he sent over to Gene, who nodded. Colin considered it. Gene raised an interesting point, there was such thing as too much and shouldering that burden alone wouldn’t be good for him. “And I take your point. I take it that you two are equally mutinous?”

“The faster the legwork gets done, the faster we can save the survivors and punish the pendejos so...” Erika replied, while Max waved his hand in agreement with a nod to her. “And I am pretty sure everyone else will want in too.” she finished. Colin sighed.

“Alright. I’ll break out the barf bags and soothing music. However, triage. There’s ten who fit the profile for non-survival leaving sixteen likely survivors we can save, plus the corporate offenders.”

"We could bring in a proper bloodhound unit to help with those.” Erika suggested.

"Colin and I decided to do that already." Gene informed her. "Not sure who though, he just made some calls to get someone on standby for when the warrants came in."

<We need someone we can trust. Someone who won’t turn them over to whoever the fuck is
disappearing people.> Gene thought at him.

<Way ahead of you.>

“Marcel Szewczyk runs a pack of ‘hounds out of Warsaw. That's who I called.”

<That Marcel?> Gene asked. <Your cadre brother?>

<Yeah, that one. I know exactly where his loyalties are. If I know him, and I do, he's been giving the Director's office hell in secret since the day he got out of training. Bit of a firebrand. You'd like him.>

>Your taste in men hasn't changed huh?> Gene asked, with a bit of a tease in his mind-intonation.

<What can I say? I have a type.> Colin replied.

“We’ll want to do what we can without them.” Gene said "Even if they're ready to go in twenty minutes the transit could still take some time. I don't want to leave anyone I don't have to...That.”

“Agreed. The corporate offenders we have to hit simultaneously because there will absolutely be media attention on those. The individuals we can catch at night, no fanfare. Quick entry, scan, rendition and rescue.” Colin said.

“So… we’re disappearing them then?” Erika asked.

“Only temporarily. We don’t want them ‘disposing of evidence’. Sixteen people we can hold, and it’ll will take us three to five days to get them all. The corporate ones… we’ll need the Bloodhounds. Oh and Erika, Max?”

“Yes?” they answered simultaneously.

“You’re being drafted into ersatz bloodhounds. We’re going to have to work in tandem.” he informed them. “I’ll have the list drawn up tonight along with our assignments. We’ll take the ones with the higher ratings or where a background check indicates the people who have them might be more complicated due to the presence of a wife or other children.” Colin paused and looked at Max.

“You okay with working on Shabbat?” he asked.

“Yeah. For this, Adonai will understand.” Max replied.

“Okay.” Colin replied.

“Come to think of it, this is the sort of thing he’d send Assyrians after me for if I didn’t help…”

From: Colin Meier
To: Eugene Hendriks, Erika Flores, Max Cohen
Subject: Assignments.

Here is the list separated by day and partner assignments. Most of these guys don’t have anything on their records other than sex offenses or labor law violations. However there are a few that do,
and a few more have families who will need to be dealt with. We’ve taken those, as well as all the cases where the telepath’s rating is higher than a P5, in case they try to resist, we’re most likely to be able to secure them without harm. We’ll bring in medical telepaths in case victims need immediate medical or psychological assistance (we have dibs on Dr. Cavanaugh, you get Dr. Petrovich). If you have any questions, let me know.

Day 1.

**Gene and Colin**

Gabriela Silva, P5--Stewart Mason

Mirek Zelenka, P8--Urey Petrov

**Erika and Max**

Omar Abadi, P4--Isadore Tuff

Albert Agnarsson, P5--Ju Huang

Day 2.

**Colin and Gene**

Olubunmi Ayodele, P6--Toros Vartanian, Phillipa Vartanian

Judas Perry, P7--Toros Vartanian, Phillipa Vartanian

**Erika and Max**

Maiken Wolanski, P5--Shankar Ilic

Yessica Sharma, P4--Garasim Miburn

Day 3

**Colin and Gene**

Francisca Fernandez, P6--Hermes Dunajski

Fladimir Sault, P7--Filbert Geisler

**Erika and Max**

Lim Song, P4--Dannie McReynolds

Cheng Jiang, P5--Meino Wilton

Day 4
Good hunting, and may fortune go with you.

The Corps is Mother, The Corps is Father

~Colin

P.S. I'm triaging these kids based on public records and the length of time they've been missing. Uncertainty as to their condition is very high. If there is a God, may he forgive me if I've made mistakes.

Friday February 13th, 2263

The sun approached the horizon while Gene and Colin were standing in front of the red painted door to a suburban nightmare. The Mason residence was white with beige siding and had a little wrought iron fence, the second story windows and the garage door combined to look like a face. It was so Norman Rockwell that Colin found it revolting. Colin was pretty sure he heard a dog barking inside as he rang the doorbell to the Mason residence.

Neither of them wore their uniforms, but instead wore white shirts and black slacks with dress shoes in case someone saw them from the street. The gloves and badges couldn’t be helped, those were mandatory, and Colin was concerned that if someone did see them, they would recognize them or at least it would occur to them that mormons were not typically crepuscular. When the door started to open, Colin found the mind behind it and projected what he wanted her to see: the badge was replaced with a nametag, the gloves were gone, and both he and Gene were much younger.

“Hello?” Mrs. Mason said warily as she spied the two mormon missionaries at her door.

“Hello ma’am. I'm Elder Hendriks and this is Elder Meier, and we’re with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Would you like to hear about our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ?” Gene said, beaming a perfectly white smile at her. Colin’s illusory simulacra still had a retainer.
She was teetering on the edge of her answer, and Colin was busy maintaining the illusion. Gene however was on the ball and gently nudged her mind.

“Sure, come on in, we just finished dinner.” she said and opened the door fully, ushering them inside. “Can I get you anything? Some water?”

“Water would be lovely, Ma’am, thank you, spreading the gospel is thirsty work!” Gene replied

“Honey who’s at the door?” came a male voice from what must be the living room given the sound of the evening news. The dog, a beautiful black lab, was sniffing them over and seemed to approve. There was the sound of someone getting out of a recliner.

“Mormon missionaries, dear!” she half-shouted back over the noise.

“What? Why the fuck did you let them in?” Stewart Mason said as he rounded the corner.

“Because she’s a nice lady.” Colin said as he dropped the illusion. Gene froze the confused and terrified Margaret Mason in place.

“You however…” Colin concluded his statement by hitting Stewart with a deep penetrating scan. What Colin found in Stewart’s memories enraged and sickened him. He thought the world might be better off if he pushed the mundane so hard that he permanently forgot how to breath or became the world’s best fully conscious impression of a zucchini. It would be so easy...

“Don’t do it. I’m exercising veto.” Gene said. Those words snapped him out of it, Gene was right. He pulled out of Stewart’s mind after pushing just hard enough to make him pass out from pain. He paused and took a deep cleansing breath and filed the nightmare fuel away for later. Then he turned around to Mrs. Mason, who was, naturally, completely innocent. He composed himself as best he could, then spoke.

“Mrs. Mason, I’m sorry for the deception, and locking you down like this. I’m Lieutenant Colin Meier, this is my partner Gene Hendricks. We’re with Metapol: Psi Cops. If you promise not to do anything stupid like scream, run, or try to hurt us, Gene will let you go and we’ll explain why we came into your house and scanned your husband. He’s only unconscious, don’t worry about him for now.”

He could sense her agreement, she was too terrified to resist; a shell-shocked deer in headlights. He nodded to Gene who let her go. She immediately broke down into tears and ran to her husband as the dog visibly worried over them both but couldn’t figure out the cause. The two telepaths waited patiently while she was in a frenzy of making sure he was alive and gave her some time to calm down into numbness. Colin pulled out his comm unit and called up the digital copy of the warrant that permitted the scan.

“Mrs. Mason, before we say anything else, you might want to examine our warrant. It might give you some context. Take as much time as you need.” Colin said. She reached up on shaky hands and took it, looking over the document.

“I… I don’t believe this. How? How was he connected to this?” she asked.

“We scanned our prisoners yesterday Mrs. Mason, his name came up as having purchased a fifteen-year-old girl by the name of Gabriela Silva two years ago. She’s one of the missing telepaths you would have heard about on the news last month. She’s rated as a P5 by the people who took her.” Colin told her.

“Well she’s not here!” she exclaimed “I’d certainly know about it if she was…” then she started
coming around from numbness to denial “Why should I believe you?! My Stewart couldn’t have done this! We’ve been married for twenty years there’s no way he could keep that hidden!” she kept going “All you mind-fuckers have are your scans, I can’t trust a word of it, you people are all liars!”

“Fuck consent” Colin snarled and threw a small piece of what he’d seen into her mind. She stopped dead in her tracks and tried to close her eyes against it, but that didn’t work. Instead all she could do was break down into a horrified croaking sob.

“I will not permit you to impugn our integrity with your pathetic denial” he snarled at her. “Especially not for that dirtbag.” Colin growled, glaring past her toward her husband.

“What Colin means to say…” Gene said, looking sharply over in his partner’s direction after she was able to shake the mental image and stare at them blankly “is that you should have figured something strange was going on a while ago.”

“How?” she croaked, now being incapable of denial. Colin sighed, letting the anger flow out of him. He broadcast over some of the sanitized details of his scan and let Gene slip into his role of ‘good cop’.

“Your bedroom has a disturbing number of mirrors in strange places, like the headboard and ceiling. He likes to watch himself. Let me guess, your finances have been inexplicably stretched these past few years, but he manages the money, so you don’t know where it all goes?” Gene asked, she nodded “And he leaves for days at a time?” she nodded again.

“Business trips,” she said

“But he’s a software engineer. They don’t go on business trips that often.” Gene pressed her with logic, ever so gently.

“He” she paused, still confused but starting to see details fall into place she didn’t even know to look for “he made VP”.

“Does a promotion tend to come with a decrease in salary? Being late on bills even when expenses haven’t changed?” she shook her head.

“You want to know what he’s been up to? How he hid it from you?” he asked.

“Yes, no, maybe?” Mrs. Mason answered weakly, tears were starting to roll down her face.

“He’s been splitting his paychecks, enough to maintain a rundown basement apartment where he keeps Gabriela imprisoned.” Colin took over, pointedly using her name, thinking but not specifying ‘in a rape dungeon’. The implication was plain as day to the wife though, and she cringed. Gene typed something out on his own comm unit.

“Colin, I sent Nishita ahead. She’ll meet us there after we secure the scene.” Gene said.

“Thanks love. Now we just need to take out the trash and we’re done here.” Colin said, pulling some zip ties out of his pocket and restraining Mr. Mason’s hands in front of him. Then looked back over at Ellen Mason.

“Ellen, there is one last thing. I need you to not go to the press until we’ve caught everyone. We don’t want anyone killing their victims to hide the evidence. That’s why we came to your door dressed as missionaries, so no one catches wind that we’re onto them.” she nodded in acquiescence, but her surface thoughts were a cascade of conflicting impulses. On the one hand, she was
intimidated by the Psi Cops and really didn’t want anyone to die. On the other hand, she was so angry and disgusted with her husband, so riddled with guilt for not suspecting him that she wanted to proclaim her innocence and outrage to the galaxy at large. Colin concluded that the risk was too large that she wouldn’t be able to stop herself from doing that too soon.

“Nothing for it I suppose…” and he went into her mind, placing an action block that would keep her from wanting to talk to the news media or spread rumors among mundanes, until the Corps’ PR firm released a press statement. Nothing too traumatic, just a bias in her decision-making, and he carefully excised the memory that he'd done so. Then he helped Gene haul her husband outside and throw him ungently into the back seat of their car.

“I knew there were some slums on this colony, but Jesus Christ.” Gene commented as they approached the sunken doorway to Stewart Mason’s lair. In contrast with his house, the apartment building was made of thickly painted cinder block. There were no pleasant broad open windows, but rather, the windows were sunken into the ground and covered over with bars and a second pane of glass. They would let in light, but offered no view, and crucially, no line of sight to the outside. Unlike stronger telepaths, a P5 almost absolutely needed line of sight in order to actively communicate with another mind. Colin also noticed the wiring to the security system, if the windows were tampered with, Stewart would be alerted at minimum.

“You have the keys?” Gene asked

“Yeah.” Colin confirmed. He could feel the suffering. It wasn’t the sharp acute emotional and physical agony of someone being tortured or grieving a loved one. He detected it as the stench of hopelessness, anxiety, and fear; violation. Colin didn’t usually perceive emotions as odors, but it permeated everything, and olfaction was the only way his brain had of interpreting what he was sensing.

“How do you want to do this?” Gene asked, pensively. He felt it too.

“I don’t know. I don’t know how she’ll react to us. Stewart let his friends…” he trailed off, that needed no explanation “No badges, I’m pretty sure Ronald” he spat the name “Put the same compulsions in place he did with the others. I’m not sure we should be doing anything other than making entry and securing the apartment, Nishita should make contact once she gets here. After that it’s up to her.”

“Gotcha.” Gene said then shuddered “You didn’t show me what you p'saw. This is going to be bad, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Colin inhaled deep through his nose and exhaled through his mouth “It will be.” He heard a car pull up, and felt the gentle pulse of a high grade telepath sounding off their location and attempting to make contact. He returned the psionic ping.

<Evening. Glad to see you, though I wish it was under better circumstances.> Colin sent to Nishita as she rounded a corner.

<Brief me.> she replied. Colin packaged up everything he knew, and poured it all into her mind. She flinched, but otherwise maintained her composure.

<Recommended course of action?> Colin asked. After thinking about it for a moment, she replied.

<I’ll handle it.> she said <You have me as long as you need over the next few days. You focus on
the human garbage, I’ll focus on the victims.>

<How about the Collective?> Gene asked, referring to the teenagers already in her care.

<New guests will be taking over the common area and unused rooms, and we’ve discussed it. They’ll help. I’m bringing in some Education specialists and every medical telepath I can call too. Only temporary, they’ll have to get shipped out to larger facilities.>

<Okay. I’ll talk to Marcel, we’ll make it work.> Colin replied.

Colin stepped up to the door and unlocked it, punching in the key code and sliding the key into the secondary physical lock. He turned it, and he felt a heavy bolt slide into the open position.

Gabriela must have heard it because he felt a stab of fear and desperate longing for human contact that caused her to self-castigate and mentally turn inward. She was blooping her thoughts and emotions all over the place, having figured out how to keep other thoughts out, but not her own in. He took his badge off, the other two did as well, and then he opened the door. Colin went in first, with Gene and Nishita entering right behind.

The kitchen was bare-bones but functional and perfectly clean; the living room itself was the same. It looked like a model used for showing an apartment rather than something someone lived in. The only physical thing that gave it away for Colin was the soundproofing foam that plastered the walls and ceiling, and the complete lack of any sort of communications equipment, not even a screen for watching vids, and no bookshelves whatsoever.

The floors were white tile with a smooth texture and the furniture, while it looked comfortable enough, was all grey and uniform. Colin realized exactly what it was. It was a deprivation chamber.

<It’s designed to break people down, so whatever you do to them they both hate and desperately crave because it’s the only stimulation or human contact they get.> Nishita sent to the both of them. <I wouldn’t be shocked if long term repetitive trauma has caused her to regress emotionally to an earlier developmental state. We’ll see.>

Leading off from the living room was a hallway toward what Colin presumed was the bedroom.

<Gabriela?> Nishita cast out into the apartment with her mind

'Interest/fear/hope' ‘Who are you?’ came a hesitant vocal reply from down the hallway. Nishita disappeared down the hall and knocked on the door to the bedroom.

“My name is Dr. Nishita Cavanaugh, I’m a telepath here with some friends to help get you out of here and get you someplace safe where we can help you.”

'Hope/Happiness/Distrust' “How do I know that?” Gabriela asked through the door “What if you’re trying to trick me?”

“Why would I need to trick you? Why knock on your door and give you a say in what happens to you? There’s no lock, I could just walk in. I don’t have anything to gain by tricking you. If you want, you can open the door, I’ll let you scan my surface thoughts to see if I’m telling the truth.”

'Comprehension/Fear' “And...Stew?” the girl asked, not able to say what it was he had done or ask if she was safe.

“He won’t hurt you or anyone else. Ever. Again.” Nishita told her in no uncertain terms. Gabriela didn’t say anything, but after a moment she did open the door.
“Hi.” she said diffidently.

“Hi there! You want to get out of here?” Nitisha asked cheerfully.

“Where are we going?” the young woman asked.

“Hospital first, we need to check you out and make sure you’re okay. But I’ll give your parents a call and let them know we found you and they can come visit.”

<She’s almost eighteen but mentally she’s regressed to more like six. Please tell me you’ve contacted her parents and they haven’t rejected their daughter…> she sent to the Psi Cops around the corner on a frequency that a P5 couldn’t detect.

<We’re good there, thank God.> Gene sent back.

“Then I can go home?” Gabriela asked hopefully, but Nishita was forced to prevaricate.

“That gets complicated because you’re a telepath. A lot’s happened while you’ve been here, the civil war ended.”

“It’s been that long? Oh and that means... “ she trailed off. Nishita knew about the countermeasures and distracted her from thinking about the Psi Corps and shutting down.

“Speaking of which, the man who kidnapped you did something inside your head, to make you obey?”

'Self-loathing/self-blame' Gabriela started to cry, deep gasping sobs that were eerily muffled by the sound proofing.

“Shhh. It’s okay. It’s not your fault. None of this is your fault.” At that point, Colin felt a wave of love and compassion emanate from Nishita’s location.

“You want me to fix it? What he did inside your head?” Nishita asked.

“Mhm” Gabriela muttered her assent, from the sound of it burying her face in the psychiatrist’s shoulders. A few moments later, she let in a sharp breath.

“Got it.” Nishita confirmed for her.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. So, wanna meet my friends and get outta here?” Nishita asked in the most gentle and kind of possible tones, which for her was impressively motherly.

“Who are they?” Gabriela asked.

“A pair of Psi Cops, their names are Gene and Colin. Is it alright if they say hi?”

“They won’t hurt me?” ’Apprehension’

“Nope. Never. They’re here to make sure we’re safe.”

“I guess it’s okay” ’Cautious Trust’ At that, Gene and Colin pinned their badges back on.

When they emerged from around the corner, Nishita was holding Gabriela’s hand leading and reassuring her like one might a child much younger than she actually was, which made for an odd
sight given that she was a well-developed seventeen year old young woman. Gabriela’s body language screamed ‘nervous little kid’ and it was clear she was stressed, but the look in her eyes said that she was hopeful for the first time in a long while as well as somewhat skittish.

Physically she was well cared for. She wasn’t starving or looking like she’d been beaten frequently, but causing her physical pain wasn’t what her abuser was after and she’d been telepathically conditioned for obedience.

Gene took the lead on how to help her be more comfortable and sat on the arm of the couch, dropping himself down about to her eye level and thus less threatening. Colin took that as a cue and sat himself down with his partner on the same couch arm, interweaving their arms and holding hands partially out of affectionate habit; but partially to signal to Gabriela that they weren’t interested in women, and thus safe. Colin wasn’t sure it would help, but it couldn’t hurt and he certainly needed the physical contact.

“Hi Gabriela, it’s nice to finally meet you.” Colin said cheerfully in a slightly higher pitched and non-threatening voice than he typically used.

“Yeah, we’ve been trying to find you for a while now.” Gene followed up with the same tones.

…

It was three in the morning when the two Psi Cops exited an elevator to a luxury apartment suite in the downtown region of the planetary capital. Catering to wealthy businessmen, the short hallway had plush carpets and some very abstract art pieces for wall-hangings. The sort that were little more than splatters of paint intended to invoke some sort of emotion, but in Colin only elicited confusion.

‘Why?’ He wondered to himself looking at one of them, which was basically a white background with several different shades of grey splashed upon it in no particular way. Was it supposed to be a blizzard or something? Invoke some feeling of desolation, perhaps? Then he realized that it was working and shook his head. Gene noticed and chuffed out a short laugh.

Urey Petrov’s door loomed in front of them, a big black-painted oak number with the standard issue heavy duty physical and electronic locks. Colin also saw the panel indicating a security system. Gene looked over at him.

<We’ll set off an alarm--or worse--if we’re not careful.> Gene sent at him.

<Can you bypass it?> Colin asked.

<Probably. Check for cameras?>

Colin did that while Gene worked on disabling the locks and security system. He opened his mind and tried to perceive the magnetic fields induced by electrical equipment. There was a lot of that; building wiring, lights, security system, but visually inspecting everything, no cameras.

In retrospect, it made sense. Urey had numerous arrests for everything from usery to criminal conspiracy. No convictions. A person like that didn’t need cameras to prevent theft because his reputation alone ensured against it, and cameras allowed the comings and goings of his apartment to be tracked by anyone who got hold of the footage. The fact that he was a Russian mobster also meant that his ‘pet’ telepath could either be well-treated and serve a fairly conventional function, or subject to the vilest depths of depravity.

<We’re in!> Gene thought at him triumphantly as the physical lock clicked open. Colin nodded...
and quietly opened the door just enough for them to fit through, then crept inside.

The penthouse was opulent in a garish sort of way. The floors were spotless imported marble with rugs made of natural fibers, and all the furniture was oak and leather. Except for one glass tabletop that contained the residue of an early evening of conventional degeneracy: excessive vodka and a traces of a white powder Colin supposed was cocaine. All these little observations took place over the audible and psychic din of a man and woman enthusiastically coupling in the master bedroom.

They snuck through the apartment toward that bedroom, following the sound of mating until they reached the door, then opened it without much fanfare, finding Urey on top and pounding away at a skinny blonde underneath him. Urey was caught out and paused to look back angrily at who just entered his room. Not the most attractive face in the universe, Colin thought, and he was built like a brick shithouse to the point of being unreasonable. Body dysmorphia had set in and he was in that zone between gym rat and full freak-beast.

“Oh don’t let us interrupt.” Colin said sarcastically as Gene wordlessly immobilized his girlfriend, hooker? Colin was curious and peeked inside her mind. Hooker--not that there was anything wrong with that oldest of professions--and high-priced one at that. Urey got off her and went for his nightstand. Colin put a stop to that by sending stabbing pain down his sciatic nerve.

“B’lyad!” Urey gasped clutching at his thigh and falling off the bed with a very satisfying thump. Colin was in no mood to dither so he just swan-dove into his memories. His ‘pet’ telepath--Mirek Zelenka, a 15 year old P8--was exactly that. A useful pet.

He didn’t treat Mirek unkindly by his twisted standards, just expected him to perform services in exchange for room, board, and not being disposed of as a useless loose end. He’d rather have a loyal soldier than a prisoner, so he was working on stage one of indoctrination: letting Mirek settle in and do his job rooting out informants, modifying witness memories in the event of a criminal investigation and such like, while letting him drink himself into a stupor at night.

It had only been three months, so he hadn’t moved on to giving Mirek a nickname like Mindshark and a taste of the high life with hookers and blow yet, but it was in the works. Stage three would have been blooding him with direct involvement in some of the nastier aspects of Urey’s criminal enterprise. Kill someone, and it’s harder to go back to being a regular kid.

When he finished, Colin made sure that Urey would stay asleep for a while, and addressed the immobilized prostitute.

“Hi Sally.” he said cheerfully using her stage name. “We’re not here for you and won’t harm you in any way. My partner is going to let you go now, provided you don’t go compromising our investigation by talking to the press, waking up the neighborhood or anything like that, okay?” he could feel her assent, she was in full-on compliant survivor mode and figured the telepaths would know where she lived. She was a bit put off that she probably wouldn’t get paid though. “Feel free to take what you’re owed. He has six thousand credits cash in his wallet he intended to pay you. I’ll make sure it simply doesn’t occur to him to come after you”. He nodded to Gene, who released her motor cortex.

She didn’t say anything, she just rifled through Urey’s pants pockets until she found his wallet, taking every cent.

“Alright, we should probably go get the kid.” Gene said. “I take it… less unpleasant than the last?”

“Yeah. Though only due to duration. A couple years and this fucker would’ve turned Mirek into a
monster. As it is, just probable alcoholism and seeing things no fifteen-year-old should.” Colin replied, privately thinking it strange that alcoholism was likely the least of his concerns over the next few days.

“So, we do have a slight transport problem. Dr. Cavanaugh is at the hospital.” Gene stated. Colin gave him an indulgent grin.

“I take it we have a solution to that problem?” Gene asked.

“We do, by design, have a car with a three-dead-body trunk. Four if you break the limbs.” Colin stated matter-of-factly.

“Ah, so they will have some wiggle room. Good.”

The cell doors closed with a loud clang. Each prisoner including the ones Erika and Max brought in were given their own cell, for the time being. They would be sharing four to a cell before long, each cell only had the two beds, and Colin did not have the wherewithal to worry about the logistics of that right then. He was physically exhausted, and just as bad off emotionally. It was five in the morning and he suspected that neither Max nor Erika were in bed. He cast around with his mind as he ascended the stairs from the basement cell block and made contact with them in their offices, typing up the case notes. Colin mentally slapped himself, he and Gene would need to do that before bed. Still, he would need to check on them; if their evening was anything like his and Gene’s, they may need to talk to someone.

Max’s office was the closest, so he headed there. The door was open, and Max had his back to the portal, typing away on a detailed report of how they gained entry into Isadore Tuff’s apartment. Colin knocked on the door frame.

“Hey Max, you alright?”

“Not especially, but I’ll manage. I have worse in my head.” Max replied his tone oscillated between neutral and worry.

“You sure?” Colin asked, skeptically.

“I’m not the one who did the scans. Erika did. I’m… disconcerted, but didn’t have to p'see. Triage Colin, triage. She wouldn’t let me talk to her.” At that, his voice was worried.

“Okay. You know I’m always here, verstehe?”

“Farshteyn” Max replied in Yiddish and getting back to his report. Colin turned and bumped into Gene, who was lurking behind him.

<Are you okay?> Gene asked, wrapping his arms around Colin.

<No. I don’t know whether I want to break down weeping or go downstairs for something> he paused in his thoughts, looking for a concept <extrajudicial. But I’ll be alright for a few minutes; long enough to check on Erika and get upstairs at least.>

<Okay.> Gene replied.

<What about you?>
<Pissed off, but you did the scans. You had to p'see that, I didn’t. We’re definitely switching that
duty tomorrow and you can be here for me, okay?> Gene flooded his consciousness with warmth
and Colin returned it before they disengaged.

When they got to Erika her mind was locked up like Fort Knox, she was rhythmically contracting
her right hand around a stress ball and she was staring past the doorway into the hall. The
thousand-yard stare was unmistakable.

“Oh sweety I know exactly how you feel right now.” was all Colin said as he stepped into the
office, rounded the desk, gently coaxed her to her feet, and gave her a hug, both physically and with
his mind. “It’s okay. The kids are gonna be okay, and we are going to make sure the bastards who
did it suffer for what they’ve done. I swear to you.” the dam broke in her mind and she wept.
Colin wanted to, but couldn’t. He had to be there for her like a rock against a storm, but that's what
Gene was for, he joined them in a group-embrace and shored up Colin's mind, giving him just
enough emotional control to not break down.

Saturday February 14th, 2263

The local star was dropping toward the horizon when Gene started up the groundcar and Colin got
in beside him in the passengers seat. Colin hadn't slept well, but at least he'd slept. The same
couldn't be said for Erika who'd emerged from her room that afternoon still-fatigued with bloodshot
eyes. Gene was worried about her.

"Think Erika will be alright?” he asked.

"I think so. Max is taking over scanning lead today, mercifully. He's... well, that sort of shit is
Tuesday for him. I think his list of triggers is pretty short.” Colin replied. Gene considered it. He
had dozens of people's deaths, direct and second-hand, floating around in his head.

'The only thing that might get to him is fear of pogroms...' he privately concluded. "I hope you're
right. Computer, engage automatic driving. Destination: Toros Hectares Farm.” The car backed
out of it's parked position of its own accord and pulled out into the city streets, guided by a
combination of navigation satellites, LIDAR, RADAR, and image recognition systems.

"We'll all be there to help both of them if the worst happens. Hopefully, tonight's aren't too bad.”
Colin said hopefully, but he didn't sound convinced.

"For them, or us?" Gene asked.

"Both. More them than us. The first two nights weren't easy to prioritize. Mirek was being held
by a publicly notorious but untouchable criminal, Gabriela had been missing for two years. These
two? Year and a half, bought by a married couple. I figured that might reduce the horror somewhat
but...” Colin trailed off with a worried look on his face and anxiety was coursing through his
mind.

'He's worried he made a mistake...' Gene thought to himself. "But what? That's only actuarial?
Most likely?"

"Yeah. Like married couples and the discount they get on insurance because they're slightly less
risky than cohabitating couples." Colin replied ruefully "The reality is, when it is bad, it can be so
much worse..."

"What's the range we're looking at?” Gene asked, gripping Colin on the shoulder. <You made the
best choice you could with the information you had. No use beating yourself up until you know, and even then, don't.> Colin tilted his head and absent-mindedly kissed Gene's glove.

"Could be almost banal. Helping to enforce workers rights violations, for example. So many farmers pay their workers under the table... A telepath could pay for themselves in a couple months that way. Alternatively, the most sanity-destroying physical and sexual abuse you can imagine. The former is more likely. Matches made in hell are just... not very common, but they do occur."

The car navigated through city streets and evening traffic without incident, out into the wealthy suburbs and past them. Houses became more sparse as more and more land was given over to small-holding farms that did their growing in greenhouses. Toros Hectares was one of these, primarily growing vegetables like cucumber and tomatoes. There was a modest but comfortable looking house in the middle of the estate; a few dozen agricultural workers bustled back and forth through the greenhouses, making sure plants were watered and trimmed. Gene stopped the car several hundred meters away and concealed it behind a row of some of the native flora; photosynthetic fungoids about the size of willows, and they waited. As night fell, most of the staff left in their own vehicles, often piling into the backs of trucks that would take them to bus stations or in some cases all the way into the city proper or one of the many small towns that were beginning to crop up all over the planet's surface.

"Not that many left." Colin remarked when the sky was properly dark "We should be able to get in undetected."

"I didn't sense any telepaths out there, did you?" Gene asked. Considering their earlier conversation, that didn't bode well. If a couple of enslaved telepaths were being used to keep abused workers in line, they'd be among those same workers. They weren't.

"No, and that makes me nervous." Colin answered, and Gene's own sense of disquiet increased to match his lover's. He didn't want to p'see anything like what Colin had the day before, but he'd do it. He'd do it and he wouldn't flinch. They made their way toward the house, just to the side of the road, keeping their minds on alert for any sapient minds that might see them as well as electronic surveillance. There were a few people left in each greenhouse, but they weren't fully transparent and both telepaths kept to the darkness. They weren't in uniform but still wore all-black BDUs that worked as functional camouflage in the shadows between flood lights.

The house almost reminded Gene of some he'd seen in Kansas once. Basic no-thrills construction. Not shoddy, just not very creative architecturally. There was even a cellar. It was locked from the outside. Then something occurred to him.

'Why the hell would they have a cellar, and why is there a big padlock chaining it shut?' he asked himself. In Kansas they had cellars for storing things, or more often as a refuge against tornadoes. There was no need for a cellar, they had a refrigerated building for storing produce and there the geography and seasonal wind currents weren't right for tornadoes. <Colin. Cellar.>

<I see it. Think that might be where our teenagers are being kept?>

<Yeah, and if they're buried, we won't sense them, but it's a combination lock, pure analogue Nothing for me to pick.> The more Gene thought about it, the more he was sure he was right. The cellar was even a massive psychological barrier too, so whatever sometimes let them feel suffering in a place without line of sight might not work because of the sharp demarcation between inside and outside.

"Alright. Fuck it, we force entry." Colin decided verbally.
"You're a man after my own heart." Colin replied, and they stacked up by the door, PPGs drawn. Gene reached out and tried the door handle. It turned, and he pushed the door in as gently and quietly as he could. He didn't make a sound and crept inside with Colin right behind him, fanning out in the foyer and staggering themselves against opposite walls. There was a vidscreen playing some sort of docudrama in the living room, and there were two sapient minds viewing it and eating dinner.

They moved forward, leading with their toes rather than heels to minimize noise and managed to make it all the way to the living room without being noticed. Finally they found their prey curled up on the couch. A couple in early middle age, the man a bit portly with graying hair, his wife on the thin side with auburn hair that looked like it might be dyed.

"Are they by chance in the cellar?" Gene asked nonchalantly. Toros Vartanian let out a startled cry and his wife started to shriek for the brief instant they could still control their own bodies before Colin seized control of their bodies. Gene walked around, letting them see who'd just walked into their house.

"Hi. I'll repeat the question for your benefit before I take the information I want from your minds. Are. Our. Brother. And. Sister. In. The. Fucking. Cellar?" they wanted to say no and that they had no idea what Gene was talking about, but the answer was yes. Gene picked the number four.

"Pick a number between one and ten." he commanded, and they both did reflexively without saying a word. Toros picked seven, but Phillipa was unlucky enough to also pick four. She was first, and Gene scanned her without mercy. He wasn't interested in contextualizing what she'd done like Colin sometimes was, all he wanted to know what what she did, how, where his siblings were and how to get to them. When he found exactly what the Vartanian's did to them, twice, he couldn't stay inside her mind and let the memory play out to it's conclusion; he didn't need to p'see that. He skipped to another set of associated memories. What they'd done nine months later was sickening and cruel. They'd brought Olubumni upstairs to a guest bedroom and hired a midwife to help her give birth to a baby boy. His rating might be up in the air, but being born to a pair of telepaths meant the chances were good that he would be one too. They didn't even give him a name before they sold him off to a local minister. Neither did they ask questions as to what a man of god would want with a telepath child.

He pulled out of her mind abruptly to cause maximum pain, and Phillipa Vartanian let out a strangled gasp on the floor, but Colin still held her motor cortex so she couldn't even curl into a defensive fetal position. She was terrified, in agony, and felt incredibly violated.

'Good' Gene thought and looked over at Toros. He got everything he absolutely needed out of Phillipa, but didn't want Toros to escape the agony of his gaze, so he scanned the husband as well. There were things he could use in there. Passwords to dark net accounts, social networks and contacts he used to arrange sale including the pre-order on the fetus Olubumni was currently pregnant with. But really, it was more about punishing him. When he was done he pinched the bridge of his nose, and removed the soft cuffs from one of his pockets and secured both mundanes by the hands and feet. Then he thought better of that, removed their shoes and socks, and gagged them as well with their own sweaty footwear. When he was done, Colin let them to go buck and writhe against their bonds and attempt to scream, but only muffled moans came out through the socks.

"The employees don't know." He said out loud. "They just know the cellar is locked. But that isn't the worst of it..." He couldn't bear to say it so he dropped his blocks and let Colin look. He did, then glared at the Vartanians, trying to think of just what terrors he might be able to justify inflicting on them.
"We'll deal with the trash later, once our kids are safe." Colin said after a moment, and stalked outside. Gene followed him and found Dr. Cavanaugh just off the porch trying to talk to one of the mundane employees. She'd been spotted and was being held up, trying to de-escalate.

"She's with us." Colin called out and the mundane, a botanist, stopped. He turned his head and saw the two Psi Cops exit the house. If he were capable of shitting a brick in that moment, he would have. As it was he stopped in his tracks.

"What the... how did you? Why are hell are you here?!!" he asked, Gene could understand the confusion and answered.

"Your employers. They bought a pair of teenagers a year and a half ago. They keep them in the cellar. If you don't walk the hell away right now, we add you to our shit list and you do not want to be on our shit list." The botanist put his hands up.

"I don't want anything to do with this but... why'd they do it?" he asked "Name is Lucas by the way. Friends call me Luke."

"Well Lucas," Gene replied, he was not the man's friend. Maybe in better circumstances he might be willing, but not right then "if you want to stick around you'll probably find out." He didn't feel like saying anything, but he could sense Colin filling Nishita in.

"Christ." was all she said. Gene was already unlocking the cellar door.

'Five, thirty, twenty two...' and the lock popped open in his hand with a satisfying click. He disengaged it from the steel chain, unwrapped it, and opened the heavy ceramic doors. As soon as the doors were opened and the demarcation between inside and out broken, he could feel it. Fear, suffering, self-loathing and blame, isolation. It hung like a miasma permeating everything with it's vile stench. Gene could hear movement and 'hear terrified mind inside, their thinking a jumbled mess, but one thought rose above the rest.

'Get it out of me'

"Hello?" He called out, taking his badge off. "My name is Gene, I'm here with a couple friends. We're telepaths, and we're gonna get you the fuck out of this nightmare." he figured they were teenagers, they could take and might even appreciate some light cursing.

"We want to but... we can't" Came a male voice from inside the pit. The staircase was long, the basement was down deep and everything was covered in anechoic foam, so Judas' voice sounded flat and hollow.

"I know. We can help you with that. My partner and I can break the chains inside your head." Gene descended the stairs and what he found at the bottom was disconcerting. It wasn't uncomfortable, strictly speaking. No external communications, but there were books and a vid screen, as well as a non-networked computer. A kitchenette had food in it and it looked like the two young people inside were able to take care of themselves. But there were no sharp objects or anything that might be easily used to hang oneself. The food consisted of military rations, the couch was made of a tear resistant fabric. If he had to guess, the bedding would be too and likely sleeping bags on a bed. Harder to twist into a noose that way.

"We also have a doctor with us." Gene said.

"Hello" Nishita said with forced-cheer behind him. Both young telepaths emerged from their separate bedrooms, little more than closets with a bed from the looks of it. There was a third
bedroom, the one that Gene had seen that was larger and closed. He didn't want to look in there. Olubunmi was all of fifteen and just starting to show with her second pregnancy. Gene could feel the mind inside but it wasn't anywhere near sapient yet. Judas looked like he was once a fit young lad of about fourteen, but now... he was eating just enough to not die or go into nutritional deficiencies. They looked at each other and Gene could feel the longing for human contact in tension against fear and terrible memories. They'd been friends. They still wanted to be friends. They never could be again. Even knowing they'd both been forced by telepathic conditioning and PPGs to their heads, they could never really trust each other ever again. They were angry at each other and themselves, and Olubunmi desperately wanted their fetus out of her, but she wasn't even allowed by the action blocks to voice that desire.

"Who are these people? Who fucking cares? Might as well take the chance of getting out." Judas thought to himself, but he'd never been taught to keep his thoughts in instead of other thoughts out, so Gene picked it up. The same was true for Olubunmi 'I don't think they're here to hurt me...'

"Okay. This might be a bit uncomfortable..." Colin said in gentle and conciliatory tones "Let us know when you're ready."

"Okay." Judas replied, steeling himself.

"Now." Olubunmi answered, resigning herself to whatever was going to happen and dropping her meager defenses. Both Psi Cops went in as fast and efficiently as they could. Gene had taken apart Ronald Jenkins' action blocks numerous times by then and they had a familiar structure that was relatively simple to deconstruct. It was over in seconds. Both young telepaths inhaled sharply from the twinge of pain that accompanied deeper penetration into their minds, but once it was over they were free.

"I need an abortion. Right now." Olubunmi said immediately, the first time she'd been allowed to put a voice to the fact that she was carrying a fetus against her will.

"I'm so sorry..." Judas told her, it sounded like it wasn't the first time he'd made that apology.

"Not your fault." she told him back, but deep inside, despite all rational knowledge to the contrary, she didn't believe that herself. She knew it was objectively true, but she couldn't internalize it. He'd still been inside her when she didn't want him to be. He'd still gotten her pregnant twice. What was worse, he knew it. Colin, Gene, and Nishita put their badges back on the moment it was safe to do so.

"Holy shit, are you Psi Cops?" Judas asked.

"We are." Colin replied before Gene could. "This is Dr. Nishita Cavanaugh. She'll take you to hospital and make sure you're taken care of. We have to finish taking out the trash and... finding the baby." Gene felt a flash of shame from both of them again, and an extra dose of guilt from Olubunmi, who wanted absolutely nothing to do with that child, and felt like she should somehow.

"Nope." Gene told her. He didn't touch her. He didn't touch either of them, he could feel in their minds that neither of them wanted physical contact of any kind "You don't need to worry about that. The Corps will take care of him. Just... focus on yourselves right now."

"Come on. Let's get you to hospital. I'll make arrangements for you to see a gynecologist." Nishita told them both, but directed the last part toward the young woman. Gene felt a stab of pain from Colin.
<What's wrong?> he asked.

<Abortion. I'm pro-choice, but... well, you know the history.> Colin replied, and Gene understood. Mundanes sometimes used genetic diagnostics kill telepaths before they were born. More in the Bad Times, but it still sometimes happened.

<br understand. Being targeted makes things a bit complicated.> Gene replied. Nishita lead the two teenagers up into the night, and the Psi Cops followed behind right after. They heard and p'heard the two liberated slaves take their first breaths of free air.

'Jesus christ is she pregnant?' Lucas wondered to himself.

"Speaking of which..." Colin said, and looked over at Lucas while Gene closed and locked the cellar. "We can't let you speak about what you've seen here. We have other people to rescue this week and we can't let anyone know we know who and where they are."

"Well sure. I understand that..." Lucas replied. He was telling the truth.

"Once the story breaks, and it will break, do what you want. Until then though, can you swear to me right now that you won't put the lives of my people at risk?"

"Uh. Yeah. Yeah. Of course I can. I saw you on ISN, I know what this is about."

"Good." Colin replied, and left him with his memories and volition in tact.

<Was he considering erasing that guy's memories?> Olubunmi silently asked, evidently having learned how to project her mental voice.

<br no.> Gene replied <Just nudging his mind so he wouldn't talk until we issue a press release. You're not the only people we're saving this week but if our raids go up on ISN...> he trailed of and let her make the logical connection herself. She did, and while Gene could tell she didn't like that someone else might have to have their will and volition restrained, but she could at least see the hard spot they were in. On the other hand, it had been done to her, though in her case more comprehensively.

<br It's either that, or more people like you die. Colin would be gentle, Lucas wouldn't even know he wanted to do differently.> Nishita explained, it didn't help with the ambivalence much, but it did mollify her concern that the people she was going with would do to someone else what had been done to her. Colin might modify someone, even profoundly and in a way designed to make them suffer if they'd done something to deserve it; but Gene knew him well enough to know that he wouldn't torture someone with the very fact that they'd been changed. That was just a petty cruelty that neither of them would stand for.

<br Not sure which is worse...> Olubunmi said.

<br I know.>

With the two teenagers safely off to hospital, Colin took nominal control over the groundcar while Gene looked up the minister. His name was James Mercher. He ran a church called Living Arrows Ministries, and had ten children between the ages of five months and sixteen years. The oldest four were spaced a year and a half apart until his wife Jolene became 'afflicted with bareness'. The rest were adopted out of the foster care system at almost the same rate, except for the last one. He was shown on the church net page, but as far as Gene could tell, 'Justin Mercher'
had no legal existence. All the kids had J names. Jennifer, John, Jack, Jaiden, Jaclyn, Jace, Jean, Jeff, Jason, James II, and Justin, in birth order.

The church site was actually a treasure trove of retrograde religious beliefs. In it James Mercher railed against what he thought of as the sins of the world. Aliens of course, because they weren't mentioned in the Bible. Worse than that, some of them like the Minbari had recorded histories that were ten thousand years longer than he thought the universe had existed and therefore he thought they were creatures of the Devil sent to lead mankind astray. There was also the usual rambling about abortion, homosexuality, women wearing pants, women working outside the home, and women exercising their own will. He also wrote at length about how to 'train up a child' to be 'Godly', Obedient', and "Modest'.

"Well... we've got a special snowflake." Gene remarked. "I'm not sure we'll be able to keep this one quiet."

"What makes you say that?" Colin asked. He was not reading along, being too focused on making sure the car was able to navigate through winding backroads to the small commune that centered around the church, isolated and away from the rest of humanity.

"Well he has ten kids including ours, and a 'dutiful Christian wife'. I'm pretty sure he's at least physically and psychologically abusing all of them. Oh, and he runs a quiverfull cult."

"Never dealt with them before, an American thing?" Colin asked.

"They tried to make headway in the Southern Hemisphere, but never really succeeded. You don't see them often these days but they used to be pretty politically powerful, especially in the South and Midwest. Mercifully, they lost the political culture war in the late 2020s. I can send you a reading list." Gene informed him. "There's a twenty first century historian named Coleman who wrote the definitive works on their history, theology, and how they operate. She was what you might call an escapee." Gene did privately relish the idea of sending Colin a reading list. It wasn't much pleasure and it was a dark subject, but Gene didn't think the rest of his evening would be especially uplifting and he was going to take his victories where he got them.

"I'll take you up on that." Colin replied, and Gene felt his appreciation in addition to hearing it in his voice. "But we're just about there, I suspect I'll see the crazy in action..."

"Probably." Gene confirmed, letting the dismay enter his voice.

The little self-town wasn't properly incorporated or even really named, but was self-sufficient. There was one main street with a few essential shops including a general store and farmer's market and a few side streets splitting off from it with large houses and small compounds housing the population. A population that was much larger than the actual household count might warrant on account of large family sizes. The church was in the physical and spiritual center, and by far the largest set of buildings, including the only 'school' in town. Homeschooling was illegal but private schools weren't and that's what it was. A private religious school teaching a curriculum that was only nominally acceptable to governmental regulators if Gene had to guess. They likely taught just enough science to let their kids regurgitate enough biology and physics to pass the Earth Alliance's standardized exams, but undermined everything science was supposed to actually be about.

The Mercher residence was directly next door to the church, and was a very large house indeed. Not in a palatial estate sort of way, but in a 'we have a big family' way. It's design was modest, it was just physically large, with at least five bedrooms. It also had a white picket fence and a massive yard along with more greenhouse space than could be managed by one adult gardener.
"They often make the older girls raise the younger kids as 'practice' for later." Gene filled Colin in. "The older boys are often farm labor or get jobs to help support everyone early."

"Nothing inherently wrong with the later..." Colin remarked.

"No. But in most families it's because the income is low or because the teenager wants some spending cash. It isn't to basically turn them into parents at fifteen. In this case, it looks like they're literally putting food on the table with a greenhouse that large."

"Why not get a job in the city, or on some nearby farm or something like that?" Colin asked as he opened the car door. No need trying to hide, everyone was inside and no one was really looking out their windows in neighboring houses.

"That would require coming into contact with nonbelievers who they're not in a position to 'witness' to. Exposure to the 'sinful' world. That part got more important after said world passed them by and didn't let them influence it's politics." Gene answered. He only let his voice drip with about half the disdain he actually felt. "They don't want their kids to ever have a chance at being anything but what their parents want them to be. If they go to university at all, it's almost never the girls, and the boys are sent to whackaloon religious institutions."

"Gene, you sound like you have some direct experience with people like this..."

"No." Gene corrected him "Just with garden-variety protestant fundamentalists. These fuckers dial them up to fifteen though. Of course, I guess now I know where they all went on Earth. They left for outer-colonies." Gene got out of the car and headed for the front door, intending to just knock and wait for someone to answer. The irony of doing this after disguising himself as a missionary the day before was not at all lost on Gene and he allowed himself a dry mirthless chuckle as his gloved hands rapped on the door. "Brace for something extremely creepy."

Colin didn't answer, he just waited. After a moment, the door opened and a woman who looked like she was almost fifty answered the door. Gene knew she was around thirty five, but the stress of having that many children had aged her prematurely. She smiled at them but it didn't reach her eyes. Worse, Gene could feel it. The tell-tale mix of fear and love for her husband and children combined with self-loathing that was characteristic of abuse, and not just from her. The two oldest kids were looking on from the stairs just past the door and it was coming from them too. Gene couldn't tell what kind of abuse it was though.

"Hello. What can I do for you?" she asked politely, looking them up and down until her eyes caught sight of the badges and gloves. She couldn't tear her eyes away from them and she was worried that the heathen Psi Corps was there as an agent of the state to take her children away from her. Her only reason for living. The only reason she was allowed to have beyond her husband who loved, but also feared, hated, and felt like vile sinner for hating.

"Hello Mrs. Mercher." Colin replied, keeping the fact that he'd noticed all that too off his face and out of his voice as much as he could. His voice still cracked a little bit, and Gene was keeping pointedly silent. He had to hide his hands behind his back or she'd see them shaking from the anger and sorrow he felt for her and everyone living in that house who wasn't the 'Reverend' James Mercher. "We're here about Justin. Your youngest."

"What do you mean?" she asked, then thought better of asking for clarification and wanted to do what she always did: defer to husband and Godhead "I think maybe you should speak to my husband..." she turned around ready to call him but Colin stopped her. "No Ma'am. I'd like to speak to you first privately if that's alright. It's also about the safety of every person in this house."
Gene saw what Colin was angling for. He was trying to create just enough confusion in her mind that Gene could nudge her into coming outside and closing the door without having to assume direct control in a way the would notice and fight against. It worked. She didn't know what she should do for just a second and it was all Gene needed. He suggested to her brain that she wanted to cooperate, to see what the two Psi Cops were talking about before she woke her husband up and risked his wrath later. She stepped outside and closed the door.

"What's this about?" she asked. Colin let out a sigh.

"I honestly don't know how to explain this to her. She's completely innocent and there are other kids involved." He confessed to Gene.

"I don't either. Just... try to walk her through it?" Gene replied.

"It's... do you know how you got Justin?" he asked after a pause. Mrs. Mercher looked confused and her mind was just as confused.

"Why would Psi Cops be wondering about that and what does it have to do with the safety of my kids?" she asked herself.

"Of course." she replied "One of his congregants has a cousin who went a'whoring out of wedlock and got herself pregnant. My husband persuaded her not to get an abortion by promising to adopt the baby. Brought him home a few months ago."

"I'm afraid Mrs. Mercher, that your husband was not honest with you." Colin said as slowly and gently as he could. "About a year and a half ago, two young telepaths were kidnapped from school and sold into slavery. She gasped in shock, and refused to acknowledge any implication.

"That's terrible, but I don't see how that matters here."

"The people who bought them forced them to... " Colin continued and before she could use the term fornicate or talk about their sin "get pregnant. At gunpoint. That child was sold to your husband five months ago for twenty thousand credits. We rescued those teenagers about an hour ago."

'No. No that can't be true. There must be some mistake!' she insisted to herself, but some other part of her, the part of her that she thought was rebellious against God, believed them.

"How do you know?" she asked bluntly.

'I'll be perfectly honest with you ma'am, we ripped it from the minds of the slaving trash who did that to them. We have a warrant to use telepathic scans to find any missing telepathic children. Justin is in the scope of that warrant because it is almost certain he's a telepath, though he may not have manifested his abilities yet." Colin informed her. What struck Gene was that she believed him. She at least believed that they weren't lying. They might be wrong, but not lying. She believed that a telepath could see the sins of others and had a special gift from The Lord. A refreshing change from most protestant fundamentalists in his estimation, and he noted, a theological difference between herself and her husband that she didn't voice in public or even in private. Only inside her mind.

"Why? Why would my James do that?" she asked, the million credit question and one that Gene could feel Colin not wanting to answer.

"The most likely reason a private individual buys a telepath child... is sexual exploitation." he said in tones as neutral as he could manage. That's what when the denial started in her mind.
'But that would mean... no. No it can't be true!' But that same little Other Voice, her instincts, the part of her brain that noticed all the little things about her husband and his behavior and didn't like them talked back, rejecting that denial.

"It is." Gene finally said. "And what's more, you know it's true. Deep down inside. How he pays special attention to kids between the ages of four and ten, showing them with praise and affection and then stops when they hit a certain age. How at about that age each and every one of them starts wetting the bed again, and despite the affection he shows them seem more afraid when he's around. You know, Jolene. You just don't want to admit it because you think going against him is a sin against God. But what sin could it possibly be to protect children from a predator? What God would want you to put innocent children through that?"

"God would want me to forgive him..." she whispered, unsure what she should do. She knew Gene was telling the truth because he'd simply pulled the details out of her. All the details she'd been ignoring for years. Gene decided to hammer the point home before he resorted to telepathic manipulation. Doing that any more than was absolutely necessary just struck him as wrong to do to someone who had been manipulated since she was swept off her feet at eighteen.

"Then forgive him, but forgiveness doesn't mean you have to go back to the way things were. Everything he teaches in his church is a cover for abuse. You don't want to challenge him because you've been taught it's a sin. Your children don't disobey him no matter what he does to them because they've been taught that God will punish them for it. They're too ashamed to speak out because they believe they've committed the sin of incest too. You avoid contact with outsiders, and all that does is isolate you from people who can help. He's a predator, and he's always been one."

Hearing someone else say it was what her Other Voice needed to shout down the effects of years of emotional and spiritual abuse. Gene didn't know how long it would last, it often took several tries to leave an abusive spouse, but for the time being she was agreeing with him, and had a chance.

"That son of a..." she self-censored the profanity. "Wha... what do I do? Where do I go? Where can I take ten children?"

"We can get you in touch with a social worker." Colin told her "They can help you leave the bastard. You don't have to divorce to get an order of protection. We can't make a criminal case on nothing but telepathic scans, but your kids can testify in court. As it stands, we can hold him in our cells for a few days and give you enough time to get things in order, okay?"

"Okay." she agreed.

"As for the children, you only need to worry about nine of them. We are taking Justin. We'll give you a chance to explain things to your other kids and say goodbye to him, but he was stolen from his real parents" by which Gene meant the Psi Corps "Who love him and want him back."

... 

Jolene got all the kids out, save for one. Justin was sleeping in his crib in the master bedroom, where James was also hopefully sound asleep. Were he awake, Gene would be too tempted to simply kill him.

<You weren't kidding about the creepy.> Colin remarked, clearly disquieted <The kids all had identical haircuts, similar styles of clothes. Identical practiced false smiles to hide their fear and misery...>
Yeah. I told you. Coleman's description was spot on.

I can't believe you remember one historian in so much detail that you'd be able to describe this whole sect from memory. I mean I can literally believe it, but it's oddly specific.

I read her stuff when I was sixteen. Came across it when I was doing a paper on the limits of religious freedom. Stuck with me.

Colin opened the bedroom door and they crept inside. James himself was almost creepy looking. Even while he slept it was like he was wearing a mask.

Now I understand why the Minbari have that particular courting ritual... Colin said.

Hm? Gene didn't know the first thing about Minbari courtship rituals. Spend enough time with them to learn those, huh?

Sweetheart, if you spend any time at all with religious caste Minbari, you learn about their rituals. There's a ritual for just about everything. In this case, the female observes the male while they sleep, believing that people's masks fall away while they're unconscious. They're not wrong either. Look at this guy. Leave whatever twisted dreams he's having out of it. He's just lying there on his back not-staring up at the ceiling like some sort of vampire. You? You're adorable when you sleep. Gene grinned.

You're biased.

Damn right I am. I've been primed to think this guy is evil. Still, that's like... the opposite of a personality right there. Colin agreed, while also defending his assessment.

The crib was right by the bed and Justin was sound asleep. Both Psi Cops opened up their minds and attempted to sense him, to see whether or not he was manifested already. Gene felt just the hint of it. He'd entered the latent stage, no telling how long until he fully bloomed other than that it wouldn't be more than a couple years.

Straight into the creche with this one. Colin said. He'll probably be a full blown telepath by the time he's old enough for a cadre.

Yeah. He'll need a new name though. We can't let him go forth into life with the name this scumbag gave him.

I don't know. Justin isn't bad. Mercher has to go though. Hmm Colin considered. Why not go with tradition and stick with his mother's last name. Ayodele.

Sounds good. Gene agreed. What to do with this piece of shit though. I don't want to risk nine kids being back in his power when or if his wife decides to forgive the 'repentant' sinner. Colin was every bit as worried about that as he was, but Gene could feel inspiration overtake his partner.

"And for the first time in his life of power and control, Frollo felt a twinge of fear for his immortal soul." Colin sang in what Gene thought was a beautiful tenor, waking up James Mercher even while he used his mind to keep the baby peacefully asleep. Gene smelled what he was cooking though, and pinned the 'man of God' in place with his mind, unable to speak.

"Hello James." Gene said. "I just want to take this moment to let you know that you've been undone by two homosexuals. You won't remember this conversation, except to know that simple truth." Then Gene did his job. He went into James Mercher's head and made sure that for once in his life, he would actually repent of his sins and seek not just the justice of the Lord, but the justice
of men. He would be overcome by a religious epiphany while in Psi Corps custody, and confess all his crimes against his own children. He would reject all attempts at a plea agreement, testify against the Vartanians, and throw himself at the mercy of an Earth Alliance court. He might even get out of prison someday. If the court didn't order his mind wiped. Any legal telepath who scanned him and found this would know who put it there, and they'd certainly know why. Gene didn't know a single one who would say a damn thing to anyone. Then he erased all memory James had of waking up and being altered, and put him back to sleep; only to wake him again ten seconds later with a pair of soft cuffs around his wrists as Colin picked up the still-sleeping infant.

**Sunday February 15th, 2263**

"Dads, will you be upset with me if I say you look like hell?" Zara asked, concern was etched across her face because she'd never seen them like that.

"It's the truth isn't it?" Colin asked "We'll never be upset with you for the truth. We might be angry at the universe, but never at you."

"Yeah sweetheart, we know we look like hell. Rough couple days, we still haven't slept." Gene added. He wasn't sure how much he wanted to tell her, but if she asked why, and she almost certainly would, he'd tell her.

"What's going on?" she asked, her natural curiosity compelled it, and Gene was going to answer truthfully come hell or high water, but he could caution her against inquiring further and forcing him to tell her things she didn't need to hear.

"We found some of the mundanes who bought our people. It's been bad and we have to do it at night and keep everything really secret for the next few days. Please don't ask more. You really don't need to know more."

"Oh. Yeah. Yeah I really don't want to know." Zara agreed "At least not until I'm older and have a better handle on my own... things." she trailed off softly.

"Deal." Colin agreed. "We love you Zara. We miss you and we wish you were here or we were there."

"I know Dad. Love you too." She kissed her glove and tapped it to the camera lens. Colin and Gene did the same right back, and everyone lost image quality.

"Oops. Didn't mean to smear the camera." Zara apologized sheepishly.

**Tuesday February 17th 2263**

“You know, something occurred to me.” Colin remarked as he and Gene were taking morning coffee in the common kitchen. Colin scarcely thought it possible, but things only got worse after James Mercher and the Vartanians. Everyone else he and Gene had rescued had either been kept in appalling conditions, sexually abused, or both. To a certain extent, Colin was used to it, Gene wasn't. Colin only had nightmares, Gene had woken up crying from some of the memories he'd absorbed. But after four grueling days and nights, their cell block was over-capacity with human trash and they were both able to temporarily unwind a bit until the next phase. Being back on a daytime schedule helped. Idle conversation was normal though, it helped keep their minds of
things, so they did it.

“Oh?” Gene replied interrogatively as he sipped on his steaming mug of water of life.

“We kinda got busy and let Valentine's day pass without comment. Is that normal?” Colin asked. He was genuinely curious, Colin had never really dated so he didn't really know how things like valentines day worked on the business end.

“Hmm” Gene considered, stroking a beard that didn’t exist “Maybe not. On the other hand the last week has hardly been normal.” he smirked “If you want, we can rain-check the day proper and plot our own cheesy romantic gestures.”

“I hadn’t considered that idea...” Colin mulled it over in his head and had the beginning of something form “but I like it. I'll surprise you.” he put on an evil smirk for effect.

“Oh no. What did I get myself into? Should I be afraid?”

“I don’t know...” Colin said, giving Gene a sideways glance “That depends on what you’re afraid of. I could serenade you. In public.”

“Oh god.” Gene replied in faux horror.

“Surprise string quartet over dinner?” Colin also suggested.

“Actually, that would be pretty nice.” Gene said. "I like classical music."

“I know, right? Of course, I can’t do that one now that I’ve mentioned it.”

“Damn.” Gene finished up his coffee and got up to put the mug in the sink, stopping to kiss the top of Colin’s head as he passed. “What time do the ‘hounds get in?”

“Three hours from now. They’ve been briefed. The Corps is not fucking around either, Marcel made some calls. We’re getting the guys out of Warsaw, and London; two full platoons.” Gene let out a whistle.

“That’s... impressive. They know to play nice with the victims, right?”

“Yeah. Marcel is a teddy bear by Bloodhound standards. They’ll handle most of the corporate targets, we have Emigration Placement Services, along with a small detachment of ‘hounds.” Colin switched over to mental communication as Gene washed out his mug.

<The Mothership is standing by in hyperspace. We might need it. Several cargo containers were loaded onto a transport ship from E.P.S. last week. Before we got the name of the firm, I’m afraid.> Gene immediately understood the implication.

<They would have had to have customs clearance...>

<Probably. We’ll know for sure once we scan the proprietors. At which point, we may have a bit of a trip ahead of us. Have a go-bag?> Colin asked.

<I do> because of course Gene did. Colin nodded.

<Good. We’re also going to have issues with housing and support for the people we save. We don’t have enough available space on planet and we can’t send them back to Earth or to Mars. We do have... other assets.> Gene gave him a quizzical look.
<What other assets?> he asked.

<Well, you know about the Motherships. Hell, the Director knows about some of those he just
doesn’t know how extensively modified they are. We might have put contingencies in place after
the Earth-Minbari War.>

<So what you’re saying is, we have a colony somewhere outside Earth-controlled space?>

<No. Not that I know of. I’m saying we have a small fleet and hidden infrastructure to build and
support that fleet, and we made sure to include capacity for refugees and some of the motherships
have extensive medical facilities that are on the books but controlled by our people. At least as far
as I know. I don’t know any of the details.> Colin informed him.

<You know, I should have guessed we’d have things like that. How else would we maintain four
Motherships in secret, right? It just didn’t occur to me.>

<Exactly, though we have more than four…> Colin said, trailing off on the end. Gene gave him a
look.

<I don’t know how many more than four. What I do know is that all our best bureucromancers
end up in Transport, not Administration. People from Military and Metapol tend to ‘retire’ into
Transport and they’ve been recruiting very aggressively these past few years.> Colin said.

<Gotcha.> Gene replied.

…

Colin had never seen the spaceport so nervous. Then again, eighty telepaths emerging from a pair
of Hades Class shuttles would make just about anyone nervous. Contrary to popular perception,
bloodhounds did not always walk out of a transport ship in lock step. They were people, not
machines, and while operational discipline was tight, they wore their boots purely for functionality
and not goosestepping; unless they were deliberately trying to intimidate. These one’s weren’t.
Each group ambled out in loose order with their handlers at their heads, before filing into a pair of
square blocks. Their leaders broke off and approached Gene and Colin.

There were two of them, one man, one woman. The man was Colin’s age but a bit taller with close-
cropped brown hair, green eyes, and somewhat narrow features. The woman was a little bit
rounder in the face and of middle eastern extraction.

“Marcel!” Colin said with a beaming smile as he broke protocol and stepped forward, crushing the
other telepath in a bear hug “It’s been a long time.” For his part, Marcel constricted him right
back. After a moment the tightness faded and they held each other like the long-separated siblings
they were.

“Too long brother, too long.” Marcel replied. The woman waited for the greetings to subside
before formal introductions were made. Colin felt Marcel crawl ever-so-gently across his surface
thoughts and grow concerned.

<You okay?> Marcel asked.

<No. Lots of terrible memories that aren’t mine, plus some of my own.> Colin admitted privately.
Both Sunday and Monday had features outright sexual sadists. <But I’ll manage.>

<If you need someone…> Marcel immediately offered.
<Got it covered Marcel, but thank you.> Colin said sincerely.

“Colin, should I be jealous?” Gene asked with an amused tone and a raised eyebrow. The two telepaths parted, and Colin replied.

“Pfft. You have nothing to worry about Gene.” Colin knew Gene was kidding, but some little part of him thought it might appreciate just a little bit of that particular emotion.

“Jealousy?” Marcel asked with his own eyebrow raised. Colin chuffed out a laugh and motioned toward Gene with his hands

“Marcel, Alia; this is my partner Gene Hendriks. And just so we’re all on the same page, both senses of the term.” Marcel’s expression and mental emotes went about five shades brighter in Gene’s direction. “Gene, this is Marcel. He heads up the Warsaw Pack, and this Alia Salib. She runs the pack out of London. And yes Alia, it is a pleasure to see you again; I would hug you too but I seem to recall you don’t like physical contact.”

“Not from anyone but my hounds. Though I appreciate the sentiment. It’s good to see you too Colin.” she gave Gene an appraising eye “You’ve done well for yourself.” she said with a wry smile. Gene blushed a bit and rubbed the back of his own neck in an ‘awe shucks’ gesture.

“I know, right? But we should probably get to work.” Colin said “Your troops have been briefed?”

“Yes” Alia replied “You’re taking E.P.S ?”

“Yep.” Gene added in “We want to take them personally.”

“Right.” Marcel said, nodding “We’ll detach two fire teams of ‘hounds to go with you and provide backup. Things could get nasty in there, they might not. Either way they’ll be useful for evidence retrieval.” Colin nodded in agreement, then mentally steeled himself. The way the last few days had gone, he was starting to think that maybe the universe hated him and anything he expected to be banal and normal wouldn't be. Ever again. He was worried that things would go terribly wrong and that good men and women would get shot.

“Let’s roll.” he said. Though to Marcel, who’s back he lightly touched, he sent something mind to mind in Polish just in case Alia couldn’t be trusted. She and her people came separately from Marcel and his as far as Colin knew. He didn’t like not trusting a fellow telepath, but with stakes as high as they were, he didn’t have much choice.

< Marcel, szpital tutaj nie jest wystarczająco duży, ale na Ziemi nie jest bezpieczny. Weź naszych ludzi do miejsca, które jest bezpieczne od dyrektora. Nie pytaj mnie dlaczego, nie mogę ci teraz powiedzieć. Po prostu to zrobić.> Colin sent, letting Marcel know that the hospital wasn’t large enough, Earth wasn’t safe for long term care and that the people they rescued would need to go to a place unknown to the Director.

<Mogę to zrobić, ale wyjaśnisz mi dlaczego, jak tylko będzie to możliwe> Marcel agreed, but requested a briefing.

<Dziękuję, stary przyjacielu. Obiecuję, wyjaśnię wszystko później, za pośrednictwem bezpiecznego kanału. Umieść ich bezpośrednio na statku matce. Departament Transportu wie, dokąd się udać.> Colin replied that he would brief his friend, but that anyone they found needed to be on the Mothership and left to Transport’s discretion.

He’d been speaking Polish since he was eight and could think in it like he could German and
English. He was confident that someone reading his surface thoughts who couldn’t speak it wouldn’t be able to translate without intrusion that he’d notice.

... 

The office was completely non-descript. Mostly brick with a nice glass facade and doors, but unlike a lot of other offices, it was standalone. No other buildings shared walls, utilities, or connections of any kind. It was, however, conveniently located in a dense urban housing area with lots of dormitory style apartments for lower income residents, some of which were falling into disrepair and owned by slum lords. The perfect place to locate a business where no one would care who goes in and out in the middle of the night, and where someone looking to leave planet might go to find a job anywhere else.

“They have to have a warehousing facility of some kind.” Gene noted. “Probably not in the port, but in some industrial area. Load them onto trucks there, get them into cargo containers portside, move containers to ships. Done.”

“I tend to agree.” Colin replied.

<Okay everyone, I’m expanding beyond the scope of the warrant. We’re scanning everyone and seizing everything. Data drives, paper documents, communications equipment. Everything. We might not need it to find our people, but it’s better to have and not need than need and not have. They can sue us later.>

“Radek and Smyth.” Gene called out.

“Sir!” they replied in unison.

“Set PPGs to low power, we don’t want to kill anyone if they fight back, we need them alive to scan them. We’ll arrange their education in civic virtue when we have the information we need.” They grumbled internally, but they turned around and ordered the men and women under their command to comply.

Entry was easy, given that it was business hours and the doors were unlocked. The front receptionist didn’t know what hit her before she was on the ground writhing under an agonizing scan from one of the Bloodhounds. She was soon unconscious and being secured with zip ties and duct tape.

Beyond the reception desk, the building split into two wings at a T junction. Colin thought having help was refreshing, but Gene was in his element, coordinating between the two packs, receiving information from their scans, and sending orders that were followed like the edicts of God. The Warsaw fireteam took one side, the London team took the other, joining their minds with those of the Psi Cops to create a mental-sensory network, tracking the location of every sapient mind in the facility. They swept the office space in a leap-frogging blitzkrieg; make entry into an office, scan its occupants, restrain, move on to the next.

The space between minds was filled with surprise, fear, anger, pain and disorientation from the mundanes, and clinical detachment from the Bloodhounds. Inside five minutes, every single mundane in the building had been scanned, bound, and dragged into the front lobby next to the reception desk. Data drives and hard copy documents were also seized and stacked by the door.

“Hello everyone. I’m sure you’re wondering why we’re here. Well, okay, no. You all know why we’re here. We’re here because you’ve all been very naughty. So naughty that I’d like to take you up in a transport ship into low orbit just so I can throw you all out an airlock, but that would be
gauche.” Colin said in a cool sarcastic tone “So don’t worry too much. You’ll live. Hell, I can’t even prosecute you.” then he smiled a predatory grin “But that doesn’t mean you get off scot-free.”

Colin turned to the Bloodhound officers.

“You got what we need?” he asked.

“We did sir. We have their warehouse location and their mole in customs. Warehouse is currently empty though.” Radek replied.

“Good. Thank you, your people did good work. Same to you Smyth. When this is done, drinks are on us.” There was a telepathic murmur of appreciation from the Bloodhounds and they grinned at a job well done.

“But.” Gene piped up “That could be a few days, and after what you all saw in their heads I’m sure you’re all itching for some payback. You’ve got five minutes to do what you want, or not, to these shitsacks. No physical injury, nothing that’ll send them to a mental hospital too fast. Be personal, be creative, be subtle, and make sure they can’t tattle to the Director or Internal Affairs.”

Gene and Colin started picking up documentary evidence and took it outside, leaving the Bloodhounds to their work. Five minutes later, fifteen woosy prisoners whose memories of their psychic ordeal had been erased and their volition straight-jacketed were released to go back to work or their families. They would never speak of the incident again no matter what their individual suffering was. They wouldn't even want to.

…

For the second time that day, Gene and Colin were at the spaceport. The Bloodhounds were sent back to their units to avoid causing a panic in the port and to transport documents back to the Annex for analysis.

They walked and moved like angry predators, and people weren’t just nervous; they ducked for cover and not one person impeded their progress as they stalked through the roads and paths that were used to inspect, sort, and organize incoming and outgoing shipping. This time, everyone they saw was being at least gently scanned, looking for anyone, any living creature, that might have some culpable guilt. Thus far, no one knew anything, no one was making the connection in their heads between the presence of Metapol and something they’d done.

The customs office was unassuming, just a small portable building in the midst of the roiling chaos of any busy port with off-white paneling and the Earth Alliance seal in addition to the local planetary government’s seal on the door. Customs were a joint operation between the two governments, enforcing EA law and local regulations. Colin opened the door and stepped inside. Everyone within stopped everything they were doing and just stared as two Psi Cops strode in with all the magnanimity of a pair of hunting Orca.

“Is-is there something I can do for you?” One of them, who’s name Colin plucked out as Alan Tisdale asked in a timorous voice.

“Yes there is Alan.” Colin replied. He reached out with his mind and felt for electrical equipment, no cameras.

“We’re looking for Stephanie Galloway.” And then they felt the mental ‘EEP’ from the other end of the room. They looked over and saw a black woman in her mid thirties to early forties with close-cut curly hair in an Earth Alliance uniform. They glared at her, coordinating their movements to
do it in perfect unison.

“Hello Lieutenant.” Gene said coldly. “You know why we’re here?”

“No, I don’t” she lied “How dare you barge in like you own the place without so much as a by your leave! What the fuck are you doing here, do I look like one of your fucking mutants to you?” Colin scanned the room and found three others who were complicit.

“You” he pointed to the first one “You, and you” to the second and third “You’re staying here, no don’t try to get up. You’ll find that you can’t. We have a warrant and we intend to execute it.” Gene had already locked down their ability to move of their own will. “The rest of you, get the fuck out. Now. Unless you want to join in solidarity with someone who aids and abets trafficking in children. Our Children.” Colin snarled that last part. The customs functionaries spared her and the other three a disgusted look for all of a second and a half before realizing that they wanted nothing to do with whatever it was the Psi Cops had a warrant to do, and scrambled out the door as fast as their legs and crowd dynamics would carry them.

Colin went around zip-tying everyone who was left to their chairs by their hands and feet while Gene held them immobile.

“Alright Gene you can let go, they’re secure.” Gene released his stranglehold on their motor cortices so they could struggle against their bindings, then both of them waited until the corrupt customs agents surrendered to hopelessness.

“Give us one good reason why we shouldn’t turn you all into fucking tubers.” Gene commanded.

“I have a family...please...don’t.” whimpered the one closest to the door, a ginger male by the name of Nelson McDaniels.

“I have a family too. You helped sell some of them into slavery off world in exchange for bribes. Wrong answer.” Gene replied flatly and locked Nelson’s diaphragm in contraction, sending out all the air in his lungs in an agonizing huff. While Nelson tried desperately and without success to relax his diaphragm and inflate his lungs, Gene continued.

“Anyone else? Nothing? No flimsy justifications or appeals to our sympathy?” Gene was spiraling into a blind rage. Colin knew it. He could feel it radiating off his lover like a star shedding mass. He’d been stewing in the worst of all possible human degeneracy for days with only fleeting respite, and the trip here had given him just enough time to steep in it like a bag of earl gray. Nelson was starting to strain at his bindings, writhing, desperate for air. Colin reached out a gloved hand and put it on Gene’s shoulder, flooding Gene’s mind with all the love he could dredge up from his own worn out soul. He felt all the tension in Gene’s body unwind.

<Gene. Don’t. I’m exercising veto. Let him breath. I love you Gene, I don’t want you to turn yourself into one of Them. Let the bastard go.> Colin felt the dam in Gene’s mind start to break even as he released his hold on Nelson’s mind and the young man sucked in a frenzied gasp of air and started hyperventilating to purge built up carbon dioxide from his system. So Colin propped Gene up, holding the upwelling of anguish back for long enough to get the job done.

< I love you too. Thank you.> was all Gene said back in his mind before putting his facade back on.

“The only thing standing between you and the abyss is my boyfriend’s grace, and my conscience. We just spent four days in the minds of Mundanes” he let the word ooze out of his mouth with all the contempt he had in him “some of them friends of yours; who enslave, torture, rape, and murder
children. There isn’t anything you can say that’ll make us think you deserve to fucking live. We just refuse to pollute our hands with your blood.”

“So, what? You’re just here to scare us? Rough us up a little bit? What the fuck are you gonna do, you’re not allowed to scan us.” Stephanie Galloway said, trying one more time to escape from the zip ties, to no avail.

“That’s where you’re wrong. Court order says we can scan you for the purposes of finding missing persons. It just can’t be used against you in court. Don’t worry though. We’re still absolutely certain of your guilt and don’t feel the need to involve your mundane farce of a judicial system.” Colin told her. “We’re just not going to kill you. You might wish we had though.”

Apprehension and fear rose from their minds as they realized just how fucked they were.

<You alright, Gene?> Colin asked.

<Yeah, I can keep it together until we’re done. But I’m gonna need to be held for a while.>

<That’s what I’m here for.>

“Gene, I’ll take Galloway and McDaniels if you want to pick up the spares?”

“Sure.” Gene replied.

…

They finally got back to the Annex as the sun was setting and did the keycode and retinal scan before walking in, to find Marcel waiting in the atrium for them.

“Hey Marcel.” Colin said, noticing the distinct lack of a pack “Where are the ‘hounds?”

“They took our rescued brothers and sisters up to the mothership, mildly sedated. They’ll take a rain check on the drinks. I stayed behind to make sure you and Gene were alright, partially also because I need to be briefed. What’s going on?”

“Right. My office? I can secure that well enough.” Colin suggested.

“Oczywiście.”

“Chodź z nami.” Colin replied, almost reflexively, leading Marcel to his office.

“Okay, I’ve gotta ask, I know you met teaching each other English and Polish, but how did you wind up in Geneva not speaking English?” Gene asked. Colin could feel his mind still in turmoil and he was basically filling the void with conversation to keep from breaking in semi-public.

“I was very young.” Marcel replied “In Poland, Russian and German were taught first in school, English did not start until the age of nine or ten. I was eight when my birth parents moved to Zürich.”

“I supposed that makes sense. Best friends ever since huh?” Gene followed up as they made their way down a hallway.

“Yeah.” Colin replied.

‘Tak. Not as close as you two, but perhaps just shy of that. I was…” Marcel coughed “incapable of fully reciprocating.”
“Wait so... you would have if you could have?” Gene asked, confused. He'd rather be confused than deal with the rest of what was in his head, but he was also curious. That Colin was picking up that much of Gene's surface thoughts was indication enough that something was very wrong as far as Colin was concerned unless... Colin turned his awareness inward for just a moment, and found something new. A very subtle and easy to miss, but stable, connection to Gene's mind. Without even realizing it, Gene was drawing on Colin's resilience to shore up his own, but it was a two way connection.

'How long has this been here?' He knew his range was better with Gene than anyone else, and he knew what that meant. He hadn't expected a parapsychological bond to deepen so fast. Without acute trauma it was usually much slower. *Then again, they can't exactly be induced under experimental conditions. Might be high variability* he rationalized.

"That's... a bit meta." Gene finished. Marcel laughed at that.

"I suppose it is but you know what it's like to get that close to someone. There but for an accident of neuroanatomy."

"I just hope I didn't make things awkward for you." Colin said, momentarily shelving that information he'd just found. He knew he could block the connection, but he wasn't going to.

"Never!" Marcel repudiated the thought "You weren't as subtle as you thought you were, but it isn't like you ever tried to push beyond my comfort zones or anything. Hell, I would have happily accepted a lot more affection than you allowed yourself to show specifically to avoid making things awkward. That's how I knew." Marcel reached forward as Colin opened the door and squeezed his shoulder affectionately. "And I'm glad you found someone. I like Gene, seems like a good person" Marcel finished, looking at Gene as if directing the comment at him.

<He's teetering on the edge of a crisis. I'm worried about him.> Marcel said to Colin privately. Colin didn't know if Gene could pick it up but he replied.

<I know. I'm reinforcing his control right now.>

<I don't know how, but I trust you know what you're doing.> Marcel replied.

<I don't. I just know I'm doing it... but the faster we get you briefed the better. I'll take care of him.>

“Okay. We’re as secure as we’re going to be.” Colin said.

“Good. What’s this about?” Marcel asked.

“You remember that business with Edgars Industries?” Colin asked. He didn't hesitate or prevaricate about telling Marcel everything. Marcel was one of a handful of people in the galaxy he knew he could trust with absolute certainty.

“Tak, nasty." Marcel confirmed. "Fucker tried to kill us with a virus. Lots of telepaths died in those labs, horrible… Bester killed him. Did someone learn necromancy while I wasn’t looking?"

“No, but we think maybe someone in EarthGov is trying to replicate his results. They’re disappearing psych cases.” Colin told him.

“Mother of God, okay, that’s all I need to know. I’ll make sure they get to a safe place until they’re ready to be repatriated to the Corps. Transport knows how to obfuscate the paperwork. When you find out who it is, I want in on killing them.” Colin got the distinct impression that
Marcel knew more about Transport’s capabilities than he did.

“I can’t think of anyone I’d rather call. Your people are up for it?” Colin replied.

“Please. Who do you think trains them? Of course they are. Speaking of which, did you get the transponder codes for that transport? We can track them in hyperspace until we get into range if we’ve got those.”

“Yeah.” Colin replied.

“Good. Get some sleep. Our ships are fast enough you should be able to catch them even with the delay and… you two need it. Badly. I should get back up to the ship. Pilot’s probably waiting on me.”

“Alright Marcel, you have a good night.” Gene told him, extending a hand.

“You too.” Marcel shook, then pulled him into a bear-hug all his own. “Take care of each other while I’m gone.”

…

Colin shut the door and Gene practically collapsed, physically and emotionally. With Marcel gone and the need to be strong in front of everyone who wasn’t Colin gone, he shambled to bed and didn’t even bother taking his clothes off before he imploded into a bawling fetal position, still sitting up. It was all Colin could do to crawl into bed with him, and wrap his arms around Gene’s shoulders in a protective shell.

“It’s okay, I’ve got you.” he said gently and warmly “Those memories aren’t yours, you didn’t do those things, you didn’t suffer them either.”

“I’ve got ‘em now.” Gene replied haltingly between sobs “All of them.”

“I know baby, I know.” he kissed Gene’s shoulder “Want me to temporarily vault them?” He’d remember remembering them, but that much of a remove would let him sleep. Gene had done the same for him the night before. Gene didn’t respond verbally, but he didn’t need to.

“Okay love, drop your blocks.” Colin said, projecting as much affection, reassurance, and warmth that he could into Gene’s thoughts to double up on the effect of physical contact. Gene did, and Colin went in as gently as possible. It was never a pleasant process and Gene quivered in place as Colin sorted out his traumatic memories from those that were not his, then walled them away. When he stopped, Gene inhaled deeply and exhaled. Gene could still call them up, he could open the vault, and it was no substitute for dealing with them; but it would keep him going for at least a few days.

“Come on, lean back…” Colin suggested, as he lay back and felt Gene’s body uncoil and follow him, then shift so they were chest to stomach given Gene’s lower position. Colin took off his gloves and tossed them onto the nightstand, then cradled Gene’s head with naked fingers as the other man wept, gently coaxing him to sleep and eventually joining him.

Wednesday February 18th, 2263

The shuttle hurtled out of the atmosphere on an unbelievably powerful torch drive, a hundred kilometers in twenty seconds, a hundred Gs of acceleration and Colin didn’t even feel most of it,
just a single force of gravity pressing him into the back of his seat. The Earth Alliance only
achieved full artificial gravity the year before, but they’d had inertial dampening technology for
decades. Colin had no idea how it worked, he’d never been able to wrap his head around physics at
that level, but it never ceased to amaze him how far humanity had come technologically in a mere
century of contact with alien species.

They’d gone from a species that barely had a single off-world colony in the same system that
looked like it might get annexed by the Centauri to one of the most powerful interstellar powers in
barely a hundred years. Granted, that had largely been on the back of his own people being held in
bondage, but he could appreciate the accomplishment despite that. As the void of space extended
beyond his porthole in all directions, he marveled at it. Gone were the familiar voices of
civilization, even the background thrum of animals. There was only emptiness and the occasional
thought from Gene, or one of the two pilots.

Staring out that window it was easy to let go. To let everything that was bothering him slip,
however temporarily, into the staggering immensity of an ever-expanding cosmos. It was a small
shuttle, and Gene had his own window. He was staring out into the void and Colin could tell his
thoughts were remarkably similar. By unspoken mutual consent, they wrapped their arms around
the other’s and intertwined fingers, not saying anything; just staring off into the distant stars. It
didn’t make everything to away, it didn't really soothe the wounds they'd suffered directly and by
proxy, but it did give them something of staggering beauty to distract themselves with, even for a
moment.

It didn’t take long to reach the jumpgate. Then their little shuttle was swallowed up in the off-
yellow vortex of its entry gateway, a rend in the fabric of spacetime itself; to an alternate dimension
where distance was mapped on a smaller space.

Hyperspace was another matter entirely. Mundanes thought of it as hellish and scary, but for
telepaths it liberated their minds from the shackles of reality. It amplified their abilities
considerably. Even in the shuttle, Colin could feel the minds of their destination, a ship so far away
that the shuttle’s sensors couldn’t resolve it against the background noise. The shuttle veered right,
plunging into the deep red and off the jumpgate beacon that guided ships along safe navigated
paths. They were in spatiunm ignotum. Unknown space.

<You two lovebirds having a good time back there?> The pilot, Erik Magnusdottir, sent back to
them, and Colin could feel the smirk. Erik must have been born in the Corps and carried a female
ancestor’s last name, Colin mused.

<Har har.> Gene sent back <It’s just been a while, less time for me than him, but it feels like a lot
longer.>

<I hear that.> Erik replied <We’re coming up on the ships now, should be able to get ours on
sensors in the next ten seconds or so.>

<Ships plural?> Colin asked.

<Oh! You didn’t know? You sir, have friends you don’t know about.> the Co-Pilot Amelia
informed them excitedly. Colin made a note to himself:

'Thank Marcel however I can, and probably Bester’

<Two Loki class cruisers. Modified Hyperions. The Fenrir and the Sleipnir> Amelia continued.

<We have WHAT?> Colin asked incredulously. The two pilots laughed audibly.
Damn. I didn’t expect anything of light cruiser weight. Motherships, sure, but actual light cruisers? Gene expressed similar incredulity, but on top of that he was as giddy as a schoolgirl.

They’re heavy cruisers…> the Co-Pilot, a woman named Amelia Tobin, corrected.

Sure, sure… when they were first commissioned. Then they got replaced in our order of battle by much heavier ships filling a cruiser role that for some reason we call destroyers…> Gene retorted. She emoted back a sad face, acknowledging that the EA’s naming conventions made no sense anymore, and hadn’t for about forty years.

“This is Shuttle One to PCV Fenrir, we’re on final approach and request clearance to land.” Erik said into the ship’s comms.

“Copy that Shuttle One, you are cleared to land, docking bay doors are opened, welcome home.”

When the shuttle landed, Colin noticed something was off immediately. There was gravity. Hyperions were ancient, they shouldn’t have artificial gravity at all. They could barely fit internal ferris wheels to hold osteoporosis at bay.

‘How the hell did we get our hands on this?!’ he inwardly shouted.

“Woah. This is… unexpected.” he said. Gene nodded in agreement and still had that same shit-eating grin. Colin could feel Gene holding back what he could only think of as a military nerdgasm.

“We’ll let our Captain explain that, we have our post-flight inspection to do. She’s up in CIC, go say hello.”

“Erik, Amelia, thanks for the lift!” Gene said.

“Our pleasure. Hopefully the Captain has good news regarding the ship we’re chasing.” Amelia replied, shooing them off the ship with a gesture. They obeyed and exited onto the pressurized flight deck. It wasn’t a big hangar, just large enough for a pair of shuttles and half a dozen star furies in Psi Corps insignia, but it was serviceable, and that was still deceptively large. Hyperions were just on the other side of a kilometer long and the hangar took up the entire beam of the ship in that section and several hundred meters of length because it housed the fighters plus everything required to service and repair them, including plentiful spare parts.

Colin looked around and found the tram system that would take them to CIC, which was located deep in the bowels of the ship’s main section. He boarded it and let Gene get in before he told the computer to take him to the Combat Information Center.

…

The command center of a ship crewed by mundanes was often physically loud, but on the Fenrir it was dead silent except when someone moved and their footfalls found a place that caused the deck plating to reverberate a little. There was no need to speak.

Gene snapped to attention the moment he was about to cross the threshold.

<Captain Rhee, Lt Colin Meier and Officer Gene Hendriks request permission to enter the CIC.> Gene sent over to the person in the central command chair, a care worn Asian woman in late middle age with steel-gray hair. They both knew her first name was Sueng but no matter how familiar you might be off the ship, you called the person in command of a ship Captain while on the ship. Period.
<Permission granted> she sent back, turning her chair and thus her gaze toward them as they stepped through the bulkhead door. There were no windows and seeing out into space was impossible. It reminded Colin a great deal of an old wet-navy submarine he’d toured in Bremerhaven.

<Welcome to the Fenrir.> she thought at them getting up out of her chair <And you have questions. You’re not even bothering to mask your curiosity. Come on, I need to check in on our Navigator anyway. We can walk and talk.> Gene sent them both an image of a Spacing Guild navigator from Dune and she snorted. Colin chuckled and shook his head.

<You’re not entirely wrong.> she responded <But we can actually make computers to assist, and don’t need the spice melange.>


<Well, Warlocks have been in development for years. It wasn’t easy to get our grubby mitts on the design specs for the artificial gravity system and retrofit a pair of salvaged Hyperions; but we managed it. Along with a number of other ships. Had to bring the fusion reactor to Minbari spec, but while we were doing that we could upgrade the weapons, defense grid. Everything.> she beamed with pride, running her hand along the bulkhead nearest her. She clearly loved her ship, every square centimeter of it. <I’d like our chances against an Omega, we can out-accelerate them and have approximately equivalent forward armaments and active defenses. We’d get pasted by a Warlock though.> she grinned <At least in normal space.>

Captain Rhee brought them to the lift that would take them up to Navigation, and motioned for them to step inside. They did.

“Navigation” she said as door closed behind her. The lift chimed in acknowledgement. <So Gene, I read your file. Wish you would have transferred to Transport.> by which she meant ‘fleet’. <I could use someone like you leading my contingent of marines.>. It was meant to be private, but Gene relayed it to Colin so he caught it anyway. He didn’t take offense. He’d try to steal Gene away too.

<I’m really glad I didn’t honestly.> Gene replied, running his hand up Colin’s back by way of demonstration. <Been worth it.>

<Oh! Sorry about my not-so-subtle headhunting attempt.> The Captain exclaimed. <And you’re being open about it?> she asked.

<Yeah. Almost to the point of being insufferable.> Colin supplied <Nothing nasty so far, I was worried that people would think I was betraying the Corps or something. That… hasn’t happened.>

<Good for you! And it won’t. Not from us, except for the odd admin martinet. Mundanes are a different story. I learned that the hard way when I transitioned. Career in Military got put in stasis and I started pulling punishment duty> Gene winced at the thought of punishment duty in his old division. <Yeah…> Captain Rhee followed up <It’s exactly what you think it is.>

<Oh, wow, that didn’t even occur to us.> Colin replied.

<Well that is kind of the point…> Captain Rhee responded, smirking.

<No no, not that. The mundanes. It should have though.> Colin corrected.

<Bah!> Captain Rhee waved her hand in dismissal < Johnson did everything he could to get us to
dehumanize and indoctrinate ourselves into good little drones for the Earth Alliance. York is a little different.>

<Less likely to sideline people’s careers because we act like real people, more likely to sell us to the Ruinous Powers in job lots?> Gene ventured.

<Something like that, yeah. Johnson was vindictive, York isn’t. He still needs to die, but he’s not vindictive. Before Johnson took over, the curriculum in the cadres and academy was affirming of differences in sexuality and gender. Then that bastard took over and decided that such things were against the ‘needs of the Corps’. Put a gag order in place within the entire Education division. Still, joke’s on Johnson, he’s dead and I’m captaining a cruiser. Granted on the books I’m a logistics supervisor which is… Kinda true. You know, technically I’m a commodore right now. I like how that rolls through my mind. Commodore Rhee> she said, trying it on for size.

The lift stopped, and the door opened; the three telepaths exited into a walk-in-closet sized room that was suspended in the shifting crimson of hyperspace, a single telepath in its center operated a bank of computers with a dreamy expression. Colin felt his sensory universe expand, and the voices in his head grow to the volume of an excited sports stadium. It got so loud he had to reinforce his blocks to avoid sensory overload. Gene did the same and they both realized that they were sensing the minds inside every ship for a truly vast distance. Hundreds if not thousands of light-years in all directions. Colin shifted his attention in each direction: up, down, left, right, forward, back, and he could work out something close to their orientation with respect to the galactic disk just from the density of minds. Even shutting himself down to limit exposure, it was transcendent and sent a shiver up his spine.

He knew the motherships had spaces like this for navigation and sensors, but he’d never been permitted inside.

<You like that, huh?> Captain Rhee asked them both. They sent her back an emphatic affirmative. <Commander Etsiddy, have that location plotted?> she asked. The woman in the center of the room looked up from her computer and nodded. She had native American features and Gene mentally supplied that with that name she was probably Navajo.

<Any idea where they’re headed?> Captain Rhee inquired.

<They just left Epsilon Indi bound for Corianna. I think they’re heading toward Narn space via Mentab. It’s the only route that won’t put them in Babylon Five jurisdiction. We can catch up before they hit Mentab if we leave right now.>

<Alright, plot the course Commander.> Captain Rhee ordered.

<Yes Ma’am.>

Anaba Etsiddy closed her eyes and quested outward with her mind. Three of the six motherships were at fixed positions in hyperspace at all times. Colin could feel her contact each one’s Navigator to get a bearing and type it into the computer system, then had it calculate their relative position and plot a course.

<Preliminary course plotted. Will coordinate with the Sleipnir to account for drift. We can go when you’re ready. ETA is three days plus or minus a few hours.> Cmdr. Etsiddy said. Even assuming an easy and uneventful trip, that meant they'd miss their window for calling Zara and Colin really didn't want to do that. Not without getting a message to her first. He felt Gene's mental exclamation point, and knew the other man had picked that up or thought it himself.
<Excellent Commander. As for you two…> the Captain said, turning her attention toward the two Psi Cops <Settle in for a trip. You’re supernumerary and outside out chain of command, but we can slot you in with the Marines. I’ll schedule your integration with them for thirteen hundred hours ship time, gives you a few hours to find your quarters and familiarize yourself with the ship’s layout. Maybe catch a nap.>

<Thank you Captain.> Gene replied. <One thing, small matter.>

<Sure.>

<I hate imposing on you, but come Sunday, is there a way we could put in a call to Geneva, operational security permitting? I don't know your security protocols, but it's worth asking.> She looked at him curiously.

<What, have a kid in a cadre or something?> Captain Rhee asked.

<We do, yeah.> her eyebrows raised <Adopted. We promised that we'd call every Sunday and if we couldn't we'd get a message to her first.> Colin supplied, and explained the situation.

<Pfft. Yeah. We can route you through a mothership, as far as Admin is concerned, you’re on one anyway. Hell, doing that will help our cover if someone sees fit to trace transmissions.>

<Thank you, Captain. It’s not a promise we want to break.> Gene said.

<No problem. I have you in a spare set of officers’ quarters. Had I known about your relationship I would have stuck you down in the enlisted racks and made jokes about hot-bunking.>

…

Sitting in a classroom that looked like it could fit a whole company of marines being instructed by a line lieutenant made Gene feel almost sickeningly giddy. He Colin were up front while Lieutenant Oscar Gonzales held forth from an old-fashioned chalkboard. And that was definitely the pronunciation of ‘lieutenant’ that included a voiced f: leftenant.

“The captain asked me to integrate you. That’s our polite term for ‘bring someone up to speed so they know what’s going on and don’t fumble around like morons’, so I suppose I should start with the basics.” He said. “We have a fleet. Obviously. We also have a Marine Corps which we formally call the Psi Corps Transport Marine Corps or PTMC. I’ll start by giving you a basic rundown of the ship and it’s compliment, then I’ll go into how the marines are organized and how we do things. Sound good?”

“Sounds good to me.” Colin replied.

“Same.” Gene understated. He was practically bouncing up and down like an excited puppy.

“You must be happier than a pig in shit right now.” Oscar said. It wasn’t a question and Gene didn’t treat it as such.

“Like you wouldn’t believe.” Gene replied, smiling from ear to ear.

“Anyway, this particular vessel has been heavily modified from it’s base spec. Instead of only having inertial dampening for short periods like the older models, our artificial gravity system can keep up inertial dampening at a ratio of 100:1 for as long as the reactors have fuel. The engines have also been upgraded with a partial gravity drive based on Minbari tech. As a result, we can hit four hundred Gs forward, and one hundred in all other directions. That puts us at double the
acceleration of a standard Omega and roughly on par with a Warlock.”

Colin raised his hand.

“You have a question?” Lieutenant Gonzales asked.

“Yeah. How?” Colin asked “I mean, I figure sure there have been plenty of opportunities to snag battle damaged abandoned hulks, and I know we have to have repair facilities to maintain and upgrade our motherships, but this is a complete rebuild, except for the chassis.”

The marine grinned “Good question. You know the Markab homeworld?”

“No… Grand theft planet?!” Gene asked. Even the thought of the Psi Corps having a planet of its own had him in awe.

“Fuck no! It’s a charnel house down there. More like grand theft orbital infrastructure.”

“Oh I see. Take their orbital assets under tow and move them somewhere else?” Colin speculated.

“Exactly. As for your inevitable follow up questions: We stole the design specs for everything, and we use a lot of P1s and P2s. They’re not mundanes, but they don’t really have a normal place in the Corps because they can’t consistently do telepath jobs.”

“So, what, you set them up with mining and space-construction work in shell companies to hide the fact that the Corps is using them for ship construction and resource extraction?”

“Hendriks, is he usually this quick?” Oscar inquired. It was Colin's turn to beam. He liked praise as much as the next person and Oscar seemed like the sort who was spare in his.

“Yes.” Gene answered.

“Excellent. Yes, that’s exactly what we’ve been doing. There are a million of them and they get shat on pretty hard. But they’re family and they can move and work without the Director paying much attention because they’re only loosely attached to the Corps and aren’t seen as a threat. Who cares if a bunch of them start up small businesses? No one else will hire them so what else are they supposed to do?”

“I approve of the subterfuge.” Gene said. "And the solidarity. They really do get the short end of the stick. All the pain, none of the advantages..."

“Good! Now, the engines and artificial gravity aren’t the only things we’ve modified. The new reactors are something else; they let us have an enhanced weapons battery. In addition to the standard compliment of plasma pulse cannons, we’ve replaced the old particle cannons with a pair of heavy particle cannons identical to those found on an Omega and we’ve upgraded the defense grid to the mark threes.:

Colin was a bit more reserved than Gene was, and was mentally comparing how the Fenrir would fare against other Earth Force ships, even while Gene was barely containing just how ecstatic he was. Even so, Gene must have caught Colin's internal question because he answered it.

<The term 'curbstomp' applies. Captain Rhee wasn't kidding about this ship's odds against a standard Omega>

“Crew compliment is three hundred and fifty Navy personnel to run the ship and a full company of eighty marines. Two platoons per company. Officers use traditional wet navy ranks, while enlisted
use army enlisted ranks. The only exception is that irrespective of rank, the commanding officer of the ship is called Captain and is the only person allowed to be referred to as such. Other captains are called Senior Commander to differentiate them. Flag rank is of course flag rank. Any questions on that?” Lt. Gonzales asked.

“'Nope. Other than where we fit in.” Gene asked. The marine lieutenant grinned at the question.

“You guys are seconded as Warrant Officers.” Gene thought that made perfect sense even as Colin wasn't sure how that worked.

<Warrant officers were weird: sitting between non-commissioned officers and officers, having very specialized powers and authority. In combat, we'll be under the command of any commissioned officer, and be in line of command over the enlisted. And if it came down to it, we could arrest those same commissioned officers. It isn't elegant, but it works for a situation like this because we can be given a rank through a warrant issued by the CO, rather than having to actually take a commission.> Gene explained, and Colin certainly appreciated it. It was clear, precise, and fully justified why that option had been taken over any of several others.

<Thanks love.> Colin replied <That cleared things up.> Then curiosity stabbed at Colin again. If the Corps had these two ships and, as Lt. Gonzales had said, others... how many were there?

“I know you probably can’t tell me but... how large is the fleet?” Colin asked.

“Six Motherships, six Loki class, four Ifrit class which are modified Novas, two Wendigo class ships or modified Omegas... and we have a Wotan class under construction. Those are modified Warlocks. Plus we’ve got a bunch of escort carriers and corvettes. Just in this battlegroup. I can't say what we have otherwise, because I don't know.” The lieutenant said, clearly just wanting to show off. That the man had answered almost floored Colin. It was idle curiosity, he wasn't really expecting an answer.

“Transport has been very busy indeed. But... why be so open about it? I mean, if we ever get scanned...” Colin said.

“You already know about these two, we’re fucked if someone scans you anyway. The mundanes are going to try to either disband us or kill us sooner rather than later. Bluntly, you're going to get seconded to us or outright commissioned eventually, and in the interim you might need to know what assets you can call in if you need them. For instance, there may come a time when you have to evacuate every non-combatant telepath from Omega VII while under fire. You might not need to know, but it's good if you do know.”

“And you trust us to suicide if it looks like it’ll get out before the time comes?” Gene asked. “Because we would.” Colin nodded his agreement. He didn't like it, but he would.

“I’d rather vault the memories, but if I have to...’ Colin verbalized his assent.

“That too.” Lt. Gonzales confirmed. “And good. So what do you guys say to meeting some of the marines you’ll be working with? They’re at liberty at the moment, I suspect they’re watching vids or playing computer games or something.”

“Hell yes.” Gene agreed.

“What he said. This should be... interesting. Have they been briefed?” Colin asked.

“Not yet. You have better operational details than I do so I was hoping you would do that.”
“Consider it done.”

…

Colin wasn’t sure what he was expecting to see in a rec room for marines. He had no conception for what Psi Corps marines would look like. He had little experience with human marines in general, ironically he’d met more Minbari marines and they were universally warrior caste and extremely severe.

When he walked in they were arrayed in what he could only describe as a cuddle scrum across beanbag chairs and several couches, playing a hastily organized tournament in some first-person shooter game or another.

“Oh god damn it!” one of the young men yelled “I fucking had you!”

“Got out-played, scrublord!” the woman who apparently beat him crowed in triumph, credit chits changed hands between the marines as they settled bets. She looked up and saw the two Psi Cops and her commanding officer, and immediately stood to attention and saluted. It wasn’t the hand to forehead salute that Colin was familiar with, but it was similar. Her back was straight and she had her right index and middle fingers extended to her temple from an elbow at a forty five degree angle.

“Officer on deck!” she called. The rest of them did not follow suit but perked their heads up, paying attention. It seemed to Colin that they didn’t stand on ceremonial respect for rank. She stood at attention as a stand in for the rest of them. Colin couldn’t read the rank insignia, but she had the most chevrons on her sleeve.

“Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen.” Lt. Gonzales greeted them. “Pay attention, we have some guests. These Psi Cops are Dr. Colin Meier and his partner Officer Gene Hendriks. They’re being seconded to us on our current operation. You’re all to treat them as senior warrant officers.” Colin could feel the collective assent. “Dr. Meier will handle the briefing, because it’s his case we’re following up on.” Lt. Gonzales stepped aside for Colin to step forward.

“Hello everyone.” Colin said in salutation. “I suppose I’ll get right to it. We’re going after slavers. An Achilles class freighter using the ironic call-sign Liberty is in transit to the Mentab system where we think they’ll transfer their telepath cargo to some element of the Narn regime or another. Our mission is to interdict that ship, board it, and find out where they’ve been sending our people. Right now they’re carrying forty-eight souls, and they’ve already turned over ninety-six. All of them minors, many of them outright children.”

Colin felt the company’s anger rise before one of them, a younger private who looked like he was relatively fresh out of whatever training program served as boot camp raised his hand.

“Sure, go ahead…”

“Lars Anderson, sir.” He said in a Danish accent. “How’d they get that many?”

“We got kicked off Omega VII during the civil war. A slaver syndicate who had a P10 sociopath working with them moved in and suborned some of the school officials into turning teep kids over to them. They sold these ones to a corrupt emigration assistance firm which bribed customs officials into looking the other way.”

Colin felt the anger in the room reach a fever pitch, but they were disciplined enough to keep it contained.
“So far” he continued “We don’t know what’s been happening to the victims. However, I’d guess they’re being used as sources of genetic material for a Narn project to bring telepathy back to their species. That sort of thing isn’t normally lethal, so hopefully our people are being treated relatively well and aren’t hurt any more than what the people who took them did… Either way, we’re not showing anyone involved any kind of mercy. We obviously can’t afford to leave witnesses so it isn’t like anyone is getting hauled back for trial. Prisoners will only be taken for long enough to scan them, then it’s either a PPG to the head or spacing.”

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“We’ve got them on sensors Captain; Achilles class freighter matching given transponder codes, ironically calling itself the Liberty. Bearing 20, -45, range 100 megameters.” the sensors operator, a Russian lieutenant named Leonid Popov called out to indicate that the ship was 20 degrees to starboard, and below the Fenrir at a 45 degree angle “I don’t think they’ve seen us yet, acceleration is zero, they’re coasting on momentum.”

“Helm, intercept course.” Captain Rhee responded calmly.

Colin and Gene were in hangar bay in full combat gear watching the bridge and external surroundings using the ship’s secondary tactical display. Half a company of marines stood around them watching the same screens as the ship began accelerating forward and down bringing the Fenrir directly in front of the freighter between it and the jump gate. The freighter spun around on its axis and fired its single main engine in a futile attempt to halt its forward momentum and run.

<Why the hell are they running? What’s the point, they can’t even stop before they get to us at two Gs.> one of the marines named Corporal Chad Blevins asked the group.

“This is Captain Seung Rhee of the Fenrir to Achilles Freighter Liberty, halt your engine burn and prepare to be boarded. Any action taken against your cargo will be met with overwhelming lethal force.”

<Buying time?> Gene speculated. <Of course that means…>

“No response, but they’ve sent a signal via Tachyon beam, Narn encryption.” they all heard Lt. Popov call out.

<A distress signal.> Gene finished. <Shit. Unlikely they know the destination then. We have to board whatever comes through that gate.>

“We’re entering weapon’s range.” Came Popov’s voice.

“Forward pulse guns, precision aim, target their engines. Keep your fire away from any sentient minds.” Rhee ordered. Fire control wasn’t centrally located on most Earth Alliance ships. Instead, each gun station was controlled from separate consoles on site to allow splitting fire between different hostiles and to permit gunners to manually target their guns using in-line optical telescopes in the event of emergencies like sensor failure. The gunners took the time to plot an accurate firing solution and then depressed their triggers.

A pair of miniature suns erupted from two of the Fenrir’s pulse guns and traversed the distance between it and the unarmored torch drive of the Liberty at a significant fraction of the speed of light, slamming into it with staggering momentum and thermal energy, ripping apart the unarmored engine cowling and destroying internal mechanisms. The engine stopped firing and the ship
drifted backward through space, only able to use its maneuvering thrusters to eek out tiny amounts of delta v.

“Fenrir actual to Sleipnir.”

“This is Sleipnir actual, come in Commodore.”

“You’re in a better position to board the Liberty, we’ll spin around and guard the gate.” Which Colin realized was true. The Sleipnir was coming in from the other direction and could more easily match the Liberty’s velocity and board her while keeping her guns trained on the gate to support the Fenrir against anything that came through.

“Yes ma’am. Sleipnir out.”

About five minutes later, the Sleipnir began boarding operations. It settled its titanic bulk alongside the much smaller freighter and extended a docking collar to a hatch on the outer hull. Still nothing came through the gate.

“Christ I hate this waiting.” Gene said to Colin “If you’re gonna show up, just fucking show up...” Colin knew that Gene knew that travel time was a thing but was just trying to pass the time. Colin decided to indulge the grousing.

“If they wanted to stay hidden from anyone passing through the system, they’d probably pick a moon to hide behind or something along those lines. Could take them a bit to get here.” Colin replied. The marines were getting twitchy, one of the privates asked to take a piss but was glared down by her lance corporal.

“Yeah I know. I just hate waiting like this. You know what just sunk in for me though?” Gene asked.

“What?” Colin asked. There were a few things it could be.

“We have our own military. It’s small, but it’s ours; no mundanes.” Gene had this soft smile on his face as he basked in that thought that momentarily drove Colin to distraction. He’d never thought of it in those terms before; instead thinking of the fact that they had a secret fleet and logistics support as well as ground troops. He’d been thinking in terms of assets, not what those assets meant: That the Psi Corps was standing on its own feet as a real nation state, even if it was in secret. The moment he comprehended that, his heart swelled with something he’d never felt before. Actual national pride.

“Pretty nice, isn’t it?” Colin asked

“It really is.” Gene agreed.

“Just fuck and get it over with!” Private Anderson suggested. Corporal Blevins smacked him upside the head.

“What, right here? Right now? You wanna watch that bad?” Gene retorted, and that shut him up. First Lieutenant Gonzales snickered for a second inside his mind before striding up to his pet moron and getting in his face about disrespecting Psi Cops, then gave him three nights of fire watch duty. A few minutes later, a message came over the ship’s communications system.

“Sleipnir actual to Fenrir; Liberty is secure, prisoners secured and scanned, telepaths secure in stasis pods and we’ve set scuttling charges. The prisoners were going to transfer our people in Mentab, they don’t know the final destination. Orders?”
“Fenrir actual to Sleipnir. Execute the prisoners, your choice of means, but make it quick and re-secure for action. My Navigator feels something just beyond the jumpgate, probably their contact.”

“Affirmative” a pause “So does mine. Action stations! Prisoners go right out the airlock!” came the reply and evidently his orders to space the prisoners.

“Gardner, max burn perpendicular to the gate, coordinate with the Sleipnir. Most Narn ships have their weapons forward mounted, we can pinch them if we're lucky.”

“Yes ma’am.” answered Gardner’s masculine voice from somewhere in front of Captain Rhee. “Acceleration warning twenty seconds.” The massive ship swung around on its Yaw axis to point itself at a right angle to the gate as everyone in the shuttlebay scrambled to strap themselves into grav couches. Everyone managed, only to be slammed by just shy of four gravities as the ship accelerated and pushed the inertial dampeners.

Forty seconds and thousands of kilometers later Popov made an announcement that sent a wave of telepathic dread throughout the ship. Their maneuver hadn’t put them far enough apart for their separation to matter at that range.

“Jumpgate activated… Narn heavy cruiser, G’Quan class.” Popov informed the Captain and the rest of the crew. On the screen Colin could see the yellow entry vortex of the jumpgate spring into existence between its four massive pylons and the tremendous black and crimson mass of a Narn heavy cruiser despaghetifi as it passed the event horizon and entered into hyperspace.

“This is Captain G’Dal of the Narn Cruiser Na’Garl to Earth vessels, you have intercepted a cargo vessel carrying property of the Narn Regime. We demand that you release the vessel, its crew, and its contents over to us unopened. Failure to do so will result in us opening fire on your ships and may be considered an act of war by the Earth Alliance against the Narn Regime.”

“Captain.” Etsiddy’s voice sounded over the intercom “He’s lying. Their project is secret even from their own government. He can’t let us leave. They haven’t sent out any transmissions.” Colin figured there was no way she could have resolved Captain G’Dal, another telepath actively broadcasting sure, but she could probably get an impression of what the entire ship was thinking.

‘But maybe she can...’ He disagreed with himself. He'd never tried what she was doing in hyperspace. Single Shadow vessels sure, but he'd never tried to separate out that many minds in a confined space.

“Gardner, swing us around and begin acceleration toward the gate. Popov, jam their long-range comms and open up a short-range channel.” Captain Rhee said, and Popov did. The ship lurched as it swung around ninety degrees and started accelerating at the same G forces.

“You’ve got yourself a fight you slaving fucks.” And she cut the communications channel before saying “CIC to CAG, launch fighters.”

“Yes ma’am. Range to target: approximately one light-second.”

“Fire control, missile tubes one and two. Fire.”

A pair of missiles with fusion warheads launched from the Fenrir’s forward tubes, streaking toward the Nu’Garl. The Sleipnir also fired off a pair missiles. Between both Psi Corps ships, a dozen black omega starfuries scrambled and launched, hurtling out from their parent vessels and rapidly catching up with the missiles. The Narn cruiser launched fighters of its own
“Time to target: 4.1 minutes. Fighter time on target: 5.8 minutes if they decelerate.” sang out the voice of a female officer whose name Colin didn't know.

“The Na'Garl has accelerated. We’ve got an energy spike...energy mines. Time on target two minutes.” Popov’s voice rang out from off-screen, which was currently displaying the relative positions of every ship as well as incoming and outgoing missile tracks.

“We really need better missile tech. Main battery, fire!”

Two turrets tracked the Na'Garl, accounting for its acceleration and distance lag before drawing energy from their capacitors and opening fire. Two particle beams invisibly traversed the intervening distance and raked across the hull of the Narn ship, but distance and beam attenuation meant that it did no damage other than vaporize a dual furrow in the cruiser’s armored cowl. The Fenrir herself rocked with the impact of impulse shock.

“Damage report!”+

“One moment. Assessing… Minimal damage to the outer hull, no decompression or system damage...mild injuries reported near impact site. New defense grid did its job ma’am.” an unnamed voice in CIC responded.

“Fantastic! Keep firing as often as capacitors allow Mr. Barker.” Captain Rhee said to the gunner who was controlling the particle beams. He wasn't in the CIC, but was in communication with it.

“I’d tell you if I wasn’t Captain!”

All three ships continued exchanging long range particle beam fire for the next two minutes, neither side able to appreciably damage the other. All their crews could hope for was to take out a sensor or weapon emplacement. Colin and Gene remained huddled in the shuttle bay while a breaching pod was loaded by a robotic system.

<Well, I guess now we know what the plan is…> Gene remarked, as almost four gravities crushed him into the couch and made breathing difficult.


<Could be worse.> Gene mentally cringed <They could be Pak’ma’ra>

<I’m already having trouble keeping breakfast down, love.> Colin thought back.

<That’s why it’d be worse…>

Yet another impulse shock slammed the ship as a particle beam hit the ship and vaporized armor faster than the speed of sound, sending a sonic boom through the Fenrir’s structure.

<Eventually, soon… they’re gonna get close enough to penetrate the hull.> Colin thought.

<We’ll hit them before they can hit us, our effective range is a little better. Fighters will get in just a little bit faster too. Maybe take out their main guns, but they’ll only get one pass unless they decelerate mid trip. One thing going for us.> Gene replied.

<Defense grid dispersing the beam?> Colin asked.

<Yeah. Narn don’t have the technology. Does sweet fuck all against Minbari weapons, but against a Narn or Earth Force particle beam? Works wonders.>
“Incoming ordinance warning: energy mines entering defense grid range in three...two...one!”

The Fenrir’s defense grid, consisting of ten small rapid-fire plasma weapons designed to take out fighters and incoming missiles, projectiles, and bolts, popped out of their armored casemates and fired. Only one had to hit each mine and they were extremely accurate, taking out both energy mines on the first salvo.

“Narn fighters have intercepted our missiles, moving to engage our fighter squadrons.”

“Best of luck to them.” Captain Rhee replied to Popov. “In hyperspace our pilots won’t even need to decelerate to engage.

“Fighters entering missile range…” Popov sounded. Three seconds later, the fighter squadrons erupted in a chorus.

“Target lock, Fox One” A dozen tracks representing anti-fighter missiles appeared on the screen Colin was watching. As they approached their targets, evasive maneuvers on the part of the Narn fighters abruptly stopped and they traveled in a straight line on their last vector. Colin could only imagine what the fighter pilots had done. A starfury was almost as good as being exposed to the void of hyperspace like the Navigators. They didn’t need line of sight that close, they just had to be able to resolve an individual from the background noise, and that close, they could. Maybe not enough for a deep scan, but certainly enough to spark out their nervous systems.

The Narn never even had a chance to fire back. They couldn’t even take evasive action or fire countermeasures. They just died, the markers on the tactical display representing them disappeared and it was as if they no longer existed.

“Captain, this is the Commander Nieves, I’ve talked to the Sleipnir’s CAG. It’s best if we make multiple passes on that cruiser before you come into its range. We’re decelerating, recommend you halt your burn. Sleipnir will do the same.”

“Alright Anna, you must have read my mind, I’d assumed you would be.”

“Har. Har. Very funny Captain.” Commander Anna Nieves replied before ceasing verbal communication on that channel.

“Helm, you heard the CAG, stop acceleration.” she paused to type something into a computer which beeped and spat out a number. “In fact, fire retro thrusters and decelerate at ten Gs. That should give the fighters a minute to work the Narn over.”

“Aye Captain. Decelerating.”

The engines cut off and Colin was able to draw in a deep breath that didn’t make him think his ribs were about to break. Gene was equally happy, as were all the other crew who’d spent the last few minutes in acceleration couches. There had been a time when crews in the Earth Alliance put up with punishing seven or nine Gs for hours at a time aided by flight suits, acceleration couches, and drugs. Now they could accelerate at hundreds of Gs and only endure a tiny fraction of that. Without artificial gravity and inferior inertial dampeners he knew that the lives of the Narn crew were not at all pleasant right then.

<And they deserve every picosecond of it.> Gene sent him. Colin couldn’t disagree. They objectively did.

<Gonna have issues pulling the trigger?> Gene asked.
<Given what they’re complicit in. Absolutely the fuck not. At least not on the sharp end. I might beat myself up over it later.>

<Then we’ll get through it, alright?>

<Yeah. We’ll get through it.> Colin replied. <Gene, before we get in that breaching pod, I love you.> Colin added, and made sure Gene felt it. There was every chance they'd just get blown out of the void in that thing.

<Love you too.> Gene replied and Colin felt that same warmth reflected back at him, quelling his anxiety.

<Speaking of breaching pods…> Lieutenant Gonzales reminded them. Colin let out a chuff of laughter.

<Sorry, we do that sometimes.> Colin replied sheepishly.

<De nada. Combat jitters, happens to everyone. If I had someone I loved here, I’d tell her…> As the young officer said that, the ship jolted harder than before. <We’re approaching effective range. Soon those shots will start doing damage.> Gonzales added and helped them out of the acceleration couches.

“Fighters are in range, making a pass.” the familiar voice of Popov said. “They’ve hit the particle beams, damaged maneuvering thrusters. Hah! They’ve gone under the Narn’s defensive guns!” Which was the biggest problem with Narn cruisers, for the cruiser. They were sheathed in thick armor but that restricted the gun layout, by passing to the sides of the ship a fighter could get out of the arcs of their dual purpose plasma weapons. Those were nasty copies of Centauri designs that could shred fighters and capital ships alike.

The maintenance crew let out a loud audible and telepathic cheer for their pilots and the lack of damage to the fighters that could be p’heard throughout the ship.

“Captain we’re about to enter effective firing range.” Popov said. “Fighter squadrons have hit their main targeting sensors; the Narn will be on emergency manual targeting.”

“Do we have a solution on their weapon arrays?” Captain Rhee asked.

“Not a good one.” Popov replied.

“We’ll just have to rely on the defense grid. Fire control, general attack but don’t destroy the ship.”

“We’re in effective range.” Popov declared.

Outside the ship, particle beams raked across the outer hull of the Narn Cruiser, penetrating the armor and cutting into the crew spaces which decompressed explosively, sending molten metal, solid debris, and the corpses of Narn servicemembers into the void. Some weren’t corpses yet but still alive, flailing against the vacuum of space like puppets that had their strings cut, helplessly trying to suck in air that didn’t exist until the pressure differential drained their blood of oxygen and they lost consciousness.

The Sleipnir managed to work its way behind the G’Quan and it’s forward firing heavy plasma cannon opened up on the Narn cruiser’s engines. Several tonnes of plasma accelerated to a significant fraction of the speed of light slammed into the engine casings and transferred not only heat that melted and vaporized metal and ceramic tile, but penetrated into the engines themselves
through kinetic energy transfer. The engines partially exploded and then went dark, leaving the cruiser adrift with nothing but a reduced number of maneuvering thrusters to control its orientation.

Yet it continued to fight. Both the Fenrir and the Sleipnir got into arc for its forward and rear firing secondary battery, which opened up with a withering fusillade of tiny stars. The Fenrir’s defense grid caught all of it, the Sleipnir was less lucky and took a pair of hits amidships, vaporizing swaths of her composite armor and penetrating into the pressure hull in blinding flashes of white light and explosive decompression.

Then the fighters were back. Pilots dove in with the Narn gunners distracted and not receiving good data from their sensor arrays on threats other than those directly down their gunsights. Aurora class starfuries annihilated the rear guns in a barrage of pulse gun fire. For her part, the Fenrir’s own pulse guns opened fire and raked the Narn gun turrets, destroying their mounts and casting their molecules into the vacuum.

“Commodore, we’ve dropped pressure doors and have damage control teams en route to assess. Preliminary estimate is nine dead, and we’ve lost our port particle beam. Don’t know yet if it’s the power system or the mount.” the Sleipnir’s captain said over the inter-ship comms.

“Do the best you can. We’ll take it from here Sleipnir.” Captain Rhee replied. “CIC to Hangar. Launch breaching pods, go straight to the command and control spaces.”

... The trip in the beaching pod was in completely silence. It was basically a Starfury bolted onto a cargo pod with a soft-seal and a very powerful plasma cutter attached. Most of the occupants, Gene and Colin included, spent it listening to the crew of the Narn ship and getting a feel for their deployment and disposition.

They were desperate. They knew that even if they won, they were drifting in hyperspace and probably dead anyway unless someone happened to notice them, and that was if the warships that had them at their mercy didn’t just finish the job. But they were Narn and would go down fighting; they’d deployed themselves at every junction and choke point in the ship and armed themselves with the heaviest weapons they could, but they didn’t have a large infantry compliment; just the crew and a small contingent of marines against a total of eighty telepath marines; which to Colin's mind left his telepaths with favorable odds of only five to one.

The breaching pod reached its destination and the docking collar attached. After that the plasma torch got to work, slowly burning is way through the outer and inner hull of the cruiser until a small number of breaching charges went off and cleared the resulting hunks of metal from the hole. Then the doors opened. Everyone was flat against the sidewalls as PPG fire started to pour in from Narn who’d redeployed to cover their location. Still in an unshielded breaching pod, Colin didn’t need line of sight. He reached out with his mind and found a Narn, then assumed direct control over his body.

Being inside an alien mind was disconcerting and he didn’t know where everything was, so he let his intent guide him through the Narn’s neural pathways to the part of his brain that handled movement and sight. He saw through the Narn’s eyes and made him turn around on his magnetic boots, spraying his fellow soldiers with his PPG on full auto. He saw the shock and betrayal in their eyes for the first few, realization in the next several of what it was they were dealing with, and finally determination as the last to die tried to shoot back. Colin felt all their mind-screams and that opening-shut sensation as their souls departed their bodies, and shuddered inwardly. When Colin pulled out of his mind, the Narn was left with the knowledge that he’d killed most of his own squad against his will, and stood in dumbstruck terror and guilt for a moment before Lt.
Gonzales shot him in the head.

They fought their way through the ship, using periscopes to peek around corners and disrupt knots of Narn who didn’t know they were there, or simply assaulting when that wasn’t possible, locking the Narn down with their minds and shooting them. If the enemy crew ever got a message out saying they were dealing with telepaths, Colin didn’t know. Either way the air was filled with the acrid odor of burned flesh, ozone, and the moans of the dying; and it was all Colin could do to block the pain and fear from his mind while continuing to work through the ship toward it’s CIC. Gene was having similar trouble. Everyone was.

Even so, as outclassed as the Narn were, they did manage to punch back. One of them threw a plasma grenade. Rather than feel or see anyone else die, Private Anderson threw himself on top of it and curled his body around the little ball. When it went off, the plasma vaporized the front of his body and killed him instantly, but doing that used up most of the thermal energy contained in the small amount of helium plasma and no one else got hurt.

Eventually they reached the ship’s command deck. It took them a few minutes to burn through the bulkhead door, but eventually Corporal Blevins got through it.

Inside, the ship’s command staff had taken cover behind their chairs and had PPGs pointed at the opening. Gene seized control of their minds and held them in place long enough for the marines to swarm inside, disarm, and search them. Then Gene released them. Colin was starting to come down off combat adrenaline, his perceptions returning to normal, but feeling mentally and physically exhausted.

“Platoon Alpha to Platoon Beta, we’ve secured CIC.” Lt Gonzales spoke into his radio.

“Copy that Alpha, we’re about to breach engineering.” Lt. Karen McCleary replied.

"You guys want to take this? Your case," Oscar asked both Colin and Gene. Colin nodded and looked at the Narn commanding officer and spoke to him, doing his best to remain unflappably calm.

“Captain, we’ve taken your ship. You know why we’re here.” he said. The Narn, a male whose age Colin could only guess but likely somewhere in late middle age looked down toward his feet shamefully. Not at what he’d done, but at being so thoroughly defeated. Gene started to translate, but to Colin’s surprise, the captain spoke English.

“You’re Psi Corps. I know. And I also know you can’t leave any of us alive because you shouldn’t have warships.” Captain G’Dal confirmed, doing his best to not look at the floor and look at the people who'd taken his ship with as much dignity as he could.

“Among other reasons, yes. You kidnapped my people. I will know where they were taken, and why.” That’s when Colin hit him with a scan. The alienness of the mind made his stomach churn and he didn’t bother to learn Captain G’Dal’s entire life story, but he got what he was there for. A location in the Sheffer system just this side of the Narn border within the buffer zone created by the Earth-Narn border war of 2219.

The Narn were trying to produce Narn telepaths. They’d been trying to do it ever since the Centauri left the first time, without success, and without kidnapping anyone as far as G’Dal knew. The recent Centauri occupation forced their scientists underground, operating on funding secured through former Ambassador G’Kar’s resistance movement, using less than ethical means. G’Kar didn’t know, which Colin decided was a good thing. He didn’t want to have to kill someone he always thought was decent.
They kept going after the occupation because they were angry that their homeworld had been bombarded with asteroids, and wanted an edge, any edge, to make sure it never happened again. Colin couldn’t blame them for that, after all he’d lived through the trauma of a planetary mock-execution during the Earth-Minbari war, and felt what it did to the entire human population of earth. He also lived under de facto occupation by what he considered to be a foreign power every day of his life. What Colin couldn’t abide were the means.

He knew what he had to do, but really didn’t like it.

<Want me to do it?> Gene asked, wanting to spare Colin the necessity and guilt, but he wasn't vetoing it. They’d vowed together not to become monsters, not to go too far; but this was different from ripping someone’s consciousness to bits or making them forget how to breath out of sheer rage. This was cold, rational, and necessary. They couldn’t afford any leaks. There could be no trial to diffuse responsibility, and simply releasing a ship captain into the world without his ship… that wouldn’t do. There would be questions. The Ka’Ri might hire a Brakiri or Drazi telepath to comb through his mind and that might reveal what had happened. Leaving no survivors was the only way to avoid a war they couldn’t win while still protecting their people.

<No.  I won’t order something done I’m not willing to do myself.>

“I’ll give you and your command staff a moment to make peace within whatever faith you follow. We’ll make it quick.”

“Thank you.” Captain G’Dal replied, picking himself up off the floor to stand up straight before his executioner “I’d prefer a clean death if you don’t mind. I’d rather not die on my knees.”

“I can do that for you.” Colin said, figuring that the dignity might lessen his own guilty conscience a little. Captain G’Dal closed his eyes and prayed for a moment. Colin locked up his mind, throwing barrier upon barrier up so he wouldn’t have to feel that terrible mind scream again.

“Very well Psi Corps. We’re ready. Let’s get this over with.” G’Dal said, mustering up as much courage as he could to set an example for his crew. Colin nodded and motioned for Gene to take the Executive Officer. Gonzales stepped up to the Sensors and Electronic Warfare Officer. The rest of the command crew were assigned in descending rank-order.

Once they were in position, Colin leveled his PPG at the the Narn’s head and pulled the trigger.

He couldn’t feel the mind-scream, just the open-shut sensation as G’Dal died, and so on in sequence until the entire bridge crew was dead.

“This is Beta Team to Alpha Team, main engineering secured.”

“Copy that Beta Team.” Gonzales said, then switched frequencies “Gonzales to Navigator. Any Narn left on this ship?”

After a moment Etsiddy didn’t respond over the radio, but directly in their heads.

<I’m not picking up any Narn minds, you’re all that’s left. Get back to your breaching pods for extraction. Sleipnir will take the Na’Garl under tow back to base for salvage.>

“Copy that.”

...

Sheffer was only an hour away, well-within the Earth Alliance-Narn Regime buffer zone. None of
its planets were habitable; the third planet in the system was earth sized, but the atmosphere was nitrogen with high concentrations of carbon monoxide. Even if someone wanted to terraform it, removing gases was far more difficult than adding it like Earth was doing on Mars. And yet, the Narn had put a hidden and completely environmentally sealed research facility there, carved deep into a mountain to shield it from scanners. The only reason they knew it was there was from Colin’s scan of Captain G’Dal. Colin also knew that it was more or less undefended. A few security guards to control their experimental subjects, but that was about it. Even G’Dal didn’t know the details of what exactly went on there, other than genetic tests. Colin hoped that was all it was and that he’d find every single telepath in good health.

He was also pretty sure that was too much to ask.

“You okay?” Gene asked, gripping his still-bloodstained shoulder as the expropriated Narn shuttle descended, and the pilot entered in the hangar access codes Colin had ripped from the captain’s mind. Colin could tell Gene was worried about something. Not about how Colin was doing necessarily, but about what they were about to go and do. He’d just executed people and it was gnawing at him.

“I don’t know yet. Kinda depends on what we see down there. If everyone’s well-treated…” Colin sighed “We all know what it’s like to live under occupation. We’ve both done some pretty questionable things.” Colin thought of the various creative extrajudicial punishments and psychological torments they’d devised over the past few weeks. It was hard to rationalize sometimes with his concept of justice, but there were unspoken rules. What he and Gene did had to be proportional the crime and thematically appropriate, and the person couldn’t know they were being telepathically manipulated. Cognitive dissonance was a cruelty all its own he wouldn't inflict. Gene nodded like he was agreeing with Colin's train of thought as Colin continued. “I can empathize, even if I know they have to die. If it’s some Mengelian horror...I’ll sleep like a baby after going Full Soviet Union at Auschwitz.”

“People who would do that shouldn’t fucking exist Colin. Hell, one oppressed people enslaving another shouldn’t fucking exist. Just promise me something.”

“Sure.”

“Whatever we see down there… we won’t brutalize ourselves. No matter how much pain and misery has seeped into the walls, no matter how much we want to lash out and make the perpetrators suffer a fate worse than death… we’ll be better than them. We'll abide by our own rules” Gene said, confirming that he had picked up what Colin was thinking. “I have to ask because I think I might be more prone to going that way than you are.”

’Is that true?’ Colin asked himself. ’It isn’t like he’s alone in having to be vetoed, but if he thinks of himself that way who am I to argue?’

He took Gene’s hand from his shoulder and into both of his own hands and looked him in the eyes.

“I promise.” Colin said, then turned to the marines. “That goes for the rest of you. Whatever nightmare is in the base we’re about to assault, we’re probably going to end up killing every Narn inside unless they have their own test subjects. We do it quick and clean. If we have telepath survivors, they’re going to judge the Corps by us, and they’ll be able to feel whatever we do to their captors, they haven’t been trained to block it out. Whatever satisfaction or moral catharsis you might get from it, it’s not worth staining your soul with torture, and it’s not worth traumatizing our own people further.” Colin paused because Gene had something he wanted to add.

“If you start, Colin and I will make you stop. If either one of us start down that path, we expect
you to make us stop. We can’t let it pollute who we are, or let it contaminate our brothers and sisters.”

“The Corps is Mother, The Corps is Father.” everyone said back in agreement.

The shuttle’s descent slowed, then stopped, it moved forward slowly, supported against gravity by maneuvering thrusters until it touched down. When the ramp lowered, everyone reached out with their minds, pinging off the mental imprints of the Narn that were coming to unload their latest batch of experimental subjects. There were a total of a dozen.

They didn’t expect the telepaths to unload themselves, let alone to start shooting. As a result the last one dropped about four seconds after the ramp did, and only because it took someone a little bit of time to get a good firing angle on her. The two Psi Cops and the marine contingent fanned out and found the entrance into the facility proper. No alarms had been sounded, and making entry was as simple as raising a loading gate and walking inside.

The facility looked like any self-sufficient medical lab Colin had ever seen, except for the red tinge to the overhead lighting that mimicked natural light on the Narn homeworld. The external areas had storage for chemicals, food, glassware, and spare parts. What made it special wasn’t anything a mundane could see. Colin walked inside and mentally recoiled as his worst fears were realized or possibly exceeded. Hopelessness and pain were embedded in the walls, suffering hung in the air. Even in the storage areas.

They didn’t meet any actual resistance, just a few lab technicians and maintenance workers who were quickly dispatched by PPG or mind-shredding attack probes. It wasn’t until they approached the interior that an alarm was sounded and anyone armed showed up to resist their penetration into the holding areas and specimen examination rooms, and none of them were much of a threat. Internal security was very lax, and getting into the main area didn’t even require access codes, just keycards taken off bodies.

Entering it, Colin found a central operating theater surrounded by fifty windowless doors, behind which were a twenty four human minds.

‘Where are the rest?’

<Get our people out, remember, they’re probably conditioned for obedience and to resist the Psi Corps, so you’ll have to deconstruct their action blocks.> Colin advised Lt. Gonzales, who agreed and rapidly deployed his troops to systematically search all the doors.

<Gene, what’s that text over the door on the far side?> Colin asked.

<Analysis and Integration. The other is Disposal… > Gene replied.

<If I were a head researcher, I’d be in the Analysis area.> Colin sent, and headed in that direction. He had a feeling what he’d see in the area marked Disposal, and he wanted as little to do with that as possible right then. A scavenged keycard opened the door and they walked inside, PPGs drawn and ready. This was the meat and bones of the lab, Colin realized. Neural imagers, physiological apparatuses, artificial wombs with Narn fetuses in various stages of gestation.

<Jesus.> Gene thought.

<I don’t think he has anything to do with this…but I think I have an idea what they’re doing.>

<What they were doing.> Gene corrected. Past tense.
They heard something crash in a nearby room and opened the door. A number of Narn in their version of lab coats were huddled together in a corner, cowering in fear. Gene said something in Narn and everyone separated themselves from one older individual, a female from the look of her. Colin grabbed hold of the rest of their minds and made their brains forget how to breathe and tell their hearts to beat, then knocked them unconscious to die painlessly.

“Are-are you going to kill me too?” She asked, with somewhat shakey but understandable english.

“Yes.” Colin replied. Then he scanned her. He was getting used to the feeling of Narn minds and was getting a handle on where things were. Her name was Na’Ran, a developmental geneticist. She’d lost her entire family when the Centauri bombarded the Narn homeworld with asteroids plucked from their local belt. During the occupation, she managed to get off-world and was recruited by an element of the Narn resistance to continue their long-standing program of re-introducing telepathy into the Narn population.

Up until then, they’d used ethical if ineffective means. Obtaining tissue samples from consenting telepaths and attempting to incorporate the known genes that controlled telepathy into Narn germ line cells. But it never worked. In her grief and rage she’d discarded ethics entirely. She studied the physiology underlying telepathy in living humans, humans they bought from human traffickers on Omega VII. They even bought some mundanes as controls in the early period. She also used Narn volunteers, willing to sacrifice themselves to give their people a weapon to use against the Centauri. She replicated what human telepathy genes did using Narn physiology and development, and she’d succeeded; successfully gestating a dozen or so Narn telepaths and placing the babies with unknowing adoptive families. They were weak, but they were definitely telepaths.

Colin broke the scan and left her quivering on the floor. He found a computer terminal and typed in her access codes, then popped a data crystal into the drive and downloaded all her research data. Maybe someone, someday, would find the information useful and be able to use it ethically. The scientist in him was actually impressed. The human being in him was horrified and shook with rage. Rage that he suppressed under a blanket of iron will.

“Doctor, you’ve done something amazing. Your methods were a fucking abomination, but what you’ve accomplished in such a short time is nothing short of a miracle. I want you to know that.” he told her as she picked herself up off the floor to stand with some shred of dignity. He felt the open-shut sensation of death as her assistants started to die from respiratory and cardiac failure. One by one. “I’m taking your research notes and data. Maybe someday, someone with a conscience can pick up where you left off, but that’ll be for me to decide.”

<How do you want to handle this?> Gene asked, and Colin could tell he was fighting back the urge to go medieval.

<We give her a choice.> Colin replied.

“You have a choice to make. You’ve committed a crime against sentience, one for which you can never be tried. My government can’t be informed and yours will probably want to give you a medal. So I can shoot you, right here, right now.”

“And the other option?” she asked, starting to weep.

“This lab is being nuked once I get my people out. You can be annihilated in a thermonuclear fireball.”
She looked at her labmates, then back up at the two telepaths. She didn’t hate them, she understood how far she’d fallen; but to her eyes, the end justified the means, and she always factored in the risk that she’d get caught.

“Just shoot me. I’m done,” she finally said.

“Well.” Gene said, he didn’t want to make Colin execute this one too. He didn’t need to say it, or even think it. Colin just knew. “Do you need a minute? To, I don’t know, pray, or something?”

“Just do it. I gave up on that when the Centauri came.” Na’Ran replied. Then Gene executed her before her next thought could fully form. It was too fast for a mind scream, just the now familiar open-shut of her soul departing that sent a shiver up both their spines.

“Thanks.” Colin said, walking up to him an wrapping him in a hug. Colin tried to kiss him on the cheek but Gene dodged toward him and made sure it was on the lips, letting out a tired chuckle in the process.


“Thank God.” Colin agreed letting go of tension he’d held for days.

“I don’t think that bastard had much to do with it…” Gene rejoined, stroking Colin’s back.

“Point taken. That rancid son of a bitch. Can’t even exist so we have someone to blame!” Colin felt Gene look down at Na’Ron’s corpse. At all their corpses. He slipped into Gene’s mind and looked through his eyes.

It was sad, what the Centauri had reduced so many Narn to. Chattel slaves, bodies, and that. She’d watched her family get crushed when a 100 meter wide chondrite smashed into her home city and the shockwave leveled their house. She didn’t stop at merely trying to secure the continuing freedom of the Narn, but let her thirst for revenge consume her, as it did many of her people. Colin worried that, in the end, there would be those within the Corps who’d allow the same thing to happen to them.

And he also knew that the line between justice and revenge was very thin indeed. He’d probably crossed it a few times.

<But it hasn't consumed us yet.> Gene assured him, squeezing just a little bit more than he had a second prior.

“We should probably get back to the others.” Gene finally suggested.

“Yes. No rest for the weary.” He got on his radio. “Meier to Gonzales, everything secure on your end?”

“Yes.” The Lieutenant replied “We found twenty four… and a crematorium.”

“Yes. I know. Na’Ron… ‘euthanized’ her subjects at the end of trials. She’s been executed, along with her research staff. That said, she succeeded.”

“She WHAT?”

“She created Narn telepaths. Nothing above a P3 or P4, but she managed it. About a dozen in total. Foster families don’t know.” Colin said.
“Holy shit. That’s… I don’t know how to feel about that.” Oscar said.

“I don’t either if I’m being honest. How are the kids doing?” Colin didn’t say that they were slated for the crematorium the next day.

“They’ve all been… experimented on. We have them sedated and on amnesics until we can get them to a Mothership and from there to one of our facilities. They’re all gonna to need a good Psychosurgeon I think. Unless you want to do that assessment?” Lt. Gonzales asked.

“No need. I saw what she did to them. No one should have memories that… fucked. I’m suspending my usual reservations about the technique.” Colin replied, also realizing how big a statement that was. Still, watching and feeling someone get vivisected wasn't something anyone needed in their heads.

<What are we going to do about their families?> Gene asked. Colin really didn’t want to think about it but it was his decision.

<Say nothing. Their mundane families can’t help them. Not with this. We can’t keep them physically safe if mundanes know where they are, and we’re likely really fucked if the Alliance knows we can take down a cruiser. No. They’ll wake up in a mothership, no idea how they got there, and while they won’t ever forget their parents… we’ll make sure they have no desire to go back either.> Gene did not like that idea at all.

<...>

<I know. I don’t like it anymore than you do. If you have a better idea, I’m all ears.> Colin told him, practically begging for an alternative.

<...Fuck… I don't have one.> Gene replied.

“Allright Doctor. I’ll meet you back at the shuttle.”

“Yeah. Over and out.”

...

Once their shuttle and the second sent down to evacuate survivors was safely in orbit, a missile streaked through the sky over Sheffer III and headed straight for the hangar doors, punching through the outer-airlock with an armor piercing warhead. It was inside when it’s fuse triggered, setting off the Teller-Ulam configuration device at a yield of sixty million tonnes of trinitrotoluene. The resulting nuclear fireball atomized everything inside the research facility and collapsed the mountainside into the cavity. Not even archaeologists would be able to determine what the facility was or could even be sure it was there other than the fact that something got nuked at the site.

That’s when it started. One of the PFCs whose job it was to help load a box full of ashes retrieved from the crematoria finally lost his emotional control and started to weep. The sound and emotional over-spill made it contagious. One marine after the other burst into tears of anger, grief, and empathic pain. Their lieutenant was powerless to stop himself, and neither were Colin and Gene who lost themselves in the catharsis of collective mourning for the dead brothers and sisters none of them would ever have a chance to know.

...

Getting back to the ship, both men were tired. Their bodies and souls ached and all they wanted to
do was go to sleep. Instead, they got a call over the ship’s intercomm.

“Meier and Hendriks, please report to the Captain’s cabin.”

“What time is it ship time?” Colin asked the void.

“Something like 2100 hours I think.” Gene replied. “What could she possibly want with us after today?”

“Best go find out. The sooner we find out, the sooner we can sleep.” Colin said.

Between the tram and the lift they managed to make it to Captain Rhee’s room inside five minutes and hit the door chime.

“Enter.” and the door opened. She had nice quarters for a warship. Basically a studio with a bed along the back wall, a writing desk, and a small couch with a decent coffee table. Spartan, but elegant. Colin thought it suited her.

“Come on in. I figured I should, I don’t know, congratulate you I guess? Job well done!” She said cheerfully.

“Thank you Captain.” Gene replied, albeit a bit listlessly.

“I know you’re tired and hurting, it’s worth it. I swear.” She sent to both of them.

“Pfft. In private just call me Sueng. Most of the officers do when we’re not around the other crew.” Colin smiled.

“I think we can do that, same for us actually. Just used our first names.” he replied “What were our casualties. I know we lost Lars Anderson.”

“Beta Platoon lost four. The narn fought pretty hard for engineering.”

“I assume funeral services will be held?”

“Yeah. 0800 tomorrow morning.” Sueng pulled a bottle out of somewhere, along with three shot glasses. “Sake?”

“Sure.” Gene replied, for the both of them. Colin nodded in confirmation. She poured the sake.

“To our dead brothers and sisters.” she raised her glass.

“Prost.” Colin said back in German

“Ura” Gene in Russian. Then they drank the rice wine.

“Anyway, we’re all exhausted. I should let you two get some sleep. But before that… a message came through while you were in Hell.” she passed Colin a document, he checked it over.

“Holy shit, that was fast.” Colin remarked, suddenly feeling a hell of a lot better. ‘Strange what a little document can do…’

“What is it?” Gene asked, and Colin handed him the form. “Wow. That was fast. Adoption went through. Zara’s gonna be really happy to hear about this!”

“I thought I’d do you one better. We have to transfer our most precious cargo to a mothership for
transport to” she coughed and locked up to not reveal the actual location “Nearest one is just off the Sol hyperspace beacon. My crew has earned a day or so of R&R, so we’ll be sticking around and there’s absolutely nothing stopping you from visiting your daughter…”

“Sueng, you are an amazing person, you know that, right?” Colin said.

“I know, but it’s nice to be appreciated.” She replied, grinning that wolfish smile of hers.

**Sunday February 22nd, 2263**

The Psi Corps’ landing pad was just outside the vast geodesic dome that was TeepTown. It used to just be fenced in with razor wire but over the decades it had been improved and engineered so as to not occlude the sky, and reached up hundreds of meters, towering over the city. Near the ground though, the massive panels were blurred to protect the privacy of those inside, and to keep them from getting line of sight on the inviolable mundanes of Geneva.

The two Psi Cops stepped out of the shuttle and onto the pad. It was brisk, maybe eighteen degrees Celsius. Omega VII was much warmer at the colony’s latitude. The gate leading into the Metasensory Compound was a mere hundred meters away.

“Been a while since I’ve been home.” Colin remarked. Absorbing the city into him. The Stadtgeist was still the same; melding the frenetic pressure of business and government in a major metropolitan area and clockwork efficiency of the native swiss to the slow and laconic pace of life in Europe. To Colin it was a beautiful study in contrasts. And the air had texture. Pollen. Actual no-shit pollen that had a smell his nose could pick up. And birds. He hadn’t heard Terran birds outside a recording or telepathic projection in over a year. Granted, in Geneva many of them were pigeons and gulls, but that was alright. Even the gravity difference was welcome for it’s hominess.

“Enjoying yourself eh?” Gene asked. Colin glanced over at him and grinned a little bit.

“Yeah. I really am. It’s good to be back, even for just a day.” Colin replied. TeepTown and Geneva was where he grew up. He would always have fond memories of the place.

“Given any thought to what we want to do?” Gene asked.

“Well” Colin replied “It’s more up to Zara than me, but I was thinking a museum crawl, a walk and picnic lunch by the lake, and then dinner before we have to get her back.”

“Little ambitious, but I’m game. I never got a chance to hit the museums here. Think she can handle it? Being out with the mundanes?” That was a very good question. Ultimately the only person who could decide that was Zara, though.

“She’ll be out with us, and if we have to, we can always take her someplace away from them. Even if it’s just in her head. Besides, if she wants to stay in the complex, there’s other stuff to do.” Colin answered after a moment of consideration. The reality was, he really wanted to show her around. It was a beautiful city even if it was populated by mundanes.

“Alright, let’s go. If we don’t get there soon she might think we’re late for our call and get upset and we can’t have that.”

The gate through the walls of the dome was well marked and they covered the distance at a brisk pace. A uniformed Security division officer was there, logging entry and exit IDs, a hispanic guy in what looked to be his middle years with a friendly and non-threatening demeanor, but a PPG at his hip.

“Hello there!” he greeted them as they presented their Identicards and he scanned them. His console beeped. “Huh, you guys are supposed to be on Omega VII, what brings you to Earth?” A short mental conference had Gene selected to respond. It was strange though, two Psi Cops being questioned at the gate. Had it gotten so bad that even they weren’t above suspicion? Maybe Byron shook the Corps more than Colin suspected it might. He was the first Psi Cop to ever actually go rogue of his own volition, after all.

“Off-world mission. Our ship’s taking on supplies, so we have a day before our trip back. Figured we give our daughter a surprise visit.” Colin could feel the officer scanning Gene for truth verification, but everything he said was true. Technically. The answer seemed to mollify him, though Colin could feel his curiosity at ‘our daughter’. He checked his computer and Colin could see from the display that he confirmed both that they were scheduled to be on one of the officially unarmed motherships and they did in fact have an adopted daughter. He still looked puzzled.

“Is there a problem?” Colin asked amiably, masking mild annoyance behind his best professional demeanor.

“Well, no. It’s just that adoption is rare, let alone two guys. I guess I’m just not used to seeing it.” he replied.

“Ah, I suppose I can’t blame you for being confused.” Gene replied. “But may we enter?”

“Yes, yes of course.” and he opened up the gate to let them through. As soon as they broke line of sight, Colin turned his thoughts to Gene.

<They increased entry vetting. Was it like that when you were here last year?>

<No> Gene replied <But then, terrorist attacks picked up only in the latter third. Honestly, I’d question us too.>

<I know, I know. I just don’t like being interrogated coming home to my parents’ house. You know?> Colin replied. <It feels… wrong.>

TeepTown proper was essentially a small college town within a city, the dome cut it off from Geneva in more ways than just being a physical barrier; it was a cultural and mental barrier as well, in addition to the difference in residents. It had its own psionic feel to it, and the architecture was different. Inhabited since before the birth of Christ, Geneva had grown organically, overgrowing its city walls repeatedly over the centuries until those were dispensed with. It’s planning, or lack thereof, and architecture reflected this down to the haphazard street layout and concentric rings of architecture from the late medieval and baroque in the old city to progressively more modern buildings as one traveled outward and forward in time.

It stood in stark contrast to TeepTown, which was a planned community with a grid like organization and rigid zoning complete with room for internal expansion. In TeepTown, the architecture was designed to provoke certain feelings and behaviors depending on the purpose of a building or area. They had to pass through one of many commercial and entertainment districts with cafes and storefronts lining cobbled streets and a mix of architectural styles resembling Geneva itself. In the distance they could see the concrete, steel, and glass of the administrative buildings; the red brick and limestone of the minor and major academies; and the creative concrete
brutalism of the dormitory style single residence areas.

And it was full of almost nothing but telepaths. Not a mundane in sight save for the occasional government or military functionary from EarthDome who had business in the administrative areas. Bustling, happy, and alive among their own people, in a space that was theirs and theirs alone. It was approaching nine in the morning and people were leaving cafes after their morning coffee and heading to work or grabbing a quick bite to eat doing the same. Either walking or taking one of numerous street cars that trundled along the city on maglev tracks.

The early educational and family residence zone they were heading toward was all grass, trees, playgrounds, and placid suburbia; with the cadre houses as its’ physical and psychological center.

“Ah. Hello Mr. Karges.” Colin said upon seeing the massive bronze statue of William Karges that marked the location of the cadre quad. Colin stopped.

<What is it?> Gene asked. Colin always stopped to look at that statue and contemplate it whenever he saw it. Once, Colin had idolized him because he sacrificed his life protecting President Robinson; catalyzing the formation of the Corps and ended half a century of death. As an adult, Karges stood as a symbol of what mundanes wanted telepaths to be. Seen and not heard, useful, willing to sacrifice themselves for mundanes. That was why mundanes had made sure a statue got put there and why telepath children were encouraged to idolize them.

’But then, there's another monument on that same square, now isn't there?’ he though.

<It’s strange how symbols change as you grow up, is all.> Colin said after a moment.

<Ah.> Gene replied in understanding <I might put someone else in his place too. Not sure who, but someone.>

<I know who I’d pick. Sandoval Bey.> Colin said. Sandoval Bey had been the first head of Metapol, and later demoted himself to Geneva Station Chief. He had come into the Corps at sixteen and reached that rank in a time when almost all the top posts within the Corps went to those raised in it. He did that by becoming the platonic form of everything the Corps was supposed to be.

<Not a bad choice, except…>

<Rumors of his treason and subsequent suicide. I know.> Colin thought about those. From what he’d read, he was convicted by Director Johnson, acting on his own, of being a rogue sympathizer, as opposed to throwing his loyalty behind the Earth Alliance. He’d committed suicide to spare the Psi Corps the shame of it, and reading between the lines, to prevent reprisals against other telepaths he cared about <Only treason by mundane reckoning. Caring more for your own people than mundanes is hardly a crime.>

<Or at least it shouldn’t be.> Gene agreed.

That’s when Colin noticed it. The telescope wasn’t in the position that he and Marcel had originally put it in. It was just a little bit different, maybe ten meters away from the original spot. He’d never noticed that before. It was still on the side of the square closest to the cadres, closest to the heart of the Corps. Nearer and dearer to the hearts of telepaths than Karges was, and perfectly interposed between the two. It was a relatively small unassuming thing. Just large enough for two adults to stand in, one of them looking through the eyepiece and another maintaining physical contact with the outside through the door. The meaning was crystal clear to Colin.
'We'll fight invaders from other stars, we'll fight and subvert your impositions, and we'll fight you if you ever come for us again...' he thought. He didn't shield it, he just didn't project it. Gene picked up on it immediately.

"Hmm?" Gene asked verbally.

"Look at the telescope. What do you think that means beyond a monument to an event?" Colin inquired in answer. Gene got it. Colin could feel it as he mulled it over and grasped the core concept of everything about the position.

"Holy shit." was all Gene said for a moment before following up "That's almost brazen, but it's subtle enough and depicts something that EarthGov doesn't acknowledge as happening so what are they going to say exactly?"

"Absolutely nothing. If they even know enough about us to grasp the meaning." Colin replied.

<Alright, which one are we heading to? I don’t actually know my way around this area.> Gene asked, but he wasn't entirely thinking about that. He was eyeing the telescope housing and thinking about what he might do to Colin in there. Colin gave him a look.


"I'm not about to make crazy love to you that in public this close to the cadres, Gene."

"I know... it was just an idle thought is all..." Gene replied, but Colin did use his embarrassment at being caught out to drag him unexpectedly into a deep and passionate kiss. They lost themselves in it for just a moment, but Gene kept their minds distinct. Sometimes one or both of them didn't want to dive fully into the other's mind, but rather to revel in physical sensation and more conventional affection. Colin understood, even if in that moment he wanted a bit more than that; and that was a private thing and they were very public. When they finally let go, Colin answered his original question.

<That one right there.> Colin replied, pointing to a small cluster of houses that sat next door to one cluster of slightly larger houses.

<What’s that bigger one?>

<Cadre Prime proper. There are more kids who manifest before puberty than there’s actually room in Cadre Prime, but they cluster us. There are enough of us that between the breeding program and random chance more kids manifest early than in the old days. Still, we all interact, and it’s mostly the same experience growing up.>

<Mostly?> Gene asked for clarification.

<Eh> Colin replied <Let’s just say there are some things Cadre Prime does because That’s The Way It’s Always Been Done. They have Rites of Passage that get a little odd, from what I’ve been able to gather. Their grins are a little bit harsher, that sort of thing.>

<... Huh. God, it just struck me that I’ve been interrogating you a little bit. I’m sorry.> Gene apologized. Though Colin didn’t think it was necessary and leaned over as they walked to affectionately touch his head to Gene’s shoulder.

<It’s alright. You’re wondering after the childhood of people you love, there’s nothing wrong with that.>
Outside the cadre house, kids were playing outside, self-organizing into games of telepathic hide and seek, or cops and blips, many of them waiting on their own moms and dads to trickle in. Thoughts were leaking everywhere from the boys and girls who hadn’t yet learned how to keep their thoughts private.

As Gene and Colin approached, they noticed and the first instinct of most of them was to think that someone got themselves in Big Trouble, more trouble even than the dreaded grins. But when the Psi Cops seemed happy that mild trepidation turned to awe, then realization as they made connections. Two male Psi Cops, there on a Sunday. There was only one person they could be there for, and she wasn’t in any trouble. They weren’t technically correct, a lot of Psi Cops were men and often paired together, but they’d reached the correct conclusion anyway and Colin could see the collective exclamation mark over their heads in his imagination. But Zara wasn’t outside, she’d be inside waiting on their call. A call that wasn’t coming because they were about twenty meters away.

“Oh no! They found us out!” Gene said in exaggerated tones, making a dramatic show of defeat, clutching imaginary pearls and placing the back of his other hand to his forehead. One of the house parents, not Mike, came over to investigate and saw them.

“Can I help you?” she asked, emoting curiosity and concern.

“Colin Meier, Eugene Hendriks.” Colin said, motioning to himself and Gene respectively. “We’re Zara’s parents, just here to pick her up. Surprise visit, we had a chance to come to Earth and took it.”

“Oh! Won’t she be happy to see you! She’s inside waiting on you to call.”

“We know.” Gene replied, giving her a mischievous grin. She returned that with her own conspiratorial smile and raised her telepathic voice to the kids.

<Okay kids. Zara doesn’t know they’re coming. Pretend like nothing unusual is going on.>

And they did as best they could, not wanting to ruin the surprise for their sister, and went back to constructive play. As they crept inside, Colin could hear Mike chit-chatting with Zara about something through a closed door but couldn’t make out what it was. Both of them were blanketing the area in telepathic static so their approach wouldn’t be detected.

“I know, they’re a little late. But they’re on a different planet and the time-zones get weird.” Mike said on the other side of his office door. Gene opened the door and walked in first.

“Well that and our arms are tired from swimming through hyperspace. It took a few minutes just to catch our breath.”

Zara’s scream of delight wasn’t as high-pitched as Colin expected and she practically teleported into Gene’s chest. Of course, she was nine years old and a bit big to just be carried like that, but Gene was pretty strong and he managed.

“I know, missed you too.” Gene said softly “But it’s not just me who’s here…” which was when Zara noticed Colin was there too coming in just behind Gene and squirmed to be let down only to collide with Colin who’d knelt down to scoop her up into a position that was far easier to support.

“Love you too Zara” was all he had to say when the happy tears started to flow.

It took a few minutes for the individual hugs to transition into a family hug, and from there to a point where Mike felt comfortable interjecting.
“Good to see you both. Wasn’t expecting to see you in person for...well...a while.”

<Give me just a second Zara, need to say hi to Mr. Chastain>

<Do I have to?> She replied but let him disentangle himself. Gene said something to her privately and her reply was a jumble of happy emotions and surprise, but she kept herself from broadcasting the substance. Colin didn’t pry. If it was meant to be private it was private.

“Good to see you too.” Mike put his hand out to be shook and Colin took it, but it really wasn’t sufficient for the person who embodied what the Psi Corps came to be for him so he pulled the older man in for his own hug, which Mike accepted and returned without complaint. The opposite in fact. He drenched Colin’s mind with the affection he’d last felt when he too was a child and what he’d been sending into Zara’s mind. Unconditional warmth.

“All grown up…” Mike said gently, fighting back proud-papa tears.

“Yep. You got older.” Colin replied, fighting back tears of his own, forcing the words out of his throat. Lots of emotions were swarming in his head right then, all the changes in his life in the last few months, the things he’d seen and done, the feeling of coming full circle. He didn’t even realize it would be a thing until it was.

<There’s so much I want to tell you but I just...can’t.> he said to Mike.

<I know. It’s always like that for you kids who have more Responsibility than the rest.> Mike replied, with emphasis on the responsibility <Regret any of it? Was anything for personal reasons rather than the good of the Corps?> he asked.

<No. But there’s some stuff I feel like maybe I should regret.>

<That’s the way of the world kiddo. It’s always like that for us, I wish I could say something different that was true… but the Corps is proud of you. I’m proud of you.>

Somehow, just hearing that snapped Colin out of it. Like it was all he needed to hear. What was it? Validation? Absolution maybe?

<Thanks Mike.> was all he could say. <I...needed to hear that, from you in particular I think.>

<I know. It’s also true. What are parents for? Speaking of which...>

<Yeah, that happened. It’s even official now.> Colin replied. Mike chuckled and released Colin, who turned back to Zara.

“So, how’ve you been the last week?” Colin asked Zara “No trouble or anything like that?”

“No, nothing really. Billy got taken by the grins, but that’s because he cheated at Cops and Blips by tracking us with sparrows he took over.”

“Well that wasn’t very nice of him. Let me guess, he just wanted to win huh?” Colin asked.

“Yes, but he’s still pretty new, I don’t think he really gets the point of the game yet.” Colin found it both adorable and immensely funny that she talked that way, like she wasn’t less than a month into the cadre herself.

“Oh I see. Did it make you mad that he used something you taught him to cheat?” Colin asked

“Kinda? Not about that though. I’d be one thing if everyone playing could do that, or if he’d
asked, but he didn’t. It’s not about showing off or even winning the game at all.” Zara answered. All it had taken was that one little homework assignment for a lot of things to click into place for her. Colin couldn’t help but feel an upwelling of pride. What was really funny to him was that she was talking like she’d been raised in a cadre from birth. Then again, in a sense Zara had been reborn into the Corps, hadn’t she? She knew a lot of things going in, though she didn’t know she knew them.

“And what did you do when he came back?” Gene asked, interjecting just a little.

“We all gave him a hug and forgave him like it never happened. What else would we do?” she asked.

“That’s about the only thing you can do, really.” Colin assured her. “I take it Mr. Chastain gave you the good news on Friday?”

“Duh! Is that why you’re here?” she asked, but then backtracked “Are you okay Dad? I know last week was bad, did it get better?” She didn’t make any verbal distinction, they just knew who she was referring to.

“Yeah. I am now, mostly. I can’t really say much but… well we saved everyone we could save, which was a lot but… not everyone.” Just over half, he recalled bitterly, but didn’t let that show.

“Oh.” she looked down at the floor and then back up again “I know you did everything you could. You wouldn’t be you if you didn’t.” then she walked up and he knelt down again and she wrapped her arms around him and gave him a kiss on cheek, and it was his turn for her to project comforting warmth and affection into his mind, she even caught Gene in it. Colin returned the hug sent and every scrap of parental pride he could right back, so did Gene.

“You know Zara, we have the entire day while our ship takes on supplies.” Gene said after a moment.

“Really?” she asked.

“Yep! So if Mr. Chastain is okay with it” Gene said, knowing Mike would be “We’d like to show you around a bit.”

“You mean around Geneva?” clearly a bit nervous about all the mundanes.

“Sure, if you’re up for it. Or just around TeepTown. Colin had some ideas about museums. You’ll be perfectly safe, it’s not like mundanes are will mess with two uniformed Psi Cops. Besides, we can teach you how to walk like a predator so they instinctively stay away, and you’ll get to practice.”

Colin thought that the sight of Zara doing the predator walk was kinda wrong, delightfully creepy, and adorable all at the same time and fully endorsed this plan in his head.

<It’s something we all learn how to do anyway…Hmm. I’ll clear an external excursion on educational grounds> Mike said telepathically, and typed something into his computer. <You’re clear.>

<Thank you Mike> Colin mentally replied.

Zara thought about it for a second, weighing the options. She’d seen most of TeepTown, and she loved museums. On the other hand, mundanes. She didn’t like being around that many of them. What really sold it was learning how to walk like a predator. She imagined herself as a prowling
jungle cat going for a stroll down an urban street and started to giggle. Colin caught her inner monologue and that mental image and suppressed his own chuckle. She was usually pretty good about keeping her private thoughts inside, so Colin figured she just wanted to keep them inside her decision loop.

“Let’s go then!” she finally said.

“Ausgezeichnet!” Colin said enthusiastically “Now go get your gloves. Can’t leave TeepTown without them.” Most of the time, kids didn’t wear gloves until the minor academy, at least if they didn’t leave TeepTown, which most never did. Zara had her own set and ran off to get them.

“She’s got her own?” Mike asked.

“Yeah. We gave her a pair right before she left.” Gene replied. Mike worked his way through the logic and nodded.

“You two got acquainted?” Colin asked; they’d been exchanging telepathic missives. Mike and Gene gave each other a wink they thought Colin didn’t notice. He did, but pretended he didn’t.

“Yeah we did.” Mike answered “As much as we could in two minutes anyway. Good first impression.”

“Likewise.” Gene added. Colin was almost too curious by then, he felt like they were planning something, but both their minds were locked up tight and he wasn’t about to push. That would be rude.

Zara got back and she’d changed into a solid black dress, her badge, and her gloves.

“Be still my heart, that dress is smashing! It matches the gloves so well!” Gene said, splaying his hand across is chest.

“And I like the contrast. It’s one of the reasons we tend to wear black. It makes sure mundanes can’t help but notice the gloves and badge. It calls attention and marks us out, which you might not think you want sometimes, but it also signals that we’re confident in who we are.” Colin filled in.

“Wait, you’ve started the lesson already haven’t you?” Zara asked.

“Heck yeah kiddo. What, did you think we were going to teach you our secrets in front of mundanes?” Gene asked.

“Now that I think about it...no. If they see it’s an act it won’t work anymore.”

“Right!” Gene confirmed. Mike stepped out and let Colin mentally know there was a brush and hair ties in his desk. He was right, her hair was very fine and a little bit everywhere from static.

In a decent world, she’d be able to go out among mundanes with her hair however the hell she wanted it; but this wasn’t a decent world and ensuring her safety wasn’t just his job as a Psi Cop, but as her dad. He wasn’t relishing having to talk to her about that, but he’d figure out a way to do it that didn’t make her feel bad.

“What you’ve gotta remember Zara is that people are nothing more than smart monkeys, and we still act like monkeys most of the time.” Colin said, then he knelt down and made a show of picking through her hair for nits and pretending to eat them and chittering in her ear; he groomed her like a chimpanzee while she giggled.
“Daaaad, you made a mess of my hair!” Colin affected a wince and a mental apology, which was actually genuine. It was a ruse and he was sorry he had to do it.

“I did didn’t I? Hmm. I think Mr. Chastain keeps a brush and some hair ties in here. Where are they?” He got up and looked around in the wrong drawers until the found the brush and pack of hair ties.

“What do monkeys have to do with anything? I mean, I know we’re smart monkeys. Thumbs and everything.”

“Well, what do monkeys do when they think someone is low on the pecking order?” Gene asked while Colin sat down on a chair and Zara hopped up on his lap to get her hair brushed back into position.

“They pick on the-oh!” Zara got it.

“Exactly. Really, most mundanes tolerate us most of the time, and are only overtly nasty occasionally. A few are great people all the time, Like Steve or our lawyer Ms. Carmichael. But some of them feel weak and powerless, and they want to make themselves feel better by making life miserable for someone else.” Gene confirmed.

“So you have to make them think you’re higher on the pecking order than you are.” Zara concluded.

“You got it little monkey” Colin said. And he liked the way that rolled of his tongue. Zara gave him a look that said ‘not around the other kids’, but she liked it too. “So when you’re out among them, you have to project that confidence. Even if you don’t feel it. Even if you really don’t want to bother. It means being well dressed, keeping your hair and nails in good order. What are you feeling right now? Ponytail?” Her hair was just long enough for it.

“Ponytail’s good…hang on. You messed up my hair on purpose just so you could do my hair!” her accusation wounded him a little bit.

“Guilty.” Colin confessed. “You’re hair is awesome and gorgeous no matter how you want to wear it. Never let anyone tell you different. Heck, if it wasn’t part of a lesson I’d probably still look for an excuse to brush it on principle.” he kissed her on the cheek for emphasis.

“I like having my hair brushed, but I feel like there’s a ‘but’ coming on...”

“Kinda? It’s like, I like the way I look, and have it on good authority that I am a really good-looking man” Gene nodded enthusiastically “But if left to my own devices, I’d be a little smaller. I’m about 80 kilos right now, I’d be at about 67 to 69 kilos if I didn’t have to be at least a little bit bigger for work.”

“Because bigger people are just a little bit scarier and people are less likely to fight you?” Zara asked.

<So that’s why you try to skip leg day…> Gene remarked.

<That and I just hate doing squats.> Colin shot back.

<Yeah… but I like watching you do squats…>

<Only reason I put up with them sweetheart. I like that you like watching me do squats.>
“Yep. That and I’m stronger if I have to get into a fight, strength helps with a lot of things.” Colin replied to Zara verbally. “Hair is the same way. For women and girls though, the most important thing no matter what you do with it is that it’s tidy and it stays where you want it. Ponytails are really low effort, but if you want to go full Princess Leia Buns, you can totally do that.”

“Is that because it shows that we care about how we look and so show that we’re confident and proud of who we are? But, hmm. But I don’t really think that makes much sense, I mean, I get the short hair. Military buzz cuts and stuff, people kinda expect that tough guys have short hair. Oh! I think I get it. It’s more that I’m not sad or in a hurry or stressed out. If I can take the time to do my hair somehow, it means I might not be the easy target they’re looking for.”

“Zara, have either of us told you that you’re really smart lately?” Gene asked. Zara gave him a speculative look.

“I don’t know, I suppose it depends on how you define ‘lately’. It’s been a week, so I’ll say… no.” Gene rolled his eyes and gave her an affectionate sigh.


“Mhmm. But which one? Now that’s the real question…” Zara teased.

“Warum nicht beide?” Colin asked.

“Oui. C’est les deux!” Zara replied. Her French was progressing rapidly. Colin finished brushing her hair out then gathered it up and tied it in place and inspected for loose hair. Nice and clean.

“There we go! Check yourself out. We can always do something else if you don’t like it.” Zara hopped off his lap and checked gave herself a good once over in Mike’s door-hanging mirror.

“It’ll do I suppose. Might need to experiment and see what’s ‘me’. Hey, maybe the other kids will help out. I just never bothered doing anything that wasn’t combed straight before but his works just fine.”

“Sweet. Though now I’m worried we’ve created a fashion-fiend.” Gene said. Zara stuck out her tongue out at him, he returned the gesture. “But now the fun part. Can I be fun-dad?”

“I don’t know, what do you think little monkey?” Colin asked.

"I thought he was already fun-dad?” Zara replied “We voted.” she appended after a brief pause.

“Right. We did vote. Of course Gene, you can be fun-dad.” Technically it was true, they just had.

“Great! I like being fun-dad! So, let’s give Mr. Chastain his office back and head outside. Sidewalks are better for this than an office.”

Zara ran outside without any further consultation.

“Well that was sudden.” Colin remarked. Gene shrugged and followed after, with Colin going along behind. Mike was waiting just outside the door to re-occupy his office.

“Thanks Mike. For… everything. I don’t know how many of us come back and do that.” Colin said on his way out. Gene kept going, and Colin knew it was to give him a bit of privacy.

“More than you think, and you’re welcome. Having a granddaughter come through though, that’s a first.” he grinned. “Now go. I’ll see you again. I know you two will stop by and visit whenever
you can. Oh, and make sure I get a wedding invitation when that happens!”

“I wouldn’t dream of leaving you out. Besides, who else can give the bride away?” Colin said a bit slyly. Mike left out a horse-laugh.

“Being a traditionalist huh?”

“Well no…” Colin replied, grinning ear to ear. “But of course I’m inviting you. And Marcel. Ran into him last week actually.”

“Really? That’s great! How’s he doing?” Mike asked, anxious for news about one of his other kids.

“He’s doing well, English is still accented though. Oh, and we did list him as Zara's godfather if anything should happen to us or in the event of an emergency where we can’t get here in time.” Colin said a bit pointedly, trusting Mike to know what he meant. Mike nodded and tapped his head, but otherwise didn't change conversational tone.

“I’ll keep that in mind. Let him know I said hi, and to stop by sometime. He doesn’t need kids in my cadre to come visit.” Mike replied.

“Alright, will do! Anyway, I have to go or there’s no telling what Gene will do.”

…

When he got outside, most of the kids had gone. Their parents were mostly in the Corps and mostly local, so they could come and take them home or on any number of family excursions. A few got left behind though and were getting the personal attention of one of several house parents. Colin remembered those days, hanging out with Mike or playing with one or two of the other kids. Marcel had been one of them. Under a big oak tree in the center of the cluster, Marcel had just gotten in. He didn’t know anyone, his parents were mundanes and he didn’t have much English, or French, and only a smattering of German. So Colin walked up to him and started talking, translating with little pictograms in his head. Marcel talked back in Polish and did the same. Thick as thieves from eight years old until their early 20s when life and the needs of the Corps sent them to separate places.

And there Gene was, under that same oak tree cuddled up with Zara, pretending to be asleep. The feeling of life being an ouroboros was something he just couldn’t escape. It wasn’t bad, just a very strange sort of… Zukunftsgefühl. He felt like he was in his own future. He decided to embrace the weird and roll with it.

Colin walked up to the both of them and started speaking in Polish, sending translations in image format directly into their heads.

“Wiem, że wy dwaj nie śpicie.” the image he sent was an image of himself addressing them as he was, with a thought bubble of them being wide awake.

“Gah! What the?” Gene pretended to startle awake “Oh. It’s you. You were in there for so long…”

“Yeah.” Zara affected a yawn “Figured we had time for a nap. What was that, Russian?”

“Nope, but close. Polish. Want to get going? We can travel and predator-walk at the same time you know.” Colin answered her.

“Good point.” Gene answered. Colin helped Zara up first, then gave Gene a hand; taking the
opportunity to give him a little peck on the lips.


<Yeah, I am. Lots of memories, almost all of them good. It just feels weird being in this exact place. Same house, same house-father… with my own daughter. After this last week it’s just a bit jarring, the tonal shift.>

<Ah. Okay.> Gene returned the lip-peck and the whole exchange of thoughts was done in less time than it took Zara to notice there was one.

“Okay” Gene said “Give me your best idea of what you think a predator-walk should look like.”

Zara did certainly try. She tried to pull off the look of a stalking cat but it was way too much motion in the hips and shoulders.

“Good try, but remember, you’re not trying to sneak up on prey, but ward off aggressors.” Gene told her.

“Okay, what about this?” Zara asked, and puffed up her chest a little bit and strutted.

“Closer” Gene said “But that’s more alpha male gorilla, and what happens with alpha male gorillas?”

“They get challenged for their harem.” she answered instantly.

“Yep. It’s great if you’re bigger than the other guy, but it’s also a show of insecurity. If you feel the need to do that, it means you’re already insecure.” Gene informed her.

“So what should it be like?” Zara asked.

“Think about a cat who isn’t hunting. A big tiger who feels safe and isn’t hungry. How do they walk? Keep in mind, you only have two legs.” Colin suggested. He preferred the socratic method to simply telling her. If she thought of it herself, she’d retain it and the reasoning far better.

Zara thought about every nature documentary she ever saw and then remembered that walk. She did it. It was the perfect balance between leisurely and fast, completely in control. She walked like she owned that sidewalk.

“Perfection. Now let’s talk about how you can use your facial expressions to modulate that a little.” Gene said, extending the exercise.

“What do you mean?” Zara asked.

“Well…” Gene said “It’s the difference between this” and Gene walked down the sidewalk using the same pace Zara just had toward her and Colin. He was cool, confident, and master of all he surveyed. “And this” Then he stopped and reset his jaw and eyes; using the same gait, he was pissed and likely to rip someone’s soul out.

“Woah! Okay, big difference!” Zara exclaimed.

“Think you can do the first one? Just look at something and think to yourself ‘I own this room. I own you.’ and you should have it down.”

She gave it a go. She walked toward a squirrel that she decided she owned. Colin and Gene both borrowed the animal’s eyes to see her face, and it was dead on. Her eyes were intent but not
hostile, and her jaw was neutral.

“Great work!” Gene encouraged her, and Colin clapped. “Now try the other one.”

They kept their eyes in the rodent and she continued toward it while it gnawed on an acorn. Her eyebrows were pulled in toward the center and her jaw was set a bit forward of its usual position, and she looked mad as hell. The squirrel fled in terror at that point.

“Yes!” Gene shouted.

“Yas!” Colin added.

“Drink the blood of your enemies!” Gene followed up, switching over a heavy metal growler voice. Zara lost it and started laughing.

“Mind if I practice on the way to the gate?” she asked.

“By all means!” Colin confirmed. “Need to get the things we need for a picnic on the way too.”

…

On the way through the commercial district Colin picked up a backpack, a picnic blanket, some sandwiches and fruit, as well as a few sundry things to drink and snack on. Everything got tossed into the backpack. Gene disappeared for a moment and passed something over to Zara, who put whatever it was in her pocket; because of course her dress had pockets, the Corps was not full of savages. Colin concluded that they were definitely planning something though. He was starting to get increasingly curious, but not alarmed. The worst it would be was a harmless prank, which would be hilarious even if it was at his expense. He trusted Gene not to go too far with whatever it was.

They got to the gate and a different Security officer was there, this time a black woman with her hair in very classy and functional cornrows. The little sign on her guardpost window said her name was Larissa King.

“Woah there.” she said, holding up her hand and very much not opening the gate. Everyone handed over their Identicards and Colin was privately thankful that Zara hadn’t forgotten hers. Larissa scanned them all in and made a computer inquiry, then looked over at Gene who at that point had Zara on his shoulders giving her a break from the walk.

“Who cleared this little...excursion?” she asked.

“Michael Chastain, six through ten cadre house” and he gave the address, pulling it from Colin’s memory.

“Okay. Checks out. Have Zara back by eight and keep her with you at all times.” Larissa commanded.

“Of course.” Colin said “We won’t let her out of our sight. We’re Psi Cops. Nothing will touch her and we won’t let our own daughter go rogue, even if she wanted to.”

“Which I don’t!” Zara insisted. Her disgust with the idea broadcasting for everyone in mind-shot. The vehemence of it made Larissa blush a little bit.

“I’m sorry to have offended you young lady.” she said.
“It’s okay. You’re just doing your job and looking out for me.” Zara said, happily forgiving her.

“Alright then. Have fun and be good!” Larissa said, opening the gate and letting them out.

“And now for the glory of mundane public transit…” Gene grumbled.

The maglev street car wasn’t too bad. Designated telepath seeing was at the back, which Gene mentally grumbled about, but at least no one tried to mess with them on the way to the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle. Once there though it was a different story. The thoughts were vile. There were the usual mental accusations of fascism, which both the adults had long ago learned to take in annoyed stride. Worse were the speculations that they’d kidnapped Zara from her family, or about what the monsters in the Corps might be doing to her. Even that, Colin could ignore. Zara on the other hand couldn’t always block it out. So instead of subjecting her to that on a good day, Colin and Gene took turns doing some light jamming, just enough to keep the mental voices broken up so they wouldn’t overpower Zara’s blocks or draw her attention.

The museum itself was magnificent and Zara gravitated toward the biological exhibits; particularly it’s splendid fossil collection.

“So those spikes on the tail are called a thagomizer? I’ve never heard that--really cool sounding--word and I read ALL the dinosaur books when I was little.” Zara said looking at the Stegosaurus skeleton.

“Yeah, it actually comes from a really old funny comic series called The Far Side. It was a joke that paleontologists saw and ran with.” Gene answered.

“I can see why, it just kinda fits. Thagomizer…” she rolled it off the tongue and she was right, it did just fit somehow. No real etymological meaning the sound just sort of worked for the concept.

When they got to the section on human evolution there was a whole series of skulls and other bones. Some were real, some were casts made of some sort of enamel that perfectly captured the original detail for the fossil as far as the naked eye and even touch was concerned. Zara contemplated them, looking at each on in sequence from Australopithecus to the dead end that was Paranthropus, up to the Homo habilis, H. erectus, H. Heidelbergensis, H. neanderthalensis and finally their own species: Homo sapiens sapiens. She read all the plaques and called up information on the accompanying computer terminals and just absorbed it all. She needed help with the French from time to time but insisted on not using the translation.

“So humans interbred with neanderthals… does that mean they existed peacefully but neanderthal just kinda died out from climate change and competition or… the other thing?” Zara eventually asked. Colin decided to leave aside the ‘they’ for the time being.

“We don’t know. There’s evidence either way. No reason it can’t have been both. Just like with people more recently. Even if two groups hate each other and are actively engaged in a genocide, there are those who fall in love and have kids. It was that way with us, in the early days.” he replied. “I don’t see why modern humans and neanderthals would have been different.” She nodded in understanding while Colin spoke, but while she could get the concept, she couldn’t understand how it was possible for that sort of thing to happen.

<It happens sweetpea.> Gene told her telepathically <Sometimes where you’d least expect it. Like in Auschwitz. There was one Nazi. Yes, a Nazi. He fell in love with a Jewish woman who was imprisoned there and risked his life to save her sister.>>
“And they were different species…” she looked over at an exhibit full of preserved squirrels in their staggering variety, then passed her gaze over a large case of beetles, literally hundreds all within a single genus. “What is a species, anyway?”

That was a doozy. Even for Colin. Even for evolutionary biologists.

“That… is a very good question. Nature is weird, it doesn’t like obeying simple rules of thumb. What’s worse is that we only see snapshots of evolution. What I can say is that all members of one species share the same common ancestor, and they’re more closely related to each other than the next closest relative.”

“So, because telepaths started showing up everywhere, we’re not a different species. Huh.” Zara thought about that for a second, and Colin could feel her reaching a conclusion that he really didn’t want her to, but if she asked he wouldn’t lie. He looked around to make sure no mundanes could overhear. Unsurprisingly, most of them had not so much fled the exhibit area they were in as just quietly drifted away.

<Colin, you know where this is going, right?> Gene said to him telepathically, in a range Zara wouldn’t pick up.

<A mile away.> Colin replied.

<What will you tell her?>

<The truth.>

<...>

<She’s gonna pick it up anyway, Byron made sure of that. Even if he didn’t she’s smart enough to piece it together. Hell there have already been papers about it in the last month, as well as a paper from 2117 that the government suppressed, thank God. We just have to deal with it.>

“Mutation is random, right? And telepathy is controlled by lots of different genes.” Zara asked rhetorically and then remembered coin tosses and how each one was independent. It made no sense to her and she wasn’t bothering to shield her thoughts. Then she remembered genetic modification. It had to be extensive for agriculture to work on Omega VII an she'd learned about it from Hoshi. Her eyes went wide when the implication hit. But she had the sense to ask the question in Colin’s head and not with her voice.

<Who made us?> And there it was. The question.

<Come on, there’s a bench over there by the squirrels. We should sit down for this.> Gene told them both and sat down. Zara sat on his lap and he wrapped his arms around her. She was horrified and confused and more than a little bit scared of some of the implications her smart-but-still-a-child mind was cooking up. Colin sat down next to them.

<The Vorlons did.> he answered

<The really old aliens that were blowing up planets that Sheridan kicked out of the galaxy?>

<Yeah. Them.> Gene answered <Colin only told me a couple weeks ago, and only some of us know. All the rogues do, but so far most people write it off as propaganda. So don’t go spreading it around.>
<Yeah, we really don’t want the mundanes getting confirmation of that for as long as possible. I just… I won’t ever lie to you so here we are.> Colin followed up.

<Because of what happened when we met the Centauri and their telepaths?> Zara asked. <Max told me.>

<Yes.> Gene answered <That would be bad.>

<So… why? Why’d they do it? Are we even really humans?> Zara asked. That last part she said while looking over at the hominid skulls. She wasn’t bothering to mask her unease. What was she? Was she artificial? Did she merely ape at being human while appropriating their culture? Was she some kind of...Cylon? Colin wondered when she'd seen Battlestar Galactica.

<Of course we are little monkey. The Vorlons aren’t so good at bioengineering that they could make fake people like that and have them able to interbreed with mundanes or even pass as mundanes for centuries. They abducted a bunch of people and modified their DNA so they’d pass on telepathy genes to their kids and spread them in the population for a while before any telepaths ever actually showed up.> Colin replied in answer.

<Oh.> She breathed a sigh of relief but was still really queasy about the whole prospect. <But still…why?>

<They had a surprisingly good reason but…there’s stuff I want to tell you but really really shouldn’t.> Colin said.

<What, am I too young or something? My birth parents said that all the time.> Zara didn’t say that like it was a bad thing, just a fact of life, saying she understood if that were the case.

<No, nothing like that.> Gene said <We don’t believe any topic is… too mature for a kid if put the right way. It’s just that there are some things that people will literally kill to keep secret.>

<Gotcha! Okay! Don’t wanna know! I want to keep my head where it is thankyouverymuch.>

<Good.> Gene kissed the top of her head. <Love you.>

<Love you too, Dad.>

<So> Colin said. <I think we’ve pretty much hit everything here. Unless you want to go back through I could go for lunch.>

<Lunch sounds good. Street car over to the park by the lake?> Zara asked, and she had a mental image of taking the seagulls for a test drive.

<Sure. I’m starving.> Gene replied.

…

The mundanes in the botanical garden were keeping what Colin would consider a polite distance, which meant they found excuses to be slightly elsewhere. If they hadn’t been in Metapol uniforms and openly armed it might have been slightly different, predator walk or no. Was it Colin’s imagination or were people even in Geneva more hostile than they had been in years past? They were used to telepaths in this city, the telepath capitol of the Earth Alliance was visible to everyone who bothered to look. He had a hard time believing that things had changed that much.

“You know, there’s a history of science museum in this park.” Colin said as they strolled through
the botanical garden.

“Dad, I think I’ve questioned the origin of my existence enough for one day.” Zara said completely seriously. Gene broke out into laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Zara asked. Colin couldn’t help himself, he started laughing too.

“What?” Zara asked again, almost mad, feeling like she was being laughed at. Colin nipped that in the bud, but he couldn’t actually talk.

<We’re not laughing at you.> Colin told her

<We’re laughing at the absurdity of the universe. You just triggered it.> Gene followed up.

“I… I don’t get it.” Zara replied, now very confused.

<Just give us a second.> Colin said, still unable to contain himself

“It’s been a second. And another.” she started counting off seconds. The problem was, that just made it worse. It took a minute, Zara counted, for them to get themselves under control.

“Sorry if that upset you little monkey.” Colin told her. He gave her a hug by way of apology “It’s just that most people don’t encounter anything that makes them… worry about being artificial. Ever.”

“Yeah.” Gene added as a follow up, wiping tears that had nothing to do with sadness out of his eyes “And when they do, it’s because they start reading weird French philosophy like I did, not because they went to a natural history museum.”

“Ooooh” She said, kind of understanding the direction, but not really getting it. “This is one of those adult things that I’ll remember later and only then find funny, isn’t it?”

“Afraid so.” Gene confirmed, nodding. She sighed.

“So, how about finding a spot?” Colin suggested “Do we want waterfront?”

“I know I do!” Zara agreed with vigor. She had something in mind.

“Yeah, I’m cool by the lake. The breeze should be nice.” The temperature had risen to a pleasant 19 degrees, but it was sunny and that was only ambient temperature. Wearing black, it was surprisingly warm and Gene in particularly was getting a bit sweaty.

The only unfortunate part was that there wasn’t an actual beach. The waterfront had been paved with a pedestrian sidewalk and an erosion barrier put in place ages ago, but just back from that were some nice grassy spots. Colin laid out the picnic blanket and set the sandwiches out while Gene got the drinks ready; a supplemented lemonade full of B vitamins, vitamin K, choline, and omega-3 fatty acids. Zara cut the apples Colin picked up into little wedges.

Colin tried the lemonade “Not bad. Not bad. It’s not what I grew up with and it’s definitely pretending to be lemon, but it’s not bad.”

“I’ve never had actual lemonade.” Zara said, sipping the concoction happily between bites of turkey and swiss on rye. “Loaded with way too much sugar. Mr. Chastain grumbles about the ‘newfangled nutritional guidelines’ sometimes.”

“He does seem like the type to grumble.” Gene remarked with a mouthful of roast beef and
cheddar. “I was raised on the real stuff but then, mundanes.”

“Oh he definitely is.” Colin confirmed. “But he is right. Too much sugar to drink regularly, but as an occasional treat? It’s a bit like cake that way. Hmmm. Tell you what, next time we’re here we’ll make some actual lemonade. There are houses we can rent for days just like today.”

“Why didn’t you do that this time?” Zara asked.

“We didn’t know we’d be here until friday. Not enough advance notice.” Gene answered with his mouth still full.

“Oh that makes sense. There’s probably a waiting list.” Zara realized. A few minutes later, after the food had been thoroughly devoured amid trivial chit chat and bird watching Zara yawned.

“Tired?” Colin asked.

“Warning: Food-coma inbound.” Gene said “For both of us I’m afraid.

“Gotcha. Well… there’s a nice oak tree over there if you two want to curl up and take a nap. I’ll watch over our stuff”. Colin knew Gene caught the subtext that he’d also keep an eye out for mundanes who might want to mess with sleeping teeps.

“That sounds like a great idea.” Zara agreed, feeling so safe she didn’t think about the potential for trouble. So they cleaned up their lunch and Colin sat back against the tree, offering himself as a guardian pillow. Gene took him up on it and sat back on Colin’s chest. Zara in her turn climbed into Gene’s lap and spread the freshly shaken off picnic blanket over herself. Colin put his arms around both of them and they were asleep in short order.

He looked around. It really was a beautiful day. The heat island of Geneva itself also meant that it was warm enough for many of the birds of prey that would otherwise be migratory to stick around through the year. He didn’t see any of them, but there were plenty of gulls. Colin got curious. He’d never actually seen through the eyes of a bird before. He reached out with his mind and borrowed the eyes of a common gull.

What he saw was so different from what he normally perceived it was like being on LSD. Colors were sharper than he’d ever perceived them, and he realized from the deep iridescent purple that he was seeing in the ultraviolet, and his brain was interpreting it the only way it could. He didn’t take direct control over the bird; for one thing he had no idea how to fly, but what he could do was manipulate the animals’ will and volition ever so subtly. Suggesting that it go this way, or that way. He asked it to land near their tree and it did. He informed the bird that there might be some bread crusts on the ground waiting for it, because there were. Gene didn’t like the crusts apparently. It hopped over and he took the opportunity to look at his little family napping under that tree. He held them just a little bit tighter and saw himself doing it.

‘Is that what contentment, even happiness look like?’ he asked himself, and realized he’d answered his own question.

He didn’t really have time to contemplate it further than that because of how alert a seagull was. It never stopped looking around, and made an excellent sentry. Up, down, left, right, always on the lookout for predators and competitors, even when it was in the middle of swallowing a piece of bread. It was that avian paranoia that alerted him to possible danger when the gull saw a group of someones approaching and flew off.

Colin pulled out of its mind and waited. Whoever they were they hadn’t come into his line of sight
yet. He looked at his comm unit, he’d been playing around inside that bird for half an hour. If he had to wake them up, he wouldn’t feel too bad. Hopefully though, he wouldn’t have to until they got at least one REM cycle in.

Five people rounded a bend and came into view. Swiss teenagers, all white and of mixed gender, with a similar but much spikier taste in clothes to the Psi Corps, smoking cigarettes. He never really kept track of what the various fashions meant. Punks? Goths? Then he saw the messenger bags with anarchy symbols, red and black flags, along with the odd hammer and sickle; those he understood. Anarcho-communists.

“Well look what we have here. Two little fascists under a tree.” the lead one said in French, they hadn’t seen Zara under the picnic blanket. The others stopped to look and they were definitely considering bashing the fash; which Colin found infuriatingly ironic.

What he wanted to do was lash out. Verbally, physically, telepathically, he didn’t much care. If they just didn’t like telepaths, fine. He could handle that, he’d handled it every day since he first ventured out of TeepTown as a teenager. He could even understand a newly manifested telepath like Daniel expecting some jack-booted thug and being afraid. But idiot teenagers willing to physically assault them because of the uniform they wore? The uniform that earlier in the day may have been all that was shielding them from attack, but now might cause it? Not on his day off with his family. Not after he and Gene had crawled through the worst kind of filth imaginable while wearing a legal straightjacket that denied them and his people legitimized justice. That was too much.

But the little voice in the back of his head stopped him from making them regret being born. 'They're young, they don't know any better, their hearts are in the right place because they hate fascists. Zara shouldn't have to see or p'see that. I made that promise to Gene and myself. I won't prove the mundanes right.'

Colin suspended his rage and refused to act on it, deciding to try and diffuse things peacefully. He very gently kept both Gene and Zara asleep. He didn’t want Zara to wake up surrounded by scary and hostile mundanes, and Gene would certainly go into full defense mode. He could wake them up instantly if he had to, but it was best to keep them asleep unless things escalated.

“More like syndicalist Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, really.” Colin said in French, in a friendly tone. They hadn’t expected a friendly response, let alone what he actually said, and were visibly confused.

“Are you fucking with us?” the lead one asked, trying to resolve the dissonance caused by the violation of expectations.

“No. I just find it ironic that you’d call someone forced to wear the next best thing to a Star of David and subjected to the Nuremberg Laws a fascist. Seriously, have you ever actually talked to a telepath who’s in the Corps?”

Internally, the cognitive dissonance resolved in one of two ways, either they were angry about being called out like that, or they were concerned that they’d been unjust. It wasn’t quite split down the middle, the horrified ones won out with a slim majority. When the one up front who fell into the angry camp looked like was about to leap forward to punch the supposed fascist in the face, the young women behind him grabbed onto his arm, stopping him in his tracks.

“No. I don’t mind giving fascists what they deserve, but we have to know if we’re dealing with one, and if what he just said is true, I’m not contributing to that.”
“Neither will I,” another young woman said.

“Me either.” said one of the young men. “We’ll fight you if we have to.” That made Colin smile inside, though he didn’t show it on his face. Instead he leaned down and kissed the top of Gene’s sleeping head.

An argument ensued and was two against three. To avoid fighting among themselves, they agreed to talk to the supposed fascist to make sure he was a fascist. That he might lie occurred to them, but they figured they would know one by his works.

After a few moments, the three who were most in favor of actually talking walked over and sat down, just inside the shade of the tree, about three meter away. The other two stood back and did their best to look surly.

“Did you mean what you said? About being more like Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto?” the first young woman asked.

“First, what’s your name?” Colin asked, again being soft-spoken.

“Marie. And you?”

“Dr. Meier. Pleasure to meet you.” he was an adult, they were teenagers, but he used his academic title rather than his rank, figuring they’d respect that. “But yes, I absolutely did. Before I continue, I have to make something clear: The Psi Corps Charter, which was written by the senate without our input, prohibits me from discussing politics. I’m not going to do that, just explain the bare facts and let you draw your own conclusions.”

“I can work with that.” Marie said, and what he meant by that was not lost on her either. Marie turned to the others “Can you?” They all nodded, even the ones in the back.

“Okay. So here’s what I want you to do. Take out your comm units and look up the Crawford-Tokash act, there should be a summary somewhere. Also the Psi Corps Charter.” Colin suggested. He’d be damned if he didn’t go full Socrates.

To his surprise they actually did it. They sat there and read for a minute, absorbing the black letter law that governed his life that no one had ever suggested they read before.

“That’s bullshit!” the fighty one in the back said angrily, but to Colin’s surprise actually kept it to something like a stage shout out of respect for the ones who were sleeping. By then they’d all noticed the small lump of a sleeping child. The others nodded or expressed agreement with solidarity fists.

“I can’t comment.” Colin said ruefully, in a tone of voice that plainly indicated that he just had.

“But what about all the terrible things the Corps does?” the fighty one asked. He was still angry, but he was at least willing to hear Colin out.

“Your name? You can use a fake one if you want.” Colin asked politely.

“Claude.”

“Well Claude… it gets complicated. I am a Psi Cop, we both are.” he motioned to Gene. “Our first job is to protect our people, both as individuals, and as a collective. That means I have to enforce those laws you just read, or… EarthGov might decide to disband the Corps.”
“Would that be so bad?” Claude asked. Colin shuddered at the thought.

“Yes. Because that would likely involve an ethnic cleansing, it’s doubtful they would keep most of us alive. Before the founding of the Corps, normals killed millions of my people.”

“...Oh.” Claude replied, feeling like an idiot, he knew enough history to recall hearing about the number of dead telepaths in the pre-Corps years.

“More than that, the Psi Corps is our home. When we say the Corps is Mother the Corps is Father, it isn’t some culty indoctrination thing. It’s literally true because we raise our children communally. Why would we want to abolish everything we’ve ever known and loved?”

“But you still end up taking children from their parents.” Marie stated.

“Yes and no. There are two options when a child manifests. Join the Corps or go on the Sleepers. I will break the law to tell you this: sleepers are a fucking abomination. Suicide risk for the people taking them is one to two percent annually.” Marie crossed herself, communist or not, she was still a Swiss catholic. Looking around, they were all wearing crucifixes.

That explained the lack of hatred for telepaths at least, because there hadn’t been a single anti-telepath thought. Anarcho-communists full of liberation theology, like Christ intended. Colin was privately glad he didn’t hurt them. They were precious. The rest of them also expressed shock and outrage in their own quiet ways. When they wanted to be, they could be very polite.

“The other option…” Colin shrugged a little “We try to maintain relationships with normal families but more often than not, it just doesn’t work out. Parents stop showing up to visit after a while. We’ll even cover travel expenses if necessary and there are holiday breaks and a few weeks in summer where kids are welcome to go and see their birth families. It just...doesn’t usually happen. But I bet you if asked where little Timmy is at Christmas dinner, his parents say that we stole him away.”

“What about telepath families, do you still give up your kids?” Marie asked earnestly.

“Yeah. We do. Though as you can see, not completely. We’re much better about maintaining our family ties. We raise our children communally. In practice, the Psi Corps very similar to a kibbutz in Israel, which is why I referred to us as Syndicalists before.”

Colin talked to them for a few more minutes, exchanging questions and answers about as much as he could get away with, educating the youths of Geneva about how the Psi Corps operated internally. How telepaths self-governed by consensus where they could get away with and shared resources. It wasn’t his job, but he figured if it meant one of them might stand up to someone harassing a commercial telepath on a train, it was worth it.

“I think I can see how this works.” Claude said. “They” he checked himself “We put you under a system of oppression then made you enforce it against yourselves. So then you get blamed, even though you’re just trying survive having a gun to your heads.”

“I can’t say it.” Colin replied. They all took that as confirmation, because it was in an ass-covering sort of way.

“I’m really sorry.” Claude said. “For wanting to beat you up, and... for all that.”

“So am I” the other formerly aggressive one agreed, his name was apparently Jean-Luc.

“It’s alright. I can’t blame you for wanting to beat up fascists. I’m just glad you were willing to
talk things through.” He didn’t mention he could have and almost did kill them all without getting up. That would break the rapport.

“Anything you need us to do? I think we’d all like to help somehow, but we’re not going to assume what help it is you need, if any.” Marie offered. Colin thought it was sweet.

“Honestly, just be decent to telepaths. My rating and vocation afford me immense privilege. I’m allowed to use my abilities in self-defense. Most other telepaths aren’t; they’re not really trained for it and they won’t risk scandalizing the Corps even if they were. So if you see someone on a bus being harassed or being attacked on the street, help. You know how to do that right?” It could involve non-violent forms of assistance, but with these kids, Colin knew it very well might involve brass knuckles and he was perfectly fine with that.

“Yeah, we do. It’s… been an unexpected pleasure talking to you Dr. Meier, but we have a thing to get to.” Claude said. Colin could tell that this batch would tell their friends about the conversation they’d just had and would keep his identity private. Nice kids.

“I understand, and likewise, it’s been an unexpected pleasure. Have fun and stay safe.” Colin replied, and let go of both Gene and Zara’s minds to let them wake up when they were ready. They’d been asleep about an hour by then and were starting to naturally stir. Gene woke up first with a yawn.

“Sleep well?” Colin asked, it was a ruse, Gene turned his head and Colin pinned it there and kissed him, parting his lips and letting their tongues collide.

“Gross.” Zara said flatly when she woke up, causing them to break their kiss, but she just made a silly face.

“I slept very well thank you.” Gene finally replied.

“Why are there cigarette butts everywhere?” Zara asked.

“Some anarcho-communist teenagers stopped by while you napped.” Colin informed her. She looked at him both concerned and curious. “They were friendly, it’s okay.”

“What are anarcho-communists?” Zara asked, pronouncing the term slowly and carefully.

“They’re people who believe that the state is oppressive and we should get rid of it. They also believe that the working people should seize the means of economic production and distribute its goods and services in a more equitable fashion than capitalism does, and use increased automation to liberate the worker from needing to earn a living and let them instead spend their time pursuing their personal dreams and goals.” Colin replied.

<What happened?> Gene asked.

<They thought Psi Cops are fascists at first and wanted to beat us up. I talked them down and persuaded them of the truth: we’re an oppressed people just trying to get by. We are now allies in class struggle. They’ll tell their friends.>

<You...you make the strangest friends.>

<Oh my god, Gene, they were so earnest it was adorable. All full of life and liberation theology.>

“That… doesn’t sound so bad.” Zara remarked.
“It isn’t as ideals go. It isn’t practical, but their hearts are in the right place” Gene replied. “They tend to be all about helping the oppressed, and that means us too.”

“Yep. Generally, communists are decent people. Same with the catholic church actually. If you’re ever in trouble if you can get to a catholic church the priest will do what they can to protect you.

<The RCC has really come a long way in the past couple centuries…> Gene remarked to Colin.

<Tell me about it. Two hundred and fifty years ago, I’d be telling her not to go anywhere alone with a priest.>

Zara thought that over. She’d done well today, she realized. She even managed to sleep outside with mundanes nearby, and she felt ridiculously proud of herself. Now she had somewhere she could go if she ever got caught in a bad situation and Zara was happy about that too.

“Thanks dad. Both of you.” and she walked up and gave them both a kiss on the cheek where they sat, and caught them in a hug.

“Our pleasure.” Gene said, hugging her back. Colin could only really reach with the one arm.

“Oh, Zara, I tried something while you were sleeping and I think you might be able to pull it off.” Colin said.

“Oh? And what’s that?” She asked.

“I flew a seagull.” Colin told her, completely deadpan.

“What? No way! But… even if I could take that kind of control, I don’t know how to fly, I’d crash it.” Zara protested.

“You don’t have to take over. Just… suggest. Nudge it a bit and convince it that it wants to go where you want.”

“Hmm.” she considered for a minute. “Okay, that’s something I think I can do.”

“Awesome! Okay, so find a bird you like.” Colin told her. She looked around until she found one.

“I think I wanna fly a Kite…” Gene started chuckling immediately, Colin took a second and groaned.

“You take after your dad…” he said.

“Funny. That’s what dad said.” Zara riposted. Colin just didn’t have a good response to that, and Zara claimed victory “Oh yeah! Beat dad at his own bad jokes!”


“This one’s female.” Zara said “Woah. I’ve never seen through the eyes of a raptor before. This is WAY cool! Dad, look at this, she has a zoom lens!”

Both of them did.

“Holy crap!” Gene exclaimed “Is this iridescent purple normal?”

“Pretty much all birds I’ve ever looked through, yeah. They see in the ultraviolet” Zara said “Neat huh?”
“It really is, and it’s panoramic too!” Gene was terribly excited. Colin got to sit back and be smug.

“Try to get her to take off.” Colin suggested.

“How?” She asked.

“Expand your awareness of the bird’s mind, beyond its vision to its subjective perception.” He used his mind to guide her where she needed to go. “Here it is, the nidopallium caudolaterale. That’s the name for where you are right now. It’s basically our prefrontal cortex, where executive function lives.”

“Oh, I’ve got it.” and she did, she was there.

“Now you’re in its decision loop. You can start interfering. Very gently, not a command just a suggestion basically, tell it to take off into the air. Its brain will do all the work.”

It took a couple tries, but she got the Kite to take off into the air and soar over the lake.

“Think you’ve got it?” Colin asked. Zara speculatively asked the Kite to wheel right then left. It did both times.

“Yeah. I’ve got it. Oooo! There’s a mouse down there. She’s seen it but hasn't noticed.” she politely drew the Kite’s attention to the field mouse and all three telepaths observed as the raptor went in for the kill.

They got Zara inside the gate at 7:55 and walked her back to the cadre house.

“So, you have a good time?” Gene asked, holding Zara up on his shoulders.

“I did!” Zara replied happily then got a little sad “I just wish you didn’t have to go.”

“I know sweety, and I wish we could stay too, but we’ll be back.” Gene replied.

“Promise?”

“We promise.” Gene affirmed.

“Of course we do little monkey. We’ll move heaven and earth to see you as often as we can.” Colin told her, and he would. He didn't care if he had to do it literally by finding a way into heaven to kill God.

<Did Omega VII ever have its own center? It’s big enough.> Gene asked.

<It did, yeah, but we evacuated and the properties got confiscated and resold. We might be able to eminent domain them back or build something new though. We could spin it politically through a PR firm to make it easier for kids to spend time with their mundane families, even if that isn’t what usually happens…> Colin suggested in reply.

<We should see about doing that. Most cadres get reshuffled anyway, so if we can get that done by next year…>

<It’d be a seamless transition. I’d prefer earlier, but yeah. Still need to talk to admin to talk to the local government about increasing security, or to pressure them from below. It’ll be a hard sell.> Colin said.
<Will someone please think of The Children™!> Gene replied, complete with a glyph of the trademark symbol.

<Might work? Still, best not to get her hopes up. I never want to make a promise to her I can’t deliver.> Colin cautioned.

“But I thought most telekinetics were insane?” Zara asked with a goofy grin.

“They often are but not--” Colin started then groaned. Zara cackled at his suffering.

“You’re evil.” he said affectionately.

“I know!” She replied, doing her best 'I’m about to cackle in the thunderstorm' face.

...

It was well past civil twilight by the time they got to Zara’s cadre house, and parents were starting to trickle in with their kids. The whole area was well illuminated with street and porch lights, and crickets were starting to chirp.

“Well this is our stop.” Colin said regretfully.

“You could come inside you know.” Zara suggested.

“We could, but then we’d want to stay and then we’d never actually leave, and we’d end up AWOL from being Psi Cops and a bunch of people would think we’d gone rogue and go searching for us and it would a big waste of time for everyone because we’d be in TeepTown the whole time…” Gene painted a picture.

“Yeah, I know Dad.” Zara replied, more than a little sad, but trying not to show it. If there was one thing Colin knew for certain it was that a stolen day here and there wouldn’t be enough; and if it wasn’t enough for them, it certainly wasn’t fair to every other telepath living on his planet or who would manifest their abilities there. He would just have to see if administration on Omega VII could grow an institutional spine. Francois he thought, might actually be able to do it given the proper inducement.

“You know, there is one thing we need to do before we go Zara.” Gene said with a huge but strangely nervous grin. His thoughts were also locked down tight. Zara’s were too, but she winked in a conspiratorial fashion and bolted for the porch all of five meters away. The movement caught Colin’s attention and when he turned back around to see what Gene was up to, he’d...taken a knee in the grass and was holding a little box with a pair of simple silver rings nestled within it.

“Oh God!” was what he said while one part of his brain peeled with excitement. Another part of his brain realized he should have seen this coming a mile away.

“Colin, you’ve been my conscience, and I’ve been yours; we’ve already walked through hell together and come back out, and we’ll probably do it again. I love you and Zara with everything I am and want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?”

Colin knew the substance of his answer was ‘yes’, but he really wanted to reply with something other than that. He really wished he’d practiced something in front of a mirror because Gene clearly had.

“Gene, I can’t imagine an existence without you and Zara in it anymore. Of course I will.” Gene stood up, took his hand, and solemnly put one of the rings over Colin’s gloved left ring finger. The
other one he handed to Colin who slipped it onto Gene’s ring finger. Their lips met immediately after and for a moment they lost themselves in it, barely aware of a cacophony of cheering kids outside as their minds started to mingle.

Until a nine year old girl named Zara collided with them and they both felt it in stereo. That broke them out of it and almost knocked them over. Colin was so happy he couldn’t even be annoyed. He knelt down and scooped Zara up and it was his turn to carry her on his shoulders. By then, the other kids were all inside. Colin figured Mike must have shepherded them inside to give them a little bit of extra space.

“So this is what you’ve been planning all day?” he asked.

“Yep! You noticed huh?” she asked.

“Of course I did, I’m a Psi Cop, it’s my job to notice everything. I just didn’t pry into what it might be. What was your role in all this?” Colin asked, looking up at her on her perch.

“It was my job to fly the photo drone.” Zara pointed to a little quadcopter hovering a few meters away.

“And I bet you did a great job.” Gene encouraged. “Love you Zara, you’re the best daughter some schmuck like me could ever hope for.”

“Love you too, but why would you call yourself that? Max told me what that means.” That confused Gene.

“What are you talking about? Does it mean something different in Yiddish or something?” he asked. Zara looked at him with a scandalized expression.

“I don’t wanna say it, it’s mean and gross…” she said.

Colin was barely keeping the laughter contained when Gene looked to him for help, but he managed to shift into a high-band frequency so the other kids couldn’t pick up his mental voice.

<It’s literally an obscene word for penis, but it’s also used as an insult for idiot, but the connotations are worse in Yiddish than in English. For us it just means an idiot. In Yiddish it’s someone who’s utterly detestable. A better word might be klutz.>

“Well, now I know what happens when a word gets borrowed from another language without its meaning being understood.” Gene said. “But you’re right, I shouldn’t call myself that. Amended: klutz like me.”

“That’s better!” Zara agreed and sent both of them a little telepathic kiss on the cheek. Somehow, she knew Colin had helped.

“He is right though.” Colin said as a segway, hoisting her off his shoulders and setting her down so he could wrap his arms around her in a hug “I love you little monkey, and I’m gonna miss the hell out of you every picosecond I’m gone.”

“I’m gonna miss you too Dad.” Colin p’heard her send something to Gene.

<Get in here Dad. It’s group hug time. Probably goodbye too, I have class in the morning and need to tell Mr. Chastain about the anarcho-communists at the park.>
There was exactly one hotel in TeepTown, and it catered exclusively to telepaths. Every other hotel in all of Geneva actively discriminated, segregating them off in discrete wings separate from other guests, or prohibited telepaths outright.

“So, you made reservations right?” Colin asked. “I’d hate to have to try to find something in Geneva.”

“Colin, lover, what do you take me for?” Gene beamed at him.

“Well you did call yourself a schmuck earlier, and amended to klutz…” Colin replied affectionately.

“…Touche. But yes, I did.”

They got to the front desk and there was a friendly looking middle aged woman behind the counter. Gene approached amiably.

“Good evening, welcome to Metasensory Marriott, I’m Jennie, how can I help you?” she said

“Hi Jennie, I’m here to check in. I have a reservation under Hendriks” Gene replied. She typed it into her computer’s haptic interface and pulled up the reservation.

“Alright, I have a single night reservation for two in our romantic getaway suite. Is your wife or girlfriend with you or should we hold a key for her?”

“That would be Dr. Meier and he’s presently here.” Colin filled in, holding up his left hand.

“Oh.” Jennie replied, tilting her head, then her eyes widened “Oh! I misread the whole situation. I apologize.”

“It’s alright.” Gene reassured her “Not exactly common.”

“Anyway, I’ll need both your Identicards and all that, you know the drill.” Both Colin and Gene handed them over and she scanned them before cheerfully handing over the electronic keys.

“Enjoy your stay!”

“Oh, we will” Gene replied with a provocative raising and lowering of both eyebrows.

The lift took them up to their room, which was a suite on the highest floor, and Colin was impressed. It was done up to invoke the feeling of a cabin in the alps. There was a fireplace with a luxuriously comfortable looking loveseat in one corner. An actual no-shit log fireplace. Colin had never actually seen one of those in something he was allowed to occupy. The bed was stacked in quilts, not comforters, but quilts, and everything was done in soft earth-tones. There was even a hot tub just large enough for two people over by the bathroom.

“You spoil me, sir.” Colin said. Gene snaked his hands around Colin’s waist and nuzzled the back of his neck.

“Well, to be fair I’m spoiling both of us. I don’t think we’ll be able to tie the knot for a while so…” Colin leaned back into him, maximizing body contact.

“Yeah. The stars are going to have to align and Cthulhu rise from R’lyeh before we get everyone together for that. And it won’t even be a big wedding. Christ.” Colin verbally replied

“Yeah. I want to do it right, not… elope to Vegas or Babylon 5 in the night.” Gene said, pausing
just long enough to lay a line of kisses down Colin's neck down to his shoulder. "So I figured I can splurge on the really swanky room for a night."

“We’re agreed on both counts, except…” Colin’s mind drifted back to Gene’s time in the hospital. Something could happen and mundanes wouldn’t respect their relationship without a marriage license, and that meant that the legal rules governing the Corps wouldn’t either. Either one could be transferred, or worse.

“I know. We always can elope if we really have to…” Gene reassured him. Colin chuckled a little and turned around and was about to plant a kiss on him when Gene put a finger to his lips. “One second, before we get to that… there’s something I forgot.” Gene reached into one of his pockets and fished out two silver chains.

“For when the gloves come off. Or we think we might need to punch someone, take your pick.”
Wednesday February 25th, 2263

Colin and Gene walked in the front door to the Annex to find a miasma of helplessness, it hung in the air like the fog of London. Colin and Gene could kill people, or rewrite their personalities as punishment. The rest of them except for Erika and Max couldn’t. They’d been forced to watch as their brothers and sisters were pulled out of horrid conditions for a week and the perpetrators go free. They couldn’t even know the specifics of what he and Gene had done to the ones they’d already released. They’d poured through what documents they’d collected, scoured forensic evidence; they even found and dug up the bodies of ten young telepaths hoping the corpses would speak for themselves. All that in a desperate attempt to find some trail of admissible evidence however flimsy to use as a lever for a parallel construction case that would likely be tossed out.

Nothing. He could tell that just from the feeling in the atrium and logical deduction. He reached out with his mind and contacted everyone.

<Hey. We’re back. We’ve got some catch up to do, meet us in the briefing room in five minutes?>

The response was happy in a lackluster sort of way. Glad to see them but expecting the worst possible outcome. When everyone filed into the briefing room, Colin stood at the front, with Gene at the back by the door. Everyone else sat down in their usual position and waited.

“Okay. I called this briefing to give you guys a few updates you all sorely need, and to see exactly how… fruitless… the past two weeks have been. I’m so very sorry we left before we could look after you all.”

“It’s alright Colin, not your fault. You four were barely holding it together as it was and when you have to chase a ship, well…” Su replied. Everyone else nodded sympathetically.

“Yeah we… we had to use memory vaults. We’ll have to unpack those later, but we don’t have to do it now.” Erika nodded in agreement, and Max just shrugged. He was well-accustomed to dealing with traumatic memories that weren’t his. “To that end, all four of us will be seeking psych assistance. Yes that means you two as well” he nodded in Max and Erika’s direction. “I don’t want to have to order it, and you don’t need to go make appointments at Alliance Arms as soon as this briefing is over, but you really should do it soon. Gene and I will be.”

“You don’t want to walk around without processing the mental shrapnel” Gene added “Trust me on that. It gets bad if you don’t deal with it. Hell, the rest of you might want to at least consider a counseling session. For what you’ve been doing, even a mundane can be of help.”

Hassan raised his hand. Colin nodded at him to ask whatever question he had.

“I have to ask… are those wedding bands? Did you two elope to Vegas or something while you were away?” The collective exclamation mark in the room meant he was the first one to notice the little silver rings around both their fingers.

“No. We didn’t elope.” Gene replied. “We had a chance to make a day trip to Geneva and see Zara though, adoption paperwork went through and I didn’t know when the next chance to propose
with her around would be so...yeah. It’ll be a long engagement we think, we want everyone at the wedding, including all of you and our daughter so…”

“Yeah, I can see how that would be a problem.” Hassan agreed.

“If you can get Zara out here, I can probably get rabbi Liebgott to do a secular ceremony…” Max suggested helpfully. Colin hadn’t even considered the question of the officiant. So many options that would be open to mundanes were barred to telepaths either by law or in practice and neither he nor Gene were religious.

<What do you think? We don’t exactly have chaplains.> Gene asked.

<Well if I’m going to have clergy of some sort officiate at my wedding, he’s a good choice.> Colin replied. <Honestly the more I think about it, the more I like the idea.>

“That is a really good thought. Sure he’ll do it?” Gene asked back to confirm.

“Eh. He likes you and you’re my family, he’ll do it.” Max answered, sounding pretty confident.

“Thanks Max.” Colin said, and really wasn’t looking forward to the tonal shift he was about to inflict on everyone. “As for our update… operational security means I have to be somewhat light on details, but out of a total one hundred and forty-four telepaths taken off world, we managed to save forty eight. The rest… didn’t make it. They were dead months, in some cases years ago.” The news was bittersweet, a third was better than none but it wasn’t enough. Not for any of them. “They’re not missing though, the dead have been accounted for and we have their remains. We need to hold a funeral service at some point in the near future.”

“You managed to get the bodies?” Erika asked.

“No. There was a crematoria on site… amalgamated ashes.” Colin replied. Dead was dead to everyone else, except for the sense that being thrown into a crematorium like trash was dehumanizing and wrong; but for Max is something else entirely. Shades of the Final Solution played across his mind and memories of far more recent atrocities unveiled themselves to wreak havoc on his emotions. He exploded into uncontrollable tears at what he thought was the single largest mass murder of telepaths in the last hundred years. Colin knew it wasn’t, but Max didn’t need to know that.

Everyone else did what came instinctively to them, realizing what he carried in his mind but not how. Erika held him as he sobbed, the others reached across the space between them with their hands and minds and filled him with as much love and comforting thoughts as they could, but it didn’t work.

There was only one thing Colin could think of that wouldn’t break operational security. He looked over at Gene, who nodded.

<I think you can get away with it.> Gene replied to his wordless sanity check request.

Colin walked up to Max, knelt down and dried his tears.

<Max.> No coherent response. Instead of trying to talk to him, or projecting sympathy, he dug up what he and Gene felt when the realization hit them that the Psi Corps had its own fleet, its own marine corps, their own sword against oppression and a shield against genocide. He projected that hope into Max and then spoke into his mind again.

<It won’t happen again Max. I can’t tell you the details, but we’re not helpless anymore. They
can’t do that to us ever again without feeling our wrath. I swear to you, on the memory of Director Vacit. Never again.>

'I don’t see how.’ Max thought, still in the grips of everything he’d seen and done in the prior ten days and his own borrowed memories. He couldn’t even muster enough focus to project the thought.

<You’re not meant to, not yet. But you will. Could I project hope like that if I didn’t own at least some of it?> That seemed to do the trick, in combination with everything else. The knowledge that in this, Colin couldn't lie to him, that pogroms would never again go unanswered. Max was able to reassert enough control to project his thoughts.

<No. No you couldn’t.> Max was able to reply purposefully, already getting the fear and anguish of himself and dozens of others back under the rational control of his conscious mind.

<We’ll all mourn the dead together, but we've got some work we have to do. Do you need me?> Colin asked.

<No. No I’ve got it. Thank you.>

Thursday February 26th, 2263

“Colin! It’s good to see you! How’d the uh… hunting trip go?” Francois Auger greeted Colin ebulliently. He wore an immaculate black suite that went nicely with his gloves and badge and complimented the steel gray of his hair.

“Good to see you too Francois, the hunting trip was… productive. Details are strictly need to know.”

“Oh? Not the personal ones. I see that engagement ring on your hand, did you finally decide to settle down and get married?” Francois asked. Colin knew where this was going to go, he had as little contact with Administrators as humanly possible for this exact reason. Not just bureaucrats, every department had those, but Administrators. He decided to stick to his rule of thumb. Never volunteer information to an Administrator.

“I did.” was all he said. Francois put his elbows on the table and set his chin into his palms.

“What’s her name? Tell me a bit about her, as much as you know anyway…” Colin was briefly tempted to rip the willful stupidity out of him, but that would be a black mark on his permanent record.

“Francois, I jointly adopted a daughter with my partner, Gene. I know you know this because it had to have crossed your desk. Why on Earth do you think I’d be marrying a woman?” Colin gently rebuked him. Francois’ train of thought momentarily derailed.

“It’s just that… it isn't done, Colin.” Francois said in tones so gentle it was almost condescending. Like he was letting down a child. "There are obviously gay and trans people in the Corps, but we arrange marriages for a reason. If we're ever to break free from mundane control, sacrifices are required. From all of us. I... I just have a hard time accepting that you of all people are selfish enough to not understand that.”

That raised Colin’s hackles, it was the same internal argument that had him living a lie of omission for almost two decades, but it was short lived. He wanted to be angry, but he just couldn’t be. If
he’d been driven into the shadows by it, why would he expect an Administrator to be any different?

“Don’t talk to me about being selfish Francois. I have a fifty-fifty chance of living to see forty. I’m willing to die for my people, but not give up who I am and I’m not living a lie. There are fucking limits on what personal sacrifices a human being ought be expected to accept. As for producing the next generation of P12s, we’ll do that the same way any infertile couple does. Sperm donation. Go on. Check. How many times have my samples been pulled from storage? Hell, even if I did get married to a woman, the only way I’m ever having kids is through IVF anyway.”

To his credit, Francois did. He typed a few commands into the computer at his desk and set up a database query. Francois got the results back a few seconds later and almost seemed disappointed.

“I take your point” was all he said.

“Look at it this way Francois: the law says any children I produce have to have a substantial likelihood of being a P12 or better. If I get married to a woman, that’s an issue. If I don’t, it’s moot. The supreme court said so.”

“The mundane supreme court.” Francois retorted.

“With briefs filed by Vacit himself, joined by the entire Legal and Administrative divisions. We fought for that ruling against the Earth Alliance. What changed?” Colin asked. Francois’ saving grace was that he wasn’t a complete martinet, he could be persuaded if you took the right approach and for all his faults, he believed with all his heart and soul in self-determination for telepaths; even if he didn’t always reach the right conclusion on the first pass.

“The Director did. We got Johnson.”

“And you wanna bet how he changed policy in the Psi Corps so no one finds out about that ruling unless they dig, and so gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender telepaths don’t come out of the closet?”

“Gag orders in Education division and heavy emphasis on personal sacrifice. That’s how I’d do it.” Francois replied, casting his head down in shame, both in recognizing that truth about himself, and that he’d fallen for it.

“And that’s exactly what he did, and he sidelined the careers of anyone who did anything different like ‘being gay or trans openly’. And you know that because, as much as it pains me to admit it, you’re very good at your job.”

“Christ, I’m sorry. Wait, why pains you?”

“Because Francois, I’m on the sharp end. It’s a law of the universe that Admin is the Enemy. Doesn’t stop us from being friendly or cooperating.” Colin winked. Francois rolled his eyes.

“What are you actually here for Colin?” Francois asked with a long-suffering sigh.

“Well, I came to ask you about what it would take to actually get an Education facility set up on this planet again.” Colin said.

“Why, so you can see your adopted daughter more often?” Francois gave him a sidelong look.

“Full confession: that is part of the reason, I have enough on my plate that I wouldn’t have thought
of it without a personal reason. But we also need one. We have other people here who are separated from their kids more than they should be. I know, ‘sacrifice for the good of the Corps’, but this one isn't necessary, and bluntly, it's too much to expect from people. Plus we still have kids of cadre age who haven’t manifested yet in the mundane population, with more to be born. About thirty per year. It’s one thing if their parents drift away over the course of months to a couple years like what usually happens but… the hard shock.” Colin said, laying out his logical case.

“More likely to be put on Sleepers, more likely to be disciplinary problems or even go rogue later. I know.” Francois replied. He didn't take much convincing in principle. "I’ve been trying for the last year to get our old facility back, but they turned it into low-income housing. They compensated us. Hell, the only reason you got the Annex back was because they couldn’t sell a… mixed use building like that. But between the price gouging and land appreciation, we’ll have a hard time getting anything in the cities suitable for young children with what they paid us.”

“What if you scrap that idea entirely?” Colin asked.

“What do you mean?” Francois asked. “It’s standard practice to locate our facilities in urban centers.”

“Right. Because central place theory dictates that it’s easier for people to get to the city from their outlying towns and thorps than for someone from one thorp to get to another thorp. And it’s easier to get all the things you need for a large self-contained facility to run.”

“Oi” Francois confirmed.

“But I’m just talking about a couple cadre blocks and something we can run a minor academy out of.” That little nudge was all Francois needed. The cog-wheels started turning in his head.

“Hmmm. We can buy a plot of land out in one of the agricultural zones. The roads and maglevs run both ways, it’s easy to get to and from. Land is cheap out there, and we can use prefabs. It doesn’t need to be idyllic like we usually try for. At least not initially. We can upgrade it over time. As for the older kids… we’re going to need housing and classroom space.” Francois brainstormed, and Colin liked what he heard. This was why, despite hating deal with Administrators, the Corps needed Administrators.

“I have some ideas there. I happen to know of several offices whose owners have been put out of business rather permanently.” Colin suggested.

“Emigration Placement Services...You didn’t kill them, did you?” Francois asked both wishing Colin had, and hoping he didn’t.

“Not...directly. Though I suspect what the Bloodhounds did do to them will cause some suicides. They are however abandoning the business and they have creditors. We can put in a good bid when they go belly up. They were in a light business and low-income residential zone. Plenty of slumlord apartment buildings we could buy out and renovate.”

“That takes care of housing and classroom space but I might have an even better idea than that. I’ll consult our attorney. Oh and we’ll want a skyway to not inflict mundanes on our teenagers. Might be able to set up a campus out there over time too… Honestly I have no idea why I didn’t think of this.” Francois castigated himself a little bit.

“Francois you have a good mind, but you might need a nudge to think outside the box. Give you that nudge though and you run with it pretty well. I wouldn’t have thought of the skyway.” Colin
encouraged him. He didn't even need to lie.

“Hey!” Francois paused “Okay, I’ll give you that one. I tried for social sciences but they said I didn’t have the capacity to make intuitive leaps but was really good at following procedures to the letter, and that my career would always be limited. So I went Admin.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that limitation Francois, and as I said, you are very good at your job. For example, you’re also very good at weeding mundane authorities into giving you what you want, and figuring out what conditions you’ll need to get them to change their mind.” As far as Colin was concerned, a little validation went a long way.

“Why do I get the feeling you want something else too?” Francois asked.

“Because you’re a P8 and I’m not shielding that hard?” Colin replied. “Seriously though, we’re an easy target. It’s me and Gene covering a colony of 2.4 million, I trust my support staff but they’re not combat trained more than a single week-long assault course.”

“The readmittance treaty prevents anything but a minimal Metapol presence without the local government’s permission. You know that.” Francois answered, all but nixing the idea. "You having a partner was a stretch but I made it work. It doesn’t say anything about Security or Military though, and there’s enough skill and training overlap you could turn them into ersatz bloodhounds if you had command authority, but there’s no way for you to get it directly.”

“Stovepipes between departments?” Colin asked.

“Oi.” Francoid nodded. "The only way for you to get it is to get transfers, and then they’d be Metapol. Even if that weren’t the case, I don’t know if anyone is going to be willing to spare personnel. Transport’s been poaching good recruits, no idea where they’re putting them all but they seem to be on an expansion kick. Crewing new motherships or something, no idea why they’re snapping up anyone over P8.” Colin kept his knowledge of that private.

“Damn.” Colin said.

“I’m sorry. The only way I can make that work is if we get hit, and then you and I both know what our song and dance number is going to have to be.” Francois agreed, rolling his eyes at the very thought.

“Yep. Terrorists attack us, but we have to hype up the collateral mundane casualties.” Colin practically spat the word ‘mundane’.


“Well we can’t be together all the time… but he’s in a therapy session. I’m going in later today.” Colin replied.

“It was that bad?” Francois asked.

“Yes.” Colin confirmed “Slavery cases are always bad but this one took the cake. I’m just glad it’s over. We have the memories vaulted for now, but they can't stay that way.”

Colin felt something occur to Francois. “There might be another way. The whole treaty is predicated on the ability of mundane Security forces to assist you with manpower.”

“I thought of that.” Colin concurred “But that requires Earth Force to fuck up. I’ve been waiting for an opportunity but it isn't something I want to count on or worse, invite.”
"Oi. But you can always count on mundanes to fuck up. You can also always count on mundane politicians to cave to the fears of the populace. They don’t want rogue telepaths running around blowing things up any more than we do. They just have to have something they can show their constituents and say ‘look, we tried, but there really is no other way to protect you from the Big Bad Rogue Telepaths.’” Francois said, and for the life of him, Colin couldn't think of any way Francois was incorrect in his assessment.

“Francois, you're not wrong. I can’t really create an opportunity there, but…”

“You can use it if it comes up!”

…

When Colin got home, Gerald stopped him almost as soon as he got in the door.

“Hey there you daft wazzock.” Gerald opened up with his usual insult, but something was bothering him.

“Hello yourself you ligging sod. What’s up?” Colin returned the insult in the spirit in which it was given: familial affection.

“I recorded ISN tonight, you might want to take a look at the recording. Another mundane went missing and someone in Earth Force Security leaked the existence of the killer.” Gerald replied, worry was plastered on his face and he wasn't bothering to shield his inner monologue.

'It's a sodding public relations clusterfuck.'

“…Fuck. How much did they release and what’s their spin?” Colin asked.

“Your entire profile. As for the spin it's the usual ‘Why hasn’t the Psi Corps made any arrests?’ Citizen reactions shown without context like the exact question asked where they emphasize speculation about the Psi Corps letting the guy go for killing mundanes. ISN didn’t even ask for a statement before running with it. They have now, after poisoning the well. They’ve asked for you and Gene, Francois already agreed. Geneva has cleared it.”

'Desperate fucking damage control. This is an absolute fucking mess what the bleeding christ do we even do with this. Fucking shitcunt mundane propagandists...’ Gerald thought.

“When?” Colin asked, hoping beyond hope he had some prep-time to line up someone who could act as a surrogate to talk about political subjects. The Albrechts would be ideal.

“Three hours, just on time for the live evening broadcast.” Gerald informed him, and Colin's heart sank. There was no way he was going to get them onboard with such limited time. No way whatsoever.

“Well at least they can’t edit us into oblivion then.” Colin said, more to reassure himself than Gerald who was going to be angry-worried until it was over, and would then probably just be worried.

“That was the Corps’ condition. Rudding cockwomble-slags at ISN wanted something they could edit.” Gerald replied, his profanity laced with every ounce of scorn and contempt that was in his soul.

“Of course they did. Alright, I’ll go get Gene.” Colin could feel his fiancé up in his quarters. The thought occurred to him that they really did need to either knock a wall out or start actually moving
belongings instead of alternating. Colin ascended the stairs and walked into Gene’s official quarters, noting that there was a time when he’d have to actively reach out to find Gene in the building. These days he just knew. The door wasn’t locked, and Colin walked in to find Gene reading on that magnificent chair.

“Hey Gene, you have an hour free in about three hours?” he asked.

“Well other than my leg day, sure.” Gene replied. "Something up? You seem upset?"

“ISN interview, short notice. Someone leaked the serial killer and they’re drumming up anti-Corps sentiment.”

“God damn it. They want us both?”

“Yeah.” Colin confirmed.

“Okay, I’m with you. Just remember, if it comes up, stick to the cover story for where we’ve been.” Gene reminded him.

“Oh it’s definitely going to come up when we have to explain what else has been occupying our attention. Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve lined up some parents whose kids are now in the Corps to lambast us for doing our job.” Colin grumbled. It was the way these things went. Parents who’d the Corps had offered to fly to Earth, move to Geneva if they wanted, who had rejected their children outright, complaining about how the Corps took them.

“Wouldn’t shock me. Thankfully, we get to cheat.” Gene said with a bit of encouragement at the end.

…

It was Gene’s first time on television and he hated the lights. Absolutely hated them. They were in his face and he couldn’t see out past the cameras. It made him nervous, like he was in some sort of star chamber. The sound stage was set up for a round-table discussion, with Trisha at the head and there were four empty chairs.

<Relax> Colin told him over their ever-present mental connection while making him feel like his back was being caressed. <I hate it too, but it’ll be okay. It’s just pre-combat jitters.>

<It doesn’t fill me with confidence when you put it like that.> Gene replied <It’s the fucking political neutrality I can’t stand. You just know she’s going to ask questions we can’t respond to at all.>

<She’ll try to bait us.> Colin confirmed. <Turn the anger into guile.> Colin was trying to put on a front for him, even though he knew it wouldn’t work. Gene could tell Colin was just as nervous as he was, and let one of his hands settle on Colin’s knee to reassure him.

Trisha Nguyen’s surface thoughts were consumed by the nursery rhyme Little Bo Peep as much as her undisciplined mundane mind could manage, so that included occasional musings about whether she should leave her boyfriend or if she left the stove on. Gene realized she’d undergone antitelepath training. It wouldn’t keep him out if he wanted in, but it would protect her inner monologue from a casual look-see.

The producer held up his hand just inside the halo of blindness and started counting off fingers starting with his thumb first.
“We’re on in five, four, three, two, one…”

“Good evening. I’m your host Trisha Nguyen and this is ISN Evening News Live.”

<How many shows does she do per day, anyway?> Gene asked.


“For this segment we’re being joined by our two resident Psi Cops; Dr. Colin Meier, and his partner Eugene Hendriks.” Trisha said, speaking to the camera with a smile that Gene noticed was practiced in front of a mirror.

“Happy to be here Ms. Nguyen.” Colin replied with his own completely fake smile.

“Likewise.” Gene agreed, doing his best to smile but knowing it wouldn’t look genuine.

<You did fine.> Colin informed him.

“So before we start, I couldn’t help but notice the rings. Dr. Meier, you weren’t wearing that the last time I saw you. Are you two…” she trailed off.

“Partners in both senses of the term? Yes.” Gene answered. He could see where she wanted to go with it, and mentally prepared his response in advance.

“Doesn’t that get a little bit complicated?” She asked “I mean, the Psi Corps arranges most marriages and you work together.”

“Not at all.” Gene replied confidently “The arrangements are suggestions, not commands, and Earth Alliance law only requires that any children we have be the result of an approved match. No biological offspring, no problem. There’s always in vitro fertilization for that, which we’ve availed ourselves of. We are completely in the clear. As to the second issue… also no.”

“Our workplace rules are a bit different.” Colin followed up “Genuine affection with a genetic match is rare, so there’s a tendency to not want to restrict it.” In addition, there were the other benefits such as long-range communication, but Colin wasn’t going to volunteer that information. “Plus, if something untoward ever did happen, finding out the truth upon a complaint is pretty easy. They said-they said is unheard of in the Corps. It just isn’t a thing that happens.”

“Because you just scan each other to find the truth, right?” Trisha asked.

“Basically, yeah. Well, we wouldn’t scan each other, but someone from Legal or Admin would be brought in. Sort of a criminal versus civil thing, unless there’s an assault.” Colin answered.

“Well congratulations!” to Gene’s surprise, that was genuine. Her smile was real. “But we should probably get to our main topic of discussion. We’re here to talk about The Giver and what the Psi Corps is doing to capture him.” Gene was dumbstruck by that literary reference; it was old, obscure, and to his mind a mediocre book at best.

<She’s very good at compartmentalization I think.> Colin sent.

<Ah.>

“Right. Honestly, we prefer to call them unknown subjects. Good general practice to not give them names. That way the narcissistic ones don’t get to feed on the notoriety. We can’t stop the media from doing it, but we tend not to dignify it. I take it you got access to my profile then?”
Colin asked, and the mere fact that ISN had it at all galled him.

“I did yes, fascinating reading, but would you mind summarizing for our audience?” Trisha asked.

“Not at all.” Colin said. Gene accidentally finished his statement for him though.

“There are some things we’ll need to redact in the interest of public safety. We don’t want to give him ideas.” Gene clarified.

“Your profile is already all over the net. Not our doing, I might add.” Trisha said, trying to get them to agree to spill the beans on everything, but her statement was only technically true. They didn't post it up, but if you traced back far enough ISN owned the domain name.

Colin and Gene both groaned.

'Whoever leaked this, I’ll have their head on a plate.' Colin complained, and Gene caught it somehow despite Colin's blocks being up.

“Public Service Announcement: When you leak documents like this to the general public without putting them first in the hands of responsible journalists, you run the risk of getting people killed.” Gene said into the camera “So don’t do it. If you feel you have to leak something, do it responsibly.” It was as politically neutral as Gene could be. Colin was just resigned to it. To both their minds, ISN was not to be considered ‘responsible’ journalists, but there was little they could do about that. They couldn't even say as such in public.

“Even so, I’m not going to help. For all I know, the unknown subject doesn’t have access to a computer.” Colin started, then broke down the profile in relatively simple terms and pointedly avoided the fact that the killer might start targeting telepaths.

“Interesting and… horrifying.” Trisha admitted “How did you reach those conclusions?”

“Well, these cases go back a few years.” Colin explained, and Gene felt him entering teacher-mode. "No one thought to bring the Psi Corps in on them before early February of this year. I looked at the medical examiner’s reports for the earlier ones. The last one I had direct access to the victim’s brain and was able to use more advanced imaging.”

“You can tell all that from the victim’s brain?” Trisha asked.

“Well Trisha, I didn’t earn my Ph.D by collecting bottlecaps. But yes; in combination with other factors. It’s no different than any other forensic psychologist. What the killer does to the victim tells you about the killer. For instance, how and where he disposes of a body can tell us how he feels about the victim. If they’re buried properly it tells us he still considers them people and might indicate he’s experiencing command delusions. If he dumps them in the garbage, we know he views them that way.”

At that point, Gene felt her affect change. She was getting ready to pounce.

<Here it comes. I’ve got this.> he sent over to Colin.

“So if you know so much about him, why haven’t you caught him yet? He’s been killing for years, what are you waiting for?” Trisha inquired, hoping that their answer would somehow pain the Psi Corps badly, or could be spun to.

“It isn’t like we can go around making random arrests and claiming we caught the guy.” Gene responded “We know what he is, but not who. He’s very good at not leaving forensic evidence to
ID him with. He’s managed to avoid even hidden camera systems because he’s at least a P9 and can detect them. We’ve managed to narrow down a search grid to sixteen square kilometers of high-density urban area. That’s way too much to search manually, but it’s starting to give us an idea of how he approaches his victims.”

“And you only got that because you had Earth Force do the leg-work.” Trisha countered. Colin mentally rolled his eyes and Gene glyphed his head hitting the table.

“It’s the two of us and seven support staff. It’s taken weeks for Earth Force Security to go through all the data and get us that far. If we hadn’t enlisted their help, it would take us months if not years, and that’s if we didn’t have other cases; which we do.”

“And what other cases could be more important than a serial killer?” Trisha asked. This time she let her wall of inutteral sheep-poems slip. She had a surprise for them.

<Fuck.>

<I caught it too. Some of the minds in the back are familiar.> Colin informed him <Four of them.> Gene paid attention and noticed them too. They did seem familiar.

“Well there’s the usual garden-variety cases. The odd blip, domestic abuse, a murder. Oh, and a massive human trafficking case.” Colin said, knowing it triggered the trap. That’s when Gene caught it. In her triumph she slipped and knew she’d slipped. This whole interview had been a ruse, it was why she wasn’t really pressing them on the serial killer. Just maneuvering them into talking about what she was really interested in.

Both Gene and Colin were stone-faced, not giving any outward indication they knew what was coming.

“Right. About ten days ago, you raided several corporate offices in conjunction with that, right? Brought in two full packs of bloodhounds if I remember correctly?”

“Correct.” Colin replied “And for four days prior to that, we rescued sixteen others from captivity by individuals. Buried ten others.”

“And you found four others prior to that?” Trisha asked.

“That’s right.” Gene replied, and mentally braced for impact.

“How would you respond to charges that the Psi Corps kidnapped them all over again, taking them from their parents and families never to be seen again?”

“We won’t respond. You’ve made this a policy and political issue in which the Psi Corps, and ourselves, must remain neutral. Had you been up front about your intentions, the Corps never would have cleared this interview at all.” Colin answered. He looked down and Gene saw Colin type a code into his comm unit and swing a slider over from Red to Orange, elevating the threat level to the planet’s telepaths and updating them all with a vibratory alarm. Red was safe, orange was cautionary and advised all registered telepaths on planet to lock their doors and only travel if absolutely necessary.

<How do we handle this?> Gene asked <Leave?> Gene wanted to do more than leave. He wanted to make Ms. Nguyen forget her mother’s warmth...

<No.> Colin replied, also vetoing Gene’s unvoiced desire and doing his level best to contain his own outrage <Then we just look like we’re running away and have something to hide. Plus…
those minds are familiar. She may have fucked up and we can use it.

“Hmm.” She turned toward the camera and Gene felt her feeling like she’d won, and finally caught the Psi Cops out in a lie. “Well let’s talk to some people who might be willing to answer questions, I’d like to welcome a few more special guests to the show.”

Two very familiar sets of parents entered from the other side of the stage. Trisha Nguyen introduced the Lawsons who sat down on the other side of the desk from the two Psi Cops. Then she introduced the Greens who sat straddling the curve at the far end of the oval, across from and Gene got the impression in opposition to the newscaster. Not because of the arrangement, because of the set of their minds. They gave no outward sign of it, but they were ready to square off.

Colin smiled wolfishly. ISN had been hasty when vetting its guests for spin-correctness. For his part, Gene was elated to see the Greens, which given his first interaction with Mrs. Green, he hadn’t expected to ever think.

<Welp, someone fucked up!> Colin sent Gene cheerfully

“It’s my understanding Mister and Missus Lawson that you are being prevented by the Psi Corps from seeing your son Albert.”

“That’s right. Bastards won’t let us anywhere near him. Same for everyone else.” Stanley Lawson replied.

<Lying pieces of shit.> Gene mentally remarked.

Tyrone and Tisha Green sat there almost expressionless, but Tyrone winked across the table on the side not facing the active camera. They knew exactly what was going on and weren’t having any of it.

“Just so everyone in the audience knows, the other two families we contacted declined to be interviewed.” Ms Nguyen explained into the lens.

“Because the Psi Corps intimidated them into silence. They don’t want you to hear the truth!” Mrs. Lawson exclaimed. “They took our son from us, we miss him so much, and we’re hoping we can put pressure on the Corps to get him and the others released.”

Colin was fidgeting with something while the camera wasn’t on him.

<What are you doing?> Gene asked.

<Just a bit of audio editing. Making a clip.> Colin replied, giggling inside his own head.

<Right, you recorded that whole mess.>

<I did!> Colin confirmed triumphantly. <Ironically, the Earth Alliance has one-party wiretap laws and these fucksticks are breaking doctor-patient privilege and voiding their own right to privacy. Would have been useful in court.>

<Or the court of public opinion.>

“What do you have to say to that?” Ms. Nguyen asked them.

“Absolutely nothing, because we are not permitted to comment on Earth Alliance policy.” Colin said, pointedly distinguishing the laws of the Earth Alliance from he Psi Corps “That said, I think
the Greens have something to say.”

“That we do.” Tyrone said pointing his index finger over at the Lawsons “Y’all are lying trash. The Psi Corps isn’t keeping them from seeing their son. Their son doesn’t want anything to do with ‘em, and the last time Stan over there saw Albert, Stan was getting ready to beat him senseless. Colin, Gene, and the doctor had to put themselves in the way.”

“How can you sit there and defend them? They brainwashed our kids! Albert didn’t know what he was saying.” Mrs Lawson countered.

Colin took the dictaphone and palmed it to Tisha. She gave him a quizzical look.

<Just press play. Trust me. I recorded the whole thing, but that’s just the part that’s relevant.> he said into her mind. She didn’t respond negatively. She’d spent enough time with her son his and bond-mates that she was used to it. She just loudly thought ‘hello, and thank you’ back at him so he and Gene would catch it.

Tisha pressed the play button with an almost sadistic relish, she guessed, correctly, what was on it.

“Well, irregardless what Tisha has to say we just don’t think that being in the Psi Corps is what’s best for them. And honestly I don’t see how it’s any of your business at all, they’re our children and it’s our decision to make. You just wouldn’t understand, you don’t love your children like we do.” Mrs. Lawson’s voice played back for the whole planet.

“I can’t fucking believe you just said that to him. Scratch that, I absolutely fucking can.” Retorted the voice of an angry young man, Albert.

“Albert! Language!” came the voice of Linda Lawson.

“No Linda. You just told the man who saved my life and sanity; who was rejected by his own parents; who is adopting a little girl whose parents viciously forgot her, that his people—my people and by extension me—don’t love our children like you do. It was fucking disgusting and you just lost every shred of my respect.” Albert laid into her and it was every bit as beautiful to Gene as it had been hearing it the first time.

“Of—of course I don’t mean you, you’re my son and I love y—”

“Oh, so I’m the exception to your bigotry? Like a racist’s black friend? You don’t love me Linda. You love the idealized memory of me so much that you want to erase who I actually am with drugs and possibly kill me. They love who I actually am.” referring to his compatriots "So do they." referring to Gene, Colin, and Nishita. "The Psi Corps freed me from chains inside my own head, literally picked me up off the floor, and gave my life back. You want to kill me by inches."

“Son, you know that’s not true.” His father Stan said

“Don’t lie to me Stanley, you were bad at it before I could read your mind, and I can see it in her thoughts.”

“Stay out of my head you little mind-fucker!” Stan growled, the microphone picked up one chair falling backwards and three others sliding across the floor immediately. There was a brief pause.

“Mister and Missus Lawson” Gene’s voice came crisp and cool through the pickups “get the
fuck out. You are no longer welcome.”

“And if we won’t?” Stan asked “What if I want to withdraw my son from this freak show?”

“Then we bring in security to throw you out and our lawyers bury you. But if you take one more step forward you’ll become a trauma patient.” Gene heard his own voice promising unspeakable violence for the first time not in his own head. It sounded off somehow. Did he really sound like that when angry?

<Yes.> Colin replied to his unspoken question <And if I’m honest it’s kinda sexy.>

“Come on honey, let’s go. We don’t need to put up with these…mutants.” Stan’s recorded voice declared and the last sound picked up before the audio cut out was the door slamming shut.

Gene and Colin grinned from ear to ear, happy as clams that Ms. Nguyen and the Lawsons had been so outplayed; both of them basked in the furious mortification. Ms. Nguyen was contemplating muting the microphones, but that would be a losing move and she knew it. Tisha decided to go in for the kill.

“Albert sounded like he knew exactly what he was saying and is adult enough to make his own decisions.” She said. “Ms. Nguyen, when Phil asked us if our Sam had gone into the Corps without our permission or input, I don’t think they understood us correctly.” Gene saw where Tisha was going and decided that she was one hell of a class-act, no matter what she might have deluded herself into believing before, she’d pulled a one-eighty.

“How so?” Trisha asked, her voice clipped, her face and neutral expression a mask of rage that wouldn’t be visible to the camera but was all too evident to Gene.

“Sam didn’t have our permission or input because he didn’t need it. What he went through…we’re not taking his right to choose; we’re not separating him from the people he went through hell with. We’re not reducing him to what Sleepers do to people.”

“We weren’t telling you about all the terrible things the Psi Corps does?” Linda asked incredulously “You mean to tell me you’re okay with your son being involved in that?”

“I was some spouting some crazy shit, maybe some of it’s true. I don’t know.” Tisha shrugged. “What I do know is that my little boy’s been given a real sh*t sandwich for options. If he denies who and what he is and takes the sleepers, he’ll be free, sure. He might not even be discriminated against. But he’ll probably commit suicide because they’ll suck the life right out of him. Or, he can embrace himself and live in a community that loves and values him; but have a gun to his head every day of his life held by you and me. I can’t make that choice for him.”

“Wait, who holds the gun here? Those freaks can kill us with their fucking minds!” Stan yelled, point at Gene and Colin. Gene couldn’t help himself, he nodded and shrugged, but otherwise said nothing.

“And yet they don’t with any regularity, despite how tempting it might be on days like today. They can’t hold office, they can’t vote.” Tyrone answered. "They're registered with the state, and that pin they wear is more than a badge of office."

“I don’t see how that’s relevant.” Stan interjected.

“The gun we have is Earth Force. We already spent fifty years committing genocide and killed their people—our son’s people—by the millions. The price they pay for being allowed to exist is
the silence you hear. That, and every other right of sapient beings.”

“Wait, let me make sure I’m hearing you correctly. You’re saying that you believe telepaths are an oppressed minority who are under constant threat of genocide—if that ever happened at all—if they step out of line and you are okay with your own son joining their ranks? What are you, insane?”

“First: It fucking happened, our entire society just conveniently forgot. Second: They are oppressed. That’s black letter law. Third: I didn’t raise Sam to be a coward. My ancestors in Mississippi didn’t try to hide from the KKK by bleaching their skin, and I’m damn proud of my son for standing up and refusing to sell out his integrity to maintain his privilege.”

“Oh please. You talk about not being a coward, but what are those two doing? They haven’t said a word the entire time we’ve been out here. They’ve left defending the Psi Corps to you. How is that not cowardice if they won’t even engage in a debate?” Linda asked rhetorically, going on the attack.

“Shit, they can’t legally defend themselves when they’re ambushed on ISN. The only reason this hasn’t been a disaster for them is because her producer” Tyrone pointed toward Trisha Nguyen with his thumb “fucked up. If there was any justice in the world, they’d have their own voice and be able to defend themselves, but we’ve all taken that from them.”

“That reminds me.” Tisha said and turned to Colin “When the Psi Corps director—who is not a telepath and not bound by the charter—endorsed Clark, how many telepaths were murdered in reprisal for the perceived charter breach?”

<God. I don’t know the exact figure.> Gene remarked in Colin’s mind. He was on a ship then and managed to dodge the worst of it, including the circular with the numbers. <I know it was in the thousands but…>

<I do.> was Colin's mental response.

“Five thousand seven hundred and eighty-two” Colin replied, “in the span of a week.” Colin finished after a pregnant pause.

“That’s… pretty bad.” Tisha said before turning to Ms. Nguyen “So, when you ambushed them with your sensational allegations, were you trying to get people killed or did you just fail to think that far in advance?”

Gene glanced over at the newscaster and relished the look on her face, and the thoughts playing across her mind. She looked like a deer caught in headlights; she’d completely lost control of the situation and nothing was going the way she thought it would go. She thought she could get some people on, lambast the Psi Cops like the news editor wanted without them being able to say anything back because the issue was politicized, and make them look bad by way of having something to hide. But no. Phil fucked up and brought the wrong parents on the show and now everything was shit. Phil was probably out of a job.

Colin was silently chortling beside him.

<Enjoying the show?> Gene asked.

<Best entertainment I’ve had all week.> Colin replied <I’m really glad we took the time to reach out to them. Even if the way we did it was emotionally manipulative.> A thought occurred to Gene just then and Colin caught it. <Yeah, I’ve noticed too. People who’ve been shit on
sometimes recognize when it’s happening to others.>

<Not always.> Gene noted.

<No. Not always. But sometimes it’s enough. And you can stack the deck on epiphanies from time to time.>

<We’re not out of the woods yet though. No matter what anyone actually says, just having us here and repeating that shit is going to have people think it’s open season on us.> Gene said.

<I know. I raised the threat level accordingly. Hopefully it’ll just be some broken windows and graffiti.> Colin replied, but he was obviously worried.

“I think that’s about all the time we have for this segment.” Trisha Nguyen said after a slight pause, not answering Tisha’s question “So, we’re going to go ahead and cut to a message from our sponsors. I’d like to thank all our guests for appearing on the show tonight.”

“Pleasure to educate everyone and help our friends in the Corps out of a tough spot.” Tisha replied.

“Uh, yeah. Pleasure to be here.” Stan said.

Neither Gene nor Colin said a word until the cameras went off and they stood up.

“Ms. Nguyen, your network just became persona non grata with the Psi Corps.” Colin told her.
“No telepath will contract with your network or anyone who does business with it until everyone involved in this bush-league farce is gone.”

“What? You can’t do that!” she replied incredulously “You can’t enforce that.”

“We don’t need to.” Gene corrected her “All we have to do is let everyone know what you pulled. Good evening ma’am.”

“Hey Tyrone, Tisha; if you don’t want to share the green room with the Lawsons” Colin said over the table “you’re welcome into the blue room to take off the state makeup.” The Lawsons were already on their way out.

“Thanks.” Tyrone replied.

They walked out, leaving Trisha Nguyen contemplating the generosity of her severance package.

…

In the blue room, Colin cleaned foundation of his face, finally able to feel his skin breathe again.
“You missed a spot” Gene told him, and used his sponge to clean it off. Colin kissed his glove as he did so, annoyed that the gloves had to be on with the mundanes—scratch that—normals around.

<Hah. Linguistics. We really need better vocabulary.> Gene mused.

<Yeah. They’re either a slur or a default. Can’t say I like it either. Speaking of them…> It wasn’t lost on Colin that the Greens may well have put themselves in danger on their behalf.

<Yeah. They may have stepped in it.> Gene agreed. <You thinking what I’m thinking?>

<Yeah.>
“Mister and Missus Green?” Colin said, turning toward them as they cleaned the makeup off themselves.

“You can use our first names, you know.” Tisha replied.

“What she said. What’s up?” Tyrone agreed.

“I…we, want to thank you for that. You could have made your point without going to bat for us that hard.” Colin told them sincerely.

“Shit Colin, you two saved our son. You talked us out of making a big mistake. Besides, the rest of us have a little reading club going. We’ve been educating ourselves and what the Earth Alliance did was…” Tyrone was at a loss for words.

“Fucking monstrous. We were, no, we are complicit in that. We shouldn’t get cookies for being baseline decent people.” Tisha supplied, and she meant every word of it.

“Be that as it may” Colin replied “You may have put yourselves at risk and we want to extend our protection, if you’ll have it. We uh… don’t have that many friends and allies. We don’t abandon them.”

“I’m not sure I understand.” Tisha informed them, asking for clarification.

“He means that we stood up to be counted as friends of telepaths, and the Corps in particular. Someone might think we’re an easy target because we can’t kill people with our brains.” Tyrone supplied. “Same thing happened with white civil rights activists during Jim Crow.”

“Shit.” Tisha cursed. “How likely, do you think?”

“One second.” Colin said and listened to the city itself. There was an undercurrent of angry in the Stadtgeist, not at anything systemic, but immediate. The bloodhounds, the serial killer, those wild accusations. The centroid of the city was angrier than it usually was, but it wasn’t the average that was the problem, it was the outliers. The tail end of the distribution. He opened up his comm unit again and slid the slider from Orange a place between Orange and Yellow.

“What was that? Was that a terror alert?” Tyrone asked.

“Something like that, yeah.” Colin replied, showing him the user interface “Sort of our emergency broadcast system. Red is normal. Orange is a suggestion to exercise caution. Yellow is a suggestion to seek and secure shelter as protection against lone wolf hate crimes. Green is to seek shelter from possible or active anti-telepath riots or organized attack. Blue is a terrorism alert. Indigo is an active pogrom.” He didn’t mention that the slider could go into the ultraviolet, x ray, or gamma spectrum.

“You… you have an early warning system for ethnic cleansing?” Tyrone didn’t really ask, completely dumbfounded and thinking ‘that’s fucked up’.

“Yep. First time I’ve had to use it this year though. We were at green when York endorsed Clark in 2058.” Colin replied. “Right now, I don’t expect much more than broken windows or isolated hate crimes if someone gets caught out.”

“But you want to be sure. Jesus fuck.” It wasn’t until that moment that Tyrone really understood on a visceral level what was going on. The tight-rope telepaths had to walk. But then, having to have an app for hate crime alerts and pogrom warnings and treating it as if it was just a life hazard was, Colin supposed, somewhat visceral.
<Is it fucked up that we’re so blasé about that?> Gene asked.

<Probably. But we grew up with it and it’s not like we use it all the time. I haven’t even really thought about it for months.>

“Well um, what kind of protection are you talking about?” Tisha asked.

“Well, that depends on you. If your building has controlled access we’ll just take you home. If it doesn’t, we have spare rooms in the annex. I’m not too worried about after tonight, but I’ll assess then.”

“Oh, our building is access controlled. Gate with a physical key and we’re on an upper floor.” Tyrone confirmed.

“Okay. Then we’ll make sure you get home safely. We brought the car this time. No public transit.” Colin assured him. Then he remembered his conversation with Francois “Oh, and one other thing.”

<He agreed?> Gene asked

<Wait your turn, lover> Colin replied, stimulating his nerves so he felt a kiss on the cheek.

“What is it?” Tisha asked, “Something good from your voice…”

“Yeah! I talked to our planetary administrator. We’re going to set up schools. Might be a bit while we secure buildings and bring in staff, but I think we can get away with housing Sam and the others at the annex and bring in some instructors in the interim.”

Friday February 27th, 2263

Colin and Gene had spent most of the night awake on pins and needles waiting on reports of violence, but thankfully nothing escalated too far. Some graffiti, messages sent on bricks through windows, threatening emails, and hang-up calls. Upon waking up, a few telepaths had been subjected to harassment and two had been attacked, but nothing serious. They were being looked at and Hassan was searching CCTV footage for the assailants.

It bothered him. The whole incident, no matter how much he tried to shake it, grated on Colin’s sense of justice. Mundanes could murder telepaths and not only would they not get convicted, but most mundanes would cry crocodile tears about the treatment of telepaths, but never work to change it. The Greens and Rabbi Liebgott were some of only a handful of mundanes who ever actually did anything meaningful.

The fact remained, telepaths could be ambushed on ISN and be unable to argue their own side. He’d gotten lucky that he’d manage to effectively convert some mundanes, and he knew it. Even then, it hadn’t been enough to prevent the masses from making the lives of telepaths hell; and there was nothing he could do about it. Even if Hassan found footage, there was little chance of justice being done.

Then there was whatever little shitstain leaked sensitive documents. That person he could do something about.

Colin stalked down the hall and poked his head into Franklin’s office. It was early, and the poor man was still staring blankly at the wall sipping on his first of several pots of water of life. Colin
did what he could to keep from being visibly angry or projecting his anger in any way. He may or may not have succeeded.

“Hey Franklin.” He greeted the sleep deprived programmer, who turned his head slowly and at a tilt.

“Morning. I can’t say it’s good. What’s up, other than the cursed day-star?” Franklin said, taking another sip of coffee that was the same shade as his skin.

“My profile of our unknown subject got leaked from Earth Force Security. Once you’re awake and have a chance, if you wouldn’t mind tracing it?” Colin asked.

“Sure. I’ll put that on my to-do list.” Franklin clumsily reached over to a white board and uncapped a marker. For a computer specialist, Colin thought Franklin did certain things uncharacteristically old school. He wrote ‘pluggin’ the leaks like yeah’ under ‘To-do’.

“Thanks Franklin.” Colin said, pulling his head back out of the office.

…

Two hours later and Colin, for once, had Gene down on the mat with a rapier at his throat. His daily training session helped him take his mind off things, and winning was even better for that.

“I think that’s match.” Colin beamed triumphantly down at him, and tore off his mask so he could breath more freely. Gene did the same, sweat pouring down his face, panting. Colin felt mischief come over Gene and then Gene’s mental shields snapped into place even as Colin reached down to help him up. Colin didn’t have time to even be curious as to why before Gene had his hand and used his legs to trip him to the mat and pin Colin with his hands above his head.

“Gene! What the” he was cut off by his fiancé pressing their lips together in a kiss born of raw barely-restrained lust. It wasn’t the soul-sharing intimacy Gene was after this time, but an outlet for the needs of the flesh. Colin enjoyed both forms and returned that kiss enthusiastically. Gene had been waiting to be beaten. He didn’t want to be beaten so didn’t let it happen, but the fact that Colin had done it honestly was a massive turn-on. Colin understood, profoundly, he just hadn’t taken matters into his own hands like that post-fencing. Post workout yes, not post-fencing.

The only problem, and both of them knew it, was that it was the beginning of their work day rather than the end. Gene moaned in frustration and broke the kiss.

“Next time you kick my ass, have the decency to do it when we’re not on duty.” He suggested, pressing his forehead to Colin’s and releasing Colin’s hands. Colin ran his gloves fingertips up Gene’s sides, though the protective gear got in the way.

“Well, at least we’ll both have blue balls.” Colin joked.

“Ugh. Don’t remind me.” Gene chuckled, then got serious. “I was a little abrupt there. Sorry.” He said sheepishly.

“Gene.” Colin assured him “If you ever do something I don’t like, you’ll know. I won’t even need to say anything. I was a little surprised, but I liked it.” He kissed Gene’s nose and grinned.

“Okay.” Gene took in a deep breath in let it out “We should probably get to actual work but…God I love you.” Gene couldn’t help himself, he kissed Colin again, gentle and languid both keeping themselves just on the precipice of letting their subjective perceptions mingle.
<Love you too> Colin replied, but then his mind went on alert because someone was coming down
the stairs. They didn’t have time to disentangle themselves and get off the floor when Franklin
walked in.

“Well, this is the height of professionalism on display right here.” He said, his voice dripping with
the kind of sarcasm that indicated he was just giving them shit. “I’ve wondered why you two spend
so much time down here.”

“Sorry.” Colin said “I uh… accidently found Gene’s fetish.” Franklin raised an eyebrow.

“Getting my ass kicked.” Gene supplied.

“I’m not touching that with a three-meter pole.” Franklin joked. “Anyway, I managed to track
down the guy who leaked. He made it disturbingly easy.”

Gene rolled off Colin’s chest and let him up, letting Colin help him to his feet that time around.


“He used an anonymous file-hosting site. The ISN shell site linked to it there rather than hosting it
themselves, but they don’t have any actual data protections. His IP address was listed. Went back
to his precinct and from there I could figure out who was logged into the computer that uploaded
the documents.”

“Who was it?” Gene prodded.

“Kevin Woolsey.” Franklin answered. For a moment Colin didn’t know who that was but it
popped into Gene’s mind first. He was the guy who forced them to bring out Bubbles the Monkey
during a briefing.

we have a reprimand to administer.”

“Shouldn’t that come from his commanding officer?” Gene asked.

“Not the one I have planned.” Colin paused “I'm going to beat him with the criminal code.”

Colin opened the precinct door and headed straight for Steve’s office. The enlisted men and
women in the bullpen, formerly busy filing reports and doing other paperwork either before or after
going out on patrol rounds tried very hard to ignore them. Steve had his own office away from
everyone else but not so far to be unseemly. Colin got the impression that it was the sort of thing
where Steve was considered low-key tainted for working with the Corps.

Gene knocked on the closed office door.

“Come on in!” Steve replied through the door and Gene opened it up, revealing a neat and tidy
office where Steve still practically drowned in bureaucracy. He might have been the Psi Corps
liaison, but that was part time. His main job was still a detective, and with Captain Roach off on
Friday, he was precinct CO as a CWO.

“Hi Steve!” Colin said in greeting. Steve gave them both the stink-eye.

“You didn’t tell me, guys.” Steve said flatly, and like Trisha was masking his surface thoughts with
nursery rhymes. Gene winced.

“Yeah, sorry about that… things got complicated and we got busy.”

“I bet you did.” Steve winked, and both telepaths knew that everything was okay because Steve stopped masking. He was just giving them shit. “But I get it. Your caseload has been kinda special, not much time for anythin' social.”

“Well, that and we can't get enough of each other. You know how new couples are.” Gene said, winking across the office. Steve laughed from his belly.

“That I do! How long?” he asked.

“Well… kinda depends on your definitions.” Colin answered, Steve raised an eyebrow. “We officially became a couple about two minutes after we left your apartment, but really, we pretty much were anyway without realizing it.”

“Yeah. I’d peg the actual start as the ninth.” Gene finished the thought.

“Huh. And you don’t think you’re rushin’ things a bit?” Steve asked. Colin didn't think so, but then he didn't have much experience with relationships of any romantic sort.

“Nope!” they replied in unison, before a quick mental negotiation had Colin explaining “It’s hard to explain. I’ve seen Gene’s soul. He’s seen mine. We’re… compatible. Plus, we don’t have communication issues because we don’t really shield our thoughts anymore, trust is absolute etcetera.”

“So what you’re sayin’ is, because your telepaths, a lot of the problems we have just don’t apply?” Steve asked. “And all that you fed my wife about arranged marriages not being so bad in comparison to marrying young?”

“Still true.” Gene replied “I wasn’t lying just… omitting a third category. The sort of couple that gets together when they’re sixteen and stays together until they’re eighty. When they’re young, they don’t know that’s what they are. We're pretty sure. That’s the difference.”

“But teenagers don’t know when they’re not, either.” Colin added. “They lack a frame of reference.”

“Alright. So long as you know what you’re doin’. What did you come by for anyway?”

“Plugging a leak.” Colin said evenly. “Someone here put our people at risk and made our investigation more difficult.”

“Some people around here have been complainin’ that you guys don’t have skin in the game. Ain’t your people dyin’ and all that.” Steve informed them, he didn’t believe that himself, but Colin had to bite back the urge to shoot the messenger.

“The unsub isn’t getting what he wants. So, he waits a while, thinks, figures out what else he might want to try. Then he finds another victim. The cycle can take weeks and he keeps his victims alive for a while.” Colin said, doing everything he could to keep a neutral tone. “Now he knows what he needs to do. He’ll burn out the mind of a victim within hours and then he’s had a taste, he’ll want more almost immediately.”

“You’re sayin’ he’ll accelerate a lot?” Steve asked, understanding causing his eyes to widen.
“Yes. And you’re fellow officers are right, Steve. It’s not our people dying, which means we can remain objective.” Colin informed him. "We know every telepath this bastard will kill. They're family. If he takes one of ours, you won't be dealing with two relatively dispassionate investigators anymore. You'll be dealing with the victim's brothers losing their minds with worry. We’re arresting Woolsey.”

“Christ, that stupid fuck? Loudest of them all.” Steve asked but notably didn’t protest Woolsey’s arrest. He could imagine the charges. Disseminating restricted files, obstruction of justice, reckless endangerment. “I take it he left a data trail?”

“And how. Franklin found him pretty quick while half-asleep.” Gene confirmed.

“Do it then. I’ll call his lawyer and union rep. You going to interrogate him here?”

“Yeah. Put in a call to the Public Defender’s office too. They’ll send a legal telepath over to observe and ensure that all of his rights are being respected.” Gene advised grudgingly.

Kevin Woolsey was at his desk going over security camera footage from 2261 when Colin and Gene approached him. Just seeing him made Colin see red.

“Warrant Officer Kevin Woolsey.” Colin said, in a voice that would carry throughout the entire precinct. Woolsey looked up at them.

“Shite.” Was all he said as the realization that he’d been caught flashed into his mind. Both telepaths ignored it as inadmissible.

“Shite is correct. You are under arrest for disseminating restricted files, obstruction of justice, and if any telepaths get hurt or die as a result of your stupidity we’ll tack reckless endangerment on there too.” Colin went through the motions of charging and mirandizing him. “You have the right to remain silent and anything you say may be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to refuse a telepathic scan. You have the right to an attorney, if you cannot afford an attorney one will be appointed to you. If you wish to waive that right and answer questions without consulting an attorney, you can of course stop at any time. Do you understand these rights as I have informed you?”

“Yeah. Lawyer. I’m clammin’ right up.”

“They’ve been called. Please come with us. We won’t be holding you at our facility but yours, so we’ll just be over in interrogation room one.” Gene assured him. Woolsey was relieved by that and stood up, assuming the position to be cuffed. Gene shackled him and they down a hall and down a flight of stairs and down a hallway past the holding cells to the interrogation rooms. The other officers looked on in shock.

They set him inside and left him there before retiring to the observation room. Once there, Colin dimmed the lights inside the interrogation room and brightened those in observation so that it would act as a mirror on their side; reassuring Mr. Woolsey that he couldn’t be scanned. Colin was sorely tempted to do it anyway, but he restrained himself.

“You really want to throw the book at him like this?” Gene asked.

“We can’t let some petulant mundane dick us around. If we can’t trust these people to keep working documents secret because it’s good practice, then they’ll just have to fear us.” Gene looked and felt concerned. Should he?
“You alright?” Gene asked, drawing the blinds so the mundane couldn’t see inside before turning his attention to rubbing Colin’s shoulders.

“I’m just tired. Sick and god damn tired of…” he made an omnibus gesture with both hands, unable to put his frustration into words. Being denied a voice in how he was ruled; having to partially blind himself for mundane’s peace of mind or walk on egg-shells to avoid suspicion when he didn’t bother; being systematically denied justice of any kind except for what he took into his own hands; fending off two genocide attempts with what amounted to a stick. And that was just the big stuff. Women in particular weren’t even allowed to have a bad hair day or they risked abuse either to themselves or someone else.

Thankfully, Gene didn’t need words to know exactly what he meant.

“Now, the killing will accelerate and it’ll be our people doing the dying, all because that little fuckboy got his feels in a tizzy because he had to do the work his department should have done years ago.” His rant was starting to subside, rage replaced by a quiet resentment “And I’m sick of just… meekly taking it.”

“I know exactly how you feel, but sweetheart, do we even have jurisdiction over this case? Shouldn’t it be up to the JAG office?” Gene understood of course, and he was right. The law did matter. As much as Colin hated it.

“We forward the case to them then. They wouldn’t have taken notice of it at all otherwise.” Colin replied bitterly. “And they’ll let him walk, probably…” he added at the tail end.

“And we’re back to square one, but at least we’ll have cost the bastard a few weeks or months of fear. He’ll lose his security clearance and get nothing but skut work. And we send that message.” Gene reasoned. "It's the best we can do without putting most of our institutional bridges to the torch."

“I suppose that will just have to do...” Colin assured Gene “But from now on, we take no shit from mundanes, within the bounds of the law when we can. We tell them to fuck themselves and check their privilege, we file lawsuits, we leverage the fact that we’re organized labor with no scabs. Everything. We don't just grin and bear their bullshit anymore.”

"That's a proposal I can get behind Colin." Gene agreed.

…

It took an hour for anyone to show up while Mr. Woolsey sweated in the interrogation room, when the knock on the door did come, it was a lawyer from the JAG office. It seemed to Gene that Steve noticed the jurisdictional issue. She wore the rank insignia of a major, was Japanese, and all of 160 cm tall; but looked like she was made of steel cable

“I really don’t like being called in to prosecute a case I didn’t initiate…” she said “But from what Mr. Washington tells me, it’s pretty serious and you have the goods. What’s going on?”

“Well… do you prefer Counselor or Major?” Gene asked.

“Major.” Major Hinata Sato replied coolly.

“Well Major, our profile of a serial killer leaked yesterday. We found out on ISN last night.” Colin informed her. He didn't know what to make of her; Major Sato's mind was like clockwork and didn't betray much in the way of emotions.
“Yes. I saw. I’m willing to bet Ms Nguyen arranged the leak.” Colin was intrigued and so was Gene.

“What makes you say that?” Colin asked.

“That bait and switch she pulled takes some time to plan. She couldn’t have conceived of it and gotten everything arranged in an afternoon.” The Major replied back. “If so, we’ll forward the case to civilian prosecutors.”

“Woah. Uh, I didn’t think that would be a thing. Freedom of the Press and all that.” Gene remarked.

“Had she simply obtained it, sure. But suborning Earth Force personnel without exposing wrongdoing? That’s several crimes. We’ll probably lose but it’ll make her life hell for a while.” She replied. Colin was confused. Why on earth would she do that? Certainly not for them; and it wasn’t. Not as such. Major Sato was offended and angry with Trisha Nguyen and Kevin Woolsey on pure principle.

“Don’t give me that look Dr. Meier. It’s not that hard to grasp.” She replied to something present only on Colin's face. "Their little stunt made solving a criminal investigation harder and put innocent people at risk. I have no patience for that. What evidence do you have?” Colin handed her the data pad. She read over the results of Franklin’s search.

“Your guy is good. I can use this. I’ve got it from here, you can go.” Major Sato informed them in physical and mental tones that betrayed absolutely nothing but their bare facts of what she said. Colin actually had to take a look to make sure she wasn't a telepath. She wasn't. Her mind was just that well disciplined and she was taking it upon herself to safeguard her own privacy. Colin decided he might like her.

<Would staying count as ‘not taking shit from mundanes’?> Gene asked.

<No. No. This one is not someone to piss off. Besides, she treats us with respect, even if it’s terse. We’ll go.>
Zara's face materialized on the screen as the call connected and she looked both proud of herself, and slightly chastened. Colin thought that last part was odd, Zara normally had pretty good self-esteem so the combination was somewhat off-putting. Gene noticed it too and said something about it.

"Hey Zara, anything interesting happen this week?" he asked.

'Was that shame?' Colin asked himself as her expression changed.

<That was shame.> Gene replied.

"I um... I got a visit from the Grins." She replied, a little downcast. Colin immediately wondered what she could have done, and the only thing he could think of was that she might have broken one of their rules on combat telepathy in some way.

"Zara, what happened?" He asked.

"We have a new kid." She started "Julie was being mean to him when the house-parent's weren't looking and I didn't like that so she might have ended up with pigeon poop in her hair. And shoulders. All I did was suggest that she might make a good statue!" Colin was laughing inside, and Gene was almost laughing outside. Partially because it was funny and partially because what she did wasn't nearly as bad as it could have been.

"And why did the Grins come have a talk with you? Why was that wrong?" It was almost a rhetorical question. Gene wanted to know what lesson she took away from it, he wasn't asking why what she did was bad because he didn't know.

"Because I should have told the teachers..." Zara replied.

"Obviously, but do you know why?" Colin followed up "Let's dig a bit deeper here. Don't get us wrong, we're actually proud of you for wanting to stick up for someone like that, but there is a reason why you're supposed to tell the teachers instead of doing it yourself." Zara thought about it for a minute. She didn't look like she was struggling conceptually but in how to put it into words. Colin's own experiences with the Grins were limited, he was always well behaved, but they always put the necessary lesson directly into his mind. He understood, but articulating it later could be difficult.

"I think it's for two reasons." Zara said "The first is that The Corps isn't... it isn't hot." she didn't know the right word to use and tried to explain what she meant "It isn't angry. It isn't taking things personally, and so can be fair."

"The word you're looking for is dispassionate, little monkey." Colin helpfully suggested.

"Yeah that one! The other reason is that we're not savages. We have a system of justice in place for dealing with people doing bad things and we should use it instead of doing revenge. The Grins told me that revenge hurts us just as much as it does the other person. It's easy to take it too far and
that it consumes us and stains our souls." Zara told them, contemplating the concept "But I'm not sure that's always true. What do we do when revenge is all there is? When the system of justice fails or gets rigged so we can't have it?"

<How the hell do we even answer that?> Colin asked.

<As with all things, the truth...> Gene replied. <She's going to be on the receiving end of this as an adult too, and she needs to know someone's in her corner. Granted, it isn't a secure line so we can't be too obvious about it.>

"That's a question that's stumped smarter people than either of us. We can only tell you what we'd do if that were true." Gene said, putting just enough emphasis on the last part of the sentence to maybe give her a clue that it was what they did do. "We might resort to vigilante justice. Punishment that's proportionate and fitting the crime in its... essential character. And we would only do it on behalf of others, not ourselves. To maintain that objectivity."

"What would that look like? What sort of things would you do?" Zara asked, putting a slight emphasis on the 'would' to indicate that she got the message.

"Well... say for example that a mundane kidnapped a young telepath and made them do things they didn't want to do..." Colin speculated "I might make him afraid to touch other people for the rest of his life to deny him the human connections her turned to violence with his victim."

"Yes we can do that sweetpea, and no, we're not teaching you until you're older." Gene followed up before the question even occurred to her. "If you ever end up working in Metapol or Medical though, you'll learn how in school."

Monday March 2nd, 2263

Gene and Colin were both sitting down on the mat to begin scan and counter exercises. Colin opened his randomly selected envelope and burned the image of a melting pufferfish into his mind. Then his comm unit rang its emergency alert at him, jolting him out of his pre-battle meditation in a sudden spike of adrenaline. He reached into his pocket, grabbed the small device and answered the call.

“This is—” Colin was cut off immediately by the spanish accented voice of a man he knew, Carlos Rivera, in pain and in a state of panic.

“Gracias Dios! Colin, he’s Car-HNNNG” he sounded like he was desperately straining against something “I don’t know how long I can hold him off!” Colin could hear Carlos’ footsteps, and the voices of other people. He was in a busy area, but no one else was responding to a telepath running for his life. For a brief second, that made Colin unspeakably angry but then he realized it could be something else. He’d done something like that himself before. Hedging out the ability of mundanes to perceive him and his targets. The mundanes didn't know he was there. A cold shiver ran down Colin's spine.

'If this guy is powerful enough to do that more or less untrained...'

<Shit.> Gene mentally spat, reaching the same conclusion <He’s not lower end. This could get really bad.>

<I know.>
“Carlos! Do you know where you are?!” Colin asked. It was all he could think to ask as he got up, motioned for Gene to join him, and trotted and to the weapons locker. Punching in the key code, Colin removed two PPGs as sidearms, and threw out a pair of flak jackets. Gene grabbed the rifles. Colin reached out with his mind, beyond line of sight, beyond the concrete ceiling and floor above and broadcast as hard as he could.

<Trace Carlos Rivera’s comms. Get emergency services including medical telepaths there right now. Call mundane security as well. Query all local camera feeds.>

“No! The streets signs are all melted and I don’t know what’s where anymore… he doesn’t even have line of sight!” Carlos was starting to cry. “GAGHG” then it sounded like he fell. No line of sight either. Colin could speak to someone, maybe scan their surface thoughts. He couldn't actually attack someone, even weakened, without being able to see them. Not acting along. Colin knew that the only way someone could do that is if they were off the standard scale, a P11 or P12 on dust was the only way outside Vorlon intervention and Colin doubted that. The only reason Carlos was holding on at all was that he’d broken line of sight and weakened whatever it was the unsub was doing to him.

“Carlos?! You still with me buddy?” Carlos could only whimper in reply. Both Colin and Gene removed their rings from their hands and affixed them to the chains around their necks. Colin realized he couldn't get there in time. There was no way. Not if the unsub didn't need to see the poor man. “Carlos? We can’t stop him from taking you, but we can come get you. But I need you to help me do that okay? We need you to keep hold of your comm unit so we can track it. If you can’t do that, when you feel our minds reach out to you, reach back or find a way to scream. Don’t worry about line of sight, Gene and I have that covered okay?”

An affirmative sob was all they got back for a few seconds until Carlos started to yell. “No! No! Get away from m-- HNNGNG! ¡Hijo de puta!” After that it was the sounds of a brief scuffle and terrified screaming before the call ended. Colin put on the flak jacked and belt for the sidearm, and placed a spare energy cap and two extra mags of 5.56 mm ammo into it’s ammo pouches. Gene did the same and they bolted up the stairs, Hassan met them at the top.

“I’ve sent you the tracking data. I don’t know how, but he kept his comms.” Hassan informed him while running down the stairs at a dead sprint.

Gerald shouted across the hall from his own desk. “Talking to CWO Washington, Captain Roach is slow-rolling Security response, but EMS and Medical Telepaths are on route. I’m updating them with tracking data as it comes in and I’ve sent the feed to both of you.”

The collective response to the knowledge that Captain Roach was intentionally dragging his heels could be characterized as ‘That son of a bitch’. Colin figured it was because he’d jammed up Kevin Woolsey, but at least now he knew Earth Force, with the exception of Steve and the JAG office, was actively hostile. As much as he hated it, he’d use it to extract concessions out of the government.

“Thanks Gerald, but we really need to run.” Gene replied as Colin opened the door.

…”

The Psi Cops pulled up alongside the curb about a block away from their target location. Gene didn't know if he was excited or terrified. Some part of him liked combat, he was proud of what he'd been trained for. On the other hand, he was going into battle with the man he loved against someone who stood a good chance of simply annihilating them. There was a chance one of both of them wasn't going to come out, and he didn't think he could live with himself if he survived and
Colin didn't. He also knew that Colin was thinking the same thing. His blocks were tight, but Colin was still leaking through only to him.

'Both of us come back alive or neither.' Colin thought, and Gene reached over and took his hand as they approached.

'We're both coming back. Even if I have to follow you to the liminality and drag your ass out.' Gene told him

'Don't think for a second that I won't do the same for you.' Colin replied <No one dies today. I'm rejecting the concept of funerals.>

Emergency medical services, along with a cohort of telepaths from Medical division lead by Doctors Cavanaugh and Petrovich milled about in an empty lot they'd picked as an assembly area. Albert, Fatima, Machteld, and Sam were also there, arrayed around Nishita. Colin and Gene both expressed telepathic concern.

<THEY INSISTED> Nishita sent <THEY DIDN'T WANT TO SEE ANOTHER TELEPATH DIE ALONE IN THE DARK IF THEY COULD HELP IT.>

“We can speak for ourselves Doctor.” Fatima interjected verbally so everyone including the mundanes could hear “But yeah, that. You’ll need all the help you can get and we’re not taking no for an answer.”

“She’s not wrong.” Gene said to Colin, shrugging. He was not at all sanguine about the prospect of dealing with a high psi-rating telepath on dust. Neither of them wanted those four in danger, but there they were, in badges and gloves, with looks of stolid determination on their faces.

“Fuck it. They'll be useful and they're volunteering.” Colin agreed, then stepped forward to address everyone. A second vehicle pulled up behind them. Gene turned at the same time Colin did, almost expecting to see Earth Force Security forces there to impede them in some way. Instead, it was their own prisoner transport van. Gerald opened the driver side door and stepped out, Su exited from the shotgun position and ran around to open the back; Franklin, Erika, Max, Hoshi, Eduardo, and Hassan emerged. All armed with PPGs and in flak jackets.

“We figured ‘Hey we all went through the assault course, why not tag along?’.” Hoshi informed everyone. Colin had been with these same people for over a year. He’d made sure they’d all gone through that assault course, even if he hoped they’d never need it and he’d never put them at risk; but they’d volunteered, and the upwelling of pride he felt for them in that moment almost moved Gene to tears by proxy.

“Guys you didn’t have to—” Colin started before Max cut him off mid-sentence.

“Sure we did ya nudnik. We’re mishpocheh. Someone armed has to be out here if he gets past you” his voice got quiet “and to come in after you. Both of you.” Max assured him. A wave of affection hit both of them then, and Gene felt it twice. Once through himself, and again through his and Colin's backchannel. They'd treated him like family from day one, and he'd always known it wasn't an affectionation or the cultural convention of the Corps, but he'd never felt it like that before. The incredible feeling of solidarity with all of them he felt right then made his heart sing. He gathered it into himself, and sent it back to each and every one of them.

“Okay. Let’s do this.” Colin agreed after a moment of basking in the warmth of his village. “The unknown subject has one of ours: Carlos Rivera.” The collective of telepaths bristled with anger and worry. “Captain Roach is withholding his troops, so with the exception of EMS—thank you,
by the way—we have to do this by ourselves.”

Just before Gene went on to tell everyone what they would need to do, he felt the collective mass of telepaths solidify into a monolith of resolve. There were twenty-four of them, twenty-six with the Psi Cops. They didn’t need mundanes to rescue one of their own.

“The unsub can use reality fabrication and scan well enough to shatter the defenses of a P8 without line of sight. He can also obscure himself and at least one other from large crowds of mundanes at the same time.” Gene informed everyone. The vocal and telepathic murmurs told Gene that they understood. When enhanced by dust, the unknown subject was at least a P13, possibly even a P14.

“We don’t know how he did it, but Carlos managed to keep hold of his comm unit, so we have satellites tracking it. It’s in a condemned tenement block about a block away, but could be beneath it. First, Dr. Cavanaugh, Dr. Petrovich, Max, Erika. You’ve all been trained in attack probes so you’re the group leaders.” The two psychiatrists looked at the two Legal specialists with a quizzical expression.

<Who do you think Colin was practicing with before Gene got here?> Erika asked them. Nishita snorted.

“Adults” Gene said, pointedly excluding the teenagers, but placated their protests with a raised index finger, he’d get to them in a moment. “Split up with them. You’ll be searching for and covering all entrances to the building, including finding entrances into the maintenance tunnels. Once you’ve found them, gestalt your minds and do a search and rescue scan. Medical telepaths will be lead on those.”

“Because we know how to do them!” one of them shouted from the back.

“Yes you do!” Colin shouted back.

“Was sollen wir machen?” Machteld asked what they’d be doing.

“You” Colin said “Are the lynch pin. Each one of you will go with one group and keep them all communicating. If the unknown subject gets past us or…takes us out…you four can act as a bridge for everyone else to form telepath Voltron and hit him like freight train. Your job is help everyone keep him contained.” No one other than Colin actually knew who or what Voltron was, but it painted a picture without anyone getting the reference.

“As for you guys!” Colin addressed the mundane EMS personnel “Get ready for a show. Also, please stand by for casualties. This guy is stronger than a P12 when he’s high. If we come out…it might be in dire need of medical attention, and Mr. Rivera almost certainly will. Stay out of line of sight of the building. That should provide some protection and if these guys have to, they can jam and shield you entirely.”

…

Everyone split into their groups. Dr. Cavanaugh had Sam, Gerald, and Franklin as well as a few telepathic nurses and EMTs. Dr. Petrovich had Fatima, Hoshi, and Eduardo in addition to a few medical teeps. Max had Machteld, Su, and Hassan. Erika was with Albert and a slightly larger group of medical telepaths. All of them crept the several hundred meters to their target building, approaching from the north and using anything they could to restrict line of sight and close their perimeter.

There were two main entrances, one east entrance, one west. The apartment block itself was one of
the oldest on the planet, and fallen into disrepair long before the planetary government finally
decided to condemn and eventually demolish it. It rose six stories up and was constructed in one
of the ugliest resin material imaginable; it looked like it was made of partially melted wax with
windows that were pressed into place. The big steel-framed doorways looked out of place, almost
like the building was molded around them but not smoothed properly.

‘What the hell is that shit?’ Colin asked himself.

<Lipolite> Hassan said, over the mental connection shared through all of them by way of the
teenage telepaths. <Weird architectural fad in the 2210s... built to last.>

<Cut the side chatter please.> Colin sent back <I didn’t mean that thought to go out…>

He felt everyone tighten their blocks up to prevent further relay leakage. There were mundanes on
the streets but they were quickly clearing out. Seeing two dozen telepaths all at once, some of
them armed, was enough to make all but the most stout-hearted of mundanes flee the vicinity and
they were making their way somewhere else. Anywhere else.

<Maintenance tunnel entrance found> Dr. Petrovich informed Colin and Gene, then pinged it’s
location to his comm unit.

<Same here.> Max said, also pinging the location.

<Okay everyone. Prepare for Search and Rescue Scan.> from Dr. Cavanaugh

Colin and Gene moved closer to the building and Colin felt everyone’s mind join and weave
together into a tapestry and cover the apartment block with their power, using their collective wills
to transcend their own limits and tunnel through lipolite, concrete, steel, and earth.

<Consensus: We have Carlos’ mind. Sub-basement. Connections with maintenance tunnels
and stairs.> the collective thought boomed through Colin’s consciousness, the voices of two
dozen telepaths acting in concert for a single purpose. It was a thing of such sublime beauty that it
almost distracted him from what he was actually supposed to be doing.

Still, that explained how he was moving unobserved, there were no cameras in those tunnels. Gene
and Colin unslung their rifles and made entry through the East door. Colin looked around for the
staircase that would take them down into the basement levels, but Gene caught his eye waving at
him. He looked, Gene took his gloves off and pocketed them. They’d have to join their minds
together to beat this guy and that was easier with bare skin contact. It was a good suggestion, so
Colin removed and pocketed his own gloves.

Gene found the staircase first and mentally vectored Colin in on it. They stacked up on either side
of the entrance and Colin popped out his little periscope to check around the doorframe. The
staircase was clear. Gene took point, going down the stairs at a half crouch, one eye down the iron
sights of his rifle and the other scanning for threads. Colin followed just behind and offset on the
opposite wall to keep themselves out of the same fire-lane. Colin felt nervous and checked his
safety. It was on, and he made sure it stayed that way. Gene caught onto the precaution and did
the same.

Then they felt a brief telepathic maelstrom below them and to the North. Max’s group.

<Consensus: Unknown subject attempted escape via the tunnels with Carlos. We engaged
and have driven him back into the sub-basement.>
As they descended the second flight of stairs into the sub-basement, Colin felt Carlos’ mind. He was terrified and in immense pain. He was also restrained. Not just physically, but mentally. Colin realized he was brain-locked into a scan, taking the neural processing load for the unknown subject’s damaged neuroanatomy, and he’d been that way for a while. At least twenty minutes. He didn’t have long. Colin felt something, like a shadow pass over him while his eyes were closed and noticed the intrusion into his mind too late to stop it.

For the first time in his life, Colin lost control of his own motor cortex. It was a disconcerting and horrifying sensation as his body was roughly forced to face his lover, aim the gun, and pull the trigger. Gene had been forced to turn on his axis and do the same. He felt Gene’s own panic and horror as his finger squeezed the little lever against his will, with his entire consciousness screaming at his motor cortex to stop! Stop! For the love of God stop! Frenzied thoughts like that bounced between them in the fractional second before they both expected to die.

The actions clicked impotently; the unsub didn’t realize the safety interlocks were engaged, though they hadn’t remembered either in their own mind-numbing panic. The momentary confusion experienced by the unknown subject whose enemies weren’t dead gave the two Psi Cops just enough time to reassert control, step into line with each other, and join hands.

Their minds intermingled at their mutual consent, merging into a gestalt consciousness greater than the mere sum of its parts. Their shared will and desire to protect the other joined and their mental defenses snapped into place. Parallel processing allowed them to simultaneously attack and defend even without giving a battle of Imago to their enemy and do both at their combined strength.

They stared at the unknown subject across the featureless void of the mindscape, intervening walls and a lack of line of sight no longer relevant. Behind and above the unknown subject hovered a swirling vortex of thought and emotion (Nishita), a wheel of flaming eyes (Max), a chorus of Seraphim (Erika), a swarm of paper wasps (Dmitry), an army of avenging dead (Machteld); whatever visualization pleased whichever mind was momentarily dominant in the hive mind at street level.

Colin and Gene no longer talked to each other in their minds or even caught each other’s thoughts and emotions. They had attributed ideas and thoughts in their quorum awareness.


<Colin: Done.>

The unknown subject was no longer an emotionally and psychologically crippled insane P12. Now he was just an insane P14. They didn’t need to assess him consciously, they simply Knew, and they had to treat him accordingly. There was still a chance he could overpower them.

<No! Everyone else garbage/trash/useless, finally REGAINED! Pleased the Master. MustdefeatservantsofGOD! Too late to go back. No forgiveness, no redemption, toofrageoneforthat no no tainted by witchcraft and they mustn’t suffer me to live!>

Gene’s consciousness tried to reason with him. <Do you even know what you are? You’re not a witch and we’re not servants of God. We’re all just telepaths and you’re very sick. We can help you. Let us free our friend and we’ll make sure no one hurts you. There is forgiveness, even for what you’ve done.> Gene's consciousness wasn't lying. There was forgiveness for him. There was treatment. All he needed to do was not fight.

<God cannot deceive, but his minions can! Sin sin SIN can be forgiven if done in HIS name. No salvation for me, written in the Book of Death.>
Colin’s residual self informed Gene’s that there was no reasoning with him. Anything would just get incorporated into the delusion. The only thing that would stop him was to bring him down and pump him full of drugs and see if psychosurgery could do anything.

Gene’s sense of self acquiesced and launched an assault. It wasn’t subtle or nuanced, he simply dug deep into both of their outrage at the state of the world and formed it into an attack to rake at the unknown subject’s thoughts. They heard him chanting in the real world as he formed a shield around himself, speaking in gibberish that seemed to have some sort of meaning to him, his avatar in the mindscape lifted its hands and tendrils rose from the subjective floor and entangled Gene’s probe, another shouted word of power and he disassembled his shield. Shattering it and using the shards of his own will as a weapon.

Colin’s identity was on defense and he dredged both his and Gene’s reserves of thought and emotion, hooking into their memories of all the people they cared about and conceptualized them as whipple shield: a multi-layered spaced armor composite. The shards penetrated the first, second, third layers, shattering and becoming attenuated with each impact until they hit the inner most layer; their memories of each other. It was a near thing, but the defense held.

The unknown subject couldn’t feel pain, physical or emotional. Not normally. But now he could and both telepaths figured he’d be out of practice dealing with it. So, Gene harnessed it. The pain he felt when his family cast him out; the agony of being shot, stabbed, and burned; countless headaches from over-exertion. He borrowed Colin’s lifetime of struggle with his own sexuality, the strain on his bones from high-G maneuvering, the memory of his soul-pain post necroscan. Gene formed it all into dolorous javelin and threw it at the unsub.

But even though the unsub was crazy, his subconscious knew what would protect him from that. Years of nihilistic ennui and the memories of how he dealt with pain before he lost the capacity shielded his mind. Negative emotions likely wouldn’t work. His counter-attack was to attempt to inflict that same hopeless dissatisfaction on the two of them. Colin was ready for that, and the solution to ennui and nihilism was purpose. All he needed for that was the Psi Corps. Their people. Their future. The whirling nimbus behind the unsub. Those thoughts formed into an image of the Psi Corps seal and the psionic attack crashed into it harmlessly in a spray of flat denial.

Their confidence was growing. They could counter whatever he threw at them. It didn’t matter that he could do the same, he couldn’t sustain active telepathy for as long as they could. But Carlos didn’t have that much time. He was coming up on human limits for his own telepathy use… and then they realized that the unsub was dependent on him too. At the very least, severing their connection would be disorienting. But they couldn’t afford to take the time to free the poor man. Not when fending off a P14, but there was someone who could.

Or a group of someone’s

<Consensus: Without line of sight, we can communicate, but not much else.> they were informed. Which Colin and Gene both thought was fair. It was through dense materials, they couldn’t see, and there was a P14 on the other end. But they could send someone down. Whoever that was would have to separate from their gestalt consciousness to navigate though.

<Machteld: Ich werde es tun>

<Colin: You know how to break a mind-lock?>

<Machteld: Ja!>
She didn’t need or want their consent. She was going to do it the moment they realized someone would have to. Now it was going to be their job to keep the unknown subject distracted. The swirling vortex of telepathic power got smaller as Machteld left it and cut her group off from the consensus. But as Colin and Gene’s conjoined minds battled for their lives, it reformed at nearly its former strength. The other telepaths must have regrouped.

The unknown subject elected to attack them with the chaos of his own schizophrenic thoughts, represented by a horde of yipping biting demon-beasts. Colin imposed order by defending himself and Gene with a conceptualization of perfectly ordered fractals: a three-dimensional representation of the Mandelbrot Set. Gene didn’t attack the other man’s mind so much as have a change of heart. If pain and anguish didn’t work, maybe the near opposite would break his will to resist.

Love and intimacy. That is what Gene’s consciousness used. Pulled from his and Colin’s memories. For and from each other, Zara, Marcel, Colin’s deceased parents, Michael Chastain, everyone who lived at the Annex, Dr. Cavanaugh, every single marine on the PCS Fenrir. He gently projected it all at the unsub in a wave that washed over and started to eat at his defenses. He was reminded what that felt like, how much he loved his own parents, his little sister.

And that’s when Carlos was freed. No longer having the functional neuroanatomy to support those kinds of emotions, the attack lost all effectiveness, but it left him disoriented, and both Psi Cops slammed into him with an attack probe of pure obdurate will. The defenses around his mind completely collapsed.

Still joined at the soul, Colin and Gene scanned him. To find out who Qing Gao was, and exactly what happened to him, they took themselves on a tour of his memories. He’d been a nice, sweet, and innocent kid growing up in Beijing in a Christian Scientist congregation. He had a family history of paranoid schizophrenia and a giant fluffy cat named Xing who was a particularly good mouser. Colin knew, and so Gene knew, that it was a recipe for toxoplasma gondii, and thus not only manifested schizophrenia, but decreased impulse control. By the time he was in his late teens he’d screwed up at university and decided to leave Earth behind and travel to Omega VII where the growing colony had plenty of opportunities for people who were down on their luck.

That’s when the trouble started. He didn’t have a support system so no one noticed when he started to go off the rails. His delusions were conventional at first. He believed he was being tormented by demons and that the people in his life were actually agents of Satan, so he cut himself off from everyone and descended into homelessness. When his talent manifested, they were incorporated into it. He believed the demons had given him power and he became a willing collaborator with the Christian version of Lucifer. Then he convinced himself that a drug dealer was one of them, trying to give him more, so he took the Faustian Bargain. The price was his ability to feel pain, empathy, and many aspects of himself, and like Faust, he rebelled against the terms of the agreement and tried to do what the demonic voices in his head, both hallucinatory and real, were telling him to do in order to restore what he lost. But it never worked. He wasn’t doing it right, the sacrifices weren’t what the voices wanted. Until Friday. He caught the ISN segment about himself and decided to go looking for what Colin said he was suppressing. Qing found what the demons were looking for…

Before breaking contact, the two Psi Cops put him into a telepathically induced coma. With some reluctance, they separated from each other as well, disconnecting their hands and coming back into themselves and the world with a swirling sensation. Like being flushed in reverse, or despaghettifying coming out of hyperspace.

“That was… “ Colin started
“Fucking amazing?” Gene speculated, wrapping Colin in his arms in a mixture of jubilation and relief. Colin returned the embrace and rested his head on Gene’s shoulder.

“I was going to say too close…” Colin corrected, swallowing gravely “I’m very glad we didn’t roll safeties off.” Gene didn’t need to say anything for Colin to know he was equally happy, he just didn’t want to think about what could have happened.

“That too.” Gene said, pulling back just a little bit “Hey Colin?”

“Yeah?” Colin asked.

“You’re weeping blood.” At that, Colin put his bare finger to a wet spot on his cheek and looked. Definitely blood. Of course, Gene had a nosebleed he was already staunching with a handkerchief. Colin slipped his gloves back on at the same time Gene did.

“Come on. We should actually get downstairs.” Colin suggested, and without another word they descended to the sub-basement.

What they saw down there was, Colin couldn’t think of a better word, disconcerting. Illuminated in the wan light of weak LEDs it looked like a bog-standard boiler room; were it not for the arcane script written on the walls in blood, the pentagram scrawled on the floor, also in blood. Carlos Rivera was unconscious and strapped to a gurney bleeding out of his eyes and nose, but breathing with a steady heartbeat. Colin looked at his mind and there wasn’t anything too unusual. He was just exhausted and fast asleep. Machteld Albrecht stood next to him just…staring at the whole display in a mix of horror, shock, and fascination.

Colin could see Qing’s foot emerging from behind a corner; still very unconscious.

“Was zum Teufel ist los mit diesem Kerl?” Machteld asked what was wrong with the guy.

“Schizophrenie und Hirnschäden.” Colin replied, specifying the schizophrenia and brain damage, then clarified the type of delusions. “Religiöse Wahnvorstellungen.”

“Scheisse. Unglücklicher Bastard.” She remarked, for all possible meanings of unlucky bastard. Qing wasn’t a large man and Gene was able to simply pick him up in a fireman’s carry while Colin approached Machteld.

“Hey.” Gene greeted her.

“Hallo.” She replied, looking at him confused. Colin felt Gene’s emotions and Gene didn’t know what to feel. He was proud of her, of everyone, but ashamed and mortified and sorry all at once. Colin didn't disagree either. She'd been through her own hell, she shouldn't have had to see this one.

“You shouldn’t have had to see this. I’m sorry I asked it of you.” Colin apologized.

“Du hast es nicht getan. Ich melde mich freiwillig.” She replied matter of factly. Colin had to disagree a little bit. Sure, she did volunteer, but he also had a pretty good idea who would be coming down into the tunnels when he and Gene had thought of the idea.

“I know you volunteered but I knew who would say yes when we made the suggestion.”

“Sei nicht albern” She rebuked him for being absurd, not unkindly. “Ich habe durch schlechter als diese gelebt und hatte die Anderen bei mir.”
“I suppose that’s true; you have been through worse.” Colin agreed. "Do you have any idea how awesome that was to see?"

“Nein… Kannst du uns zeigen?” She asked to be shown.

“Sure.” Colin said and touched her mind, transferring the memory of seeing Everyone’s mind connected into a single perfect whole roiling and transforming above them like the host of heaven. Her facial expression went towards awe.

“Dann zu sein war…erhaben” she said in response with an expression and memory of profound serenity.

“Yeah… It was like that with Gene and I too. We need to get Carlos out of here. Gene is already heading back the way you came. Is there a way to get that gurney up?”

<Come on Colin, hurry your ass up.>

“Ja. Ein Aufzug.” She said, telling him that there was a lift.

“Ausgezeichnet.” Colin replied.

…

Gene met them by the elevator, still carrying Qing out-cold on his shoulders, tapping his foot in mock-impatience.

“Way to dither.” He winked, stepping onto the platform. Both the wink and the voice tone meant there was no venom. He understood why Colin had talked to Machteld, and approved. Still, they were on a clock.

“Sorry.” Colin apologized genuinely, he pushed the gurney with Carlos still sleeping onto it, and allowed Machteld on before getting on himself. No safety railing. Colin despaired that it wasn’t up to code.

“No, I get it, really. Machteld, you’re pure awesome. Colin would it be premature to say that she has a career in Metapol or Transport if she wants it?”

“Danke!” Machteld blushed. Colin thought it was adorable but then he caught something else. Her eyes were fixated on Gene’s biceps and pects.

“Wirklich?” He asked her.

“Es tut mir leid, aber sieh ihn dir an! Er ist sehr…!” Colin just gave her a look. She was shielding as hard as she could and to keep things private he did the same, making sure the backchannel between him and Gene was temporarily closed. It was too damn funny for Colin to resist and he felt like an uncle teasing his favorite niece.

“Guys, what’s going on?” Gene asked, confused as he pressed the button to take them to the surface.

“Du erinnerst dich daran—” Colin asked, but she cut him off.

“Ich weiß, dass er genommen, schwul, und zu alt für mich ist, aber verdammt. Sag es ihm nicht! Das wäre demütigend sein!” Colin was openly chortling at that point. “Ich bin nicht verliebt oder so, er ist nur süß, das ist alles!”
“Wait just right one minute! I know that word! I know what schwul means! You two are not talking about the weather and there is way too much desperation in her voice! Is she talking about us?”

Machteld blushed harder and locked up like Fort Knox.

“Me?” Gene asked. Machteld looked like she wanted to throw herself off the elevator in a perfect display of why safety railings needed to exist.

“Shhh. You’re not helping.” Colin gave him a kiss, both because he wanted to and to shut him up. Gene was so cute when he was confused. While he did so, Gene mentally copied him on what he sent to Machteld.

<It’s alright. Happens to the best of us. Is it the big-strong-guy-who-helped-rescue-you thing?>

<Nein. Mehr wie sexy Kerl in der Turnhall Sache.> she replied, embarrassed but feeling a little better that Gene was taking it well. Colin had to mentally translate for him and was relieved at the exact characterization: sexy-guy-in-the-gym thing.

<Oh! That’s not too bad. We’ve all been there. Nothing too serious then?>

<Nein, nein. Es ist vergänglich, ich bin nicht dumm.>

“Oh. Okay,” Gene said aloud then smirked evilly. “Well if it ends up not being a fleeting thing, my genetic material is on file.”

The horror at even thinking about that killed it. Just killed it. Colin could feel her mind run for the hills screaming the word ‘Ne!’ over and over again. Gene laughed like a madman, Colin laughed, the three other telepaths in Machteld’s head laughed. It took the poor young woman a second to get over herself, but she laughed too. Once the laughter subsided, Colin decided to answer Gene’s initial question.

“As for your earlier query: it is not too much to say Machteld, and for that matter Sam, Albert, and Fatima easily have careers waiting for them in Metapol, or Transport. Especially Transport.”

“Warum Transport?” She asked as they neared the top.

“Oh sweety… we’re going to have a talk about Transport. But later. No one upstairs has been briefed on that yet.”

Gene looked over at him <We going to read them in?> He asked.

<Yeah. Plus a few others, I think you know whom.> Colin answered.

The manhole cover opened like an iris and the elevator stopped flush with the pavement. The EMTs were nearby and took Qing of Gene’s shoulders. He rolled his shoulders in relief as other EMTs including a group of telepathic EMTs took care of Carlos. Doctors Cavanaugh and Petrovich gave them a hand.

“Blood pressure slightly elevated at one-twenty-one over eighty” one EMT said.

“Blood-Ox ninety-seven, heart-rate eighty BPM” said another. Dr. Cavanaugh checked his mind

“No signs of significant neural disruption. We’ll need to wait on imaging. Stage four sleep.”

“You’ll want to sedate him very heavily. Do not let him wake up until he’s in a padded room on
all the anti-psychotics you can get your hands on. Do you hear me?” Colin told the EMTs carrying
Qing to a waiting ambulance.

The two mundane EMTs looked at him like he’d grown a second head, but one of the
telepath EMTs set them straight.

“This guy is the serial killer who’d been in the news. He’s batshit fucking crazy, and it took two
Psi Cops and 24 others to bring him down. We can’t fuck around. Take him to the secured Psych
ward at Alliance arms. No questions. We know what we’re talking about. Just fucking do it!”

“Why not just put him on slee—” one of the mundanes started to ask.

“Because we’re not fucking savages, that’s why!” the telepath cut him off.

“Thanks Alec!” Colin shouted behind him.

Unfortunately, the EMTs were all hospitalists and weren’t licensed for transport work so they had
to stay behind and hope the mundanes listened. Colin waited for the mundanes to clear out before
he gathered all the telepaths together in a semi-circle on the grounds of the apartment block. They
weren’t in any particular order, save that Gene was holding his hand, absentmindedly stroking his thumb,
even that simple contact sent a shiver up his spine. Then he stood there in front of them,
just...beholding, for a moment. He owed them thanks and he wasn't really sure how to do that.
Individually would take forever. A speech maybe? He considered whether people really ever did
oration like that anymore, or if it was the sort of thing that works better in a novel instead of in real
life. He wasn't sure, but it seems like the thing to do.

<Go ahead and do it. You know you want to.> Gene told him. Colin didn't need to be given
permission twice.

“The Corps is Mother, the Corps is Father. Mundanes think it’s some weird fascist thing. But we
know better. I know it sounds trite sometimes, we all say it. We teach our children it means that
the Corps is family: that we’re all mother, father, brother, and sister to each other. But it has a
deeper meaning than that. Whether you realize it or not, you know what that meaning is.” Colin
paused just long enough to let them consider that for a moment.

"It’s our collective oath. An absolute mutual guarantee that come whatever life may throw at us
we’re there for each other. Protecting each other, easing each other’s hurt. Seeing all your minds
there as a whirling thunderstorm of power, as a wheel of flaming eyes, as a choir of seraphim
girded for battle against the forces of darkness… that was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.
You all understand your pledge! More than understand it, you proved to me and to the entire
Corps, to the mundanes; that it has teeth!”

...

A few minutes later, everyone was getting packed up to leave when Colin approached Dr. Nishita
Cavanaugh.

“Nishita, when you take The Hive Mind back, could you make a detour to the annex?” he asked.
He needed to get everyone briefed and it was best to do it all at the same time.

“I can, I’d ask why, though.” She replied, her expression asking the question her mind and voice
didn’t. ‘Are they in danger and what are you planning?’

“Well, they’re pretty obviously ready for release…” Colin replied.
“And you’d be the one to determine that eh?” She replied, but there wasn’t any force in it. She was just giving him a bit of shit.

“From what I’ve seen? Yeah. Anyway, there are some options I want to go over with them and there’s something I want to read them, you, and everyone at home in on.” Colin said. Nishita tilted her head and probed at his blocks almost subconsciously, but he wasn’t letting her in yet. Not in public.

“Is this about whatever you and Gene have been secret squirrel about? Why I’ve been on the lookout for someone trying to transfer my charges, and where you two were for a week?” She asked. Her curiosity was bubbling over on general principle. She knew something bigger was going on, and she was dying to know what it was.

“Yeah, it is. My people have long since earned my trust there. So have you. Those kids… they deserve to know and with their talents…let’s just say I want them to go in with their eyes open.” Colin replied. Nishita considered for a moment.

“Okay. I can do that.” Nishita nodded. She wanted to see where things went and she trusted Colin to not put anyone in danger unless there was a good reason. She was just worried that her charges would dive into whatever it was without considering the consequences too much.

“Excellent. And don’t worry, I’m not going to put them in danger without a good reason and I’m going to be pretty thorough laying out the potential ramifications. So head on over to the Annex. We’ll be a bit behind you. We need to stop by Earth Force Security. There’s a mundane captain who needs a serious dressing down.” Colin mentally passed the idea to Gene.

“Oh! What I wouldn’t give to be a fly on the wall for that meeting!” Nishita replied.

As far as Gene was concerned, there was nothing sexier than Colin on a war-path. Well, except maybe after Colin beat him fencing. There was something about the set of his jaw and the look in his eyes when he was truly and magnificently angry that made Gene want to rip his shirt off, and Colin had spent the entire trip writing up a document and working himself into a frozen rage. Gene wasn’t as angry because everything had worked out and he was more concerned with the outcome, but for Colin it was about the principle of the thing. Just because he was waiting for Captain Roach to fuck the Corps over it didn't mean that he couldn't be ruinously angry about it, particularly the timing.

Colin walked into Captain Roach’s office like he owned the place. And in a sense he did. Colin had Captain Roach by the administrative balls and he knew it.

“Hello Captain. Enjoying your lunch?” Colin said with a congenial tone and expression that was obviously forced to the mundane.

“I was.” The Security officer replied, but also thinking ‘Then I found out you were still alive’. He set his sandwich down on the wrapping on his desk. “You have some nerv—” Colin cut him off.

“Shove it. You left me and my people out to dry.” Colin growled. “If you had said you didn’t feel comfortable putting your people at risk, I would have understood. You didn’t.” Gene picked up the lie forming in the captain’s head, he was going to say that was why he didn’t send his people into danger, but that wasn’t it at all. It was an attempt to get them both killed. Colin knew it too. “Don’t even try to lie about your reasoning now.”
“How dare you!? Stay the fuck out of my head!” Captain Roach shouted, and Gene felt the rest of the mundane officers take official notice.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Colin answered in false conciliatory tones, a hand raised in a placating gesture.

“The homicidal mendacity was so strong in your thoughts, I couldn’t help but pick it up!”

“My partner’s tone aside Captain, we hear the whispers of your thoughts constantly and ignore it. It’s just hard to ignore your criminal intentions. Especially when they’re directed at us.” Gene added.

“Be that as it may, you can’t prove shit.” Captain Roach replied in clipped tones.

“Oh I know! Isn’t it great!?” Colin was pissed, but he was also excited that he could use the Captain’s pettiness for the good of the Corps. Gene particularly loved the deer in the headlights look from the Captain when Colin’s affect metamorphosed into predatory sympathy.

“You weren’t comfortable sending your people in to help contain a high-rating telepath and I agreed it was too dangerous for your men, and that’s what goes into my report.” Colin grinned wolfishly “The Psi Corps will conclude that Earth Force is incapable of realistically assisting the Metasensory Police in these matters and will put pressure on the planetary government to allow me to bring in a contingent of Bloodhounds. For the protection of mundanes on this planet, of course.”

Gene decided to play good cop. For certain values of ’good cop’ that included reminding the good Captain that his little stunt would get him shoved under the brig.

“That is, unless you want to correct that record with the truth. That you, as a Captain in Earth Force, intentionally and with malice failed to provide requested assistance to the Psi Corps because it’s representative arrested one of your subordinates for serious felonies and referred the case to the JAG office. I’m sure that will go over so well Major Sato. You might get some credit for admitting to it of course. And we still get our Bloodhounds.”

“It’s gonna happen.” Colin said “You can help us and concur with that report in writing right now, and it’ll go easy. Or, it can go hard, and we tell the unvarnished truth. I’m sure we can find mundane witnesses willing to throw you under a bus.” Colin assured him. Steve stood out in his mind as willing and his credibility was impeccable.

Captain Roach weighed his options. He knew the JAG office would eat him alive; Major Sato did not fuck around. He didn’t expect the normally cowed telepaths to develop a spine all the sudden and hoist him by his own petard.

“Give me whatever you want me to sign.” He finally said. Colin handed him a datapad. He used it’s stylus to sign and date the document.

“Thank you. Look on the bright side Captain. If everything goes well, you won’t ever have to interact with us professionally again other than for transfers of jurisdiction.” Gene told him as they summarily left.

Steve was waiting for them when they existed the office.

"Guys, I'm sorry." he apologized "I tried to convince him to do the right thing but he was pissed over Woolsey."

"No, that wasn't all, Steve. It was a deliberate attempt to get telepaths killed. Us in particular." Gene informed him. "We're not taking bullshit like that anymore. We're done with it."
"What do you mean 'done with it'? You guys kickin' off the revolution or somethin'?" Steve asked.

<He knows about that?> Gene asked Colin.

<No, but come on. He's not a stupid man. He's smart enough to be running a song in his head right now. He knows that the sort of shit we put up with leads to that eventually.> Colin answered.

"No." Colin denied "And I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about. What we have done is found a way to, and I do apologize for this, make your role as liaison mostly redundant." Steve was confused by that, so Colin handed him the document he'd blackmailed Captain Roach into signing. He read it over.

'But... that isn't what happened at all.' he silently remarked while no longer singing in his head, then realized what they'd done.

'So that's it then? You threatened him with the truth?'

<Yes.> Gene sent into Steve's mind.<We will be fully staffed. We don't care what we have to do in order for that to happen. Today we had to muster a telepath militia to rescue one of our own. We had to rely on half-trained but very talented teenagers. Never again. We won't tolerate that.>

'I understand. On the bright side, now we can just be friends. No professional complications.'

<Yeah.> Colin said, and smiled a bit. <Tell Liz we said hello. Oh, and what are you two doing on the twelfth of April?>

'Nothin' as far as I know.'


...

Colin opened the door to the annex and smelled something baking. Something savory rather than sweet. Beef, cheese, some sort of crust. He heard and p'heard the raucous camaraderie of his support staff backlash extended family gathering for dinner, with some new voices and minds thrown in; Nishita, Sam, Machteld, Fatima, and Albert. The contrast between what was and would could and should be left himself missing Zara terribly. He missed the little things like being able to see her smile when he made dinner or curling up with her and Gene to read or watch anime or socially regressive military sci-fi from the 1990s. He also wanted her to know why he was going to have to do things that might get him and Gene killed so that if the worst happened, she'd understand. He knew he'd cheated death by one sensible precaution earlier that day, and she'd be devastated if he wasn't that lucky again, but at least if he hadn't survived she would have understood. How could anyone explain why she'd never see him again if he died in a conflict she didn't know existed?

So for a moment, he stood in the doorway and his heart just ached.

<She's a smart kid, love. She'd figure it out, and Marcel would tell her enough to get her started.> Gene assured him, sensing his distressed thoughts. Gene massaged the back of his neck as well as he could with gloves on <But I miss her too, and she should be here for this. Soon, maybe she will be.>

<Can't be soon enough.> Was Colin's reply before he turned around and kissed his fiance. <That was way too close...> Gene kissed him back and replied.
Yeah it was. Really good thing you like to double check everything. I had my safety off.> Gene informed him, breaking this kiss. Colin shuddered inwardly.

"Come on, we should get to the others. Lots to go over..." Colin suggested, switching to verbal speech.

Gene nodded in agreement and followed Colin into the common kitchen. Several leaves got added to the table to accommodate five new people, as well as the extra chairs. Two seats were reserved for them and everyone was sitting around drinking everything from tea to beer. The teenagers were imbibing the standard Psi Corps supplemental lemonade.

“So, then her dog lays siege to our room. I shit you not, that little terrier took to body-checking our door with his shoulder and I’d wake up with sleep paralysis hallucinations of an army of invading frenchman, only to shake it off and open up the door to see that cheeky cunt wagging his tail.” Gerald was telling a story about his late-wife’s dog when they first got married. Everyone else laughed and Nishita asked a question.

“How long have you been having that issue?” she asked.

“Since I was a little blighter. Fucking terrifying at first, but I learned what it was after a while. Having it happen once a week you just learn to run with it and enjoy the ride.” Another round of laughter.

“Oh hi guys!” Hoshi said cheerfully as they walked in “Nishita tells us that you blackmailed Captain Roach! How’d that go?!”

“It went swimmingingly” Gene said, and told them all about the bind they put him in.

“Nice work. Hopefully it won’t bite us in the ass.” Franklin said in cautious congratulation.

“I don’t think it will. Government might drag it’s heels though. On the other hand, I think they’ll like the idea of a telepath militia even less than a squad of bloodhounds.” Colin replied.

“You guys went beyond what anyone ever expected of you today. Thank you. That might have been non-survivable without you.” Gene told everyone.

“Well, we weren’t about to leave you twisting in the wind with that nightmare scenario” Su assured him “Not that we want a repeat or anything. We did NOT sign up for that. We all p’saw what he could do. He’d crack any one of us like an egg.”

“We also weren’t going to let another telepath die alone in the dark. Not going to happen.” Albert said. The rest of his cohort agreed by way of telepathic denial of the very concept.

“About that.” Colin said “Gerald, you just put those pies in, right? We have some time?”

<Also, everything is in dietary spec right?> Gene asked.

<Of course. Vat grown beef is apparently both kosher and halal.> Gerald sent back.

“They’re close, but we have a little time. Why?” Gerald replied verbally.

“Well, there’s something we all need to talk about.” Colin said. He pulled up a chair and sat down, Gene plopped himself down next to him and spoke first.

“What we’re about to tell you is dangerous to know. Not just for you, but for everyone. We’re only
telling you because our trust in you is absolute, and we can’t do this while also keeping secrets from you. Even then, there are some operational things we’re keeping compartmentalized. Understand?"

Even the teenagers understood operational security and nodded.

Colin spoke next “If, after hearing this information, you don’t want to know or be responsible for keeping it secret—by suicide if necessary—I can erase the memory and you can go about your lives. It wouldn’t change our relationship, it would just mean that you’re not up to carrying a very heavy burden and I’d never ask that of you if you weren’t willing. If you just want to nope out right now, I’ll understand. What I can tell you right now is that it involves securing our rights as a people against mundanes.”

Max didn’t say anything for a moment. He just stared off into the middle distance for a moment. Colin could tell he was recalling memories, replaying them over in his head intentionally; holding them at bay and stopping himself from reliving them. Max’s resolve to help hardened into granite.

“Keynmol vider.” Never again, in Yiddish. Yiddish and German were close enough that Colin could understand that well enough. So could Machteld. She translated that and what it meant for the others. Her parents told her the history of the holocaust in more detail than her school ever had, and she’d over-p’heard everything she thought she needed to know about what happened to telepaths. None of them were shielding their thoughts. They didn’t bother, they considered their deliberation public.

“Nie wieder” She said. “Ich kann nicht für alle sprechen, aber ich bin bei dir, auch wenn es mich umbringt.” For her part, Machteld would do everything she could to prevent a repeat performance, even if she died. She didn’t want to live in that future if it happened again.

None of the other teenagers were going to let her go it alone, but they also felt they needed their own reasons.

“The bastards who… held us. They just fucking walked because we weren’t allowed to testify against them. Most mundanes don’t really consider us human. I won’t be ruled by them.” Albert said

“I never want another telepath to go through what we did. You can count on me.” Sam agreed.

“Allah requires that we practice justice in our daily lives and demand others do the same. I can’t turn my back on this without turning my back on Allah. That’s something I cannot do.” Famina replied.

The rest sat there for a moment, conferring telepathically. It was a quick back and forth. Colin was expecting someone to back out, he was expecting perhaps everyone to give individual reasons. He was not expecting everyone to break out into smirks, followed by a spirited rendition of La Marseillaise; but that's exactly what happened. It came on with Erika singing first and everyone else joining in with each line of the song until all of his support staff were singing along. They finished on the first Abreuve nos sillons. Gerald coughed when that was done, re-asserting his British-ness after that foray into French.

"We figured you for the revolutionary type Colin..." Gerald clarified. "We're on board, clearly. I don't know what I can do to help really, I'm only a P4, but whatever you think I can do, you've got me. As for the rest... well..."

Colin was almost stunned. He hadn’t expected unanimity at all. He'd expected at least one person
to back out, to run screaming, but he’d sensed something from all of them. It was him and Gene who were asking, so every last one of them would go to the wall.

<Dummy> Gene informed him affectionately <You honestly have no idea how much trust and loyalty you inspire, do you?>


Gene sighed in Colin’s head <Sweetheart, you’re so cute when you’re oblivious. Do you know why I fell in love with you?> Gene meant it was a rhetorical question so Colin didn’t answer and let Gene continue his line of thought <You cared about me as a person from the second you met me; and you’re like that with everyone. Not for any goal you’re trying to achieve, but just because that’s who you are. That’s what I fell in love with; and it’s a quality that inspires trust and almost fanatic loyalty.>

<That’s a bit of a low bar Gene.> Colin replied, mostly joking. Still, Gene wasn’t wrong. He’d never even considered the secondary consequences or ever thought of cultivating it as a leadership stratagem. It was just how he was, no other way to be ever seemed right to him. Every telepath was family so why shouldn’t he try to do right by them always?

<Well, how you did it mattered too. It helped that you’re hot and I like the…feel of your mind.>

<Ah. I see your point though. Funny, I didn’t realize that about myself…> And he really hadn’t.

<Of course you didn’t. We’re always our own biggest blind-spot and you tend to get fixated on how you think things should be instead of how they are. At least where you are concerned. There’s a way to be a Psi Cop other than being respected and feared, Colin. There isn’t a telepath on this planet who’s afraid of you. Everyone respects you, but you’re loved too. They teach the other thing because it’s more consistent.>

<Any combat trained P12 can be feared> Colin agreed.

<But not everyone has it in them to be loved.>

<Like Sandoval Bey was…still is, half a century after he died.> Sandoval Bey wasn’t raised in the Corps, but like Gene he’d gone native almost as soon as he was in. He was loved by the entire Psi Corps, and until he was murdered or forced to commit suicide by Director Johnson, was a galvanizing moral force in the Corps, showing an entire generation of telepaths what being in the Corps truly meant.

<And like Al Bester isn’t. Yeah. Anyway, I think you owe all these nice people a thank you.>

“Thank you, everyone. God, that feels so inadequate and suddenly I’m lost for words. That every last one of you trusts me enough to just… accept this, and is willing to put your lives on the line, not just for our people, but ultimately because I’m the one doing the asking is… a bit of a shock to be honest, but it means more to me than you know. I’m humbled by it. Thank you.”

He didn’t get a verbal reply, there was no need for one. What he did get was a collective affirmation of trust and affection he felt in his bones, projected by everyone in the room.

“But I suppose.” He continued “I should stop beating around the bush. Some of you are old enough to remember Director Johnson.” the older telepaths in the room like Erika, Gerald, Max, and Nishita nodded. “When he took over from Vacit, in 2202, he… stripped us of what self-governance we had in the Corps, and replaced—often through assassination—pretty much everyone in positions of authority put in place by Director Vacit.”
Max interjected, in his unofficial capacity as Psi Corps historian for the benefit of the teenagers and some of the telepaths who weren’t raised in the Corps like Hoshi.

“Director Kevin Vacit instituted decidedly pro-telepath policies within the Corps. There are some of us who think that he might have been one of us. As an example, official curricula back then in the Cadres was that telepaths are special and valuable for our own sakes, and stressed solidarity between all telepaths. Even the rogues were family. Now… it’s different. We’re useful, valuable as instruments. Loyalty to the Earth Alliance is stressed over loyalty to each other.”

“The House Parents do their best to work around that, the entire Education division does. But… there are things they can’t get around. Like gag-orders against being affirmative of variation in sexuality and gender identity. According to Johnson, such individuals fail in their duty to the Earth All—er I mean the Psi Corps.” Colin clarified, ending with venomous sarcasm. “Vacit’s Psi Corps was different. And you can consider it confirmed that he was certainly one of us. Likely over P12 to avoid direct detection.”

“How do you know?” Hoshi asked.

“Because I know someone who knew him. Someone powerful enough to notice Vacit scanning him twice, once without line of sight. Someone who Vacit warned about the Shadows when he was six years old.” All of that was news to Gene, whose mental question mark was palpable.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this?” he asked.

“Honestly? Just organizing my thoughts for that one was hard enough without the secret history of the Corps. But everyone fundamentally deserves the full context for this. Every telepath does.”

“That’s fair.” Gene replied, before Su asked a question.

“What do you mean by Shadows? Those Shadows?” She asked.

“The very same, but I’ll get into that in a minute.” Colin replied. “Anyway, Director Johnson instituted more than just a purge. When people who have left the Corps cite terrible things being done within the Psi Corps; when those same things actually happened and weren’t misinterpreted or misattributed… it’s usually his initiatives.”

“Can you give us an example? I honestly don’t hear much about that sort of thing.” Eduardo asked.

“There was a commercial telepath named Talia Winters, posted to Babylon 5. I say was, because she was selected, basically at random, to have her personality forcibly implanted with an entirely separate sleeper personality loyal to the Director’s Office for use as a spy. It was eventually fully activated and overwrote her.” The room went silent, still with horror. Nishita nodded and spoke into Colin’s mind.

<Sounds about right for something Johnson might have done…>

<Yeah.> he agreed.

“After the Earth-Minbari war, there have been… rumors of experiments on non-volunteers. Blips, and rogue telepaths. Sometimes on members of the Corps.” Colin continued. Nishita spoke up then.

“We’ve always experimented on telepaths. Adult volunteers who were eager to help make us stronger; or special talents like telekinetics whose abilities are accompanied by psychological
disturbances that don’t respond to traditional treatment and who are dangerous to themselves and others, for them it’s attempts at treatment. Before, it was done for us, by us. Now… now it’s done to us.”

“What she said.” Colin agreed. Max wasn’t doing so well. He was holding himself, absorbing everything in rapt attention, but doing everything he could to not react. Whenever a group of people were thoroughly othered, medical atrocity followed. Max knew that better than most.

“But we haven’t been lying down and taking it.” Gene added. “Not by a long-shot. We’ve been fighting back in two ways. The first is direct but clandestine resistance to the Director’s Office. We move people out of harm’s way, we forcibly turn enemy agents, everything you’d expect out of a human intelligence operation.”

“We’ll brief you on those on a Need to Know basis.” Colin interjected a bit.

“Yeah, that.” Gene agreed before continuing. “The second way…” Gene’s face lit up so bright it was practically blinding; and he couldn’t keep his hope, joy, and pride contained inside his own head “We have a Fleet, and a Marine Corps, controlled and operated in secret entirely by Transport. When the time comes—and no, we’re not ready yet so don’t go singing La Marsailles again—we’ll take back what the mundanes stole from us.”

Taking that as a cue, Colin remembered the PCS Fenrir, meeting the marines, seeing Psi Corps pilots mowing through their opposition in hyperspace, the efficient if brutal boarding action on the Na’Garl, and the liberation of their people from the Narn research facility. He projected some of those images to everyone in the room. What bubbled forth out of that was a mixture of awe, pride, joy. The teenagers were the most muted because they didn’t have as much context for why it was such a big deal, not on an emotional level; but Max was something else entirely.

“That’s what it was…” Max realized, referring to the hope that Colin had transferred to him days before; shielding nothing. Anyone who cared to look, cared to see, could do so. He took those images, held them in his head and recalled the dozens of death-memories he carried in his own hippocampus. He wasn’t projecting them or re-living them, but turning them over in his head, interposing those memories with the images Colin gave him as if to show the people who came before and died how far their descendants had come: that they might actually be on the cusp of being a free people.

Max turned his gaze up at the ceiling with tears of joy streaming down his cheeks and prayed “Adonai, Hallelujah! Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha’olam, she’heheyanu v’kiy’manu v’higi’anu la’z’man ha’ze! Barukh ata. Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha’olam, hagomel lahayavim tovot, sheg’molani kol tov!”

Colin didn’t know what any of that meant, only Max did. The feeling behind it was clear enough. There were definitely two prayers, one of thanks, the other of deliverance. The emotional core of it seeped out of the man. Half a century of pain and death, another century of abject servility, finally hope for a better day. The demand for one.

Feeling the cultural memory of the Psi Corps manifest itself in that way, Machteld got it, Sam understood, Fatima grasped it, and Albert brought it within his ken. They all knew how important having their own military was. No one was guarding their thoughts, nobody had defenses up that were any more powerful than were necessary to block out the constant background noise of mundanes. Anchored around Max’s prayer and borrowed memories they all reified their oath.

<Consensus: The Corps is Mother, the Corps is Father.>
Colin gave everyone a few moments to reflect. From where he was sitting the past few minutes warranted time for everyone to gather their thoughts and let them settle. How he got into a voluntary leadership position still boggled his mind, but there he was. Gene had more natural charisma than he did, or maybe that was just his own bias? Either way, Gene was there too. He couldn’t use the term executive officer because he never ordered anyone to do anything and needed to have that order enforced. Leadership partner maybe? Colin wasn’t sure.

“Well that went to an odd and beautiful place unexpectedly.” Colin remarked after a moment. Most of the others managed a chuckle.

“Sorry.” Max said. For Colin's money there was nothing to apologize for.

“Don’t be. Max, if ever there was an important time for us to remember everything that came before, it’s now. We can’t forget, and we have to make sure humanity doesn’t either.” Colin told him.

“Besides. Look what you did. It’s easy to have an academic understanding of a genocide but it’s a lot harder to understand the monstrosity of it. There isn’t a one of us who doesn’t, now.” Gene followed up. Max nodded in understanding. He knew that already, but despite being in a group-setting, what he’d done had been for him. He hadn’t meant it to be anything bigger than that and didn’t like being disruptive. He liked knowing that something good came out of it, that he’d served the purpose for which his remembrance was conceived; he just hadn’t expected it to happen that way.

“Wh—what was that, anyway?” Albert asked. Colin and Gene motioned in unison for Max to explain.

“I was raised in a cadre in Jerusalem. Jewish telepaths were hit harder than most others during... those times. There were those who carried mental shrapnel. Other people’s death-thoughts. They also had their own memories. There’s a core of Jewish telepaths, and I’m one of them, who carries those memories. We add our own to the mix we pass down to other volunteers as well.”

Erika knew, he was closest to her and she’d asked after he broke down earlier in the week. No one else did, and they looked on in stunned silence, not knowing what to say about it. It was a strange gratitude they couldn’t put into words, but Max understood and blushed.

“No need to thank me guys.” He said “I’m just glad that maybe my own kids won’t be adding to this. And I don’t think Colin and Gene were done.”

That didn’t stop anyone, Colin and Gene included, from reaching out with their minds and effectively giving him a contact-free group hug. Gerald couldn’t project something like that very easily, so instead he stood up and did it physically.

“Guys, stop! I’m getting verklempt!” Max croaked because he was getting choked up emotionally, but didn’t block anyone out; they respected his boundaries enough to let him go.

“He is right though, we’re not quite done.” Gene informed the group, then Gerald piped up.

“The cottage pie is just about done. What I wouldn’t give for some lamb.”

“We’ll see what we can arrange.” Colin said, suddenly having a massive craving for it. “Maybe have the Bloodhounds bring some when they arrive. We can introduce them to family dinner night.”

“Can we trust who the Corps sends?” Franklin asked, which Colin thought was an astute question.
“You already know them.” Gene answered “All of Marcel’s people are fully committed. We’ll get to the rest of business after we eat I think.”

“Agreed. No need to spoil dinner.” Franklin agreed.

…

Gerald brought out the cottage pie. He got Max’s out first and set it down in front of him.

“That’s the one that doesn’t have the cheese.” He said “For the rest of you, some have never had British ‘cuisine’ before. Trust me, these and various other meat and cheese pies are the only good things native to the entire island chain. There’s a bloody good reason we conquered the entire world. We wanted better food.”

“And thus I was born!” Nishita snarked.

“And so was Israel!” Both Max and Hassan said in unison before pausing and giving each-other the faux side-eye across the table.

“Don’t forget the Opium Wars!” Su added.

“And Kenya!” Franklin reminded everyone.

“Oh! Kenya was a mineral extraction colony and Mandatory Palestine was just… a mistake. I’ll grant India and China.” Gerald retorted, and Franklin giggled. Hundreds of years and being telepaths made a legacy of colonialism little more than a joke. It just didn’t have any sting anymore. Colin took his first bite and it was exactly as good as the last time Gerald made cottage pie back in September. His eyes rolled into the back of his head

“Ohmygod.” He mumbled, and Gene’s response wasn’t much different. He didn’t even slather everything in thermonuclear hot sauce.

…

Dinner was done and the Colin was doing the dishes, getting everything rinsed off and put in the dishwasher; some things never changed and fundamentally there just wasn’t a better way to clean dinner plates.

“So Colin said something about the shadows earlier?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, and he knows of someone who was warned about them a long time ago? What did you mean by that Colin? Who is it?” That was Su.

“One second.” Colin replied and pressed the button to start the wash cycle, “Gene, you want to take the first part?” he asked. As he sat down, he leaned in and planted a kiss on Gene’s lips for no other reason than because he wanted to and hadn’t done it for an hour. Gene wanted to hold him there but didn’t. What Colin did do was scoot his chair closer and put himself in direct physical contact, laying his hand across Gene’s thigh and Gene did the same.

<Later.> Gene informed him.

<Soon.>

“Sure. Everyone knows about the Shadow War? Vorlons and Shadows using the younger races as proxies in their multi-million-year-old sibling backslash parental rivalry? No one was that far
under a rock?” Gene asked the collective. Sam looked to his cohort, the only ones who that could possibly be the case for given the Earth Alliance Civil War and lack of communication with the rest of the galaxy and then year of captivity afterward.

“No, I think we’re good there.” He confirmed.

“Okay. Well… the Vorlons created us for that war. They created all telepaths, by kidnapping people from their homeworlds, genetically modifying them, then releasing them to spread those genes around. Beta tests of telepaths and telekinetics are probably responsible for legends of wizards and shit throughout human history.”

Everyone believed him, but one question suffused the room. 'Why? What possible use could telepaths actually be against one of the elder races of the galaxy?’

“We fuck up their ships. Their ships use living beings as a CPU. Even a P5 can jam them up and make them defenseless.” Colin answered. “Higher Psi-Ratings… it doesn’t end well for the capital ships. That’s why the Vorlons created us. It’s also why the Shadows infiltrated EarthGov and tried to kill us all during the war, twice that I know of. It’s why they succeeded with the Narn and until a few months ago, there were no Narn telepaths for a thousand years. I killed more than my fair share of shadow capital ships in a Starfury for that very reason. We were… uncomfortably close to being exterminated.”

Everyone looked at him. Some in wide-eyed horror, some like Nishita with pride, but mostly with dropped jaws. Max shuddered.

“I feel like there’s a lot there you need to unpack, Colin.” Erika informed him politely as soon as she picked her jaw up off the table.

“Sure. I’ll talk about the current war a bit, then I’ll go back to talk about the Narn thing. It’s also a good time to talk about someone else. Alfred Bester.” Colin felt the mental exclamation mark, but no one said anything and he continued. “Alfred Bester is the one who knows directly of Kevin Vacit. Vacit took an interest in him, which put him on Director Johnson’s shit-list when he was a child. A fucking child. Vacit warned Bester about the Shadows in 2195, when Bester was six. From what he told me, he found evidence for them in 2223, but didn’t think they’d made contact with EarthGov by then. In 2253 though, that changed. Department Sigma uncovered a Shadow vessel on Mars. By that time, the Director’s Office had control of Sigma.”

He left out Natasha Alexander, Lyta’s grandmother. Thinking about Lyta and how far she’d fallen made him too sad to want to go down that path.

“So, I take it EarthGov made contact then, and the Shadows started manipulating the government—not that it would take much—into doing the work for them?” Max asked, wearing his newly found hatred for the Shadows and abiding antipathy for EarthGov on his sleeve.

“Yes.” Colin replied. “They began assisting Clark in 2253, when President Santiago had to select a new Psi Corps Director in ‘57, it was one of Clark’s creatures he appointed. Our beloved director Robert York.”

“Who endorsed Clark, not even the President, in the ’58 election, weakening us politically and getting a bunch of us killed. Feh! Kantemptabal faking fargleybter kahn!” Max spat out Yiddish invective.

“Pretty much!” Gene agreed “Of course, that isn’t the worst of it. York emptied out re-education camps and sold our people to the Shadows in exchange for shadow tech. Use one telepath driven
insane and rigged into a mind-machine interface to block another… he also fed commercial telepaths into Edgars Industries. I say fed deliberately, because they were testing a shadow-tech virus that would kill us all if we didn’t take the anti-virals weekly. Don’t worry, we put a stop to both things very quickly!”

“A good chunk of Metapol—myself included—and Transport got sucked into the Shadow War, and Bester put a stop to Edgars.” Colin didn’t specify how. “We thought we got all the samples, but they were working with EarthGov and…” he paused, trying to think of a better way to put it than to come out and say it but failing “Sam, Machteld, Albert, Fatima…long term psych patients have been disappearing into a black hole, and that’s something we’re worried about. That’s why none of the telepaths we took from the Narn officially exist. We turned them over to Transport, which has the facilities to take care of everyone without them being put at risk. We’ve forged paper trails for the others we took from this planet who needed extensive care.”

“Das lässt uns leider in Gefahr.” Machteld commented.

“Absolutely not.” Colin rejected that flat out, though he understood why she would think that. “We won’t leave you helpless. I’ve made it difficult for them to transfer you out, and informed Nishita about the situation as soon as I was aware of it. We also have a long-term solution in the works.”

“Really? Because we really don’t want to be separated and… we don’t want to leave here either. Not yet. Not if we can help it.” Sam said in reply.

“We figured. So here’s what I think we do.” Colin replied. “We’re opening up a proper Psi Corps school on this planet. Cadres, Academy, the works. Our Administrator Francois is finalizing the acquisition paperwork on some land and some buildings right now. Should be done in the week. Renovate them, bring in the staff. Done. Up and running in a couple months if we can find reliable contractors.”

“In the mean time you stay here.” Gene said, interjecting with the plan. “We keep you on the books at Alliance Arms, it would take an internal document check inside the hospital to know you’re here in a sort of halfway-house arrangement as we ‘re-acclimate’ you. That means you’ll be safe from anything they send. And we can start training you.”

“Training us? For what?” Fatima asked.

“Anything you want but… well you said you were in, you’re all brave as hell, and you can bridge disparate groups of telepaths.” Gene replied, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly “You’d do well for yourselves anywhere you wanted to go, but we could really use you in Metapol, and Transport would love to have you.”

“None of us have any objection to that, but I’m only a P6.” Sam protested.

“Kid, we’ll take any teep who wants to serve.” Gene assured him. “And don’t undersell yourself. For example, a P6 can make mincemeat out of a mundane in a lot of ways. Hell, our nine-year-old daughter could figure it out if she had to at this point, we’ve given her the tools for it she’d just have to put it together.”

“Wait, you taught Zara how to kill? That sweet little girl?” Erika asked, wanting to disbelieve it but not denying what she’d heard either. None of the other adults said anything, but they were all thinking along similar lines, except for Hoshi and Max. Hoshi found the very concept hilarious, and Max nodded in approval. Colin wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

“Hell no.” Colin declared “She’s way the hell too young for that. But we have taught her how to
suggest courses of action to birds and incapacitate people in various ways. You can figure out ways to kill with that if pressed.” He projected a mental image to Erika of someone absent-mindedly pulling a pin on a grenade “Gene is just acknowledging the reality that she’s clever and… well she has a feisty streak a kilometer wide. If she needed to, she’d do it and cry herself to sleep later.”

Gene laughed affectionately, and Colin detected a proud-papa-talk incoming.

“He isn’t kidding! She was telling us about how last week, there was a new kid and one of her cadre mates decided she didn’t like him and bullied him. Pigeons found a new favorite toilet and Zara got her first visit from the Grins…”

Colin could feel Gene’s thoughts. Gene knew she shouldn’t have done that because she took over the job of the Corps itself, but he couldn’t help but be so very proud of her sticking up for another kid like that. It should have gotten her in trouble and it did, but if he was around he would have taken her out for ice-cream afterward. Colin couldn’t really disagree. Erika was also somewhat mollified by the answer Colin gave her.

“Oh. Thank goodness that… that would have been wrong.” She said.

“Oh we agree. It's just that a lot of what you can do to confuse or hamper can also be used to kill and it’s not a large intuitive leap to make.”

“And she’s definitely smart enough to figure it out fast.” Hoshi said “Seriously, she’s scary-smart. If she wasn’t so kind, she’d be intimidating. I’m pretty sure she could figure out how to make an IED with what I taught her about chemistry and circuits…”

Colin gave her a look.

“What? It’s such basic stuff, it’s amazing there aren’t more bomb-makers out there.” Hoshi protested.

“So why doesn’t the Corps teach that to everyone?” Sam asked “I mean, it would certainly make all of us safer day to day.”

“Because the mundanes who oversee the Corps don’t want us armed.” Max informed him. “Only powerful—and relatively rare and easily overwhelmed—telepaths ever get trained in attack probes and they’re usually in combat roles like Bloodhounds, Psi Cops, and Military Specialists; expected to fight other telepaths. Sometimes medical, legal, and high-grade commercial telepaths learn them too for various reasons. Erika and I because we work with Psi Cops, Nishita because she has combative patients or might have to defend them. Astrid Bergsen, the one who caught Albert? She’s in corporate counter-intelligence and they’re often the first line of defense against corporations breaking the rules.”

“But mundanes don’t have the defenses telepaths do, so there we’re more limited by how much… what? I don’t even know how the Psi-Rating system really works.” Sam replied.

“Well I’m no theorist, but I suppose it’s a bit like gravity.” Nishita answered “Higher-rating telepaths are like heavier objects and can do more to others at a longer range. The field curvature is steeper, and they have more ‘inertia’ so they’re harder to affect as well. We still don’t know how telepathy really works I’m afraid.”

At that point, Sam was acting as a channel again, constantly taking consensus from the others about their own curiosity, and one questioned bubbled to the surface of their hive-mind.
"So what's going on that makes us so special? Any idea how our abilities actually work?" they asked by-way-of-Sam.

"It's like you have your own private wormhole." Colin replied "It's like... it's like instead of combining your mass through close proximity, you can shunt it between yourselves irrespective of distance. We don't know why, we don't know how. We just know that you do and that's the best way the theorists have of conceptualizing it."

“Du und Gene brauchen keine Sichtverbindung.” Machteld noted separately that neither Colin nor Gene needed line of sight to talk to each other.

“No. We don’t, well... we never have but we're P12s. Neither did you in the early days, it's just harder. However, it doesn't take any particular effort anymore which is... informative. And we have a telepathic back channel. So we're probably going down the same path you did. We don't actually know how common this sort of thing is or could be under different social conditions.” Colin confirmed. “Bonds like yours have also been known to happen to the kinds of couples who will stay together for sixty years, and Psi Cop partners who’ve been through some nasty shit together. We know we’re at least one of those things.” Colin finished with a wry grin as Gene started to caress the back of his head.

“Hopefully both.” Gene said. “But I think we’ve gotten a bit off track. We were talking about training.”

“Right!” Colin agreed “No matter what you guys end up doing, what division you go into; we’re going to get you combat competent. Both individually and as a group.”

“So the plan is, you train us, get us able to kick ass, and in the mean time use us as a honeypot lure in enemy agents? Then what? Kill them?” Albert asked.

“No Albert.” Gene replied “We’re going to turn them.”

“By force if necessary.” Colin followed up.

**Tuesday March 3rd, 2263**

Colin relished teaching. He really did. He’d done it in graduate school teaching intro psych to Medical students, and now he got to teach proper combat telepathy to teenagers. Not a self-defense refresher, not teaching his daughter how to gaslight birds, but a proper course in attack probes. He especially enjoyed the extra challenge of teaching a P6 how to work within his limits. Gene was sitting down, finalizing their physical workout regimens. Combat telepathy required being in top cardiovascular condition to avoid strokes and he was equally happy about doing that as Colin was about the more telepathic aspects. There was also a cage full of about three dozen white lab rats. The Rosenbergs were not among them, they had, ironically, survived and Colin was keeping them well cared for as pets in his and Gene's quarters.

Machteld was the first one in, opening the door and holding it open for the others who shambled in like zombies. They were not accustomed to getting up with the local star and it showed.

“Is everyone well caffienated?” Colin asked.

“Ich bin.” Machteld replied, the rest groaned.

“I can’t teach the undead.” Colin admonished them “There’s a thermos and some cups over by the
rats. Help yourselves.” They did, shuffling over to the table and pouring cups of steaming water of life. Colin gave them a few minutes to drink it down and let the caffiene do its work, binding to the adenosine receptors in their brains and reversing the effects of drowsiness.

“What are the rats for?” Fatima asked, her cup half-empty by the time she could verbalize her question.

“Practice. We can’t very well kidnap mundanes off the street, that would be wrong, but rats work. The anatomy is similar enough. That’s the thing with proper attack probes. Doing things naïve, you’re basically lashing out and hope you hit something. A bit like a shotgun fired at center mass. An attack probe is more like a precision sniper shot. Instead of hoping to do enough damage to the entire brain through brute force, you’re going for something specific, like getting someone to pull the pin on a grenade, sending them into ventricular tachycardia, frying their visual system, or inducing a seizure.”

“They’re not going to last long, are they?” Fatima asked.

“I wouldn’t give them names.” Gene chimed in gravely.

“Right. Attack probes. Lab rats” Fatima replied. She didn’t really like the idea of killing them, Colin could tell that even though she wasn’t leaking any thoughts, the look on her face was sufficient. The other three looked at her and her mood brightened a few shades “Okay. I’ll manage.”

“Good. I know it sucks; I never really enjoyed this part either. But the next few days are mostly classroom stuff. I need to get you familiar with the mammalian brain, so you’ll be learning things and then using that as signposts inside the rat’s minds. You shouldn’t be hurting them too badly today.”

“Huh.” Sam intoned.

“What?” Colin asked.

“I didn’t think we’d need to study anatomy for this. We just sort of…perceive the mind.

“True.” Colin confirmed “Strictly speaking you don’t; like walking you can just sort of will something to happen and it does. However, learning the neuroanatomy and the various processing pathways gives you more precision and control.”

“It’ll also give you a leg up working within your abilities. There are things you can’t brute force, but if you know what you’re doing you can do anyway. For instance, it takes at least a P8 to turn someone into your personal marionette, but a lot of what you might want to accomplish that way can be done through more subtle suggestion or deception.” Gene added.

“So instead of taking control of someone directly, I can trick them into doing it? Like if I see a bunch of guys with guns coming down a hall toward me, instead of making one of them turn around to shoot his friends and I can make him think he’s being attacked from behind.”

“Yes!” Gene replied, but Colin felt him shudder in his mind, remembering that near-miss. “Plus, you can always just kill the guy in front, but that’s less efficient. We’ll be teaching you the quick and dirty attack probes too. The biggest problem is navigating the mind efficiently. Colin can teach you the anatomy, but unless you can find that inside someone’s mind knowing it isn’t very useful. That’s what the rats are for over the next few days, and later you’ll practice that navigation on us.”
“Is that even safe?” Albert asked “Still learning. Don’t want to hurt you by accident.”

“We’ll take precautions. So long as you’re not actually trying to hurt us we’ll be fine.” Colin answered.

Chapter End Notes

This actually finishes Act 1. I'm still writing Act 2, so expect updates to slow down.
Gene hated mundane waiting rooms and antechambers. So did Colin, but the loathing coursing through Gene’s head was palpable. They reminded him of the principal’s office, or worse, being trapped in the school councillor’s office. It was strange to Colin seeing a grown man in a full-dress uniform, jet black and complete with flight wings and service commendations slumped in his seat like he was awaiting trial.

“It’s not going to be like that.” Colin reassured him. “We’re gonna go in there and we’re gonna kick ass. It’ll be fine.”

“I hope so. Otherwise, we’ll be really over-worked.” Gene replied. "But you can never tell with mundanes. Ultimately, we still need their fucking permission, and they might decide to shoot themselves in the foot out of pure spite. There's enough of a history of people doing that.”

“Nah. We’ll make it work. We can always make that telepath militia official if we have to.” Colin assured him. “Hell, that’s growing on me. Might just do it anyway.” Gene grinned back at him.

“I’d love to see the mundanes shit a brick…” he said, projecting a mental image of mundane politicians looking like they're straining to pass a square object.

“Oh yes!”

They felt the activation of an electrical circuit at the same time they heard the almost imperceptible click of an intercom system activating and turned to face it reflexively.

“The Cabinet is ready for you.” The timerous voice of the receptionist said over it.

“Looks like it’s show time.” Colin declared, standing up and helping Gene to his feet. Not because Gene needed the help, but because he wanted to pull Gene into a kiss on his way up. It was a gentle thing, lightly caressing each other’s minds for a moment before walking into hostile territory.

“Let’s get this done and go home.” Gene said, and never letting go of Colin’s hand, opened the door. When they walked in they could feel the complex medley of emotions wafting over them. Loathing, fear, respect; all of them formed a mental perfume that suffused the room. There were a few who didn’t feel the negative emotions: minister of education Dr. Adhira Chaudry and the minister of health Dr. Rebecca Goldberg. Colin expected Dr. Goldberg to be friendly, she went to synagogue with Max. He hadn’t expected Dr. Chaudry to be the same, but she was a welcome surprise. He mentally classified everyone else as hostile.

The room was dominated by a large rectangular table with the colonial Prime Minister Adia Kotze heading it up at the far end of the room, flanked by the defense minister Anton Korolev, and finance minister Chen Zhau. Arrayed down the sides of the table were the Justice Minister Alisson Cantwell, Communications Minister Anita Gutierrez, Security Minister John Foster, Foreign Minister Mohammad Abas, and the Interior Minister Dr. Noriko Akigawa. Everyone had coffee, and everyone had chairs. Despite the near end of the table being completely open, there were no chairs laid out.

<So that’s how it’s gonna be.> Gene mentally remarked.
<Seems so. I do love pathetic little power plays, don’t you?>

<They’re the best, obviously.> Gene’s reply oozed sarcasm.

Doctors Chaudry and Goldberg looked a bit sheepish, and Colin knew they’d been overruled about seats and coffee for their guests.

“Good morning everyone!” Colin greeted the assembly with his best false cheer, and he knew he was very good at false cheer. He did decide to gently call them out though. “I see someone forgot to lay out coffee cups for us, I trust it was just a miscount or hospitality staff simply going through the motions of a normal meeting.”

They all understood that he’d seen their bullshit for what it was, and a few more than the two friendly cabinet ministers felt stabs of shame for their breach of ancient unwritten rules of hospitality, but their dislike for telepaths in general and the Psi Corps in particular overrode it. Colin figured that would be the case, but he wanted them to know that he knew, while also not breaking his obligations as a guest. He was better than them. Now they knew it. Most of the mundanes grumbled a hasty greeting back at him, maintaining the pretense of politeness. Doctors Chaudry and Goldberg gave him more polite and genuine greetings.

“I’m sure you all took a look at the document I sent over.” Colin said, and everyone pulled it up. “As you can see, Captain Roach no longer feels he and the fine men and women of Earth Force are up to providing the manpower we need to do our jobs.”

"That isn't a slight against them." Gene followed up "We did lay on the physical danger pretty thick the last time we briefed them, and at the end of the day Mr. Qing was a P12 and his abilities were enhanced by Dust. He almost took us out. Bringing him down required the assistance of an ad hoc telepath militia and that's something we would rather not have to repeat for reasons that should be obvious to everyone here." He added extra emphasis on the ad hoc to make it clear that the next time it wouldn't be ad hoc.

Prime Minister Kotze interjected. "I don't see how it will ever be an issue again. He's in a secure facility now and you're preparing to ship him back to Earth, correct? So why should we let you people run roughshod over normal people? Why should we give you increased personnel to terrorize mundanes and telepaths alike?!"

Colin stared at her. He didn't scan her, he just stared at her.

'Terrorize mundanes? Okay I'll cop to that a little bit but only the criminally guilty ones. But telepaths? Seriously!? Who in the hell does she think she is? Who does she think I am?!' As Colin thought that and grew increasingly angry, Gene rolled his eyes strictly inside his own head and projected it at Colin, but otherwise kept a neutral expression. Colin had his thoughts organized a moment later.

"When I first got on this planet I had a backlog of blips the length of my arm, hundreds. I didn't hunt them through the streets or terrorize anyone. I gave them protection, food, shelter. The basic things your government systematically denied them because you kicked us out while keeping your discriminatory laws on the books. You know how many rape victims I found who couldn't even report their rapists to the police because they wouldn't be allowed to testify and your own local police force refused jurisdiction?"

She started to talk, to rebuke him in some way, but Colin cut her off.

"Fifty six. Half were repeats. Eighty two others had been beaten by mundanes, some of them were
overlaps with the rape. Twenty who had been known to the Corps died, some by their own hand others by the hands of mundanes who would never be prosecuted. Hell, your people let the abomination of child-slavery take place under their noses for years. What, did you think that with the Psi Corps gone, telepaths would just disappear from your population like magic? Don't talk to me about terror, you don't know what the word means."

"And you do?" Allison Cantwell asked contemptuously.

"I can show you if you want. I can show you what the lowest filth in the galaxy do to telepath children. I've seen it through both sets of eyes. Just give me your consent." Colin practically snarled back, particularly the word 'consent'. He was playing over a cathartic fantasy about showing them the meaning of horror though some of his own borrowed memories. He had just the one. Gene decided to interject right there and put a stop to the situation going out of control. The mundanes were whispering among themselves and barring Doctors Chaudry and Goldberg, they weren't ashamed of their attitudes or actions, they were just angry at being called out on them. Of course, they wouldn't take Colin up on his offer, that would require letting a telepath inside their head, and it would also force empathy on them which they didn't think was a good idea.

<Calm down Colin. Take a step back and breath.> he suggested.

<Yeah. You're right. I should do that before I give these mundane fucks flashbacks...> Colin replied.

"We're getting a bit far afield here. Everyone in here knows that there are only four people in this room who give a flying fuck what happens to telepaths on this planet so don't pretend you do. Even without our abilities we see right through you. What you do care about is what happens to the people who get to vote for you and what their opinions of you are." Gene said.

"Is that a threat? Because we won't tolerate any threats for you people." the Defense Minister Anton Korolev pointedly asked for clarification, but it was all bluster. He was actually terrified.

<I can use this.> Gene told Colin.

<I just be careful. Not that I can throw stones from my glass house right now if you're not...> Colin replied.

<I've got this.>

"Of course it isn't. Not like that, anyway. I'm just telling you the truth. See, those of us who have kids are sick of not being able to see them, and so are the mundane parents of kids who get sent to Earth for training because we don't have schools here. That's changing. So there are going to be more of us here partly because more will come to teach and administrate, but mostly because fewer of us will be leaving."

"You can't do that. Our agreement with EarthGov limits Psi Corps presence on Omega VII, you need our permission for that and you're not getting it." the Interior Minister Dr. Akigawa protested. Colin chuckled, while Gene just gave her a contemptuous look.

"Point of information." Dr. Chaudry piped in, slightly smug "They can. The treaty this government signed with EarthGov to bring us back into the EA only specifies Metapol. Their Education division is not included in any provision. Had we become a semi-autonomous region like Mars we might have a leg to stand on, but we didn't."
"Be that as it may, I don't see why that would compel us to allow an increase in Metapol presence."
The Prime Minister rejoined. Colin didn't think she was particularly bright, but maybe that was just
his own loathing for mundane politicians talking. They'd ambushed her and she hadn't thought it
through. The slightly more astute Interior Minister got it through.

"Because our own constituents will want to know why there aren't more people who can police
them." she said.

"And why you won't let the Psi Corps protect some of their children. They might not visit their
kids, but with an open door in the same city they can't really say that the Psi Corps took them away
either." Dr. Chaudry added. "They've gone to boarding school and drifted apart at that point but
they're not completely out of mind either. Threats to the safety of their children are going to make
them angry and this cabinet will be blamed for it if there's an open vote on the subject, and by
Ganesha there will be."

"There's another angle you're not considering." Gene added "With a larger Psi Corps presence
comes an increased risk of terroristic attack. Oh sure, they target us, but it'll be in your population
centers and there will be collateral casualties. We don't want that. Neither do you. You might not
care if we live or die, but the converse isn't true."

"Then why the hell are you bringing more people in? Why would you risk your people and ours
like that?" John Foster demanded. He knew why. No government worth the name allowed policy
to be dictated by the risk of terrorism except when it came to security procedures and personell
requirements. He would take the same position if he were in their shoes, but that didn't mean he
wasn't going to try and beat the telepaths over the head with the counter-argument.

"Because." Colin replied "We won't be cowed by terrorist threats. They win if we do that. We will
do what's best for our people and mitigate the risks, one way or another." he finished, letting the
alternative of a decidedly not ad hoc telepath militia and the electoral nightmare that would be hang
over their heads. Then he realized he wasn't done. "Oh, and lest I forget. We're not allowed to
agitate politically, but you can bet your ass we have friends who are and we won't even need to
nudge them to do that if you decide to throw good sense to the wind."

Most of them were not at all happy, though the Education and Health ministers were smiling inside
at their colleague's expense. They were considering the political blowback and weighing their
options. They had their own prejudices to deal with and they were all more accustomed to dealing
with the conciliatory Francois, not Psi Cops who Foster thought of as outright uppity. He even used
that word in his head.

"We've given you an out." Gene said. "You can throw Captain Roach into the train tracks." That
clinched it. Colin felt their decisions get made.

"We need to deliberate." Prime Minister Kotze informed them. "In private."

"That's fine." Gene informed them

…

Inside, the cabinet deliberated. Outside, Gene sat on the bench with Colin's head in his lap,
stroking his scalp through Colin's hair and through his gloves.

'It just isn't the same with gloves on' he thought to himself. He felt Colin's silent agreement with
the sentiment.
"Seriously Colin? 'Don't talk to me about terror. You don't know what the word means.'?" Colin snorted. "Don't get me wrong, you were right and that was hot as hell, but damn. Aren't I supposed to be the angry one?" Gene asked, gently teasing.

"What can I say?" Colin replied, looking up at him "She hit a rage button."

"Clearly." Gene agreed with the understated assessment. "You were getting ready to go all Clockwork Orange." Gene decided to have a bit of fun and shot Colin a mental image of the Justice Minister strapped to a chair with her eyes pinned open, screaming. Colin broke out into a fit of snickering.

"Yeah, but open or shut her eyes wouldn't matter!" he said in the middle of it.

"Where she's going, she won't need them?" Gene asked. That renewed Colin's snickers.

"They got the Latin wrong. It should have been 'Liberate vos ipse ex infernis'."

"I know honey, I know." Gene replied indulgently. The door opened and Dr. Rebecca Goldberg emerged. She had spectacles perched on her nose and her head tilted looking at them and Gene picked up from her inner monologue that she'd simply never considered the concept of gay Psi Cops before.

"We've taken the vote." She said. "You won. Barely, but you managed it. The PM had to break the tie." Gene didn't need to ask how she and Dr. Chaudry voted, and both telepaths knew how close the vote would be when they left.

"Thank you... do you prefer Doctor or Minister?" Colin asked. She laughed.

"I worked for my MD. Doctor is fine," she said.

"Well then thank you Doctor." Colin said, getting up and standing to shake her hand, she took his hand and shook it without hesitation. "Out of curiosity, I have a pretty good idea why you're friendly but what about Dr. Chaudry?"

"That's something that will be better coming from her I think." Dr. Goldberg replied "But she should be out in a moment. In any case, I'm meeting my husband for lunch in an hour so I should get going."

"By all means Doctor. Be well." Gene told her. She turned to leave and a moment later Dr. Chaudry exited the chamber.

"Oh, I didn't expect to see you two still here." She said, in a bit of surprise before she smiled faintly. Almost smugly.

"That smug grin suits you." Colin told her "We wanted to thank you. Dr. Goldberg told us how close the vote was."

"What can I say? For all the lip-service Sheridan's allies paid to the liberation of telepaths from the Psi Corps, none of them seem too terribly willing to talk to actual telepaths about what they want, or put in place policies that guarantee telepaths an education and safety. I don't need to be a telepath to know that they're using the Psi Corps as a boogeyman to cover their own bigotry in a flag of self-righteousness." As she said that, Gene got a flash of her memories trying to introduce legislation aimed at detecting and training telepaths that didn't make them leave their parents or get them expelled from school. It failed. Never even made it out of committee. It was a source of frustration for her for two years. "I didn't even consider the human trafficking... by the Gods how
could I have missed that?"

"Don't beat yourself up over that, most people don't think about it. The so-called 'underground-railroad' for blips fleeing the Corps is basically the exact opposite of the historical one. No one thinks about where the forged identity documents come from and who profits off them, and when a telepath teenagers disappear, well... out of sight, out of mind. At least now that you know, you give a damn. Some of the others in that room don't." Colin said, in sympathetic tones. "Trust us we know. We felt it."

"I believe you." Dr. Chaudry replied. "But I wouldn't let them know you know. They'd throw a fit like a bunch of adult children." She scoffed "Like you bother to block out our inner monologues all the time. As if it's fair or reasonable to put the entire burden of safeguarding our privacy from one of your natural-born senses on you. Please."

<Oh. Oh I think I like her.> Colin privately remarked, and Gene invisibly nodded grinning inside his head.

"That is a sentiment I've heard from very few normals." Colin noted "Do you have friends or family in the Corps?"

"I do. I've known Carlos for years." and Gene knew she was referring to Carlos Rivera "I'm glad you got to him in time. I was actually on my way to see him in the hospital. Would you care to join me?"

<We haven't done that yet...> Gene noted to Colin.

<True. Training the Hive Mind and preparing for today ate up visiting hours and I can't use the same procedural rules to visit him that I could for you. We have the time now though.>

"We've actually been meaning to do that for the past few days, but other things have been in the way. We'd be delighted." Gene replied.

... The two Psi Cops and Dr. Chaudry found Carlos in the recovery ward after he'd spent several days in in neurology under observation. He was in hospital scrubs, proper gloves provided by the hospital, sitting in a comfortable looking chair facing away from the door, greedily eating something that couldn't possibly have been hospital food.

"Hey Carlos!" Dr. Chaudry said as she entered.

"Adhira! I didn't feel you come in! One second, let me get this chair turned around."

"That's because I brought surprise visitors!" She replied

"And we've been jamming. Didn't want to spoil it." Colin told him as Carlos spun the arm chair around and his face brightened a few shades.

"Gene! Colin! It's good to see you!" Carlos greeted them cheerfully and then he went a bit solemn
"And...thank you. I did everything I could to protect myself but he was too strong... too strong."

"We know Carlos. You did really good." Colin assured him "He was a P12 before taking Dust. We had to gestalt ourselves to take him down."

"Oh...So... wow. I held him off despite that?" Carlos asked.
"You broke line of sight, weakened what he could do. He was never trained, so he didn't know how to use his power to compensate." Gene told him. "And we couldn't have found you had you not kept your wits about you and called. You rescued yourself more than you know."

"You give me too much credit. It was all I could do to keep him from turning me into his marionette at the time," Carlos protested "But... who was the girl? I don't remember much about what happened down in that pit, but I remember the mind of the person who freed me, and it wasn't either of you. You were... busy. I felt a lot of that too, I could tell that much." Carlos wanted to thank her, she wasn't a Psi Cop but she'd gone down into that sub-basement at great personal risk to help him and he wasn't about to let that go unremarked upon.

"That would have been Machteld Albrecht." Colin informed him.

"Is she new? A Bloodhound or something like that who you smuggled on-world?" Carlos asked. Colin grinned at the question and replied in proud and hopeful tones.

"Maybe someday. She's one of the teenagers we rescued back in January, she's all of sixteen." Carlos' eyes went wide in disbelief and he didn't know how to feel about it.

'They brought a teenager into that?'

"No, we didn't. Well, kinda." Gene said "Her and her compatriots wouldn't take no for an answer when Dr. Cavanaugh came to assist us. We pulled them out of a nightmare and they weren't about to let another telepath die in one."

"I get that" Carlos replied "But they're still kids. Not that I'm ungrateful, but they have no business being brought into something like that."

"Carlos, they have a parapsychological bond, they were able to bridge four groups if six telepaths separated by a hundred meters without line of sight. Their search and rescue scan found you, and their gestaltet attack probes kept Gao from escaping with you into the utility tunnels." Colin said "It would have been a lot harder without them, and Machteld came down and freed you from the brain lock."

Carlos looked at both Psi Cops, processing everything he'd just heard, but Dr. Chaudry was all over it.

"Wait. Hold on. That's a lot of words I don't know, but barring that I'm with Carlos, what the hell were you thinking?" Colin sighed. He wasn't annoyed precisely, he just didn't want to have this long drawn out discussion with a mundane.

"They were there and we needed the help. Badly. Dr. Chaudry, you have to understand how dangerous this guy was. Still is actually we managed to take him alive." he said. Adhira wasn't unwilling to hear them out, but her first instinct was to protect minors. So was Carlos' but he also knew exactly what they were dealing with and understood what help those same minors had been. The Corps was nothing if not pragmatic that way, and he was starting to come around. "Qing Gao almost killed both of us Dr. Chaudry, with all that help."

"Wait, what? He almost killed two Psi Cops? How?" She asked, in near-disbelief.

"He was a P12 normally, just like we are. Typically that wouldn't be a problem, one of us can make mincemeat out of an untrained P12. However, his abilities were enhanced by Dust and he was a P14, which is an entirely different ballgame. That's off the scale for normal telepaths of every other sapient species in the galaxy. He was able to slip past both our blocks simultaneously
and take control of our bodies for a minute. We would have shot each other had our safeties been off."

Dr. Chaudry went silent for a moment contemplating that. She didn't know how the Psi-Rating system actually worked, but she could get the idea that someone was completely off the chart. She still had no idea what their vocabulary was though when they talked about gestals and some sort of parapsychological bond.

"So... you weren't in a position to look the gift horse in the mouth, then?" She asked, knowing the answer was yes, which both Gene and Colin gave her with a nod "And that's one reason why you absolutely need Bloodhounds, so you don't put people at risk... I understand that but, you said something about teenagers joining the minds of other telepaths? I didn't know you could do that."

"It isn't a secret so much as something we just keep in our back pocket." Gene replied "But we can join our minds together into something greater than the parts. We call it a Gestalt. Doing that lets a group of weaker telepaths band together and stop a more powerful one, or transcend certain normal limits like needing line of sight to affect a target. Machteld and the others are, due to the circumstances of their earlier captivity, always in that state. Because of that, anyone who joins one of them joins with all of them."

"And doing that allowed you to block off Mr. Qing's avenues of escape... I see." Dr. Chaudry connected the dots. She could definitely see the practical side, but she was still understandably leery of teenagers being put in that position.

"They're right Adhira." Carlos relented, as much as it pained him. "Under the circumstances it was the best choice they could have made. I don't like it, but that's because the situation was a mess, not because they did anything wrong. Plus..."

<They're not kids anymore, are they?> Carlos asked <What happened to them?>

<No. No they're not.> Gene replied, and Colin p'saw the images he transferred into Carlos' mind of the conditions they were kept in, or Polina's body. <They were joined with her when she died, Carlos. You saw that ISN broadcast the other night?>

<Si.> Carlos confirmed.

<Sam Green is one of them. You heard him dress down his own parents. They're all like that. They're capable of making their own decisions.>

"Plus... they might be minors in age, but they're not children anymore. Their childhoods were taken from them and they grew up fast. I've seen it before." Carlos finished his earlier verbal statement, shaking his head.

"What do you mean you've seen it before, Carlos? You don't talk about the day to day at work much..." Dr. Chaudry asked, and Carlos didn't; not with mundanes. He wanted to make an exception and looked to the Psi Cops for permission. Gene nodded.

"What do you think my job is Adhira?" he asked.

"Well you work in their Education division as a field rep, so presumably you find and rate telepaths and give them the initial training they need to control their abilities, right?" Dr. Chaudry replied, worried about what she was about to hear.

"I'm basically a social worker." He informed her, and her mind went to the sorts of dark places seen by anyone in Child Protective Services "Yes. That kind. For thirty years. Most of the time, when a
telepath manifests, its fine. They take a mind-burst and wake up in a hospital and I get called in. Or their abilities manifest gradually, someone at school or at home notices, and I get called in. But sometimes it's not. Sometimes parents are already abusive. Sometimes they get that way when they realize their son or daughter is a telepath. By the time I get there... "Carlos shook his head in dismay. "Sometimes, with love and therapy, they can be kids again. Especially the younger ones. For the rest, either they grow up fast and take their agency back...or they break."

"So, to put it simply... how can you exercise power over someone who's already had all their power taken away and they're trying to get it back?" Dr. Chaudry asked and answered with her own question inside her mind. 'You can't.'

"Not like that, no." Colin confirmed for her "A certain kind of authority borne of mutual respect you can have. The power to veto or order? No. Not if you don't want to lose them. Actually that's generally how the Corps in general operates. Mother and Father are Authoritative parents, not to be confused with Authoritarian parents." While Colin was speaking, he could p'hear Gene contemplating his own experiences both as a teenager and as a parent. Communication with adults was always two-way. Rules weren't just laid down, they were explained. Expectations were high but he set his own goals. He realized that he and Colin had defaulted to that approach with Zara too.

<It's also a better way of raising kids because it helps them develop the skills needed to make better adult decisions later.> Colin supplied to him.

<1 know in retrospect. I just never thought about it before.> Gene replied. <Where do Grins fit into that though?>

<They're a bit hard to explain. They're scary and what they do is unpleasant because it involves being scanned, but it's a two-way conversation about the lesson they're trying to teach and the values they're trying to instill, complete with telepathically implanted object-lessons.>

The minister nodded. "Well, what do I know? I can't see inside their heads..." she said, and decided that she would lay the question aside as a matter of professional courtesy and deference to expertise.

"So, Carlos... when do you get out of here?" Gene asked. "Because if you're going to be here a couple more days, bringing some people by to see you shouldn't be a hard sell."

"I get out tomorrow. Max has been by, but you weren't referring to him, were you?"

"No." Gene confirmed. "We figured you might want to meet some of our fresh faces."

<They're actually living at the Annex now, but that stays between us.> Colin told him telepathically.

<You're grooming them for Metapol, aren't you?> Carlos speculated <From what you've said, they'd make good candidates.>

<Yes and no.> Colin replied <I'm taking over their training so that whatever division they go into, they're prepared to do well.> Colin wasn't about to discuss Transport, even strictly telepathically, with a mundane present. The reaction would tip her off and that could be dangerous, no matter how well-intentioned she was. <Could use your help with lesson planning and... there is another matter we need to discuss.>

<Alright> Carlos replied. <I can do that as soon as I'm officially on my feet.>
"I'd like that, but it'll probably mean me coming to see them." Carlos agreed verbally for Dr. Chaudry's benefit.

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**Friday March 6th, 2263**

"Quick! Turn on all the machines, the Administrator's coming!" Gerald shouted down the hall to Hoshi's office and lab space. Gene was in his own office, and laughed, letting the mental image of Monty Python's Flying Circus hospital scene play through his head.

"Make sure you turn on the one that goes Bing!" he shouted back. Hoshi let out a groan that could be heard throughout the offices. Gene chuckled to himself and got back to work. Unlike Colin, he'd actually taken sufficient courses in the academy to graduate from the Earth Force Staff College were he a mundane, and he was putting that knowledge to good use; planning an urban combat course for training purposes. He wasn't sure where they'd hold drills or what he'd use it for, though a certain abandoned and condemned apartment building was tempting. It wasn't falling over it just wasn't up to code anymore.

<Hey Gene> Colin said into his head <Francois is coming over along with everyone in Education division.>

<Really? School planning?> Gene asked, intrigued as to why they'd all be meeting there.

<Yeah. We're going to be short on instructors for a while so we'll all be taking over some of those duties for specialized subjects.> Colin answered.

<Sweet!> Gene responded enthusiastically <I take it they'll be wanting us to teach combat telepathy?>

<Among other things.> Colin said <How's that urban combat course coming along?>

<Pretty well. I think we should probably acquire that building we found Carlos under for that sort of thing. It has pretty extensive grounds too. Useful for all kinds of practical exercises. It'll be good for any Bloodhounds or Military telepaths we end up training. Security too.>

<We can talk to Francois about that, but I don't see any problems on his end other than maybe budgetary.> Colin replied.

...

Gene didn't know what to expect out of Francois. In his experience there were three types of Administrators, no matter what organization. The ladder-climbing cut-throat kind whose primary interest was accumulating as much power and influence as possible; the martinet who liked everything in its own little box and cared for the rules and only the rules; and the dedicated civil servant for whom accumulating power and influence were the means to an end for helping others. From what Colin had told him, Francois was mostly the third with a bit of the second. Francois got there before everyone from Education division and Colin escorted him to the briefing room where Gene had taken up his usual position by the rear door,

"I've got hand it to you Colin, I wasn't sure you'd get that through. I hoped, obviously, but you can never tell with them until you're there. I'm just lucky they couldn't do anything to oppose building acquisitions." Francois said as he entered.

"They can't oppose Security division either, now that we'll have facilities that require them." Colin
replied, and Francois gave him a look, but kept his thoughts rigidly guarded.

"Colin if I didn't know any better I'd think you were trying to turn our presence on this colony into an armed camp." Francois stated skeptically.

"Francois, we had to use the alert system for the first time ever not too terribly long ago. Bloodhounds are good for counter-terrorism, finding blips, and assaulting a fortified compound but they're wasted guarding a door." Colin replied, Gene decided now was the time to say something.

"We're not letting our children be protected only by their teachers." Gene said, and Francois noticed him for the first time with a mental exclamation mark of surprise as he realized someone was behind him.

"You must be Gene. Colin sings your praises! Of course, he would. Still, he's always been a good judge of character." Francois turned and told him, putting out his black-gloved hand to be shaken "I'm Francois Auger, your friendly neighborhood administrator!" Gene certainly thought he was friendly enough and he had a genuine toothy smile that went from ear to ear and right to his eyes. Gene reached out and shook his hand right back.

"Gene Hendriks. Pleasure to meet you. Colin speaks highly of you as well." He said pausing just long enough for Francois eyes to widen in mild disbelief "As much as he ever does for Administrators anyway." Gene finished with a wry grin of his own, and Francois' facial expression returned to something that said all was right with the world.

"That's more like him." Francois replied ruefully "But I get it. Lots of Administration likes to get in the way rather than act as a facilitator. I prefer to help more than I hinder." To that Colin admitted agreement with a nod. "Today, I hope I can make good on that, though it may increase your workload in the near future. Not only have I acquired all the space we'll need and then some, but I've managed to line up reliable contractors for the renovation."

Gene almost had to pick his jaw up off the floor. He'd expected the negotiations on buying up an apartment complex and getting the tenants out to take a lot longer. Colin was equally stunned and just stared at Francois with a facial expression that screamed 'How!?' without needing to speak or project his thoughts.

"Don't underestimate a talented paper-pusher. One of the buildings had a shared kitchen on each floor. It was billed as 'dormitory style' living and definitely low income, mostly young professionals just getting into the job market. The thing is, no one actually likes living in a place like that. Instead of buying the place out and having to evict people, I offered to pay off the fees for breaking a lease and cover the difference in rent for a new place as soon as they were out. The landlord saw their investment collapse and I was waiting there with a perfectly reasonable offer on the building."

"I bet you even saved money, didn't you?" Colin asked, and Gene understood that Colin wanted to append 'you sly dog' to the end of that statement, but didn't.

"Oh yes!" Francois replied jovially, clearly immensely proud of himself. "More importantly I saved time. Major renovations aren't necessary. Just replacement of fixtures, amenities, and some of the carpets. As for the contractor, did you know that a lot of P1s and P2s end up going into business for themselves?" Colin gave Gene a knowing glance.

<Think Transport put assets here?> Gene asked.

<I doubt it. There are a lot of P1s and P2s, they're registered so mundanes won't hire them but
nothing stops them from applying for a business loan.> Colin replied.

"We did." Gene replied "They're quasi outside the Corps because they can't do telepath jobs, but they're still family."

"Who do you think built the Annex? Completion date should be the end of the month. For everything. Including the Cadre school if we use prefabs, and we're definitely using off-the-shelf prefab buildings. We can buy those off the lot and set them on a foundation with existing infrastructure within a few days. I managed to buy a large plot of land on the outskirts of one of the smaller towns for a good price and it has full water and electricity hookups" The implications of that hit both Psi Cops like a tidal wave. Everything would be done on time for the twelfth of April, which meant Birthday, which meant seamless Cadre transfers. The fact that they could see each other's facial expressions mattered much less than feeling the other become unspeakably happy. Francois actually took a step back

"Wow, d'accord, calmez-vous tous les deux!" Francois requested in French before muttering "Merde gendarmes, ne peut pas garder leurs pensées pour eux-mêmes."

"Pardon." Colin apologized, feeling ashamed for not keeping his thoughts inside his own head. "C'est juste une très bonne nouvelle."

"Ça va. Je comprends!" Francois accepted the apology with good cheer. "I thought you would like it."

"I am carving an exception into my usual antipathy for Admin. Just for you." Colin informed him.

"Thank you. Of course, I think our Education staff is going to appreciate the news too. I will need to shore up my blocks or I'll end up with mental...how you say Diabète?"

... The entire compliment of Education division telepaths arrived fifteen minutes later and filed into Colin's briefing room. For once, it wasn't Colin doing the briefing but Francois, who stood at the front of the room looking about as pleased with himself as a Bauer Bird with lots of blue. Carlos was there off to the left hand side, and everyone was clustered up at the front of the room.

"Good afternoon everyone, I hope the day finds you well." Francois greeted everyone. "I suppose I'll just get down to it. We're re-opening training centers here on Omega VII in the next few weeks. No more sending children to Earth." there was an audible and telepathic gasp, followed by happiness and relief. Doing that solved a lot of problems and every Education telepath knew it. They were mostly of the social-worker type, going to schools and people's homes and bringing telepaths into the Corps; though a few worked in testing centers for adults who manifest their abilities after school. It was always a bitter pill to swallow, sending people away, and none of them liked having to explain that part to parents of frightened children. It increased the odds of them being put on Sleepers and they all knew it.

Francois continued to speak because they were all too polite to interrupt "Now, it won't be a by-the-book arrangement, because we weren't able to get our old facilities back, however, we managed to buy out enough housing and nearby vacant business space to set up a school and dormitories for a combined major and minor academy. We also managed to get some land about an hour outside the city for cadres. They'll be in prefabricated housing at first, but we'll upgrade and expand over time. So, starting today, no one else gets sent to Earth, and we start recalling everyone we've sent there in the past year who isn't currently of the age of majority, family situation and willingness to
return permitting. I'll need you to get the ball rolling on that last part there's only so many documents I can push and shove at once."

One of them, a woman named Valerie raised her hand and Francois nodded in her direction.

"What about the security arrangements? Are we going to be able to secure these facilities?" she asked. "You two are good at your jobs but you can't be everywhere at once, and even if you could, you couldn't do it while remaining sane."

"Absolutely!" Francois replied in the affirmative. "Colin, would you care to explain?" Colin stood up.

"I managed to out-maneuver the planetary government. I'm getting Bloodhounds. They're fresh recruits just out of their internships, but they'll be here in mid-April. Coming along with telepaths from Education division will be twenty four from Security division. For now, we'll actually be over-staffed for our population but it gives us room to expand." In truth, it was going to cause the telepath population of Omega VII to spike, because they would bring their families too. Children from cadres, wives and husbands. "With them on site, we'll not only be able to protect our schools, but also provide standing security at our civilian residences as well." The Psi Corps had all but bought out several apartment complexes to serve as residencies. It wasn't official, and they paid a premium in rent, but no one wanted to live too close to telepaths so once one moved in other residents moved out and more telepaths moved in.

Security division telepaths weren't paramilitary gendarmes like Metapol, they were guards. Full stop. They were trained to secure fixed locations and be watchful for harm to those inside. They were also trained in things like riot control. Everyone in the room remembered Colin's use of the warning system and breathed a sigh of relief. They weren't leaving the defense of their children to their teachers. Academy instructors for telepathic subjects were all rated P10 or better, so were house-parents in the cadres; And they were all trained in attack probes for that very reason, but it was better that they not have to resort to that. Having Security division guarding them while they slept also gave everyone else just a bit more peace of mind.

"That is really good news." Carlos piped up, saying what everyone else in the room was thinking. "But there is a problem I see. We're really small right now. We do run the risk of becoming a target, and the increased Psi Corps presence might inflame the mundanes in a bad way."

"We have considered that. But we're going to be a target for Byronite terrorists eventually anyway, and the mundanes do a perfectly good job riling themselves up. I'd rather have the resources and manpower on hand to deal with those things than not have them." Gene replied.

"So, why bring us in?" Carlos asked.

"How many young people do we have on Sleepers?" Colin asked.

"Planet-wide, between the ages of three" Carlos shuddered, Colin was horrified. The developmental consequences of that drug in children? Colin didn't even want to think about that, to say nothing of the fact that there was a high chance of a seven year old killing themselves. Gene went still, like the sails on a ship that was becalmed, and Colin felt rage forming in him like ice-crystals "and seventeen... thirty eight."

"That's why. For how many of those families was the prospect of their sons and daughters being shipped to Earth a major contributing factor?" Colin followed up, frowning. The Education telepaths conferred, recalling their cases and what they'd sensed from the parents.
"Twenty three to twenty seven, from memory." Carlos answered. "You want us to make second approaches and make the pitch that we're re-opening schools?"

"You're god damned right we do." Gene replied forcefully, and Colin felt him make an executive decision and concurred with it immediately. " Fucking toddlers...Pull out all the stops. This office no longer gives a fuck about the opinions of mundanes who would watch a three year old suffer like that and be content to let it continue. They can fuck themselves with _broken glass_. If they try to pillory us in the press, we fight back within a picometer of a Charter Breach." Francois made a choking sound, but the Education telepaths liked what they were hearing and wanted to know more.

"So when you say pull out all the stops?" Valerie asked, probing to make sure Gene meant what she thought he meant.

"In order of preference: Persuasion, showing them what they're doing to our little ones, legal maneuvers, telepathic manipulation. Metapol on this planet will not prosecute you as long as you use the least-forceful means. Nudge them, don't outright force them or put in action blocks. If the kids are old enough to make the decision themselves, back them to the nines in whatever they want to do; but the little ones..."

"I-I can't let you do that!" Francois protested, he did not like the plan at all. From his perspective, and he was broadcasting it, it simply wasn't safe. It exposed the Corps to risk and he wasn't prepared to accept that. Colin understood, but he couldn't abide children being put on those drugs. Older teenagers who chose it themselves, and adults? Okay that was their choice. A small child though needed to see color, needed to not feel like they weren't in their own skins.

"You can and you will." Colin added "You've never been on Sleepers or met a telepath who's on them have you?"

"Drop your blocks, Francois. You need to experience something to understand." Gene forcefully suggested. It wasn't a command or voiced threateningly, Gene wasn't going to batter his defenses down, Colin knew that. Francois knew that, but Francois dropped his defenses anyway. Gene showed him, made him feel exactly what Sleepers were like in all their misery. By the end of the demonstration Francois was shaking, weeping in sympathetic horror.

"Non non. Pas les petits. Comment quelqu'un peut-il faire cela à leurs enfants? Comment?"

"Not on our planet. Not on our watch. Never. The Fuck. Again." That time, it was a command from Gene.

"Oi." Was all Francois could reply with.

When everyone else left, Carlos and Valerie stayed behind, sitting patiently while Francois and Gene talked about getting the paperwork ready to contest guardianship of any kids whose parents refused to take them off Sleepers. Carlos sat between Colin and Valerie. Colin knew Valerie was something of a firebrand. Carlos was the nurturing sort, he'd rather shield his charges from harm. She'd like to punish those who did the harm, but settled for shielding them.

"Are you sure this is a good idea? I hate it when mundane parents take that option but... if we do what you're suggesting and we don't shackle their free will, some of these parents might end up really pissed. It could be a public relations disaster. Most of them will probably do the right thing when they don't have to send their kids away. It's just a boarding school at that point, most of the
rest will give in once they know exactly what they're putting their kids through but... some won't
because their objections are ideological. I can think of a few who are like that and they will
absolutely go to the press or pressure the government." Carlos said.

"I know." Colin replied "But to be honest, Gene and I...we're done. We're not taking their bullshit
anymore. You know that ISN broadcast?"

"That pile of horseshit? What I wouldn't give to have a clean shot at that waste of oxygen's
mind..." Valerie grumbled "You only saw the shit that happened to registered telepaths. Kids who
were suspected of being telepaths by their peers--and they usually aren't they're just autists or
something--got hit pretty hard."

"They courted that story, solicited the leak. The best thing we can say about it is that it was rating-
seeking. What happened after? That was a deliberate attempt to inflame public opinion against the
Psi Corps using facts they didn't do due diligence to confirm. They were just counting on us not
being able to correct them openly. It came from the editors, not Trisha Nguyen." Colin informed
them, and Carlos made the necessary inference.

"They're going to manufacture stories anyway, so we might as well do some good." Carlos
concluded.

"Damn right..." Valerie agreed. "If you're going to be accused of something anyway, you might as
well do it and reap the benefits."

"Basically. So we're done. We're not playing a bullshit public relations game against a stacked
deck, we're not going to be beg the mundanes for the personnel we need and hope they grow a
conscience, put ourselves at the mercy of Earth Force's good graces, or sit back and watch telepaths
forced to take Sleepers spiral into suicidality. We're going to do what's right by our own people on
our own terms to the very limit of what we can get away with." Colin's frustration was boiling over
past his blocks and he knew Carlos and Valerie felt it. So did Francois. Gene was a given. He
excused himself from Francois and sat down next to his fiance, putting an arm around his
shoulders. Colin for his part reached up with his right hand and intertwined their fingers, sharing
the vexation.

Francois looked on, perplexed. The problem was that he was isolated from a lot of it in his office,
he didn't have to see the shit Metapol or Education did. He could understand it academically and
had his own issues to deal with. He was no stranger to casual prejudice and derision from
mundanes, or the countless petty insults they lobbed at him verbally or with their minds; but he
never saw the true breadth and depth of mundane barbarity. So after a moment, he asked a
question.

"What happened Colin?" Francois asked "You've... radicalized, for lack of a better term."

"Not quite yet." Colin replied. "If I'd truly radicalized, I wouldn't have limits." While Colin
collected his thoughts, Gene p'heard them in advance and mixed in a few of his own.

"Francois, do you ever wonder why the planetary government never addressed the issue with
unregistered telepaths on this planet? Ever ask, or poke inside someone's head to find out why they
didn't institute some sort of reforms when the Corps got kicked off this planet?"

"No. I always assumed they couldn't agree on anything." Francois said.

"I'm afraid they could agree on something Francois. Adhira Chaudry tried to get something passed
that would have been humane. It never got out of committee. All their rhetoric about the Psi
Corps being terrible for telepaths was just smoke and mirrors. They were perfectly content to keep Crawford-Tokash in place without the Corps and leave young telepaths vulnerable."

It didn't take long for the implication to set in for Valerie. "Figures," she practically spat the words. Francois wasn't far behind her but he was having trouble believing that the people who yes, loathed him, would go as far as Colin was implying. Or, rather, he didn't want to believe it.

"That's not... that's not possible." he declared in disbelief. "I know they don't like telepaths but are you seriously suggesting that they knew what was going on?"

"Why else keep Metapol understaffed after they let the Corps set up shop again? Why else keep our minimization as such a hard bargaining position with EarthGov? We're not saying it's the whole cabinet, it's probably a mix. Then there's the Privacy and Technology committee. How much do you want to bet that their finances were all mixed up with the companies that had telepaths locked in back rooms? If we could get warrants for the records, I'd expect to see them dump stock back in January when we raided that warehouse." Gene sad.

"But it isn't just that." Colin followed up "The moment we're gone mundanes start locking telepaths in cages, or worse. Our own culture is built around trying to make mundane laws and policies have some sort of positive meaning just to make them palatable; because we can't vote, we can't even take to the streets in protest. We can't dress in civilian clothes without risking attack, our own daughter has a phobia of mundanes that's entirely rational; and we have to find a fun and non-horrifying way to teach her how to walk like a prowling tiger while turned out like a doll because otherwise she won't be safe on the streets of Geneva. She's nine. We can't convict people who murder us, we're waiting right now for a jury to hang for Xun Yang's murder; and I'll eat my hat if we can convict a single slaver of anything but white collar crimes." By that point, Colin was coming down off his rant and wanted Gene to take over. If he talked about it anymore he'd scream.

"So yeah. We're done. Our staff is done." Gene said before asking Colin a question.

<Do we tell them?> Gene asked. Colin considered the matter. It was a difficult question. He trusted them reasonably enough, but not with this. Not when he couldn't be there all the time to protect them from scans.

<No. Not yet. There will come a time when we have to, but for now we don't want the circle expanding.> Colin replied.

"We're not going to go on a bloody Revenge kick or anything like that, but we're not playing Mr. Nice Teep either." Gene followed up verbally.

"Badass. It'll be good to have people in our corner who actually fight." Valerie replied. Carlos looked at them. He'd directed a play about Magneto examining this very question he was about to ask.

"Just so I know... do you think reconciliation and co-existence is possible?" Carlos asked.

"And is fighting like you're discussing worth throwing away the peace we've had for a hundred years?" Francois asked as a follow up question. Colin thought both were solid questions and Gene decided to answer the second one first.

"Francois, we've never been at peace. We've been in a war for our survival since 2115. They committed genocide then suspended it, ignoring the fact that they ever did it. They write our laws, get to approve or disapprove our policies regarding those laws, get to force Education to rewrite
our culture, and have the due-process-free power of life and death over us as individuals and as a whole. That isn't peace. It's the brutal occupation of a captive people." Gene explained, rather forcefully. "And you know that. Just because they're not openly putting us in mass graves right now doesn't mean we're at peace."

"As for reconciliation and coexistence? That has to come from them." Colin answered "They've been beating us for so long, telling us that it's our fault for so long that a lot of us somehow think it's incumbent on us to seek those things. It isn't. Anymore than 'an end to the abuse' is somehow the responsibility of an abused spouse or child. I certainly want to coexist with mundanes, but I'm not going to internalize their oppression to do it."

Carlos nodded and everyone looked over at Francois.

"Putain." Francois cursed. "Je peux vivre avec ça. Mais si vous foutre en l'air, je ne peux pas vous aider. Je serai occupé à essayer de contrôler les dégâts." Colin figured Francois would be pretty good at damage control in the event that everything went terribly wrong.

"That's fair. If we do fuck up, we'll need someone who can do that. We'll just have to not fuck up." Colin replied. "So, Carlos, there are some others here I seem to remember you wanted to meet?"

"Si. It would be good to thank them in person." Carlos replied.

"Excellent, because I think they've been listening at the door." Gene told him before projecting his thoughts through the walls.

<Come on in, we're done talking about the march toward revolution.> Francois made that choking sound again.

"Just kidding Francois..." Gene reassured him. "Running joke around here."

"Why do I get the feeling that you're only half-kidding?" Francois asked. The door opened and Albert came in first, followed by Machteld, then Fatima, with Sam pulling up the rear.

"No comment." Gene said. "Carlos, do you speak German?"

"Ja." Carlos replied.

"Ausgezeichnet" Came Machteld's voice. "Ich kann nicht Englisch sprechen, nicht mehr."

"Warum nicht?" Carlos asked.

"Hirnbluten. Ich kann immer noch verstehen, ich kann die Worte nicht bilden." Machteld replied, specifying that she still understood the language she just couldn't form the words.

"Ah. I'm sorry that happened to you." Carlos said.

"Es ist ein kleines Problem." Machteld said, minimizing it "Ich verwalte, die meisten Telepathen sind mehrsprachig. Es ist schön zu sehen, dass du dich schnell erholt hast." Gene was probably the only person in the room who didn't speak at least some German, but he was the only one who spoke Narn and Mandarin. Colin provided him a mental translation.

<It's a small problem. I manage, most telepaths are multi-lingual. It's good to see you recovered quickly.>
"I owe that to you. It was brave of you to go down there and release me from that brain-lock. Thank you." Carlos told her with absolutely genuine gratitude "A few more minutes and I was toast." Fatima took over for Machteld, speaking on behalf of all of them.

"Machteld wasn't in any danger. She had to separate from the whole Gestalt so she could walk around, but if she was attacked... Nothing will harm one of us." to emphasize the point, without any physical contact they wove their minds together and made sure that everyone else in the room could p'see. Their individual mental imprints upon the world formed a singular mass that seemed to collapse into a singularity; a psychic entity of staggering power and perfect cohesion, not a gestalt but a true collective consciousness. Then, almost as soon as it was formed, it collapsed back into their own individual but connected minds.

Carlos simply sat in his seat in awe, not making his thoughts in the slightest; he'd heard of telepaths who could do that but he'd never seen it. Francois was still standing and his jaw looked like it was trying to escape it's socket to skitter across the floor and hide. Valerie was grinning from ear to ear.

"I-I take back every objection I had to a sixteen year old rescuing me... you weren't in any danger." Carlos said once he regained the power of speech.

"Ich weiss. Ich war es nicht." Machteld replied.
Monday March 16th, 2263

Zara Tam

Zara rose. She did not wake, she rose. Pretending to be a vampire she sat up in bed with her arms folded across her chest. The only problem was that the sun was coming up instead of going down and it just lacked the magic she expected when she first conceived of it five seconds prior. The other kids were still sleeping, but she liked to get up just a little bit early to bathe on her own. For the other kids who'd all been raised in the cadre from the time they left the creche bathing communally was normal. For her, it was a bridge too far. The others thought it was strange at first but once she explained it they understood, and Mr. Chastain didn't seem to mind.

Once she was done in the very large tub she curled up on the very large sectional couch in the living room and paged through her copy of The Martian. It was so retro, she loved it. Everything about space travel was so primitive it fascinated her, like how the Hermes couldn't just spin around on its axis and go back for Mark because it's acceleration was too small at only a few millimeters per second squared. A modern ship could have done that. It also took her a little bit to wrap her head around his fascination with being, technically, a space pirate.

'I guess back then it wasn't a problem and pirates hadn't been a real danger since the age of sail, unlike today where pirates have whole fighter wings and can take down armed merchant ships...' Zara mused. The other kids were starting to stir, their minds waking up, still too groggy to clamp down on their thoughts to avoid being overheard entirely and it wasn't long before there was a line forming at the toilet and they were dividing up into orderly groups to bathe.

"Coffee?" Mr. Chastain asked from behind her. She hadn't felt him approach but that wasn't unusual. He let her have coffee because she didn't run around the house all jittery afterward like some of the others. Zara didn't understand that. It was the same thing with sugar. If she wasn't a telepath she'd suspect it was an affectation, like they were using the coffee or sugary drinks as an excuse to act crazy; but it was real. That was something other kids did.

'Maybe it's just because I'm already a little crazy?' she wondered.

"Sure. Thank you." she replied, and he set the coffee down on the table by the couch arm for her.

"No problem, just remember not to spill on the couch." he replied and sat down next to her.

"So, moving day is coming up awfully fast." Mr Chastain remarked. "Excited?"

"Yeah!" she started, but then got a little bit uncertain "But... I don't know. I miss my dads but I'm gonna miss you too. And my friends here."

"I know, and I'll miss you too Zara. But you know, you were going to move up to an older cadre next year anyway so it isn't that big of a change when you think about it. And you'll make new friends." Zara knew he was right, he almost always was when it came to this sort of thing, but it was still a change and it made her nervous.

"Yeah..." she agreed, then she had an idea "I can always call on sundays right?" she asked.

"Of course you can. I'll be here. And I'll be going with you for the wedding so it won't be a hard transition either." The thought of that made Zara inwardly scream in delight, but she kept it off her
"Now, I need to go make breakfast, drink up. Can't have the rest of them seeing the coffee and getting jealous, now can we?" Mr. Chastain said.

"Nope!" Zara agreed, and sipped the coffee. It was a delicious light roast, just the way she liked it. Lots of floral aromas, almost but not actually sweet.

"The informal definition of a limit is as follows:" Teacher Xiang told the class, writing down the informal definition on the old-school whiteboard "The function F assigns an output or F(x) to every input x. The limit L at input p means that F(x) gets arbitrarily closer to L as x moves closer to p from any other input that is sufficiently close to p, however, we must specify that we're not merely evaluating the function at x. Can anyone give me an example of what this might mean in a real function?" Zara p'heard the mental 'what' from the rest of the class, but she thought she got it, and raised her hand.

"Yes, Ms. Tam?" Teacher Xiang responded.

"So, say we have the function Sin x divided by x. That's undefined at zero, right?" She glyphed an approximation of the function's graph for everyone to see, a wavy shallow curve that crossed the X axis at several points on either size of zero and then climbed toward a value of one, skipped the Y intercept, and continued symmetrically on the other side. "But from either direction as x approaches zero, p gets closer and closer asymptotically to one. Yes?"

"You're right. However, in that case, we refer to the limit as deleted because the function is undefined for that particular value of x. We'll get into that in a couple days." One of the other students named Bret who was sixteen looked over at Zara and asked her a question he'd had on his mind for a while.

"It's great having you in the class, but...how? Like, seriously how? Math is like breathing for you and I just don't get how someone so young can know as much as you do."

Zara glyphed a shrug back at him I don't really know. I'm a little ahead in other subjects but not like this. Outlook and practice I guess? I like to learn and I'm not afraid of walls of greek letters. I think that's what holds a lot of people back. They think math is scary.>

"Well, I don't think log-functions are going to come for me in my dreams or anything but some people just aren't good at math. I'm not." Bret retorted.

"That's self-reinforcing too. If you go into it thinking I'm gonna own those log-functions! guess what? You'll own the log-functions."

Zara got back to the cadre house two hours later, just in time for Psi Corps history with Mr. Chastain. Earth History was an entirely different subject, and she liked how there was a distinction between the two. It couldn't be taught by time period like most history classes. No one ever entered into the fourth grade without also having gone through something that looked like Kindergarten, first, second, and third grade, so they could cover history linearly. Kids came into a cadre a few days or weeks after learning they were telepaths, so to some extent things had to be retaught each year. Or so the other kids told her. Instead, history was organized by topic-themes that were studied historically, which meant each year there was apparently more nuance and detail than the years previous, which would continue to make things interesting even though the same events and topics were being covered. Zara could appreciate the approach, even if she had a bit of
a head-start thanks to Max and Dad: both of them.

She walked in and headed toward the classroom, and someone else was standing at the front of the class and off to the side while Mr. Chastain waited for her specifically. Of course, there wasn't anyone else for him to wait for and this was normal given her walking distance. Zara thought she recognized the person though. He was tall, heavily built about like Colin-Dad, but with narrower features, wearing a uniform that was definitely Metapol but slightly different from those of the Psi Cops, a dark grey instead of black. She'd never seen him before but she had p'seen him in Colin-Dad's mind.

<Uncle Marcel?> she asked him, sending it across the room into his mind.

<Of course, pisklę. I would have come on Sunday but I had a case come up. Pleasure to meet you at last.> Zara wondered for a second what that term 'pisklę' meant but he glyphed an image of a songbird into her mind and she knew it was also an affectionate term for child. Little Bird. She thought it appropriate and felt a warm protective agency settle over her for just a moment and knew that Marcel was overjoyed to have a niece and god-daughter. Zara returned the warm affection of it, though the protective nature of what he'd sent her she couldn't exactly reciprocate without it being silly. She decided to do it anyway and Marcel gave her a proud smile from across the room.

<You can always try, its all any of us can do for each other.> Marcel told her. <But we'll talk after class.>

"Alright everyone." Mr. Chastain said after giving them just long enough to have that conversation "This is Mr. Szewczyk' pronounced like shev-chick "He leads the Bloodhound pack in Warsaw and he stopped by to visit and I asked if he could give today's lesson."

"Fair warning though, I'm not used to giving lectures to children, you'll help if I get stuck on something yes?" Marcel said with a grin and a wink "For example, I did not prepare any visual aids." Everyone in the class answered with an emphatic verbal and mental Yes, and the space between their minds was filled with speculative glyphs of everything from actual bloodhound dogs to spaceships and comically bumbling Earth Force officers.

"Well, I certainly appreciate the effort, but today I'm actually here to talk about the Earth-Minbari War. Mr. Chastain tells me that the theme for this week is how useful and valuable telepaths are to everyone and I can't think of a better example of what that means than the defining moment of human civilization." Zara knew exactly where he was going and Marcel telepathically winked at her because he knew that she knew. One of the more powerful P10s named Susanna picked it up and asked Zara a question.

<Do you know him?> she asked.

<Kinda? It feels like I do. I've never seen him before but I've p'seen him, when he was younger. He's the closest thing my dad has to an actual sibling and that makes him my uncle, in a way.>  

<We're all brothers and sisters, Zara. I thought you understood that.> Susanna corrected her, not unkindly, but she didn't understand.

<1 do, but... it's different. I don't really know how to explain it to you but they're really close." Then she realized the answer was staring her in face. <It's like how the Corps is Mother and Father, but we have Mom and Dad too, or Dads, or Moms. Well, we're all brother and sister in the Corps, but even if we don't have blood-siblings, we can still choose people to be that.>

<Oh. That makes sense.> It didn't entirely to her, Zara could pick up that much, but it made
enough sense to satisfy Susanna's curiosity.

"I speak of course of the Earth-Minbari War." Marcel continued after a pregnant pause.

"Not the Earth Alliance Civil War?" one of the other, a P5 named Asher asked. He was confused but the Earth Alliance Civil War was the only war he had any experience of. He was only eight, Zara reasoned.

'Oh yeah, like you're so much older than he is...' Zara caught herself.

<You had a head start in some ways.> Mr. Chastain whispered in her mind.

"No." Marcel corrected. "The Earth Alliance Civil War was caused by a seed of xenophobia planted during the Earth-Minbari War. I was here, in Geneva, during the battle of the line. I felt the seed germinate." He thought for a moment and something passed between him and Mr. Chastain, who nodded. "I will demonstrate. If you would mind lowering your blocks?"

Everyone did, and he projected what Geneva's stadtgeist was at the time to everyone. The joy of being alive and not dead, at having a second chance, and that undercurrent of trauma, shock, and suspicion. Zara turned it over and around in her head trying to make sense of it. It wasn't rational at all. Why would the Minbari bother with some sort of fifth column secret conquest when they could effortlessly bombard earth from orbit?

"First contact happened on what was supposed to be a recon mission, trying to get some information on the Minbari. So I have a pair of questions for the class. I'll give you some background information first. You're a young interstellar power and you're fresh out of a war with what amount to hyper-nazi cat-people in space; you're looking to expand. Maybe colonize some new planets, build alliances with your neighbors. One of those neighbors has been in space since before your species invented gunpowder. You know almost nothing about them. What do you think? Good idea to send an exploration mission to the edge of their space? Maybe say hello if you can't avoid their ships?"

Zara thought about the question. The problem was she had hindsight. She tried to ignore it and make her decision as if she didn't know how things turned out. The other kids were doing the same thing and she felt all their minds settle. At the end of the day, as far as she was concerned, it was risky either way. If the Earth Alliance knew nothing, they could piss off the Minbari by mistake. Or they could screw up first contact. One of those things was something they could control, the other they couldn't. Zara settled on her answer.

"So." Marcel asked "Who thinks bad idea?" About half the class raised their hands including Susanna. "Okay, tell me why. No hindsight. First principles only." A few hands wavered and went down but Susanna stood up.

"It's too easy to mess up first contact. You don't know their language, you don't know their customs. It's better to just steer clear and let them come to you if they're interested. Like the Centauri did."

"Not an unreasonable argument. Who says good idea?" Zara raised her hand, and so did a good chunk of the rest of the class, but some weren't sure and kept their hands down for both. "Okay. Tell me why." Zara stood up almost before anyone could blink.

"It comes down to control. You can improve your odds in first contact if you initiate it. You can bring telepaths along, select your captain well, pick the time and place. You're going to meet them eventually it should be on your own terms. You control it then."
"Also good." Marcel replied. "Ultimately I tend to take that approach as well, and so did the Earth Alliance, but that brings us to the second question. What sort of commander would you want for an expedition like that?"

Zara considered that question too, but instead of waiting until everyone did their deliberations on their own, she broadcast her thoughts and started a brain-storming session.

<I wouldn't want someone who reacts to stress by punching something> She thought.

<Someone who scares easily would be bad too.> Susanna added.

<Probably someone cautious. Older and experienced maybe?> Another kid named Pierre tossed that into the mix.

<Anyone who's managed first contacts before? Did we have anyone back then who was like that?
> The newest kid Edward suggested and also asked.

<Of course we did, more worlds get added to the League all the time... One of the Explorer captains might be best? Kaveri Varma maybe?> Julie suggested a very specific captain and everyone looked at her.

"What?" She replied aloud "My mom is a military teep.Apparently Captain Varma is good to telepaths too."

"She'd be a good choice. Her daughter Zhen-li Varma would be too actually were this scenario taking place in today's Earth Force. Unfortunately it isn't. Because of political maneuvering and string-pulling, the exact opposite of all those things was chosen." Marcel said, much to everyone's frustration. We'll never know exactly what happened on Captain Jankowski's ship, but as far as anyone can tell, he interpreted the Minbari protocol of greeting approaching ships with gunports open as a threat and ordered his flotilla to open fire. He killed... I suppose you could call Dukat the Minbari President backslash Pope? As you might imagine the Minbari got mad. Then they went a little mad; the entire species went...Kurwa. Càlkowicie niepoczytalny."

Before anyone could stop her, Zara translated 'Kurwa' for the class which erupted in scandalized giggles.

"Sorry." Marcel apologized trying to sound sheepish but failing "I meant to say 'bonkers'." more giggles because clearly that was a lie.

<That was naughty, Zara.> he faux-chastized her.

<I know.> Zara replied <But come on, I had to!>

<I didn't know you knew Polish... Mike, please don't bring in the Grins for this.> Marcel pleaded.

<Neither did I! But I won't. It was funny and I've been around the block enough to know the older ones are exploring curse words anyway.> Mr. Chastain joined in.

<Thanks!> Zara thanked him. <But I don't. Picked it up on the 'net from context.>

<Going to need better filtering software...> Mr. Chastain grumbled

Susanna raised her hand and Marcel nodded at her. "How would that even work, they're not all telepaths so how would that even happen?"
"Good question." Marcel replied with an approving nod "The only reasonable explanation is that 'we went crazy as a species' is just a convenient fiction they tell themselves and outsiders. They've told themselves that lie often enough they likely even believe it. The reality is probably best summed up as 'inter-caste politics'.

"What, so they had a faction that wanted war?" Edward asked for follow up.

"Exactly. Back then the Minbari were ruled by the Grey Council. Nine Minbari evenly split between their three castes. Typically there were two blocks within the council. Warrior and Religious caste don't see eye to eye and the Worker caste tended to break ties. The vote to go to war with us was a close one, five to four. We don't know who voted how for sure, but it probably broke along those lines. It's more likely that the Worker caste deferred to the Warrior caste while they were at war, and the Warrior caste was out for blood because they didn't have anyone to fight for half a millennia. All those toys, no one to use them on..." Marcel glyphed everyone a mental image of a mean dog straining at his leash to attack a mail-carrier.

"So why'd they surrender?" Zara asked. She didn't know the answer to that question it wasn't for everyone else's benefit.

"We still don't know for sure. We know the order came from the religious caste with the backing of the worker caste, but that's it. Even now they've never gone public with the reason. What we do know is that several times the religious caste tried to broker a peace."

Zara got the distinct impression that Uncle Marcel knew more than he was telling the class. He wasn't a historian either and she found herself suspicious about how he knew this much off the top of his head in the first place.

"So, now that we have a grasp on how the war started and how it was maintained, let's talk about the war itself and how it was waged." At that point, Marcel went into an explanation of Minbari strategy during the war: hopping from planet to planet, military outpost to outpost, wiping out the defenders but leaving the planetary population untouched. "We think that they were doing was preparing the ground. Once they were done with Earth, they'd withdraw, annihilating the now defenseless civilian populations as they went. All that, you'll learn in Earth history class. Or have already."

"I think the detailed military history of the Earth-Minbari War is covered in the Minor Academy." Mr. Chastain added.

"Right. Now, here's what mundane historians don't for the most part want to acknowledge. We fought in that war. The Minbari beat us in space, but they had a much harder time on the ground, even with better tech." Marcel glyphed mental images of Earth Force defending positions on Proxima III, along with side-by-side comparisons of Earth Force tanks that still used tracks, compared to Minbari anti-grav tanks. "We were able to do this partially because of the training and discipline of mundane ground troops, partially because humans like to use more indirect-fire artillery" he projected another mental image of a schematic diagram of a Minbari beam weapon unable to penetrate an earthen wall, while an Earth Force artillery regiment simply fires over it.

"But most important of all" Marcel continued "we have stronger and better trained telepaths. Most of theirs are worker and religious caste, they're practically monks. They're not trained for battlefield operations as well as our Military Division and Metapol are. As a result, we had superior military intelligence and our special forces were operationally superior and able to disrupt their command and control as well as logistics." About ninety percent of the kids stared at him blankly. Zara had spent evenings reading with Gene so she knew what he was talking about.
"We were better at sneaking around, taking out their leaders and making sure they couldn't deliver supplies." Zara explained.

"Ooooh" most of the others replied in understanding.

"Thank you Zara. As I said, I'm not used to this. Anyway, that put our people in direct combat and...that's always dangerous. Telepaths died in that war by the thousands. Many of them draftees. Men and women who are denied the most basic of all rights--free expression, the vote. They died to protect their brothers and sisters in the Corps" Marcel paused, and Zara felt his anger, felt him hold back some of what he wanted to say. "Like in the Earth-Narn Border War, the Dilgar war, we proved ourselves to be great assets to humanity. We were so very useful." Bitter contempt dripped from Marcel's lips and from his mind. "Useful enough that when the war was all but lost and EarthGov was planning the evacuation of as many civilians as possible, they took the decision to leave every human telepath to die."

Someone dropped their pen, but otherwise every child in the room was dead-silent. Zara already knew about this from Colin's memories, but she maintained the silence even as she seethed at the injustice of it. She had a pretty good idea what Uncle Marcel would say next. Marcel looked out the window toward the statue of William Karges and and Zara felt loathing from deep in Marcel's soul. Not toward the man, but the symbol mundanes turned him into.

"Our people sacrificed themselves for mundanes, used and discarded." Marcel paused, working himself down from his anger and bitterness at the world to try and bring himself back to the point he was ultimately trying to get to, and Zara could sense the anger rising from everyone. "I don't mean to make you angry. If poorly managed that can lead you into a toxic spiral of hatred. I'll confess, the things I see...bring me close to that sometimes." he followed up, softening his tone. "Rather, I want to drive a point home that you must not repeat on any standardized test ever." Marcel glyphed every child a free response question on an exam with the words 'Down with EarthGov' written on it, followed up by another glyph of them being black-bagged in the middle of the night by people with 'Director's Goons' written across their foreheads, and another mental image of him and Mr. Chastain being given notes reading 'Commit suicide Or Else'.

"It's so easy to think that if you're just good enough, if you're useful enough, that mundanes will respect you as human beings and value you. They won't. Individuals might, and if you find those people cherish and protect them. But their society won't. Don't sacrifice yourself or of yourself for them."

... After history was structured playtime, but Mr. Chastain pointedly didn't say anything when Zara stayed behind to talk to her uncle, who was sitting on the teacher's desk giving her a once over.

"This is, I will admit, a little odd." He said contemplatively "I never actually expected to have a niece, for obvious reasons." Zara let out something between a chuff and a giggle.

"Hey, imagine how I feel. I have two new dads and a new uncle. Funny where life takes you I guess." She replied.

"I can imagine. When I came into the Corps it was a big change and it took me a while to adjust but you seem to have taken to the change well. Except for that incident with the grins, anyway..." Marcel gave her a sideways look with an accompanying knowing grin and she could tell he was carefully avoiding the reason why she likely took to the Corps so well. She had no one else, nowhere else to go. Her entire old life had been erased, adapting to the change had been all she could do. Plus, she really did love her dads and if the Psi Corps produced them, she knew she'd be
okay. "So Zara, most basic of all questions for an uncle to ask his newly-discovered niece. What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"I know I like math and science and I'd like to be a scientist but..." she trailed off, hit by a sudden realization while considering the future and her mind went into overdrive turning things over in her head. The adults kept the kids in the cadres rigidly protected from the outside. They learned history, they learned about the oppression of telepaths 'Like I don't know that better than most...' but they didn't learn current events except in a very filtered way because, as much as possible while preventing ignorance, the Education division wanted young children to have worry-free childhoods. She could never actually have that again, so she was left with a question. Why had Mr. Chastain permitted Marcel to give a lesson and make a speech like that? It was just shy of revolutionary.

Over in the minor academy the students whispered, on their lips, in their minds. They dutifully tried to keep her from over-hearing and over-p'hearing, but she picked up fragments. They didn't keep their thoughts and verbal conversations private from starlings and pigeons. There were just too many pigeons. There had been terrorist bombings, increasingly unfavorable coverage on ISN, hate crimes against telepaths were on the rise. Colin-Dad had been spooked badly when he handed her that picture frame with encoded contact information. She remembered that all on her own. Students who didn't used to be on education tracks that included classes in combat telepathy were having 'Advanced Self-Defense' added to their schedules for the next term without requesting it. The armed divisions of the Corps were recruiting very aggressively, and no one knew why.

There were only so many reasons why they'd do that, and it could be a response to terrorism but then she re-remembered Marcel's speech. The last part had been a warning against letting anger lead to a cycle of revenge, which necessarily meant that there could be an opportunity for revenge.

"I don't know what the future holds" she finally said, keeping her thoughts rigidly private.

"That's fair." Marcel replied. "Come on, I can't have you miss out on playing with the other kids. Colin tells me you've modified some of the games to involve birds, yes?"

"Oh yeah! Invented a new one! Come on we'll get a game going and show you!" Zara replied and couldn't help herself she was so excited to show it off to a new person, especially her uncle.

... 

The game was called Stool Pigeon, and it was played throughout minor-academy housing under the watchful supervision of Mr. Chastain and several other house-parents from participating cadres. However, unlike traditional Capture the Flag there was no direct physical or telepathic contact allowed between kids. Each side had a base, and a flag. The objective was to sneak toward the other team's base, capture their flag, and take it back to yours. However, each side didn't use their own eyes to see, but the eyes of pigeons, starlings, tits; and Zara's favorite, crows. Kids had to be tagged out by birds who'd spotted them while under another child's mental control.

Zara was on counter-surveillance duty hiding under a staircase and she noticed a pigeon was out of place. There were plenty of older minor academy students eating their lunches or studying in the open air for them to harass for food and most of the pigeons were doing exactly that, but one wasn't. It was simply perched on a safety rail overlooking a strategic avenue of approach to the enemy team's base. She hadn't been spotted yet, so she entered the pigeon's mind and found the kid controlling it before he spotted her. He was forced to pull back into his own mind and she was able to take over the bird's sensorium using it to gaze upon the world for her. She spotted the kid, trying to relocate without being seen. She suggested to the pigeon that his shoulder would make a better perch than it's current spot, and it opened it's wings and took to the air. Edward tried to run,
but a pigeon could fly at over a hundred kilometers per hour and he didn't stand a chance, and he wasn't allowed to re-occupy the same bird. It landed on his shoulder and he was out.

"Oh man!" he complained as he lay down in place and put his hands over his head. The first team to lose everyone that way lost. Zara left that very confused pigeon to its own devices, cooing as it strutted curiously around Edward's supine form before flapping away to find better prospects. She knew she needed to relocate because doing what she'd just done would partially reveal her position, so she looked around. No obviously controlled avians, but there was an attempted murder of crows just across the courtyard. They were tricky, they'd just sit there normally until an opportunity for plunder presented itself. She didn't think they'd spotted her, but just to be sure, she gently scanned each one. The one on the right was clean, the one on the left wasn't. She felt another mind, this one Susanna, break contact and jump to the second bird. It took off in a bee-line for Zara's position and she wasn't allowed to kick Susanna out because she'd just been in that bird's mind. She also knew she couldn't out-run *Corvus carone*. Her only option was an intercept from the animal she currently had under her spell.

She suggested that the other crow wasn't a crow, but a predatory falcon that deserved to be mobbed, and with an aggressive caw it attacked the other crow, throwing it off course as it defended itself. Zara used the confusion of their subsequent squabbling and disorientation to make her relocation around a corner, out of line of sight. Which was when time was called. Little wrist watched all sounded an alarm calling them in for further classes, and neither side had actually won. No one had captured a flag, and no side had all their people tagged out. Everyone knew that would happen, with a large group a game of Stool Pigeon could last for hours, far longer than structured playtime on a school day. On the other hand, winning wasn't the point and Zara bounded back toward home.

Marcel stepped out of one of the dorms and intercepted her on the way back.

"So what'd you think?" she asked him, panting from both the run, and telepathic exertion.

"It looks like a lot of fun, actually. I noticed something, the rules mean you don't advantage the stronger telepaths."

"Yep! Most of the other games do, and I don't think that's fair. Anyone can play this, it just means that those of us on counter-surveillance have to cover the P3s as they sneak." That was the point, other than honing their skills. Working together, protecting each other. She felt Marcel realize something, but it was behind his blocks and she couldn't tell what it was.

"Zara, it's okay if you say no, but do you realize the implications of this game? What it could teach telepaths how to do?" Marcel asked. Zara didn't hesitate, she knew exactly where he was going because she could scan through the birds sometimes; she couldn't extend her reach that way, but a bird could serve as a proxy for line of sight just like a periscope or fiber-optic line.

"Yes." She replied "If you wanted to, you could kill someone behind buildings or behind cover. I know. The rest of them are...innocent. It wouldn't occur to them. But one day they might have to use it." Zara knew it was messed up that she thought that way; she was nine years old, almost ten. She shouldn't think that way or thought she shouldn't, but she did. Three months in a cage watching as other kids got raped or sold into worse had seen to that. Talking, scans, medication, more talking. She'd processed it, Dr. Niehuis said she was doing well, but was this really doing well? Or was it simply the best anyone could ever hope to do? She knew she was still a kid, she liked doing silly things like pretend to be a vampire, watch cartoons, read the *Iliad* with her dads and make fun of Achilles for sulking manfully, and making terrible bird and espionage jokes; but she'd never be a child again.
Echoing her own thoughts, she could feel Uncle Marcel being both immensely sad for her, and also
proud of her. He put a hand on her shoulder to stop her, and then knelt down, scooping her into a
hug. She knew he understood, that he’d seen the kinds of things she’d seen, just like her dads had,
and she knew he’d killed some of the people who did it. She couldn’t help it, she started to cry.
She didn't even know why.

"It's okay to cry sometimes. I do, I know your dads do. And it's okay to not know why.
Sometimes the world is just too much little pisklę." Zara knew that, but it was good to hear
someone say.

Marcel stayed throughout the day, through telepathy training, science, and dinner. After dinner
Zara skipped evening cartoons with the other kids to stay and talk to Marcel in the kitchen. A
question was eating at her but she didn't have a good way of asking. So she beat around the bush
for a while, asking about what a Bloodhound did that a Psi Cop didn't.

"Well, there are a lot more of us. P12s are very rare, telepaths who are P9s through P11s are much
more common so we provide manpower for things that require more telepaths."

"What like raiding warehouses, and searching a sewer for someone who literally went to ground?"
Zara asked.

"Tak!" Marcel replied in the affirmative "But we also do some of our own things too. We do more
counter-terrorism and intelligence work that Psi Cops do too. We can be in more places at once so
we have a better chance of detecting threats to our people, or mundanes." From his tone he was far
more focused on the former than the latter; but there was her opportunity.

"Well then, maybe you can answer a question that's been eating at me..." She said, reaching up
with her ungloved skin and touched his face before he could stop her, and made telepathic contact
without any possibility of being over-p'heard.

"Uncle Marcel, tell it to me straight. We're preparing for war, aren't we?" She asked him.

"..." She felt him throw up his barriers, unable or unwilling to answer the question.

"That's a yes, then." her heart sank and Marcel was terrified for her, she could feel that. He could
protect himself, even from a P12. He also had a lot of Bloodhounds personally loyal to him in
addition to the Corps, taking him down would take a small army. She didn't have those
advantages.

"Damn it. You're too smart for your own good. The mundanes have spies even among our own
people, there are always traitors Zara. Always! They can't know."

"I know." Zara replied, and she did know. "It's knowledge worth killing me over, and how I
figured it out will kill others. I know." And Zara knew what would need to be done to protect both
herself and others. She didn't hesitate. "If you have to, wipe the memory."

"I can't. If I erase the conclusion you'll just figure it out again. Getting rid of how you got there
means getting rid of major life events, I won't do that to you. Those are good memories little one,
you need those. There's another way." Marcel rejected that idea and proposed another. "I can put
that little fact inside a memory vault, hidden inside other memories, the memory associations will
also store new related memories into the vault. I'll also have to put in a gentle action block so you
won't want to talk about this without me, Colin, or Gene physically present."
I wouldn't want to anyway.> Zara agreed. <And I've been action blocked before. I trust you.> 'If Dads trust him, then it makes sense for me to and they wouldn't have listed Marcel as my godfather and their legal next-af-kin if they didn't' she thought privately.

<Okay. This... might be unpleasant.> Marcel warned her and gave her a moment to prepare for it. Zara didn't know how to prepare for it, but she dropped her defenses and tried to think pleasant thoughts as Marcel entered her mind and her vision tunneled inward. The sensation of having her memories rearranged was painful, like a splitting cluster headache and she could hear herself make little whimpering sounds, but she grit her teeth through it, it was worse than any therapeutic deep-scan she'd ever experienced. When it was over the pain immediately receded and Marcel had her bundled up in a hug and was projecting apology into her mind and using his voice.

"I'm so sorry..."

"It's okay." she assured him "It wasn't fun but I'm okay, and you had to do it." she hugged him back and he let go.

"Are you sure?" he asked, worried but also impressed that she was the one to volunteer to have her own memories erased.

"Yes" Zara replied with certainty. "I've dealt with worse, from people who were not kind." Zara figured she might as well try to pry some information out of him. Even a little bit. <I know you can't tell me everything but... how soon?> she asked.

<Hopefully not for a while, but it's been coming for a while too. You know better than almost anyone why. We won't kick it off until we're ready.>

<But there's always the chance we won't have a choice...> Zara realized and mentally voiced.

<Tak.> Marcel replied, and Zara realized it was an affirmative. Then he looked at her, tilting his head and she felt him very gently brushing up against her mind.<Zara, are you entirely sure you're nine years old?> he asked her. It was an odd question. Zara counted her age on her fingers and the math checked out but she figured he didn't mean her actual age.

PRETTY sure... I mean I'm still a kid I'm just... not innocent. Not anymore. That got taken from me and I don't ever want it to happen to anyone else! So, if it comes to war, I want to help. If I'm old enough.>

<Because of course you do... far be it from me to say no to that. It would be hypocritical of me to the point of absurdity. You are most certainly too young right now, but if you are old enough when the time comes...in the mean time, study hard in school.> Marcel advised her.

<That won't be a problem.> Zara assured him <But... what do you have in mind?> she asked. There was a gleam in his eye she was curious about as he gave her another appraising look.

<Because I see you taking one of two paths. Intelligence, or the fleet. Both require excellent marks in school.> he informed her.

<The WHAT!?>

Valerie Saunders
Valerie Saunders was dressed and ready for the day, bright and early just how she liked it. In fact, it wasn't even bright, it was still dark. School started early and as a result, so did she. It had taken her a while to adjust since graduate school for a masters in social work, but she’d kept the same sleep schedule for a decade and if she thought about it too much it was probably a form of circadian stockholm syndrome. The one thing about being a External Case-Worker in the Education division was that she never knew what the day would bring. She might not get any calls at all and simply work typing up reports and checking in on the kids who tested positive for telepathy but hadn't manifested yet. She might end up having to help a young telepath through a difficult transition in life. Alternatively, she might get to show up like Mrs. Lee had done for her, like the archangel Michael.

Valerie desperately hoped that such a day wouldn't be a Monday though. Or any day soon. They were both the most fulfilling days of her career, and the very worst. Even so, she expected it might be a bit like that. Not the usual 'sail in and pull some poor kid out of an abusive hellscape', but something different. Today she was going to ride in and try to get two sets of parents who'd convinced themselves they were helping to stop slowly killing their own children. It was going to be an entirely different kind of very-fulfilling-but-emotionally-draining day.

She sat on her balcony drinking black tea and waited for the local star to rise over the horizon. The sky started to lighten and turn a deep azure blue; except to the East where it went through a rolling transition of warm colors as the star climbed over the horizon and then the skyline. During and after was the mundane-rise, hundreds of thousands of little voices woke from their slumber and started their own days. She breathed it in and got little hints of their hopes, dreams, worries, hurts. All of little more than whispers that finally started to coalesce into the Stadtgeist of Omega VII's primary settlement. She mused on the name, the city itself was simply called Omega VII, it was only the outlying settlements that got other names.

'I wonder why they did that...'

Eventually, once the sky was fully daylight blue and the mundanes had fully arisen into wakefulness, Valerie got up, rinsed out her coffee cup and packed to leave. She used a messenger bag instead of a purse and put a few case files inside, along with her datapad, a dose of the counter-agent for Sleepers, and made sure the PPG she secreted away into a scan-shielded pocket was fully loaded with the safety on. After which she headed out, locking the door behind her, and after taking the elevator down walked to the parking lot of her apartment complex where her van was. Her first appointment wasn't far away but there was always the possibility she'd have to take the kid and go quickly, and help move his stuff.

... The Dixon family residence was almost perfect. If their lawn wasn't astroturf it would be immaculately mowed, the yard had a little white picket fence and there was a basketball hoop in the driveway. Two of the older boys were getting in their morning exercise when she pulled up alongside the curb, playing an aggressive one-on-one game, and with the garage door open she could see the tool bench in the back as well as their stores of water for the End Times lined up along the left-hand wall. Valerie remembered their names were Keith and Richard. They stopped when she exited the van and the older one, Richard, came up to greet her. He was around seventeen while his brother was fifteen or so, and they were both fit young men and immaculately clean shaven with brown hair.

"Hi Mrs Saunders. Here for your appointment?" Richard asked with a genuine smile.

"I am." she replied returning the smile.
"Alright, come on in. Don't mind the chaos." he motioned for her to follow and she did through the garage door into the kitchen. Chaos was right. There were five other kids inside between five and thirteen years old with varying gender. Four of them were doing their best to driving their mother to her wits end. None of them succeeded. Jodie was finishing up breakfast, which for mormons evidently meant a sort of morning-ized breakfast casserole made from last night's leftovers. Valerie didn't know what a nurturing NCO looked like but she figured Jodie Dixon was it, managing to get all the younger children to the table for their morning meal and somehow making sure their homework was done and that they were all properly bathed, and dressed. Their teeth would be brushed after breakfast.

Mentally, the feeling inside the house was a loving and well-adjusted cacophony that Valerie had to work a little bit harder than normal to filter out. There was only one kid out. Lucas was seven years old and a little on the plump side. He hadn't been the last time Valerie had seen him when he manifested, but depression could do that. Valerie could tell immediately that Lucas was anhedonic, and was basically going through the motions of life without properly feeling alive; life had lost it's texture, only food still had it's full richness and he felt like he was on the outside looking through himself instead of being himself. Right then, he was pretending to be normal as much as he could while thinking about ending it, and it wasn't the first time he'd had those thoughts, pushing them through the grease trap that was his subjective experience of life.

'No seven year old should be like that' Valerie thought, remembering how she'd been when she was twice his age and forced on those same drugs by well-meaning parents. She didn't just think about killing herself, and recalled how the exacto-knife felt entering the flesh of her wrist and how it felt to have the life ebb from her body with each heartbeat.'No person should ever feel like that.' she corrected.

"Oh hi Valerie, give me just a minute?" Jodie greeted her, and it snapped her attention back out of Lucas' mind.

"Sure thing, you've got your hands full." Valerie replied "Actually, think you could use some help?"

"Sure, if you could help me out by loading the dishwasher while I make the lunches that would help out a lot." Jodie told her, and she did. Valerie used the time rinsing off the various eating utensils and cookware to get her mind in order. She wanted to be furious at the Dixons, but they didn't hate telepaths, they'd probably noticed that Lucas was a little down and his grades had slipped in the last six months, but they couldn't know. They just didn't want to lose their son to an off-world school where he probably wouldn't be kept inside the Mormon faith. Valerie could empathize, even if the results were totally unacceptable.

"So where's Rodney?" Valerie asked as she put the last fork in the silverware basket.

"Oh he's in his office, working from home today." Jodie replied, and Valerie appreciated it. Having him there would make things much easier. Traditional gender roles meant she wouldn't be taking any major decisions without him.

"Good planning." Valerie complimented them.

"Good communication is the key to a happy marriage." Jodie replied cheerfully. Valerie would have rankled at being bound by older religious codes of family organization, but Jodie seemed perfectly happy doing what she did, so Valerie wasn't about to judge. On the other hand, she wouldn't know what a happy marriage was like directly.

"That it is." she agreed. By then, most of the kids had grabbed their lunches and the older two had
them out the door to their respective school bus stops. All but Lucas. He was only six when he
was put on Sleepers and didn't really have a good understanding of what they were. Only that a
nice man came every Friday to give him a shot that made the voices in his head go away. He
never put two and two together with how he felt day in and day out. What he also knew was that
the nice lady he met just before then was back.

'Is a visitor really good enough to get out of school?' he wondered. He was about to ask when his
mother asked the question directly.

"So what's this about?" Jodie asked "We're still six months away from the scheduled re-evaluation
of Lucas' medication." She was perfectly nice and polite, and she didn't voice the question that
was really in her mind.

'Are you trying to take my child and apostacize him?'

"No. Not as such." Valerie replied to the unspoken question rather than the one that was actually
said "I couldn't help but pick that up... but circumstances have changed and it might be time to pull
Rodney away from his drafting program."

"I'd like a straight answer before I do that." Jodie replied. Her voice hardened at that, and unless
Valerie wanted to do something she might regret later, she figured her best option would be to
simply come out and say it.

"We're re-opening our schools on this planet." Valerie told her "We're on track to have everything
ready in the first couple weeks of April. As a result, we're trying to get every child we can manage
off Sleepers." Valerie considered her next words carefully when Jodie gave her a quizzical look.
Clearly she didn't remember the laundry list of side effects Valerie had read off. Not that Valerie
blamed her, it was the best she was allowed to do at the time, like the rapid-fire list of possible side
effects and complications at the end of a drug commercial. No one paid any attention. "You
remember the list of side effects I told you about?"

"Vaguely." Jodie replied, recalling that there was a list.

"Alright. Have you noticed any changes in Lucas in the last six months?" Valerie asked. She was
going to lead Jodie to the correct conclusion instead of bombarding her with horrors. She figured
that would work better, even though her entire soul was screaming at her to simply disable the
mundanes, take the kid, and run as fast as she could to Annex.

"Well..." Jodie considered "His grades have suffered, he's quiet. Almost withdrawn. He... he
sometimes talked about how he's not really 'in' himself but I just figured he's imaginative or maybe
feeling bad because he's having trouble in school."

"No Jodie. It's the Sleepers. They're..." Technically, what she was about to say was illegal for her
to say, she just knew that Colin, Gene, and Francois would make any reports or complaints
disappear. "unspeakably dangerous. In ways I'm not allowed by law to describe in detail to you
except as a dry list of side effects. Long story short, the suicide rate for people on Sleepers is very
high, and from what I'm seeing, Lucas is on the upper end of that curve. Get your husband in
here." Jodie's skin had blanched and she was white as a sheet and went to go get her husband. A
brief conversation in the office later, and Rodney was in the living room sending Lucas back to his
room.

"Am I in trouble?" Lucas asked, being sent back to his room was one consequence of being
naughty, not that he ever was naughty.
"No little man, it's just that the grown ups have to have a private talk. Everything's fine." Rodney said and kissed his son on the forehead. "Run along now. Feel free to watch a vid or play a computer game or something until I come get you, okay."

"Okay." Lucas agreed without a whole lot of enthusiasm and shambled, not scampered, but shambled to the room he shared with one of his brothers. The married couple sat on a loveseat, while Valerie sat down on the couch just a meter away.

"Valerie, Jodie told me what you said and I just... why didn't you say anything before?" Rodney asked. He was a kind looking man with horn spectacles, a black hair that was balding and a mustache.

"Because I was forbidden. Still am, technically. EarthGov doesn't want to encourage people who don't want to join the Corps to run so... we can't impress upon people what Sleepers are really like. The Psi Corps doesn't make the rules... Your elected officials do." Valerie replied "I'll be honest with you, if the wrong people found out I'm telling you...it wouldn't be good for me. I'm telling you because I don't want Lucas to hang himself one day, and he's already thinking about it."

'They're good people. They won't say shit, and even if they do, the report goes nowhere.'

"I... see." Rodney replied. He wasn't sure what he was thinking just then. It was a lot to take in and the idea of a seven year old boy being suicidal was a hard-to-swallow pill. He was willing to hear her out though. "What's the alternative?"

"As I was telling Jodie, we're re-opening our schools on planet. You're no longer looking at the prospect of sending Lucas off-world. You can visit every Sunday and take him off-site, which means he can still go to church and we can make whatever other arrangements we need to make so he's raised within the Mormon faith. Family Home Evening is still doable, for instance, with a few caveats. You have my word on that. But... look, all your other kids are latents. They could manifest at any time, or they might never. If even half of them do and they all go on Sleepers, I can pretty much guarantee you that you'll end up out-living at least one of them. I don't want that for them, and I don't want it for you."

"Do you might if we talk it over?" Jodie asked. She was just as undecided on the subject as her husband was.

"Sure thing." Valerie said, and got up, walking back into Lucas' bedroom.

"Hi there." she greeted him gently "Sorry I didn't get a chance to say hello earlier." He was just lying on his bed staring up at the ceiling. There was a cartoon in the background that he remembered liking but that he just couldn't get into now.

"It's okay." he said by reflex, then forced a question through his foggy mind and to his lips "Why? Why am I like this?" it broke Valerie's heart.

"Because sometimes grownups who love you do stupid things because they're afraid." she said.

"You mean mom and dad?" he asked.

"Me too, kiddo. You know what a telepath is, right? You know that you are one?" She sat down on the bed next to his little feet, still in their shoes.

"They can read people's minds, right? Is that why I used to hear voices in my head? The voices the shot makes go away?"
"Yep. But the shot does other things too." Valerie told him, and that's when he understood. It took him longer to grasp than it should have, but he got it.

"Oh. But... I don't have to take the shot right? I want to be me again. I want to be...whole. Why would they say I have to take it if it makes me this way?"

"Because a long time ago, a bunch of powerful grownups decided that telepaths were scary and passed laws that make us either take that shot, or join the Psi Corps. For kids, joining the Psi Corps means going to special schools, and until recently the closest one wasn't on this planet. Your parents love you very much Lucas. They never meant to hurt you, but they were afraid of losing you..." he made the connection in his head. He didn't want to go away either, but he knew he couldn't keep on going how he was. He felt stuck between a rock and a hard place, and wanted to cry. But he couldn't. Doing that required neurotransmitters that he just didn't have enough of anymore.

"I know little man, I know. I know better than you can imagine." Valerie told him leaning across to stroke his hair "But I'm here to make it better. You won't have to go so far away you can't still see your family. If your parents do the right thing..."

'If they don't...I swear to god I'm coming in the night to get you someplace safe from this.' she thought privately and hoped that if she had to do that, those reports would disappear too.

"And we're going to," Rodney interjected, stepping into the bedroom "How is this going to work?"

Valerie breathed a sigh of relief.

"I have a dose of the counter-agent right now. Our school opens on April twelfth but classes started on the twentieth. Until the twelfth, we have sufficient instructors on planet to provide initial training and keep Lucas from falling behind in standard subjects, and between the twelfth and twentieth there will be some testing and such to figure out where he is in those subjects. So with your permission?"

"Go ahead." Jodie nodded her head in permission. With it, Valerie reached into her pocket and produced the transdermal injector.

"Alright little man, let's make you feel like yourself again." Valerie said, and lifted the sleeve of Lucas' shirt to expose his right shoulder. He was an old hand at injections and didn't flinch as the injector did it's work without needles. Almost immediately, his mind began to clear as the medication took effect, it's cocktail destroying the competitive neurotransmitter inhibitors that comprised the Sleepers. He came back into himself, the world came into clarity for the first time in months, Serotonin, acetylcholine, dopamine; they were all active again. And he started to p'hear the voices again.

"Remember how I taught you to block them out when we first met?" Valerie asked before Lucas could process any distress. He nodded. "I need you to do that again. Raise the wall behind your eyes, you can do it." He did it. For the first time in months he could focus on something enough to hold that sort of thought in his head. It wasn't easy for him but he managed it. "You'll get used to holding that in your mind and doing anything else you like."

...

Valerie left the Dixon residence after setting up an appointment with one of the nicer on-planet instructors. They were used to teaching adults, but they were fully licensed and certified in early childhood education as well, just for situations like that one. They weren't a lot of them so chances are they'd have to arrange some sort of group-tutoring arrangement in the name of efficiency as a
part of the transition process, but it was out of Valerie's hands.

'Well... that went well. Hopefully the whole day goes that smoothly.' she thought, and realized that she'd probably jinxed herself. 'Damn it.'

She stopped at a coffee shop near the Province Agri Mutual Insurance complex that she knew was telepath friendly and ordered a large cold-brew coffee, then sat down with her data pad to file her reports and wait. She didn't know if there would be a call, but it was always a possibility.

After an hour and second cup, the call came in and she answered it.

"This is Valerie Saunders, Psi Corps Education Division, how can I help you?" She said in a professionally friendly tone. A female voice was on the other end of the line.

"Uh yeah, this is Principal Janice Jackson at Robinson High School. I think I have a student who recently manifested telepathic abilities," she sounded worried "And something's gone terribly wrong. I should warn you I've also called the Psi Cops but I have to call you as well due to the procedures in place." Valerie didn't recognize the name of the school, she'd never gotten a call from there, but then she remembered that their old principal had resigned after the slaving ring was exposed. Janice Jackson was new.

"What happened?" Valerie asked; she got the feeling this particular case was going to be interesting in the way that the Chinese might curse someone to live in interesting times.

"His name is Viktor Mikhailovich. He got into a fight and the other student went down. Hard." Janice informed her. The prevarication annoyed Valerie.

'Cut to the chase, god damn it.'

"Okay, what makes you think telepathy was involved?" is what Valerie actually said.

"Well, Viktor apparently never actually landed a solid punch."

"That'll do it..." Valerie said "I can be there in..." Valerie checked a map program "Twenty minutes. What about the other kid? Is he alright?"

"More or less. He basically hit the ground like a sack of potatoes unconscious. Hit his head but there's only a mild concussion." Leaving aside how serious a concussion could be, Valerie was relieved.

"I'm on my way then. See you in twenty."

...When she got on campus, Valerie couldn't help but muse on the school's name. President Robinson had been president of the Earth Alliance when first contact with the Centauri was made. She'd stood by and done nothing as telepaths were slaughtered in the resulting orgy of paranoid blood libel. It wasn't until a telepath sacrificed himself to save her that she decided to charter the Psi Corps and out an end to the butchery at the cost of the last vestiges of citizenship. The Psi Corps Charter stripped voting rights and all political participation.

'Thanks for saving me. Sleep well in the knowledge that we'll stop putting you in mass graves and will instead merely make you all unpersons.' Valerie thought bitterly. If she felt like being charitable, Valerie might think that perhaps it was all President Robinson could do politically. Valerie had long since given up on being charitable. She willed herself forward across the
pavement into the office. Principal Jackson was waiting for her. She was tall, and of African extraction though if Valerie had to guess by her name and accent, more recently out of North America.

"Mrs. Saunders." the principal greeted her coolly.

"Principal Jackson. You can call me Valerie if I can call you Janice." Valerie said.

'Do I want to get informal with one of them? No...' was what Valerie picked up from her surface thoughts. It made her hairs stand up and she wanted to say something, but she held her tongue.

"Principal Jackson is fine." Janice replied.

"Fine by me. Where is Viktor?" Valerie asked, cutting to the chase if the principal wanted to dispense with any sort of pleasantries.

"I think it's probably best if we wait for the Psi Cops. He could be dangerous." Janice replied. Valerie knew Janice was hiding the fact that Viktor didn't start the fight with Jarvis and that his teachers had noticed bullying and ostracism for the last two weeks. Valerie also picked up where he was. Handcuffed and alone in the room used for In School Suspension. She wasn't having it.

"He's not dangerous." Valerie growled "If he was, he would have snapped a week ago." Valerie saw the principal's eyes widen and felt the mental exclamation make that turning into a protest regarding her 'privacy'. She ignored it. "As it was, he just wanted Jarvis to stop hitting him." another memory flashed in the principal's mind. They'd taken Viktor straight to a secured facility after he'd been beaten bloody, denying him medical attention because the nurse didn't want to risk her mind being invaded. "He showed remarkable restraint. Like I am right now."

"You say out of my head!" The principal replied angrily, closing her eyes and willing Valerie out, as if that would do anything even if Valerie was doing anything but not blocking her inner monologue out.

"I'm not in your mind, and believe me if I were you'd know it." Valerie replied in dangerously neutral tones before pulling her comm unit out and calling the Medical division dispatch office.

"This is the Psi Corps Medical Dispatch Line." Valerie recognized the pleasant female voice as Ashton Carlisle, one of the EMTs who'd evidently pulled dispatch duty.

"Hi Ashton, this is Valerie. I need someone at Robinson High School. No serious injuries but one of ours was denied medical treatment and I'd like to make sure there aren't any concussions or hematomas. Psi Cops are on their way."

"Oh, right. We're on it. Should be there in... six minutes." Ashton replied.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome." When Valerie closed the connection she was already walking past the principal and the reception desk, and took a right when she reached a hallway. A short distance later was the In-School-Suspension room, where students who had been naughty could be separated from other students and punished without denying them an education or doing something absurd like giving them days off school for fighting.

The campus resource officer was guarding the door, Earth Force naturally and not civilian police like on Earth. That would make things a little bit tricky. On the other hand the door was glass and she could see Viktor inside. He was of medium height and medium build, black hair. She couldn't
see his eyes because he was turned around cuffed to a desk and looked like he might be blindfolded.

"It's okay." She said into his mind. "My name is Valerie and I'm with the Psi Corps. I'm here to get you out of there as soon as I take out the trash."

"Psi Corps?!" was Viktor's first thought, and Valerie felt his fear and nervousness. He'd picked up every rumor, every insinuation, every accusation about the Psi Corps for his entire life and was terrified that she was there to do something to him.

"Judge the Psi Corps by what you see Viktor. Not what you're told. Are you okay blocking out the mundanes or do you need some help?" It took him some effort but he managed to deliberately send something back at her.

"I've gotten pretty good at it. Started with rhymes, I've figured out how to use stable emotions and images. Thanks."

"My pleasure."

"Open this door immediately." Valerie ordered the mundane officer in tones of absolute authority.

"Uh, yes ma'am. You're responsible for him though." he replied, and turned aside to unlock the door.

"Cuff keys too." Valerie held out her hand. The officer fumbled for a moment but he saw the briefing with that monkey and he wasn't about to piss off an angry telepath further. He put the keys into her gloved hand and got out of dodge. He'd requisition new handcuffs. Valerie opened the door and stepped inside.

"Alright Viktor, I'm going to get the cuffs and blindfold off of you." she explained.

"Thanks..." Viktor replied, still nervous. He sounded like his nose might be broken. First she untied the blindfold and let him see. He immediately reached out and probed her mind. It was clumsy but for someone who was figuring things out on his own he did a decent job with a basic active surface scan, not that it went anywhere. His shaky probe brushed against her own blocks and his mind recoiled like a curious dog might when exposed to a skunk.

"Not bad." Valerie encouraged him while she fumbled with the small key. The gloves made such fine manipulation of objects a bit difficult for most telepaths but she had a bit more difficulty due to scar tissue on her tendons, but she managed it. "There we go." she said, and was finally able to look at him. His face was caked with his own blood; and his nose was crooked at an odd angle and definitely broken. He also had two black eyes and a bruise on his cheek. His t-shirt was red and did a decent job of concealing the bloodstain. It only looked like the shirt was wet.

"Is Jarvis..." Viktor couldn't fully voice the question but his intent was plain enough.

"No." Valerie told him "Just unconscious, probable concussion. Which I might add he deserved. I've gotta hand it to you though, you could have killed that little bastard, but you didn't. I'm proud of you." and she was. If someone ever attacked her like that, she couldn't guarantee that she wouldn't tear their mind to pieces.

As they talked, she looked into his eyes and into his mind. The process of 'rating' someone was always delicate, especially doing it undetected. In a way she imagined it was a bit like how a sensor might measure space-time curvature to assess an object's mass, it was a similar feeling. She sent out small inconsequential probes to see how they interacted with Viktor's mind.
"Seriously? So I'm not in trouble with the Psi Cops or anything?" Viktor asked. That confused him. He knew Psi Cops protected mundanes from telepaths so why wouldn't they punish him for attacking one with his mind?

"That's only part of their job. The other part is protecting us from mundanes. Thing is, the mundanes don't really need all that much protection so they try to emphasize the second part."

"I put another kid in the hospital, my experience says otherwise..." Valerie couldn't help but chuckle a bit inside.

"Was it more-or-less an accident? Are you going to do it again unless someone's trying to hurt you already?" Valerie asked. She didn't think so, but she did need to be sure.

"Well yes, then no, but..." Viktor started to object a little bit, to argue the point, but Valerie cut him off.

"When was the last time you hear about a telepath in the Psi Corps murdering a mundane? Enslaving a mundane? You can bet ISN would trumpet it to the heavens if it happened so when was the last time you heard about it happening?" Valerie asked. She knew the answer was Never or Almost Never.

"Well, there was that serial killer, and the telepath in that slaving ring..." Viktor answered, even though he knew they were both rogues. It was the closest he or anyone else could really get. Valerie knew there were things she didn't know about that might contradict her statements, but she also knew they were above her paygrade and outside her experience in the Corps. A captive population might be made to do things in order to survive, she could accept that even if she didn't like it.

"One was literally crazy as balls and brain damaged, the other was a sociopath. They're why we still use Psi Cops for that first function. Okay, now when was he last time it was the other way around?"

"Uh, that slavery ring?" Viktor replied. Xun's death didn't apparently rate ISN.

"That, and just a few weeks ago a bunch of mundanes murdered a telepath for no reason. His name was Xun, and he was..." Valerie paused. She didn't know Xun that well, only meeting him a few times at social functions in the last year, but he seemed like a nice person "...he was a worthy person. Unlike you, he was only a P3, he couldn't defend himself. By the time they were done he was practically a smear on the tile of a public bathroom. We have an early warning system for pogroms, kid."

"...what?"

"An app for our comms. In the event that a situation develops, we can be warned of possible wide-scale violence against telepaths. That it's necessary speaks volumes, yes?"

"Y-yeah..." Viktor stammered. At that point he wasn't sure he wanted anything to do with the Psi Corps, not because of public perception but because he was afraid.

"I know. I thought the same thing when I first manifested. 'Oh god, why would I join the Psi Corps when I'll just be opening myself up to hate crimes, discrimination, and being stripped of real citizenship?' I asked. I'll tell you what Ms. Hernandez told me. In the Psi Corps you'll never worry about whether or not someone cares about you. We all do. We have to, we feel each other's pain and worry, share in each other's joy...so it's not all bad. We take care of each other in a way that
you will never find in the isolated hellscape the mundanes have constructed for themselves."
Valerie felt him consider the other alternative. Sleepers. She knew she needed to head that off
fast. "Being in the Corps? No matter what the laws say they can't take who you are from you.
That's yours. The only way that can be taken from you is to do it with Sleepers."

"You make that sound personal..." Viktor may have caught her emotions or it may have just been
in her voice. Either way it didn't matter. She considered for a moment before answering.

"That's because it is. When I manifested I wasn't much older than you. My parents didn't give me
a choice and I was on Earth where reports of telepaths bending the rules don't disappear as easily as
day here. No one could rescue me like we might be able to do out here on the edge of Alliance
space." she was wearing a long-sleeved turtleneck under her practical black sheath dress and
simply rolled up the sleeves to reveal one straight-edged clean scar on her left arm, and a more
jagged nasty looking one on her right. Both extended from her wrist to her elbow "The only thing
that saved me was, ironically, trying to kill myself. The Psi Corps got a lawyer to argue on their
behalf in a sealed court that remaining on Sleepers would kill me." Viktor was stunned into silence
for a moment, both that she'd tried that and that she'd show him.

"Jesus christ... they're that bad?" he asked.

"Yes. Ever have those days where your brain feels like mush?" Valerie asked, and he nodded "All
the time. Now imagine life without texture. Sight, sound, touch. Like you're living in the uncanny
valley all the time. Everything seems two dimensional, color is off, music isn't...right. Only smell
and taste remain. Your motivation to do anything tanks because the drugs mess with that too. You
feel like you're controlling your body instead of being. You can still pretend to be you but you're
not you anymore. You're someone else. I'll go along with it if you want to but I'm begging you,
don't do that to yourself. Please. You deserve better than that."

"So what you're telling me is that my options are 'Join the Corps and be me in a community that
cares for me, but be a legal non-person' or 'Unmake myself'? That... that fucking sucks. I don't like
either of those," He was angry at the unfairness of it. He hadn't asked to be born, never done
anything to deserve any of this.

'But here I am, dealing with it anyway. Fuck. What do I even tell my parents? Hi mom and dad,
I'm a telepath and I'm joining the Psi Corps. Bye!' He could already hear them yelling at him in
Ukrainian.

"I know it sucks. Believe me I know." Valerie felt Gene and Colin's minds as they entered the
building and sent out a psionic ping. She also heard the principal's protests about her conduct with
her ears. There was another fainter psionic ping from someone Valerie figured was the EMT, she
recognized him as Hikaru Yamasaki from the impression. Neither of them would ever be able to
communicate with it. "It isn't fair, but then again the world isn't fair. You can be happy inside the
Corps. I am, the Psi Cops coming down the hall are despite everything they've seen and done; and
one day if we bide our time and survive, we can take back everything the mundanes have taken
from us." Valerie assured him. He was still having some trouble wrapping his mind around the
fact that there was most definitely an 'us' and a 'them'.

"It's just... fucked up," Viktor said, but then thought it through. His real problem wasn't that there
was an 'us' and a 'them'. There always had been. His problem was that he found himself in an 'us'
that wasn't the one with the privilege to live on his own terms. He wanted that privilege back, but
he wasn't going to torture himself and possibly hit the delete button on everything he was in order
to imitate it. "Okay. I'll join the Corps."

'Thank God.'
"Good to hear it!" Hikaru said, rounding the door first while Colin and Gene distracted the irate principal. Valerie covered up the scars, she didn't want to deal with the outpouring of love she'd inevitably receive if either Psi Cop saw them "My name is Hikaru. I'm here to check your injuries over yes?"

"Oh uh, sure. Yeah. I guess I did get hit pretty hard." Viktor replied.

"You did yes. You look like a raccoon." Hikaru told him and took out a pen light. "Look here." Viktor did and the EMT flashed a penlight into both eyes "No concussion... nose is definitely broken though. I can reset it right here, though it will likely start bleeding again."

"God that's gonna hurt like a bitch..." Viktor complained.

"Not at all, actually. Allow me?" Hikaru asked for consent. Viktor gave it, but he was unsure how a painless resetting of his nose would work. "Just relax..." Hikaru suggested. With a sharp crack he used his hand, covered in a nitrile glove, to reset the broken nose and rapidly placed some gauze there to contain the bleeding.

"Take hold, use direct pressure." He told Viktor who looked astonished that he didn't feel what should have been agonizing pain.

"Ah. Not used to this. I used telepathy to shut off your pain receptors. You'll start feeling it soon, but it'll just be a dull ache. Here, take these." Hikaru handed two little blue pills to the young man.

"What are they?" Viktor asked.

"Just Naproxen. Anti-inflammatory pain-killer." With that assurance, Viktor swallowed them dry.

"I'm telling you she scanned me, threatened me, and didn't wait for you to get here with a potentially dangerous telepath in the room. He attacked another student with his mind! Why won't you do something about it?" Principal Jackson yelled, following Colin into the room. She realized she'd made a mistake by doing that unthinkingly. Valerie could feel Colin's tolerance reach it's breaking point, he felt taught like over-taxed steel cable, and Gene stepped in.

"Ma'am, shut the fuck up" he commanded, in no uncertain terms. "You're trying my partner's patience and thus mine, you do not want to continue down the path you're trodding." he paused while she tried to decide if that was a threat "Yes that was a threat."

"...How dare you threaten me!" Principal Jackson replied after a brief pause where she contemplated the sort of threat, and assumed it was a threat to use telepathy.

"Okay. It's your ass." Gene replied and pulled out his personal comms. "Hi Adhira." Principal Jackson's eyes went wide in mortified horror as she realized the depth of her mistake if the Psi Cops were on a first-name basis with the Education Minister, with a direct line to her office or worse her personal comms. Valerie grinned evilly. "So we're at Robinson High School dealing with Principal Janice Jackson. She called us in when a student defended himself from attack with his mind. "We're at Robinson High School dealing with Principal Janice Jackson. She called us in when a student defended himself from attack with his mind. Yeah. Denied him medical care, we've got him taken care of it's fine. But now she's trying to get our Education telepath in trouble with us for no reason and trying to convince us to prosecute the kid too. She also ignored bullying for two weeks. Yeah, I know, disgusting right? I think she knows she fucked up and is trying to deflect our attention from her own negligence and bigotry, but I can't know for sure without actively scanning her. Oh? You want me to put her on, I can do that. Thanks Adhira. One second."
Gene handed the device over to Janice "It's for you." Principal Jackson reached out a shaky hand and took it, putting it to her ear.

"Yes? I... I see. Y-yes ma'am, I-I'll be out by the end of the day." she stammered before the connection ended.

"I hope your severance package is generous." Gene told her. "Now get out of my sight." Valerie felt something pass between the two Psi Cops but couldn't tell what it was, only that they were communicating somehow, what she did sense was the wave of affection for each other that flashed throughout the room a fractional second later.

"Okay, that was magical." Valerie remarked. They'd said they don't give a fuck anymore, but she hadn't thought it would extend to something like that. She thought it was just a willingness to bend the rules; not leveraging whatever sources of soft-power they could to do things like remove people from their posts.

"What just happened?" Viktor asked the group.

"Hi!" Colin greeted him "I'm Colin, this is my partner Gene. Adhira Chaudry is the Minister of Education, she also happens to be a... maybe not personal friend yet but she's generally a friend to telepaths and she's willing to stick her neck out. We'll probably catch hell for this, but...Fuck it. We can't do our jobs or live our lives if we're constantly worried about what mundanes are going to screech about on ISN. They'll just make shit up anyway."

"Even now that the war is over?" Viktor asked "I thought they got rid of that when Clark was deposed."

"Oh yeah. They're just more subtle about it now." Gene replied. "Anyway, are you okay? You look like a panda. If you need a hug you've got one." Viktor looked at Hikaru, who nodded at him in approval.

"I've been informed that I'm fine. Don't need the hug, but thanks for offering." Viktor replied, and Valerie could tell he was a bit put off by that.

<We're a very huggy people> She silently informed him <Kind of a cultural thing, you'll learn.>

<What's his rating?> Colin asked her. <And how'd the thing go this morning?>

<Viktor's a P8, haven't had a chance to tell him yet. As for the other thing, Lucas is off sleepers. If the others manifest, they won't be on them. Ever.> Valerie replied.

<Good. You want to do the honors or should one of us?> Instead of answering telepathically, she simply spoke.

"By the way Viktor, while we've been talking I've been assessing how powerful you are. Congratulations, you're a P8."


"Well, it means you're in the upper mid-range of telepathic ability, and a bunch of specialties that require higher ratings are open to you." Valerie informed him "There are a lot of possible jobs in the Psi Corps, a lot of different career paths. Some of them require high ratings to do. For example, if you wanted to go into telepathic psychiatry you'd need to be a P8 or so because some of the abilities you'd need to use are only possible for someone of that rating or above."
"Oh, that makes sense." Viktor replied, nodding in understanding. "Honestly I haven't given that sort of thing much thought."

"It's okay. You have time to make those sorts of decisions. We should probably go talk to your parents though." Valerie wasn't looking forward to that conversation. She never did.

"Oh, they're on their way..." Colin said "The now-former principal called them."

"Great... any of you speak Ukrainian? They speak English but it's mostly that at home."

"I speak Russian?" Gene offered, but winced because they are not quite mutually intelligible.

"Polish." Colin said "Not much better, though there's a certain song I can sing that might cool off any nasty feelings!"

"I know which one you're talking about, but it won't help. This is going to be special." Viktor replied mournfully.

"It's okay." Valerie declared "We can translate telepathically. At least to understand. They won't know we're doing it."

... Valerie thought that Andrei Mikhailovich looked like a young Vladimir Lenin in a strange way. No older than his late thirties, glasses, pointy goatee, a bit on the thin side, when he walked into the room and saw her, two Psi Cops and his son he started reciting poetry in his head, Valerie could tell it was a rusty habit but an old one. Sophie Mikhailovich on the other hand was pleasantly plump but that is where her pleasantness ended. When she thundered into the meeting room where the telepaths were waiting for them Valerie was reminded of the dragon in the Beowulf saga.

"What did you do!?" She growled in Ukrainian. Viktor wasn't skilled enough to translate mentally while keeping up a conversation, it was all he could do to shield himself from his mother's anger, but Valerie was able to pluck the concepts and get a fair approximation from her mind. "Why are there telepaths here?"

"Because I am one, mother." Viktor replied. "I've kept it hidden for weeks but someone noticed and attacked me. I defended myself. That's it."

"That's not what the principal told us." his father replied somewhat more gently "But...I've known you're a telepath for a little while now. I've seen the signs before. I just didn't know what to do about it. I'm sorry Viktor, this is my fault. My family's genes put you in this position."

"Father?" Viktor asked for clarification. His mother powered on past the point of contention with what the principal did or did not tell them.

"Well, you're going to take the sleepers, obviously." she said.

"No. I'm not." Viktor declared at the same time his father denied it as well.

"No. He's not." It was her turn to look at her husband, this time in disbelief.

"How can you said that Andrei? You want him to leave his home, his family? To go with those?" She pointed at Gene and Colin "You saw that ISN segment on them?"
<Shit. I didn't know they followed up. Know what they said?> Gene asked.

<You don't want to know.> Valerie told him. It had been an entirely speculative piece on what they'd done to the Greens and how they'd likely doctored the recording they used to discredit the Lawsons. No actual evidence, just some talking heads spouting bullshit.

"I don't want him to, but...I" Mr. Mikhailovich struggled to figure out whether he should use the present or past tense, because he didn't know what was applicable "My sister Svitlana is or was a telepath. She manifested when I was fifteen and she was thirteen. Our parents hid her from the Psi Corps but eventually she was reported by someone, we never knew who. Rather than give her up, they put her on the Sleepers. Against her will." Tears ran down his cheeks at the memory of what happened to her. How she died a little bit inside every day, how she begged her parents to take her off them every day and they said no. How the telepaths forced to administer them pleaded with them to let her join the Corps, and still they said no. "After a year she went to school and never came back. I never saw her again. It's been almost thirty years and I still don't know what happened to my sister, I haven't spoken to my parents since I moved out at eighteen. I will never inflict those drugs on my own son. They're an abomination. Whoever invented them needs to be taken out back and shot."

"Andrei, I knew you had a falling out with your parents but I didn't know you had a sister. Why haven't you spoken of this?" Sophie asked, her affect remarkably kinder than a mere moment before.

"It was my job to protect her. I was her older brother and I couldn't do it! Until I met you Svitlana was the most important person in my life and I lost her to that that...monstrous concoction." Despite his saying he didn't know what happened to Svitlana, he was almost certain she'd killed herself. Valerie didn't even notice that Colin was looking something up on his comm unit. Neither had anyone else.

"Mr. Mikhailovich?" Colin said in English. The slightly older man looked at him with a querying expression through his tears and red eyes.

"Yes?"

"I just did a records search. I found a record for one Svitlana Mikhailovich, raised in Kiev, who manifested at about that time. She's been living under the name 'Nina Shevchenko'. Is this her?" he turned the device around and showed him. His eyes lit up in recognition and instead of weeping he openly cried in happiness to the point that he couldn't speak, but he could think.

'It's her! She's alive! She's older but it's definitely Svitlana, praise be to God!'

<I think we should give them a minute.> Gene suggested, and got up. Colin agreed silently and stood up as well.

<I... can't say I disagree.> Valerie concurred sent Viktor a short message <We'll give you some space. We'll be right outside.>

...

About fifteen minutes later Viktor came out of the room with a happy look on his face. "I didn't know I had an aunt. Dad wants to know about her, what happened. To the extent you can say." he told Colin.

"Sure thing buddy. I can tell him anything he likes that we have records for. I'd just hand him the
device and let him read but there is secret information in there I need to protect." Colin replied, and Valerie wondered exactly what was in there and what Colin's clearance was. On the other hand, she wasn't about to ask the question ever. She followed them back into the room and they sat back down.

"What happened? We asked the Corps if they had her and the people my parents talked to said they didn't know and that they'd be sending Metapol to find her." Andrei asked and explained.

"They lied." Colin replied "We... don't administer Sleepers by choice." Valerie p'saw Andrei's understanding dawn on him.

"So when someone, a child, flees from parents making them take them you give them shelter?" Andrei concluded and asked for confirmation.

"Correct. Naturally, we won't tell the family we did that because then they could file challenges in court." Colin confirmed for him. "But, your sister is very much alive and as far as the records indicate, happy."

"What does she do? I remember someone saying she was a P9?" Andrei inquired.

"Oddly enough, she does the same thing Valerie does." Valerie was a bit taken aback by the small-world nature of that, but then the Education division did preferentially recruit from telepaths who'd been through similar things for field work. "I can put you in touch if you'd like. She's on... New London, not that far away if you wanted to visit."

"I think... I think we'd all like that very much." Sophie said for her husband, who once again had lost the ability to speak. At just that moment, a call came in for Colin. He answered his comms.

"Hi Gerald. Really? Shit. Okay, we'll be there as soon as possible." then he hung up, and Valerie could feel both irritation and worry on his mind that rapidly propagated to Gene, seemingly without any mental conversation between the two. "We actually have to get going. Got another call."

<Indiri is in some trouble.> Colin clarified for Valerie. <You okay here?>

<Yeah, I'm okay. Go. She needs you more than I do.>

"I'll forward Valerie the contact information for Svitlana. I'm sure she'd like to hear from you, and find out she has a nephew who turned out so well. It's been a pleasure meeting you all and we're glad we could help."

**Indiri Singh**

Indiri Singh woke up to the incessant screeching of her alarm clock. It was just before dawn and no matter how many times she had to wake up that early, she always hated it. Unfortunately the upstanding business community tended to consist of early risers. Like vampires, only in reverse. She reached over to her nightstand and angrily hit the shut off button. The screaming didn't stop. Instead, the clock gave her a math problem she needed to solve, projecting it onto the ceiling, along with a notification that she could hit 'snooze' instead, but if she did so she would donate ten credits to the American Center for Law and Justice. She seriously weighed her options.

'On the one hand, fuck my job, fuck my life. I want to sleep. On the other hand, hypocrites who
only care about privacy outside someone's bedroom or uterus... Fuck this I'll do the god damn math problem.'

She solved the equations using a laser stylus on her ceiling and found the value of X through the substitution method; by the time she'd done so she was groggy but awake. Indiri heaved herself out of bed, put the coffee on, and got in the shower. She turned the water to scalding and soaped herself up letting the water and lavender scented surfactant wash away the sweat and dirt of the previous day. Then she stood there in the running water. Indiri decided to brush her teeth while still in the shower and told herself she was killing two birds with one stone, but really, she knew she was just procrastinating like she did every working day. By the time she got out of the shower the water was practically ice.

She wrapped herself in a bathrobe and sat down with her morning coffee, the mud coffee properly iced and loaded with vanilla creamer just the way she liked it, just enjoying the silence. In about an hour, the sleeping minds around her would start to wake up and then she'd have to start blocking them out. For now, she could just exist.

'I suppose there is a benefit to waking up this early.'

By the time she left at 0630 she was properly, immaculately, dressed. Her hair was braided and pinned into place, her makeup was on, and she was wearing a nice gold and black sari she liked, badge pinned into position just under her left collar. She honestly liked every ensemble. Everything but the heels. Years of having to wear them meant she could walk and even run in them if she had to, but she'd be damned if she didn't hate every single second of it. She put her can of bear mace into her purse, and headed out the door.

As she left, her neighbor Tom was also leaving. He was in a suit, his own badge pinned a bit lower than hers, but then again he didn't have breasts. That is, unless one counted the natural consequence of male ageing and a sedentary occupation.

"Morning Tom." She greeted him.

"Morning Indiri." he replied "Looks like we're going into arbitration today." He stepped into the elevator with her.

"Yep. How hard is it for one insurance company to subrogate another?" Indiri asked in frustration as they walked toward the street.

"Do you want the real answer, or...?" Tom answered the question with a question.

"No no. It's cool. I'll see you at work." Indiri answered her own question as the doors to the elevator opened and they both stepped out.

'The incentive structure encourages intransigence and mendacity'

"Yep. Stay safe out there." he told her, and he meant it. It was always a worry.

"You too Tom." she said. They stepped out of the lobby and separated, heading in different directions. Corporate offices were in different locations and they had to take different trains. As she walked down the sidewalk toward the train station, Indiri did her best to project untouchability with her body language. She held her head high and strode as confidently as heels permitted. The unfortunate consequence of this was that while it dissuaded people from thinking she was vulnerable, it drew their eyes, and she could feel the eyes of other pedestrians. Some of them looked at her badge and gloves with undisguised hatred she could pick up past the Hindi earworm
she ran on a loop in her head. Others were just looking at her ass, which was annoying but nothing to worry about. A few though, a few were doing both at the same time, and that scared her. It was the reason she kept the bear mace, because thoughts like that were the precursors to a sexual assault. She'd always managed to avoid it, but she had friends who hadn't.

'Rules or no rules, if one of them touches me, they'll be in for a rude surprise.' Indiri thought to herself. Then she remembered who her local Psi Cops were and smiled to herself. 'They'd give me a hug and a cup of hot cocoa...'

Indiri arrived safely at the train station and waited for the next scheduled maglev train after swiping her identicard through the reader. The wait was the worst part because there was nowhere to retreat. If someone cornered her there things could escalate quickly. Her only defense was vigilance so instead of blocking out people's surface thoughts, she started paying attention. She looked around like she was merely inspecting the architecture and signage, but really she was cycling through the minds of mundanes picking up their inner monologues with more fidelity than simply perceiving them as background noise.

'Did I leave the lights on? Alec better have done his homework. That's a nice sari. They're maglevs, how the shit are they always late? Fucking merger negotiations are a pain in the ass. Shit, I DID leave the lights on. Christ look at her, standing there like she owns the place, fucking telepaths.' That got Indiri's attention, and she made sure the mace was in easy reach and made sure that the person who thought it was in her direct line of sight, without looking like she'd noticed him. He was a white guy, clean cut but not expensively dressed. She pegged him as being low-level white collar.

'Someone should teach her a lesson.' Indiri knew she was in danger, even out in public enough people wouldn't give a damn that someone jumping to her aid was unlikely. She prepared to defend herself as her heartbeat quickened. Just then, her train arrived and the doors opened. People flowed out and then back in like the tides. Indiri took the opportunity to momentarily distract his mind by making him notice a nearby set of tits. As much as doing that to some other woman disgusted her, someone else having to deal with the Male Gaze was better than her being attacked in a train station. She used the distraction to slip into the crowd boarding the train and effectively disappeared.

Indiri got into the train car and went as far forward as possible, putting as much distance between herself and that man as possible, then settled in for her fifteen minutes of being packed in among mundanes like a sardine in a can. She had no choice, she had to throw up every defense to keep from being overwhelmed by the mental cacophony of their thoughts. That she was half-blind was not at all lost on her and she elected to bend a bit at the knees in an attempt to hide among the torsos of people who were taller than her, just in case he came looking.

'Really glad I've been expanding my repertoire lately...' she mused to herself. Had this happened a month prior, she would've had fewer options.

The rest of the trip was uneventful and she arrived at the sprawling office complex that housed Province Agri Mutual Insurance. She swiped her badge to get into the building and stepped into the elevator with a bunch of other people just arriving for their shifts and took it to the tenth floor where her office was. It was on the other side of the building from the training room for the latest cohort of burnout statistics in the Initial Loss Reporting department for vehicle claims. She stopped just outside and listened as one of the managers gave a speech about customer service attributes. Most of the people inside were annoyed, frustrated, and deeply disliked the hand life had dealt them.
"You have to embody Province Agri's Phenomenal customer service goals" he said, with emphasis on the 'e' which she knew had a cube superscript. She could hear the trademark symbol at the end. "Every customer, every claim, every time" again, with particular emphasis on the 'e'. One of the students, a dark-haired bookish looking white girl, saw her and her badge and pointedly thought at her.

'If I hear the word Phenomenal(tm) one more time, I'm going to defenestrate the person who says it.' Indiri picked up that she had a masters degree in naval engineering. She immediately decided that she liked that one and thought back at her knowing she'd be okay with it.

<I know exactly how you feel. Stay strong.> Indiri gave her a solidarity fist through the open door. She grinned at the telepathy joke and returned the solidarity fist, but the manager who's ID badge read Michael Elm caught sight of it and turned around to see Indiri standing in the door.

"May I help you?" he asked.

"No no. I just heard you talking and got curious." Indiri replied.

"Well could you be curious elsewhere?" Michael replied, looking at her badge and gloves with mild disdain. "You're distracting my Claim Associates. I can't have them worried about you skulking inside their heads."

'Skulking? Fucking skulking like a thief in the night?' Indiri thought, offended. She briefly considered giving him a piece of her mind. That Province Agri was where people's dreams went to die. That he was distracting them from actually learning, that they hated every second of his presence in their classroom and would much rather learn what they needed to know from the friendly and knowledgeable trainers than someone who'd never actually done the job they were hired to do. But she didn't. Like a good little doormat she kept it to herself, and resented the fact that she had to.

"Sure. I'll be going." she turned to leave, but not before sparing a glance for the young woman she'd spoken to. She always made it a point to be nice to the mundanes who were nice to her.

<You deserve better than this. When it's your lunch break, come by my office we'll grab coffee or something.> The young woman thought back as hard as she could, but Indiri had to pluck it from her inner monologue.

'Sounds good.' Indiri chuckled inside and left, making it to her office about forty-five seconds later. Negotiations were in the afternoon, but she still had to prepare, so she read the claim files and the legal dispute. It hinged around liability for an industrial accident. The computer system on a self-driving truck malfunctioned and sent said truck into an agricultural chemical plant's storage tanks. The dispute was over the fractional liability for the resulting property and personal injury damages with the chemical manufacturer's underwritten by Lloyd's of London, who Tom worked for. According to Province Agri, Lloyd's held the majority of liability because of improper chemical storage, while Lloyd's contends that Province Agri held the lions share due to negligence in vehicle maintenance.

By the time she heard the trainee Claim Associates leaving for lunch she was ready to concuss herself with repeated cranial impacts to her desk, but then she heard a knock on her door and looked up.

"Hi there." that same young woman greeted her. "Just to let you know, you deserve better than this too. And..." she paused "You deserve better than to be treated like shit generally. I'm sorry we do that to you. I'd change it if I could."
"Thanks." Indiri replied. She was perfectly genuine and wanted to be Indiri's friend. She even assumed Indiri was picking up her surface thoughts right then and didn't mind. Indiri didn't have many opportunities to befriend mundanes and decided to take this one.

'Name is Freddie, by the way' she thought, smiling faintly. Indiri grinned right back at her.

"Caught in the act. Nice to meet you." She stood up and reached to shake his hand. He took it warmly and shook "Indiri. So, coffee?"

"Hell yeah." Freddie agreed.

"Awesome I know a place that isn't far from here." Indiri informed her.

...  

Freddie apparently developed a massive caffeine addiction at some point in her life because she ordered something with nine shots of espresso. Indiri was drinking a soy latte.

"So Freddie, how the hell did you end up at Province Agri? I caught that you have masters in naval engineering." Indiri asked.

"Basically? I got fucked. I invented a better tracking system for defense grids for my thesis. Unfortunately, said thesis got classified and the Intellectual Property releases mean that the university gets the royalties from Earth Force." Indiri was angry for her.

"That fucking sucks." She said.

"Tell me about it. I can't actually talk about my thesis to prospective employers so... Yeah. I'm a gal with a phantom masters degree. Lots of other naval engineers have projects they can talk about at length and have an advantage. How about you?" Freddie asked.

"The Psi Corps is our union and staffing agency." she replied "But in broader terms, I didn't manifest until I was already in university. I was studying English Literature of all things, and planned on being a novelist. Then in my second year, boom; I could read people's thoughts." Indiri explained.

"And telepaths can't be novelists..." Freddie verbalized the realization.

"Oh, we can be." Indiri corrected "We just can't circulate those novels outside the Corps. The kicker is that there aren't any jobs in English Literature. So I got tracked into Commercial division. The Florida of a telepath's dreams..." she remarked bitterly and realized it may have been a mistake. She p'heard the question before it came.

"So, I take it you're not much of a fan of the Psi Corps?" Freddie asked, in interest. She didn't have a problem with telepaths, but she was undecided about how she felt about the Psi Corps itself.

"No." Indiri replied "That isn't it at all. The Psi Corps does everything it can within the confines of Earth Alliance law to make our lives better. The problem is we're restricted by law to holding jobs that only telepaths can have. Commercial telepaths, the telepaths tasked with...whatever it is they do in courts no telepath can set foot in, certain medical applications; and there are a few internal things too. Security, Metapol, Military division, Education, and our own internal logistics system Transport division. Admin of course. But a lot of those have rating restrictions and even so, only so many spots. So a lot of us get shuffled into Commercial division; which does a lot of stuff. Not just this, but running shops in our installations, working with Admin on acquisitions, that sort of thing."
"Ah. And whatever dreams or aspirations you might have had before are gone." Freddie realized "But it isn't the Corps that does it. It's the fact that you don't have a...for lack of a better term, country of your own with an economy and jobs that need doing that don't involve being telepaths?"

"Basically." Indiri confirmed.

"And beyond that, other things. You can't even make a living publishing novels either which is just..." Freddie thought about that for a second "That's fucking twisted. It's like we have a legislated monopoly on the human condition, when... shit the insights of a telepath into what it means to be a person? Not allowed to see the light of day. That's messed up." Indiri had honestly never thought of it that way, but then, she was wrapped up in the experience of it rather than the broader implications, and Freddie was right. That really was fucked up.

"Yeah. Now that I think about it, you're not wrong."

... Indiri and Freddie got back into the building and were waiting for the elevator. The hour she had for lunch was always the high point of Indiri's day but she found herself rather enjoying Freddie's company and it was mutual. She enjoyed being able to commiserate with someone who was actually at work.

"Same time tomorrow?" Indiri asked.

"Sure." Freddie replied "Tomorrow we start going through adjuster licensing. It's going to be grand..." Indiri laughed a little bit.

"I know what you mean. Mind-numbing compliance training modules, whole nine yards."

"Yeah." Freddie confirmed, dejected.

"You'll get through it." But then Indiri had an idea and maybe Freddie didn't have to. "Actually Freddie, I can't promise anything, but I know someone. Runs a zero-G construction firm. I could give him a call, see if he needs an engineer. You won't even need to move off planet." The feel of Freddie's thoughts was wonderful, excitement and gratitude bubbled up from her mind like water in a volcanic spring.

"Wow. You'd do that?"

"Of course I would." Indiri replied, smugly "Vincet is a P2, only loosely attached to the Corps. About all they can do is go into business for themselves so they do." In an interesting and mutually beneficial legal and economic relationship with the Corps.

"That sounds awesome! Thank you!" Freddie answered jubilantly and caught Indiri in a hug. It was strange hugging a mundane but Indiri returned it just as the elevator opened.

"Well... back to the grind-stone." Indiri remarked as Freddie let her go.

"Yeah. I'll try not to throw anyone through the plate-glass."

"Good idea!" Indiri replied with a toothy smile.

When Indiri got back to her office someone was waiting for her. She could recognize him by his mind even before he turned around and revealed his clean-cut face. Ethan Brown was white with brown hair and around two meters tall. Indiri cringed inside but didn't let it show on her face.
"You're late." Ethan told her in a shameless play to put her on the defensive.

"I took my lunch and came back on time. Late does not mean 'not here when I am'." she told him.

"Come on, the groundcar is waiting for us." he replied, unphased, and walked past her; expecting her to follow. Everything in her screamed at her not to, but she didn't have much choice because he was the adjuster and claim specialist assigned to her current case. Stepping into the lift again for the second time in as many minutes, there was plenty of room for both of them to separate, and Indiri tried. She closed herself off by crossing her arms in front of her but Ethan wasn't deterred by that at all. He undressed her with his eyes and provided a narrative account of what he'd like to do to her, strictly inside his own head but shouting at the top of his mind. No witnesses, nothing actionable by Human Resources. What was almost worse was that he knew it. Casual sexual thoughts were normal. She didn't mind that; but this was deliberate harassment. She felt exposed, used, and disgusted. She couldn't even protest or she'd be accused of his invading his privacy, so Indiri just had to grin and bear it, throwing up all her defenses into a bullwark inside her mind.

Mercifully, the elevator door opened and Indiri was able to escape into the underground parking garage where a high-end car was waiting for them. She got into the front seat so Ethan couldn't conspire to sit in the back with her and possibly touch her with his gross and probably rapey hands. She wondered privately if he did this with all women, or if he only did it to her. Unfortunately him being in the back seat didn't help. Instead she had to tolerate occasional flashes of what he wanted to do from behind; strong thoughts slipping past the defenses she could erect and sustain for protracted periods while remaining able to interact with the world around here. But then she had an idea. she wasn't driving, so she slipped into the mindscape, devoting her consciousness fully to defending her mind and dissociated almost entirely from the world outside her own head. She took her three little piggy house made of sticks and rebuilt it in brick.

'I really should just punch him repeatedly in the dick.' Indiri thought to herself, treating herself to that mental image and using it to reinforce her mind-shield. She thought that maybe she could run that thought on a loop, replaying it over and over again in her head as a defense against exactly what he was doing. She came back to the world and tried it. It worked. It provided just the right focus to keep his sexual harassment thoughts at bay. After that the car ride to the private arbitration 'court' was a breeze. She got out of the car waited for Ethan to get impatient and start without her, then walked behind him. She didn't want him staring at her ass, plus it reinforced his sense of superiority. Indiri knew better.

She arrived in the conference room to find the Lloyd's delegation and the arbitrator already there, with Tom on the other side sitting down his gloved hands splayed flat against the table.

<Save me from this mundane bastard.> Indiri told him. Tom winced in her thoughts.

<Is this the one who likes to mess with you?> he asked.

<Yeah. I'm worried he's going to escalate one day. He's been getting more...lurid.> Indiri replied.

<And you can't got to HR... > Tom commiserated, and Indiri caught an errant thought from him that he was very glad he wasn't a woman because he didn't know if he could stand it. <But... you do have other avenues of redress. Colin and Gene have evidently gotten a bit more militant, they might be willing to pay him a visit.>

<And if that would solve the problem I'd ask them, but if it isn't Ethan it'll be someone else.>

Indiri sat down at her end of the table and none of the mundanes were any the wiser about their ex parte communication.
"You want to go through the standard disclaimer, or should I?" Tom asked.

"I'll do it." Indiri replied.

"In the interest of time, I'll do the honors for both of us if that's okay with you?" she asked the arbitrator whose name she couldn't bother to remember. He nodded in acquiescence, just as eager to get the formalities over with as she was.

"The terms of this arbitration are such that neither of us will be deep-scanning anyone, only verifying the truth of specific statements. Anything but the truth value of specific statements will be kept in confidence including the details of any lies or omissions or caveats and complications regarding true statements. It won't hurt unless you try to resist so relax and try to avoid any strong emotion." Indiri recited the disclaimer by rote, completely without affect. Then the adventures in creative mendacity began. Ethan and the and the adjuster from Lloyd's who's name was evidently Phillip fenced with omission and half-truths that both telepaths readily detected but couldn't talk about because the arbitration contract forbade them. Both sides had a rank-ordered list of 'independent' adjusters and they were arguing for and rejecting each one until they found one they could both agree on, playing up the qualifications and minimizing the self-serving ties of each one in sequence. The whole thing could be avoided if they just compared lists to see who was on both, but each side hoped to convince the other to accept someone other than their own picked man or woman. And sometimes it even worked.

By the end of it, Tom was glyphing Indiri a cartoon image of himself beating his head into the table, while she sent him a mental image of her shoving Ethan into a box and packing him on a slow ship to Dubai.

"Okay, I think we've reached an agreement." The arbitrator finally declared "Thank God."

'Five hours later,' Indiri thought. Tom pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head.

... The ride back was in relative peace. Ethan was almost as mentally exhausted as Indiri was and didn't have the emotional energy to catcall her in his mind. On the other hand, the adjuster selected was higher on his list than on Phillip's, so he counted it as a win and was riding high on masculine hormones. She didn't want to get into the elevator but she knew he'd follow and the staircase was even more isolated than an elevator, so she got inside anyway and pressed the button for the ground floor.

Just as the elevator door closed and before she could turn around, Ethan reached forward and grabbed Indiri by the shoulders.

'The Fuck' Her entire body tensed. "Get your fucking hands off me!" she growled.

"Come on Indiri..." Ethan replied, not doing what she asked, but squeezing. She p'heard his inner thoughts. He was considering hitting the stop button on the elevator and wouldn't take no for an answer unless she made him. "I saw how tense you were during that entire meeting, just relax. Why not come back to my pla-" which is when Indiri whipped around and drove the heel of her palm into his nose, breaking it with a sickening crunch and sending him staggering back into the elevator doors.

"Bitch! You fucking bitch!" he croak-yelled angrily, holding his nose shut and leaning his head backward to let the blood drain into his throat. Then the door opened, spilling him backwards into the front lobby in full view of building security
"I warned you." Indiri said, her voice and affect as cold as dry ice. "If you ever touch me again, I will do far worse."

"I'll report you to the Psi Cops!" Ethan threatened.

"Do it. I haven't scanned you, and they'll know you're a rapey douchebag. All you'll accomplish is pissing off two Psi Cops who view me as their sister. Let me know how it goes!" She stepped over his supine form, and p'heard his other plan, which was to report the assault to HR.

"Oh yeah, that'll work. Go ahead. I can see it now: fifty five kilo women viciously assaults ninety kilo man for no reason. You know, even if that does work watching the twisted logic play out in their heads will be funny." at that Indiri left him to pick himself up off the floor and strolled confidently past security who were getting up to pick Ethan up off the floor with a first aid kit. One of them moved to intercept her and she stopped.

"Can I help you?" She asked.

"Uh, ma'am you know why we can't let you leave. We're going to have to call Earth Force Security." the security guard who was a black man by the name of Timothy told her.

"No. You don't. I wasn't going to report it, but if you insist...No matter how you slice it, this involves a telepath and that puts it within Metapol jurisdiction. Do you really want to bring them in?" Indiri said. Timothy looked nervous, but he'd already made his decision to hold her and Ethan pending investigation and he wasn't about to back down.

"I insist ma'am." he confirmed.

"Okay." she rolled her eyes and looked past Timothy at Ethan "Hey Ethan, looks like you get to meet the Psi Cops anyway!" she mocked him and turned back to Timothy "Mind if I sit down? They could be busy and it might take some time."

"Sure. You can sit in the security office. I'll keep the two of you in separate rooms." he replied.

"Thanks." Indiri finished and then strode back behind the security desk to a little office.

... It wasn't a nice office by any stretch of the imagination; more like a warm supply closet with a chair, desk, and a bunch of computer monitors. Computer monitors that Indiri noted were from security cameras, one of which monitored the elevatlr. Anotehr thing that recommended it as a place to be was that she was alone. In a sense, Indiri didn't want to be alone but she wanted to be with other telepaths. Not mundanes. After the near-miss that morning and after most of a day with Ethan, being touched by that creep, she felt like she needed to be held; needed to have comforting warmth and understanding bathe her mind. But that wasn't something she could have just yet so she curled her small body into a sitting fetal position on the chair designed for larger men and hugged herself. She wasn't going to cry, Indiri refused. She wouldn't give even a notional Ethan Brown the satisfaction, but she'd had a day and bravado aside she knew she might very well be some kind of trouble.

Video or no, Psi Cops shielding her or no; she still attacked a mundane. There would be those who didn't care that she was reacting to sexual harassment that bordered on outright sexual assault. She caught herself.

'No. Don't minimize it Indiri. It was a sexual assault.'
She knew she'd likely be fired or have to be reassigned for her own safety. Of course, she also knew that unless the director himself decided to intervene for some reason, the Corps took care of it's own. She'd be okay, but it was going to be a mess and she didn't really feel like moving.

'Oh Indiri just what did you get yourself into. No matter how fucked up this planet is, I don't want to leave. It's my home. Fuck.'

She loved knowing everyone who mattered, she liked knowing the local Psi Cops by their first names and knowing that no matter what happened they had her back. She adored living in an apartment complex with a ninety-five percent telepath occupancy rate. She felt safe there like she never had on Mars.

She sat in the small office for a subjective eternity, worried about her own future when a pair of familiar minds projected themselves through the door. Indiri thought that if hard pressed she might just be able to make contact with someone on the other side if she was touching the door. For these two it might as well have been tissue paper.

"Indiri, are you okay in there?" It was Colin's voice, and Gene's mental contact came through just after.

<It's safe to come out. If anyone tries anything, we'll make them want to claw out their own eyes.>

"I'm alright. You can come on in, I don't think the door is locked." Indiri replied. About half a second later, the door opened and she saw two men in the obsidian-black uniforms of Metapol, uniforms that in a bygone age would have made her nervous, but now were a sight for sore eyes. Both of them were on the tall end of medium height with athletic builds. Colin was clean cut with black hair and green eyes while Gene was a dirty blonde with blue eyes and a bit of stubble. They also had matching engagement rings.

'Those are new...' she inwardly remarked.

"So, Ethan's told quite the story." Colin said "He was lying of course, but he told one."

"Pfft" Indiri scoffed <He's in for a sad surprise if he thinks you two won't look at his surface thoughts. I hear that lately you've decided you no longer give a fuck...>

<You heard correctly.> Gene confirmed. <So, we'd ask you what happened, but we already know. Unless you need to vent?>

<Do I!> She answered angrily. <Fucking bastard's been doing shit like this for weeks. He's never touched me before but every time I have to work with him or be in his presence, it's the mental cat-calls. It's fucking gross. It's like that on my way to work too. There's always someone who does that shit; and it's not like I can go to Human Resources because under Earth Alliance law, I've invaded his privacy by knowing he's doing it and thoughts aren't harassment!>

<You can now.> Colin pointed out.

<Shit you're right. There's video. Hell, there's a police report. Still, I'm a telepath and he's a mundane. You're not going to talk to admin and have me quietly reassigned?> Indiri asked, curious with more than a little bit of trepidation.

<Why would we do that?> Gene asked. <Because you punched a mundane in the face? Come on, you know us better than that Indiri, and you don't even know us that well!> he continued with a cheeky mind-feel. <Had you scanned him into the hospital, we'd give you a hug, a cup of tea, and
might have to 'punish' you but really we'd just send you to Proxima or something without putting it in your record. As it is, it's just the hug and the tea if you want them.>

<I know, Gods, I was just speculating on that earlier today. Good to have it confirmed. Not sure what good going to HR will do though.> Indiri replied. <They're still likely to fire me.>

<Well, to the extent you like your job, Province Agri does have a rock-solid sexual harassment policy and there is video. We will also make it clear to them that if they dick around, the Psi Corps will blackball them like we did ISN.>

Indiri was struck dumb. She'd never considered the idea that they might actually do that. It was a pretty major escalation to do things like. ISN was one thing, they were brought in under false pretenses and they could do that openly. But this? It was a crime against her personally, not an offense against the Corps.

<That's where you're wrong, Indiri. An attack on one of us is an attack on all of us.> Colin gently correcting her, giving her that promised hug with his mind instead of his body. <You're our sister, and it's been open season on us for too long. We've been doormats for too long. The blackballing won't be official, but if we ask them to, I'm pretty sure we can get every commercial telepath they employ to quit and never work with them again. We've done it before.>


<You know the law firm Trudeau and Beam? They treated telepaths like shit and preferentially represented those who commit crimes against us. They no longer have legal division telepaths working for them. At all.> Gene told her.

"Well then... I guess I'm going to HR. Ethan Brown is going to get his Karma repaid a bit early..." Indiri said with a wolfish grin.

"Being bad at practicing one's Dharma will do that..." Gene replied.
Chapter Summary

Sorry this took a while. I've been working 10 hour days and its just emotionally draining. On vacation now though which means I can devote a bit more time to it and have more emotional energy... and this chapter requires a lot of it. Should be able to get seventeen out pretty fast too.

Thursday April 9th, 2263

Colin was drinking his morning coffee in the kitchen, looking through what used to be the wall between his and Gene's quarters, it hadn't been load-bearing so it was relatively easy to remove. All it had taken were a few contractors and some elbow grease helping them remove the materials and make the resulting open space look nice. They couldn't remove all of it, there would always be two kitchens and two bathrooms, but that was fine. Colin actually thought his old now-supernumerary kitchen would make for a good lab space for when Zara was over. Of course they'd also smashed out part of the wall separating her room from theirs and put in a door so she had her own kitchen and bathroom. It was a bit of jury rig, but probably the closest thing to pleasant domesticity they'd ever get living in the Annex, with it's lab and cells and training room and multitude of other residents.

He was proud of it, and loved every second; even if Gene liked to sing Narn opera in the shower. How he made those sounds with a human vocal tract Colin would never understand, but somehow, Gene managed it. If Colin was honest with himself, and he would never admit it, it was actually growing on him and he was starting to pick up bits and pieces of the language, and Gene was starting to pick up German.

Gene exited the shower a moment later and strolled into the kitchen for his own coffee, still naked and covered in nothing but a towel, the engagement band that would soon be obsolete dangled from a chain around his neck. He poured his cup and stood next to Colin, who wasn't bothering to avert his appreciative gaze. It never mattered how often Colin saw him like this in the morning, he could never keep his eyes off. His only regret was that he was fully clothed; he was showered, dressed, drinking his coffee. It was time to start the day. They had a wedding rehearsal to get to in an hour. Normally they'd want to do it the day before, but it was set for the thirteenth. Friday and Saturday were out because it was being done in a synagogue, Sunday was out because that was Birthday. That left Thursday.

"Don't lie to yourself lover." Gene teased him. "All I have to do is this..." Gene stepped back a bit and leaned forward to trail a line of kisses down Colin's neck. <We have plenty of time.> Colin couldn't help himself, Gene was right. He spun himself around and their lips met.

<Monster.>

<Love you too.> Gene thought back at him.

Gene walked into Temple Beth Zion and only then did it really strike him how large a wedding this
was going to be. The simple reality was, they couldn't not invite any of the telepaths on planet, there were a number of mundanes, people coming in from off-world. He didn't even want to think about the catering bill and Colin was doing a very good job concealing it from him.

"Nope." Colin said snaking his hand and arm around Gene's waist "I just haven't looked at it yet." Gene laughed and kissed Colin on the cheek.

"As I thought. You are doing a remarkable job concealing it from me!" he replied, and saw Rabbi Isaac Liebgott emerge from a back room. This time, he was dressed casually, in a polo shirt and khakis, with sandals on his feet. Complete with socks.

"Colin, Gene, it's good to see you. How have you been?" Isaac asked.

"Complicated question..." Colin replied, and Gene knew exactly what he meant. Their case load had been relatively light the past month, there wasn't a single telepath under the age of majority on Sleepers - mostly through gentle means - Zara was coming home. Training the Hive, as the teenagers were officially calling themselves, was coming along well and Machteld was starting to get some English back. Omega VII was starting to be a fit place for telepaths and they were getting married a year before they thought possible. But both of them still sometimes woke up in tears. Gene thought that might just be the new normal, but Colin was more optimistic. "But right here, right now, we're doing pretty good."

Isaac was legitimately happy for them; he smiled and clapped his hands together "So, what did you have in mind? I've done gay weddings before, but never secular telepath weddings."

"Yeah, the whole 'giving the bride' away thing obviously needs to go..." Gene remarked with a certain amount of amusement. If there was a more dominant partner that tradition was misogynistic, having it's roots in the exchange of women as all-but-chattel. "What we're thinking is that we come down from the sides at the same time, we meet Zara after she walks up the middle just in front of the dais and walk the remaining three meters together." It had a certain symbolic resonance that they both liked. Isaac understood what it was, he didn't become a rabbi through Hebrew stamp collecting and analyzed deeper meanings as a vocation.

"...You two can't possibly be real. This is a figment of my imagination. That's so sweet I'm going to die from diabetes right here." he said, grinning at them. "What about best-person arrangements?"

"A bit more traditional." Colin replied. "My brother Marcel is my best man. He knows the wedding drill."

"Rhee Sueng is my best-woman." Gene said. It was a hard choice between her and Max, but in the end, everyone else in the annex as well as Mike comprised the wedding party and he wanted to give Transport a certain pride of place. And the reality was, Colin and Zara were his closest family and he didn't want to choose between everyone else. They all understood, at least. It was a pity the entire crew of the Fenrir couldn't attend, but that would require far too much space. Instead, it was Sueng representing the Navy proper, and Oscar Gonzales for the Marines.

"Alright. Let's talk music!" Isaac said, enthused "And do we want chair-dancing? We can absolutely do chair-dancing."

"...We love Fiddler enough that yes, we should do chair-dancing. Though we don't want to appropriate your culture." Colin answered with a cautious affirmative.

"Nonsense, you're invited! Bit of a safety hazard, I'll admit..." Isaac replied.
"We can live with that. Let me tell you about the most recent time I got shot..." Gene replied to the warning.

**Sunday April 12th, 2263**

The spaceport's passenger terminal was almost completely devoid of life at five AM. No ships were departing, and those that were arriving were mostly for cargo and not people, which made the Hades class transport parked just outside the gate remarkable in and of itself. That it was painted black with a massive Psi painted on it in silver increased that strangeness considerably for any of the small number of mundanes, mostly employees, who saw it.

The gate opened and Colin could hear the pitter-patter of little feet running along the accordion connector and Zara appeared down the neck in the same dress she'd left in, along with her badge and gloves.

"DAD!" She screamed referring to both of them and rocketed the remaining distance. This time though, both Colin and Gene were braced for impact down on their knees, arms over each other's shoulders so they could catch her at once. The collided in a three-way explosion of happiness and tears as all three bathed each other in warmth and unconditional love; the two Psi Cops slipped into a gestalt to make communication a bit easier.

<Consensus: We missed you so much Little Monkey. There's so much we wish you'd been here for.>

<This is the best birthday ever. Love you.>

<Consensus: We love you too, and yeah, it is. Just wait until tomorrow though. That's gonna be really special.> After a moment they partially detached themselves from each other and the tears stopped flowing; Colin and Gene separated their minds and were once again fully distinct.

"So, how was the trip?" Colin asked.

"Well..." Zara said, prevaricating a little bit before answering "I think I know what I want to be when I grow up now..." She was keeping her thoughts private, which wasn't like her. She normally let them in, but Colin didn't sense it was because she wanted to. It was more that she felt she had to. It wasn't about keeping them out, but possibly someone else.

"Oh really, and what's that?" Gene asked. Zara turned around and pointed down the accordion connector at the other four others exiting the transport. Marcel, Captain Rhee, and Lieutenant Gonzales, and Mike.

"I want to be like her." Zara said.

'She knows. Jesus christ she knows.' Colin thought to himself in a strange mix of happiness that he didn't have to keep things from his daughter, and horror about what would happen if someone who ought not find out found out. She was only a P6, if the wrong people were to find out she wouldn't be able to keep out the person they'd send to scan her. He knew through the connection between their minds and possibly even their souls that Gene was having a similar ambivalent-panic response even if they both had the mental discipline not to show it.

<How in the hell?> Gene asked. <Did Marcel tell her?>
<I... I don't know, and he should have told us if...no. Not on an open channel.>

But then, he realized something else.

'She's here. Which means if someone does come for her, we're all fucked anyway.' There was simply no rational reason why he should panic. The same logic that applied to informing his own staff applied to his daughter. As he calmed down, Gene did too, but only slightly. Both of them wanted to know exactly how she found out.

<It's okay Dad. I figured a lot out on my own. I forced Uncle Marcel's hand about it. I'm action-blocked voluntarily, I can't talk about it without him or you present.> she told both of them, with Dad as an unvoiced plural.

<Sweetheart, how?> Gene asked, kissing her on the cheek out of pure frustrated parental worry.

<Dad, it's starting to get really bad on Earth. They keep it away from us kids, but I spend time in the Minor Academy. Everyone's fed up and we're arming. I know what that means, even if we can somehow hide what we're actually doing from the Director's office.> Colin's heart sank. As much as he'd promised to always be honest with Zara, this wasn't something he thought she should ever have to be worried about. She should be able to have something that looked like a childhood, even if mundanes had taken a proper one from her. <It's about time.> she said in the middle of his naval gazing.

<...> From Gene. <Okay, I don't know what I expected but it wasn't that.>

<I know why you gave me those codes, and why you've given me everything I need to know to kill mundanes with my mind.> Colin's mind wanted to not believe what he was p'hearing. He knew she could figure that out, but he didn't think she would with such cold rationality, but that it would come to her when she needed it. <It's because you're terrified that something will happen to me, that mundanes will try to hurt me again. I can feel it right now. You shouldn't have to worry like that. No one should.> Colin knew what she was about to say before she said it, and his chest clenched in a strange mix of pride and unfathomable sadness that she even had to think thoughts like this. It was her tenth birthday. <If putting a stop to that means going to war, that's okay. If we lose, well... I'd rather die on my feet than live under a boot.>

Colin felt it click for Gene, he understood. Sometimes something happened and people had to grow up far faster than they were supposed to. Colin knew it intellectually but Gene knew more deeply than that. Hundreds of eighteen year old kids, mundanes, who a few short weeks prior had been innocent. A flash of memory from Akdor of many of those young men and women dying, and those who survived never being innocent again. It wasn't much different for Zara.

<Me too Zara, me too.> Gene told her, pouring love and understanding into her mind and through touch.

<Same here Little Monkey. But let's make sure we don't lose, hm? And for now... just try to enjoy life.> Colin agreed, and advised. Then there were two more sets of arms in the family hug, encompassing all three of them and Colin recognized both. Marcel and Mike.

"Ahem, sorry to interrupt the family moment..." All five of them instinctively got up and were almost at attention, even Zara. There was just something in her voice, and Captain Rhee Sueng laughed. "It's always funny how I do that to people." She remarked. "Zara, if that's what you want to do, Transport division will be happy to have you, and there are no rating restrictions on command positions other than Navigator. From what I've seen over the last few days, you have the brain and fighting spirit to do very well."
"Thank you Ma'am." Zara replied enthusiastically, and for her money it was the best compliment she'd ever received from someone other than her Dads.

"Pfft. No need to call me Ma'am, I'm not your commanding officer yet, give that another ten years. And seriously gentlemen, relax, we're friends. I know you're all overcome with national pride, but come on...I need to let my hair down sometime, and it's our Birthday and I'm best-woman at your wedding."

"She's letting me use her first name in public guys. That's how serious she is about this. Zero formality." Oscar Gonzales told them, nodding his head. It was only then that Colin even noticed she was in civvies. It simply didn't occur to him that she'd ever be out of uniform, she always seemed the sort who slept in it and had seven of them in her closet for each day of the week. Yet, there she was, in a turtleneck, a nice jet-black blouse on top of it and a skirt that actually showed her lower legs in a devil-may-care display of contempt for social norms imposed by mundanes and internalized by the Corps. Colin thought it was a good look for her.

"Alright Sueng." Colin acquiesced, relaxing. Gene did the same thing and Marcel let out a sigh of relief and smiled broadly. Colin got the impression he knew her very well and could sense long familiarity between them now that he looked. 'How deep is he, anyway?' Colin asked himself, but then he realized Marcel had been training Bloodhounds for six years. He likely had a small army distributed around the Corps and concentrated in Warsaw. In a logical epiphany, Colin realized that when Bester had said he'd talked with others about bringing Gene in, he'd likely meant Marcel and most certainly Sueng. 'Well he's always been a firebrand... But what the hell does that make me?'

<Lover, what is it?>

<I just realized my brother might as well be Leopold Okulicki,> Colin replied <which probably makes me Willem Arondeus. Granted, I hope we have a better end than our historical counterparts, but never let it be said that homosexuals are cowards.>

<I love you when you get bleak...> Gene told him, kissing him in his mind.

<I love you too, but come off it, you love me when I'm not bleak too...> Colin returned the affection.

<Dads, what are you two talking about? It can tell it's something, but I don't know what.>

<Ancient history Little Monkey.> Colin told her. <Ancient history.>

"Unfortunately, there is one formality that I can't hold off on. I'm not actually at liberty until it's done." Marcel informed the lot. "I told them to wait a few moments but they're..." he paused, sensing them "On their way out."

A dozen black-and-grey uniformed men and women emerged from the gate, speaking verbally and mentally between each other. The bloodhounds stopped and arranged themselves in a block three by four, with the one on the far left front standing out slightly in front of the others and to the side, all at attention.

"Lieutenant Colin Meier; Lieutenant Marcel Szewczyk requests to be relieved of command of these Bloodhounds." Marcel barked out, handing the transfer orders to his brother and saluting. Colin took them and saluted back.

"You are relieved." Colin replied. Then the squad leader stepped forward.
"Sergeant Emilia Lehtonen, presenting these Bloodhounds for duty and inspection, Sir!" the Bloodhound's squad leader declared in a crisp Finnish accent. It wasn't a yell, more like theater projection, and Colin was impressed by her dedication to the formalities of Metapol, but that wasn't how he operated. Still, he did have duty to inspect them all and he did. The formalities must be obeyed, at least on ceremonial occasions.

He strode forward and examined every last one, putting real faces and metal imprints to the names and records he had on file. Atticus Herczog, Judith Assenberg, Charisse Senft, Cedric Gerhard, Salah D'cruze, Akshay Honda, Ali Karga, Basira Leclerc, Zhi Lam from China, and taking up the tail end on the far back left was Alexia Brown. Most were from Europe, but a few were from other places like North America, China, and Algeria. It was all a matter of who got placed where in the internship matches and geography did matter. All of them had been good students and all of them were fluent in a few different languages in addition to the standard English and French. Most were a mix of P9s and P10s, with Emilia as the lone P11, which was fine. Emilia was last, and she saluted for her entire squad. He saluted her in return.

"Sergeant Emilia Lehtonen, these Bloodhounds have been inspected and are fit for duty." He told her in that same formality. When their salute dropped, the ceremony was over and he could speak freely. "That having been said, I don't stand on formality or rank here outside of ceremony. You don't have to call me Sir, Colin is fine." he turned to the rest of them "Neither do you. If I have to stand on rank I'm doing something wrong. It's a pleasure meeting you all." All of them breathed a sigh of relief, evidently Marcel had only told them they'd be under his brother's command and not what he'd be like. They wanted to make a good impression, and they had; but if he knew Marcel he didn't stand on his rank either. "Also, Happy Birthday, everyone. We have something of a welcoming party planned for today, and then there's tomorrow's wedding."

All of them were young, and they definitely liked a good party so that news went over rather well with them and they grinned with an amount of mischief showing in their teeth that it actually made Colin a bit nervous.

"That said, there is someone else you should all meet and that's my fiance and executive officer, Gene Hendriks."

"Hi everyone. Pleasure to meet all of you!" Gene greeted them with an abundance of good-cheer "I'll be working you all pretty hard after the wedding so get to like me now, otherwise you'll hate me later." A few had a hard time separating the friendly-looking man before them from a harsh task-master but there it was.

<Don't be too hard on them sweetheart.> Colin requested.

<Nah. I just want to scare them a little.>

"You all met Zara on the trip, right?" Colin asked the assembled Bloodhounds. Everyone nodded and one of them, Cedric Gerhard piped up.

"Even if we hadn't, we'd know who she is. Marcel had us playing Stool Pigeon when he came back from Geneva last month."

"Ah! Excellent! Because that's going to continue with local fauna from this point forward, with a few... adult modifications." Gene told them all, and they groaned, but it was an affectation. They enjoyed it.

<Mundanes. You're going to be playing it with mundanes. Also in reverse so that mundanes never fucking see you.> Gene followed up mentally. To their credit, they didn't react negatively, but
rather with a collective 'Huh, I wonder how that's going to work'.

"You're welcome!" Zara said to them, projecting her voice just enough that it wasn't a yell but that they'd all hear.

...

For the first time since he'd arrived on-planet the Annex was a full house. Every bedroom had someone officially living in it, they'd had to break out another big sectional table and pull furniture out of storage to accommodate everyone in the common areas. And Gerald had broken out the mead.

The buzzer rang and Gene answered the door, he didn't see anyone at eye level so looked down slightly to see Serena Carmichael grinning up from her wheelchair.

"Hey Serena, good to see you! Fair warning we're at capacity and it's standing room only." he greeted her with a smile and what he thought was a clever joke.

<That's the booze talking sweetheart.> Colin told him from the lounge with a flash of drunken affection.

"Har Har! How droll. I'm in luck, I brought my own chair." Serena replied and wheeled herself inside after Gene stood aside for her. "So, where is that fiance of yours? I want to see you two make out. Happy birthday by the way." Gene laughed.

"Thanks! I'm pretty sure you're going to see that at some point, but he's in the lounge." Gene informed her.

<Yes, I am!>

"Oh god, what is he like drunk? Should I run from the Psi Corps snuggle?" Serena asked.

"Good luck with that..."

"I'll have you know I can drift in this thing!" came Serena's retort.

"Oh! Serena, I should warn you, Gerald broke out the mead and there's a keg. We can't guarantee our ability to block out surface thoughts. I know you don't care but attorney-client privilege." Gene thought to say as Serena set herself into a gear that was suitable for carpet and started toward the lounge.

"Gene, you're sweet but I don't give a damn. I'll just stay sober and count sheep if I can't keep my mind off cases. It's fine. Besides, this is your house." she replied, and continued forward. That struck a cord with Gene and he found himself standing by the door considering whether it was possible to make someone an honorary telepath.

Gene followed behind her and she passed by Atticus Herczog and Judith Assenberg chatting happily with Erika and Hoshi.

"Hi Serena!" Erika greeted her and she came to a stop.

"Erika! Good to see you! Happy birthday!" Erika stooped down to give her a hug, which she returned enthusiastically. Atticus looked over at Gene.

<What's with the mundane?> He asked
"So how are things around here? I haven't had many cases in a while?" Serena asked.

<Serena is our lawyer.> Gene replied.

"Most wouldn't hit your desk, the odd blip in need of help, had a sexual assault case but the victim there just went to HR. Lots of kids off Sleepers now, but we didn't need to litigate for it."

<I can hear that, but what is she doing here?>

"Thank God for that last part, I cringe every time I hear about that fucking poison. Is the victim okay?" Serena asked, concerned.

<Serena considers the Corps family because her cousin is one of us. It's a damn shame she's a mundane because she'd fit right in inside the Corps.> Gene told Atticus in a gentle rebuke. Atticus didn't know, so Gene didn't blame him, but it needed to be corrected. <There are a few other mundanes who show up including our former liaison with Earth Force, and most of The Hive's biological parents.>

<Oh. Sorry. Alright. I'll give them a shot. It's just not something I'm used to; mundanes who give a shit.> Atticus replied, feeling chastened.

<I know, and normally I wouldn't give people cookies for being baseline decent, but they've all gone quite a bit beyond that and put themselves at risk, either personally or professionally.> Gene finished, and Atticus nodded. He knew what that meant, if the worst came the Corps wouldn't abandon people who helped them, mundane or no.

"Yeah she's fine. Punched the bastard in the jaw."

"Hah! Good for her!" Serena agreed "It's always good when a lowlife like that gets what they deserve. However, I've been promised that the lover-boys here are going to make out and I don't want to miss that."

"You're incorrigible..." Erika told her with entirely affected annoyance.

"Hey, you weren't promised anything just... the probability that it will happen." Gene said returning to that verbal conversation. Serena pivoted on her chair's axis and headed toward the lounge again, passing the common kitchen where Sueng was holding forth to The Hive on the Transport division giving them the obvious recruitment spiel and a sign by the door read "Drinking age is 16 in this 'Grad." with a little winky face. They were all drinking pilsner of some variety of another, except for Fatima who was drinking tea. Gene didn't know where Oscar had gotten off to, he'd disappeared shortly after arriving.

In the lounge proper, Colin and Marcel, along most of the rest of the support staff including Gerald, Su, Eduardo, Franklin, and Hassan were chit-chatting with the new Bloodhounds. Colin was sitting on the couch with Zara on his lap drinking some mead, Zara had actual lemonade she was sipping with relish. Marcel was sprawled out over most of it with his head on Emilia's lap, who was running her fingers through his hair. Gene raised an eyebrow.

<Isn't he married?> he asked, and Colin gave him a look and a thought that said 'It is time!'.

<Yes> Colin replied <But it's arranged and Marcel has permission to find someone he actually likes. This is a... new development. Today, brand new. Brewing for a while though.>

<Good for both of them! So... singing.>
"You're in for a real treat." Marcel told him, and Gene couldn't tell if it was slurred speech, or just has accent. Colin stood up as soon as Zara slid off his lap, grinning like she knew what was coming, which she probably did. Gene figured something was up and didn't dare move, even as Zara came and stood next to him. Then Colin started to sing in a high tenor that Gene found stunningly beautiful. This wasn't the Polish or German folk music he often sang in the shower; it was in German and Colin was singing right at them, this slow passionate thing that was clearly a love song. Gene could understand enough of it to know what it mean: that Colin was singing about he and Zara were the best things to ever happen to him. Everyone else's thoughts were blank, they were all shielding themselves too tightly to pick up a stray emotion or whisper from their minds and it felt like him, Colin, and Zara were the only people in the room and he felt Colin's soul soar as he lost himself in the song. Someone was even shielding Serena's mind. Gene's heart melted.

When he was done, Colin only said one thing while Gene was speechless.

"I remember threatening to serenade you public... and I don't think I tell you two enough how much you mean to me."

"Only because you couldn't see me every day Dad." Zara told him and hugged him around the waist.

"Love you Little Monkey." Colin said hugging her right back.

"Love you too Dad." She turned her head "You too Dad." But then, showing a surprising amount of awareness for a ten-year-old, or not at all surprising from Zara, she let go and looked at both men with a 'you know you want to' expression. Gene did, he really did. He stepped forward the few steps and slid his hands across Colin's waist, around his back and then up across the shoulders, pulling him in. Their lips met and their minds partially merged almost immediately. Colin's hands caressed Gene's back and the back of his neck as they kissed and lost themselves in it for just a moment. When they broke the kiss and their minds snapped back into themselves, Gene finally spoke.

"Love you too Colin."

"That was both incredibly cute and ridiculously hot." Serena said.

"Finally someone gets it!" Hoshi replied jubilantly while every other telepath in the room gave them both a look.

"Nein nein. She is right." Machteld agreed from the back.

"Oi!" Gerald chastised them all "Stop objectifying your siblings, it's weird and creepy!" Gene started giggling uncontrollably until a voice entered his mind.

<We need to talk to you before or after the wedding, by the way.> Sam told Gene and Colin through Machteld, and both men noted that Sueng was standing behind her.

<I need to speak with you as well. Business.> Sueng told them both

<We can do that.> Gene replied to all of the above.
In the morning, Sueng joined Colin, and Gene for coffee just after dawn. Zara had shambled into her own room when they woke up to go back to sleep. The wedding was in the afternoon, there was time for a conversation before.

"I'll cut to the chase Colin, when I leave this rock, The Hive wants to come with me." Sueng said almost as soon as she'd finished her first sip. Colin wasn't exactly surprised, neither was Gene but they were both a little bit annoyed that their honeypot was being disrupted. Still, if that was what the four teenagers wanted to do with their lives, who were Colin and Gene to say no?

"You're both good men and it was a good thought defensively, but you're not trained for offensive counterintelligence operations of this sort. If we needed someone to hunt down a spy or mole sure, but not this. You have to have more information than you have and more planning flexibility than you've got to pull off a honeypot with a larger chance of success than luck. We have others for that, we just wanted to put you on notice so you were aware of the danger in case it came knocking. Bester should have been more clear on that but he wanted to see what you'd do with it."

Colin noticed Gene give her the side-eye "He was testing us?" Gene asked but it was more of a statement. "Did we...pass?" Sueng laughed.

"With flying colors, but not with that. Bester was actually a bit displeased but I wasn't. Others weren't. " Sueng replied with a smile.

"Thank God for that." Colin said "He gives me the willies and honestly, other than our love for our people we have little in common in values, approach, or end goals. Come to think of it we don't even have that in common. He loves our people in aggregate, I... don't"

"No, you love everyone as their own unique little snowflake. We need both types; emotionally 'detached' secret squirrels like Bester, and...well to put no finer point on it, people like you and everyone else here. The Corps' beating heart and soul. God, that sounds so damned sentimental but it's true. Bester keeps us alive right now, people like you will help us win and keep people like Bester from taking power when we're done." The implication wasn't lost on Colin. Alfred Bester was the sort of person who, while devoted to the Corps, would be bad news if he gained anything resembling political power when the revolution was done. Gene caught the other half of that implication.

"Wait, Sueng... are you telling me that we're being tapped to, what? Lead our uprising against the Earth Alliance? I'm not...I'm not cut out for that." Gene said.

'No. No this can't be happening. How did this happen? I never wanted that, all I've ever wanted is a better future for telepaths...' Colin thought and he was so shocked he wasn't shielding his thoughts all that well.

"That's why. Colin, you and Marcel have been tagged for this since that little incident in '48. Why do you think Marcel got promoted so fast? You Gene, you're a surprise but a welcome one. Look, you've taken this shit pile of a colony and made it a fit place for telepaths in just over a year, mostly in the last three months, through sheer will and force of personality. You walked through hell and you're not broken inside. I've seen Psi Cops crack under that, their psyches shattered like fucking eggshells. And yet, here you are... getting married this afternoon."

"What about you?" Gene asked "I mean, not just you personally but Transport has a whole fleet and infrastructure, you have your fingers in everything."
"No." Sueng refused "Eighty years ago, Kevin Vacit built a machine that didn't know its own purpose. A machine we now know was originally meant to fight the Shadows, but in doing that he built a deeper far stronger one. The instrument of our liberation." She shook her head "Such a machine cannot -must not - be directed by itself. The fleet cannot unilaterally set policy or choose its own objectives, lest we become a junta like the one we want to free ourselves from. Granted, I'm on the list personally, we won't lead as singular figureheads but as a consensus committee."

As much as he might try to reject the logic, Colin couldn't. He wanted to, that was a burden he didn't need and he could feel that Gene felt similarly. But who was he to refuse that call when the time came? And the reality was, the fact that neither of them wanted that kind of authority meant they were good people for it. Colin looked over at the door to Zara's room and could just feel her sleeping peacefully on the other side. 'What kind of father would I be if I didn't do everything I could to make her future better?'

<Colin, it's basically what we've been doing, but bigger.> Gene sent him.

<So much bigger... But you're right. I guess we'll just have to keep calm and trust the Corps...>

<I think it's the other way around...> Gene replied.

<Yeah. Fuck.>

"We understand, Sueng." Gene answered for the both of them. "Hell of a wedding present though, let me tell you." he followed up, trying to bring in some levity.

"Mazeltov!" Sueng replied "In the interim, just keep being you."

'I'm afraid that's something of a tautology Sueng." Colin admonished her "We can't be anyone else."

"I know, isn't it grand? That said, when we do find out who's taking our people and where you're going, I want you there to lead the assault. I'll field commission you this time."

... Two hours later Gene was making breakfast. Colin set out dishes for seven and opened the door to Zara's room, letting the scent of eggs and actual bacon waft through. It cost a pretty penny, but so had the actual pork. Still first breakfast with his daughter in months, he could spring for real meat. It didn't take long before she started to stir, and someone knocked on the door a moment later. Colin answered it and saw Fatima looking back at him with the other three just behind.

"Morning!" Colin greeted them and stepped aside. "Come on in we were just getting Zara up for breakfast. You're welcome to join us." Sam poked his head around and saw the plates.

"Well seeing as you already set the dishes out..." he said, and Fatima stepped inside.

"You know I can't eat pork Colin..." she admonished him. The other times they'd had breakfast he'd never gotten the real stuff, so it had never been an issue until then. Yet, he still managed to think of that while grocery shopping.

"I know, I have halal turkey bacon as well." he replied.

"Morning!" Gene greeted them all from the kitchen as he finished the last few strips of turkey bacon and set them on a plate with eggs and fruit and english muffin.
"...You guys went all out." Albert remarked.

"Dual income, cosmic paygrade." Gene replied casually "The only reason we don't go crazier on family dinner night is because the others won't let us eat the cost differential most of the time. You guys though..."

"We don't have an income, so you... " Machteld replied, working on her english, but she paused not knowing a word which someone else helpfully supplied inside her head "spoil us."

"Exactly!" Gene answered. "But not just you. That one!" he pointed at Zara who just emerged, still wearing her witch-printed pajamas and rubbing the sleep from her eyes with her gloves.

"Morning Dads, morning Hive."

"Guten Morgan!" Machteld replied.

"You could just use our names you know..." Sam replied with affected annoyance while giving her a pleasant wave.

"Yeah, but then I can't call someone Hive, or The Hive. Not as fun." Zara rejoined "Is that actual bacon?"

"Yes it is!" Gene replied "We don't want to spoil you rotten all the time, but bear with us, it's been a while." He left the kitchen and scooped her up in a hug and kissed the top of her head.

"Dad!" she faked protesting, the warmth she projected at Gene proved that, and the fact that she enthusiastically returned the hug. Once Gene let her go she looked at the four teenagers with eyes that were far too old for her face "You made your decision, huh?"

Fatima looked at her contemplatively and nodded "We have. Colin, Gene, we're joining Transport directly. Captain Rhee offered to take us on as Midshipmen and train us on the ship. We just..." she paused, trying to figure out how to word it "We want build a future for ourselves and the rest of our people, and we never want to be in a position to be dictated to by mundanes ever again. Transport is the only place we can have that."

"Yeah, when her shuttle leaves, we'll be on it." Sam added.

"We know guys." Colin told them, and they seemed shocked by that, and that he was taking things so well.

"You...know?" Machteld asked. "And you are not upset?" a bit stuttering, but good.

"Yeah, you had that honeypot you were running..." Albert added.

"Yeah, Sueng told us this morning. Honestly she metaphorically smacked us upside the head and told us that running a honeypot offensively like that wasn't going to work. While you were in the hospital it was a good idea, but now that you're out there's no point. There are others who can pick up the scent, you're going to do a lot more good up there." Gene replied, pointing up.

"We're both actually really proud of you. I wish I could take more of the credit for how well you've all done, but it's almost all on you. And Nishita." Colin added at the end. He could sense some anxiety from them, but nothing serious, they didn't have cold feet they were just nervous about a big life-change.

"You'll do okay." Zara nodded sagely. The teenagers laughed. "What? You will! I don't know
you very well I just met you but I believe in you. Dad told me about catching that serial killer, and I know what hyperspace does. You'll do a lot of good up there. If I had to guess you'd be working under the ship's navigator Annaba Etsiddy... she's really nice."

All four teenagers looked at Zara like she'd grown a second head. "How?" Sam asked.

"I came here with Captain Rhee from Earth. I got to spend a few days on the Fenrir. The marines are all really nice too, they remind me of pitbulls actually..."

"She's right though, you'll do just fine."

Music was playing and while Gene could hear it he was so nervous he wasn't really perceiving it. Colin was just as anxious, Gene could feel it on the other side of the synagogue. It wasn't that either of them wanted to run or were having second thoughts, it just felt like a big shift in their lives and it was marked by a very explicit ritual. Gene knew that, but it wasn't the sort of thing that could be fixed by thinking your way out of it. It simply was and there was no getting around it. So instead of focusing on it, he tried to focus on something else. As he started to walk down the left-hand side everyone was standing and he couldn't see Colin or Zara through the mass of bodies, so he mused on the people at the altar. The tradition of bridesmaids and groomsmen didn't have a clear origin and it may have been convergence. Some traditions had it that groomsmen were the small army used for bride capture and the bridesmaids were personal servants who supported and helped enforce the choice of the bride. Other traditions held that they were there dressed as the bride and groom in an attempt to trick evil spirits. Two men in the Psi Corps were a bit different, there wasn't a separate family so they didn't have separate wedding parties. Everyone was on the altar dressed like they were: in full dress-blacks including the double-breasted coats.

He made his turn and came face to face with Colin, Zara had reached her position and stood between them. They both gently probed each other's minds, and kept each other out, until they reached Zara, who reached out, took both their hands in hers, then placed them together. The moment their hands touched through their gloves, they stopped blocking each other out and flooded the other's mind with the deep passionate love they both felt, it drove them both to distraction and they both had a hard time focusing on the rest of the ceremony, but they managed it.

Zara moved forward first, walking backwards and beckoning them forward, guided by seeing through their eyes so she didn't trip. When they reached the altar and Zara handed the rings to Sueng and Marcel, Rabbi Liebgott spoke.

"Please be seated." he said, and everyone sat in unison. Even the mundanes like Steve and Liz who had their newborn with them, as well as Fatima, Sam, and Machteld's parents were guided by the silent thoughts of the other telepaths. "Family and Friends, welcome to the wedding of Colin Meier and Gene Hendriks. Today is the day they marry the one they'll laugh with, cry with, live for, fight beside, and love for the rest of their lives; however long that may be. They've taken different paths in life, much of which neither are at liberty to openly discuss" the crowd laughed a little at that. "Gene was born outside of the Corps, Colin within it, but they meet in a common place; in their devotion to each other, to Zara, and to their vast extended family in the Psi Corps. I've seen the news, I've talked with a lot of you. That they're both alive and sane, raising a daughter together... it's a testament to the love and support they show for each other. Their relationship has been tested not by financial, professional, or even personal difficulties, but by walking hand-in-hand through a waking nightmare and coming out the other side." Isaac shuffled a piece of paper and glanced down at it before continuing. "What I'd like to do now is read Pablo Neruda's Love Sonnet Seventeen that I think illustrates very well how they feel about each other. That, and
because they asked me to." Gene couldn't help himself, he started to choke up while chuckling with the audience, Colin was openly if quietly weeping in a mix of happiness and sheer nervousness. Gene reached out and took Colin's hands in his, squeezing gently through their gloves

"I do not love you as if you were salt-rose, or topaz,

or the arrow of carnations the fire shoots off.

I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,

in secret, between the shadow and the soul.

I love you as the plant that never blooms

but carries in itself the light of hidden flowers;

thanks to your love a certain solid fragrance,

risen from the earth, lives darkly in my body.

I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where.

I love you straightforwardly, without complexities or pride;

So I love you because I know no other way than this:

where I does not exist, nor you,

so close that your hand on my chest is my hand,

so close that your eyes close

as I fall asleep."

"Marriage has changed over time, what used to be a legal and religious merging of family interests has morphed into something better and more meaningful. A celebration of love and a public commitment to another person, or persons for you secular types with fewer rules." Isaac said, and the audience laughed at that last part. "It is a symbol and not magic, it cannot create something that isn't there. So it is better perhaps to think of it as the formalization of a marriage-in-progress. The vows they are about to speak aren't promises they're only now making, they're a way of saying 'you know all those things we've promised and hoped and dreamed? I meant every word, every thought.' Now normally, there is a traditional order to these things, but I am lead to believe you two have a procedure that befits the egalitarian nature of your relationship?"

Colin dried his tears and pulled an old Euro coin out of his pocket. They were obsolete, but there were so many in circulation that they could still be found and used. "Call it in the air." he said and tossed the coin to determine who would speak their vows first.

"Heads" Gene said, and when Colin caught the coin and flipped it, the heads side came up. Gene
looked straight into Colin's eyes and peered into his soul, and he felt Colin's own mind inside his in return, caressing his thoughts and sending a shiver down his spine. Everyone else in the room slipped away and there was only Colin encompassing his vision and his mind, he barely registered what the Rabbi was saying, just enough to follow the ceremony.

"Zara, the rings if you please." Rabbi Liebgott said. Zara removed two small cases from her dress pockets, handing one to Marcel and the other to Rhee, who held them in easy reach of Colin and Gene respectively. "Now gentlemen, if you could speak your vows and seal them with the rings?"

Gene looked over at the rings, it was the first time he'd seen them. They were wide copper bands with silver around the outside margins. There was a rounded placement that had small inset diamonds arranged in a greek letter Psi. Gene knew immediately from somewhere in Colin's mind where they came from, they had been melted down from the badges Colin's own biological parents used to wear. He knew that Colin thought they'd approve, that this was something they would want and he wished he could know them. Barely suppressing tears, he took up the ring and slipped it over the glove on Colin's left ring finger.

"The day we talked in your office for the first time, I knew I'd met someone special. I didn't know how special until the next day. Colin, you make me happy to be alive and I know in my mind, my heart, and my very soul that no matter what happens you'll be there by my side. That I'll never be alone again, no matter what distance might separate us or what either of us might have to do or see. And I'll be there for you. Always. Until the end of my days. And when I do pass beyond the liminality, if I don't cross that threshold with you, I'll leave a piece of myself behind."

Colin slipped the ring over his own finger and spoke.

"Gene, when I was young, I thought I knew what love was and that it was something I couldn't have, but it was a shadow on the wall and I was chained to the floor of a cave. I lived in the darkness of a despair I didn't even fully realize I was in. Then I met you. You helped me free myself, then took me by the hand and brought me out of that cavern and into a world where I can live in the sun, apologizing to no one. Now the future lies before us and I promise you that no matter what obstacles block the path, there will be no more chains, no more caves. Your future will be one worth living in, and it's going to have me in it."

Gene knew that Colin knew he might not able to live up to that vow, but it would would never be for a lack of trying. The reality was, if one of them died in the attempt, they probably both would. Something else leaped into Gene's mind then, a thought that when he was writing his vows Colin didn't have, but was now.

*I can't do it for everyone. It's too big. But I can do it for you, I can do it for Zara.*

Colin had originally written those vows personally, that he'd try to create an island of decency and respect around the people he loved, but now the stakes were larger and he had to do it for the entire Psi Corps, the burden was just too big. But Colin knew he could do everything he needed to do if he just focused on making Gene and Zara's lives better. To that end, Colin pulled out another small box. This Gene had known about, he just didn't know where the metal had come from. He and Colin linked minds and spoke as consensus with Gene as the voice.

"Zara, this seals our promise to you. You are a child of the Corps, but more importantly to us, you're our daughter. We love you more than life itself and we will never abandon you or allow you to come to harm. We will always hold you in our hearts, and we'll always be for you, supporting and protecting you." Colin put the chain and locket around her neck and she openly wept. They both felt her happiness and sense of belonging, the worries of her life slipping away for just a moment in the love and affection they were both projecting toward her.
"By the power vested in me by the Earth Alliance and by the Semikhah I hold, I pronounce you wed. You may kiss your husband."

Neither of them needed to be told twice.

A there was the sound of glass shattering and then a collective shout, both audible and telepathic. "MAZELTOV!" They were in a synagogue after all.

... The reception was in the community center, and they didn't skimp on the food. Out of deference to their hosts it was mostly Kosher, and of either eastern European or middle eastern origin, but there was a pair of tables with various cheeses and cold cuts, with crackers. The cheese and meat were separate but whatever happened after things were put on a plate was between that person and God. Colin and Gene were both cheese fiends, and while they were indulging in a smoked Gruyere and trying not to think of the bill from the caterers Gerald approached them holding a small wrapped package about the size and shape of a thing book or, more likely, a canvas.

"Cheers." he started "I know material wedding gifts aren't traditional..." and they weren't. The Corps guaranteed a certain standard of living and traditional wedding gifts had their origins in things to set up a new house. They already had all that stuff and the rest was capitalism. Wedding gifts in the Corps tended to be very personal, and were often in the form of non-tangibles"But I painted this, thought you might like it."

"Thank you Gerald." Gene replied and reached out, taking the offered package. He gently unwrapped it, careful not to tear the butcher paper it was wrapped in and what he saw stunned him. It was what Gerald had perceived from inside the Gestalt. Somehow, he managed to render it visually, but at the center was what he saw of the two them. Their very souls intertwined in a wash of colors that bled into each other, locked in psionic combat with a madman out of frame. There wasn't any actual visualization of human bodies, just color, light, and shadow in abstract forms; yet they knew exactly what it was somehow. Colin looked and it was at that moment that he understood abstract art. Some things just couldn't be depicted through representation. They were emotions, feelings, concepts without description. Attack probes and defenses were shown as spikes and walls of light and dark, the only representative thing in the entire image was the greek letter Psi being held up as a defense against the void off nihilism and despair and even then it was wavy, only somewhat distinct from the background.

"Gerald this... this is amazing. I knew you painted but I didn't know you were this good." Colin told him, and both Psi Cops crushed him in a bear hug. "Thank you."

"It's a hobby" Gerald replied when he could breath again. "Been doing it since I was a teenager." he downplayed it, but he'd taken Zara to the art museum and Colin knew he published in the Corps' underground journals and art periodicals. It was more than a hobby, but Colin had never actually seen one of his originals. Gerald never let anyone into his room, and Colin wasn't going to press as to why. Maybe he just had a bunch of projects he wasn't happy with, or artistic failures he was too embarrassed to show.

"Well you're really good, I wish you could show things like this to the world Gerald." Gene smiled at him a bit sadly. No telepath artist, no matter how good, could actually sell or distribute their art to a general audience. He'd never sell prints, all he could do was publish down-scale copies in an internal journal, and submit some works to the Education department and Admin for inclusion as motivational posters.

"Maybe someday..." Gerald replied, openly thinking about the coming of the revolution and hoping
he'd live to see its end. He kept one thing hidden though and neither of the other two men pushed.

"Yeah." Gene agreed. <Gerald, brother... if we have to die to make that happen for you, we'll do it gladly.>

<I know Gene>

**Wednesday April 15th, 2263**

For the second time, Colin found himself at the spaceport to say goodbye. This time though it wasn't a sad or bittersweet occasion. This time he was watching friends and students make their first truly independent step toward their own futures, and they weren't the only ones. Oscar had evidently been busy on Sunday after he vanished because he had a group of a dozen people leaving with him. Colin looked over the group and while he knew all of them, one stood out in a big way, literally given her height. Astrid. Albert noticed her too and his jaw dropped.

"No way, you too!" he asked, running over to her and throwing his arms around her in a bear hug.

"Why hello there!" Astrid exclaimed hugging him right back "It is good to see you again little brother. Looks like we are to be ship-mates!" Her Swedish accent was nice a thick, as was an English diction that didn't believe in contractions.

"Yeah. This is awesome!" Machteld, Sam and Fatima joined in the hug. Colin gave them space to celebrate on their own and walked up to Oscar while Gene talked to Sueng.

"You've been busy. I was wondering where you'd gotten off to the past few days, barring the wedding and reception." Colin said.

"Well, I don't get that many opportunities to recruit, and I take what I can get." Oscar shrugged. "They won't all go into the marines. Astrid there will make an excellent spy, she does that already. What's up with that welcoming party anyway?"

"Oh she's the one who found Albert initially. He let slip enough information when she fought him that we were able to find him and the rest." Colin replied.

"Ah" Oscar nodded. He was about to say something else when he was interrupted by everyone's comm units blaring out an alarm klaxon. Everyone pulled them out reflexively and Colin stared at the alert in horror. Blue, broadcast Corps-wide. An active terrorism alert across the entire Earth Alliance. 'Thank God Zara is at school.' he thought, then thought better of it. Something on this scale would take time to plan, The ship was also a good target. He was frozen for a three-count as his mind got up to speed, then Colin's mind snapped into sharp focus and he knew what he needed to do.

"Oscar, has the ship been secure continuously since landing?" It had a big psi-shaped target painted on it, he needed to be sure.

"Yes, security detail of six marines on twelve hour watches since we landed." Oscar replied.

"Good. Get your recruits into hyperspace as soon as you can prep the engines. Fuck traffic control protocols, emergency takeoff, we don't know if when or where we're going to be hit. Go!"

<What about you?> Oscar asked, already running toward the entry umbilical to the shuttle. Shouting with his voice for everyone to get aboard. Sueng repeated the order like the voice of
God, and the fear-struck recruits followed. The only ones who showed any hesitation were Astrid and The Hive.

<GO!> Colin shouted with his mind <We have to get to work and so do you. Get on the ship!>

They did, as fast as their legs could carry them.

"Babe!" Gene shouted, running at a dead spring to join Colin's own fast-jog to the ground-car. He was going out of his mind, Colin felt it; so many attacks had been against schools that he was terrified for Zara, but the school was in the open. It would be very difficult to approach it by stealth and too new for a tunnel to have been excavated to approach it that way. The annex however was a prime target. Small, in an urban environment, and the symbolic heart of the Psi Corps on Omega VII.

"No!" Colin replied "We have to get home, it's the only viable target!" They reached the ground-car and got into the trunk, pulled their rifles out and strapped on flak jackets. They felt the ignition of the shuttle's engines in their bones and it taxied to the takeoff zone on maneuvering thrusters. Moments later in what seemed to Colin like a blur of lost time, they were speeding dangerously through city streets with their car under manual control, long-disused lights and sirens on at full blast. Colin was used to piloting much faster craft that were far less forgiving of errors and zipped between recalcitrant illegally-still-driving vehicles like he was dodging pulsegun fire from a capital ship. Gene wasn't idle. He was navigating, helping Colin avoid collisions by providing him with extra-sensory awareness of his surroundings.

It should have been a much longer trip, but between his speed and taking dodgy shortcuts it only took fifteen agonizing minutes. In that time there hadn't been any transmissions from the Annex, and there should have been. He should have heard Gerald's voice over the car's comms, telling him they were under attack or giving him a safety signal, and that silence terrified him. Colin was more scared than he'd ever been in his entire life and he'd fought echinoderms from hell in the inky blackness of deep space. He was getting the check-ins from everywhere else, both the Cadre school and the Academy, civilian housing, administration. Everyone was secure with nothing on their threat surface. But the annex, his home, was dead-silent. Was Marcel okay? He'd taken a week of leave for the first time in a decade, was he going to get killed while he wasn't even on the clock? What about the others? If something happened to Max or Erika, Hassan or Hoshi, Su or Gerald, Franklin, Eduardo...Colin didn't know what he would do.

As his car approached the last turn Colin's worst fears were realized. Mundanes were in panicked flight down Fourteenth street, away from the Annex and blocking his path. He stopped the car and got out at the same time Gene did, both guns slung across Gene's chest. He heard the screaming and the sounds of gunfire, both plasma and slug-throwers. Gene passed him a rifle across the hood of the car and Colin grabbed it, then he borrowed a mundane; seizing control of a man's nervous system just enough to make him glance back and see. Colin looked through his eyes and saw the front door of the Annex blasted in, smoke rose from the flaming wreckage of a groundcar that was stopped cold by a crash barrier ten meters from the door. The first floor wall surrounding the door was gone. That's where Gerald kept his office space, and where the short-range transmitter was. There wasn't a single window left intact. The room overlooking the door that Marcel and Emilia were sleeping in had it's balcony ripped off and the glass doors were shattered inward.

'No.'

<Colin, sweetheart, they're still fighting we have to help.> Gene said gently, snapping him out of his horror and grief, putting the steel back in his spine. He took a deep breath and secured the german-made assault rifle against his shoulder, finger near the safety but keeping the switch flipped to on. Gene did the same.
<Let's go.>

The tide of mundanes evacuating the area was starting to slacken as more made their way away from the battle raging behind them. When the two Psi Cops hit the corner they pressed themselves against it, poking their heads out looking for a good avenue of approach. That's when Marcel made contact with their minds to deliver a status report. Colin could tell he was hurt, but Marcel concealed how badly.

<We count ten hostiles. Four are holed up in the general store at the intersection of Fourteenth Street and Eighth Avenue, another two look like snipers and they're on the fifth floor of the hotel on Eighth.> Marcel glyphed him the exact window. <The other four are sappers. They have explosives and they're just waiting for us to concentrate so they can get an approach on the walls, snipers are covering them so we can't sortie to take them out. We're spread out trying to cover everything. I got torn up by flying glass, Emilia is out-cold but I think she'll be okay. Hassan and Franklin are hurt, Hoshi is critically wounded but Alexia has her stable for now... Gerald was in his office when the car blew, we don't know... no one had line of sight on him.> Colin tried desperately not to think about what that could mean. He could still be alive and buried under rubble, he just had to hope that was true.

<They probably weren't counting on a dozen Bloodhounds.> Gene replied, and Colin could sense he was trying to distract both himself and Colin from the litany of terrible possibilities.<br>

<Probably not, no. I don't think they know you're at-large either, But they're well-equipped and someone trained them for this.> Marcel confirmed.<br>

<We'll take care of the lower firing position first, then the snipers. You guys can sortie for the sappers.> Gene said<br>

<Okay. Try to take prisoners.>

<Always.> Colin agreed. Putting in the ear plugs to protect his hearing.

They were on Fourteenth Street and would have to get to the intersection first, preferably without being seen and coming under fire. So Colin and Gene crept forwarding in a low crouch, using as much cover and concealment from buildings and parked vehicles as they could. There was shattered glass everywhere from the explosion so ducking into and out of buildings was relatively easy. As they got closer, there were also dead and wounded mundanes scattered around the street and sidewalk, dead from overpressure and shrapnel from an exploding car that was full of ball-bearings. Colin realized that had it not been for the crash barriers, basically steel and concrete pylons that marked the boundaries of the Annex's small grounds, everyone inside would be dead. They would sent the car through the door before detonation. The rogues weren't counting on those pylons being as sturdy as they were.

The flashes and percussion of slug-thrower fire was coming from the Annex, while PPGs answered back from the general store, from the looks of it from PPG carbines instead of sidearms, letting loose torrents of Helium plasma instead of the pistol's semi-automatic fire. Colin entered the general store first via the simple expedient of stepping through the door. He checked his corners and they were clear, Gene followed by just behind. They felt the surprise of those inside who were trying to redeploy to cover their own rear, That required moving from protected positions and someone in the Annex was able to take one of them out. Not with a gun, but with their minds. Colin felt the mental assault pin the man in place as he desperately tried to defend himself, leaving three others to come after them. Gene shot one in the center of her chest, killing her instantly;
Colin didn't let himself think, he acted on reflex bringing his gun up flipping the safety and opened fire. He caught one with a three-round burst to center mass and dropped him. They both heard the pair of mind-screams and that familiar open-shut sensation as they died. The third tried to stay out of line-of-sight, but it wasn't going to do her any good. Colin felt a powerful mind reach out, questing for them, trying to get a fix on their position to fire through the shelves.

Gene found her first, grabbing hold of her mind and squeezing like a vice. She fought back, lashing out viciously with her mind, but she wasn't strong enough to stand a chance against a Psi Cop. When her defenses finally cracked, Gene poured himself into her brain, putting her into a coma. The other one shattered a moment later under assault from whichever Bloodhound had him in sight and was similarly rendered harmless, thudding to the floor of the small establishment like a sack of rice.

The momentary safety gave Colin the time he needed to take stock. The little shop was a broken mess, the windows had been blown in by an explosion and so had all the freezer cases, a lot of the goods were riddled with bullets or had exploded from PPG hits. He couldn't help himself, he looked across the street the gaping hole in the Annex, his home, to the place where he knew Gerald was, maybe dead, maybe alive and hurt, he couldn't tell. He was too far away to sense without line of sight and Gerald was probably buried under debris. Adrenaline had his heart in his throat, but that didn't escape an agonized sob from escaping his lips.

Gene was better at compartmentalization than he was, and was still cool and rational. He felt Gene's arms around him despite the fact that they weren't touching.

<Come on, snipers. We can leave the sappers to the Bloodhounds, but they can't do much without those snipers on over-watch.>

<Right...> Colin agreed, and did what he could to set his anxiety and grief aside.

Both of them crossed the street and traveled down Eighth. They crabbed flat against buildings to keep out of sight of the snipers who had a limited field of fire from their window, and entered the building. They used the stairs rather than the elevator, and got up to the fifth floor. Getting to the snipers was easier than they expected, they didn't have anyone guarding their rear. It only took a few seconds to break the lock but to Colin it felt like hours waiting for the LED to go from red to green.

'Eliminate the threat. Worry about Gerald and the others later. Eliminate the threat.' Was all he could think as he impatiently tapped his foot. He felt Gene cast his mind through the door, trying to sense what was on the other side.

<They're both pretty strong...> Gene told him and they both shored up their own blocks.

The LED changed and Colin heard the door unlock, they shoved the door open taking cover behind the wall on either side, crouched low to expose as little of themselves as possible. Balls of superheated plasma flew through the open door and impacted on the far wall, vaporizing the paint and drywall revealing the concrete beneath. Gene looked at Colin and he knew what his husband was thinking. It would be unspeakably dangerous to poke their heads around to get proper line of sight. Without even having to try, without having to think about the same thing or make physical contact, their minds met, melding themselves together. Their anguish at having their home invaded and their family attacked, their righteous anger, their worry for Gerald and the others; they combined and then amplified into a psionic juggernaut, their senses reached through the wall and found the minds of the two rogue telepaths on the other side.

The two rogues couldn't help but notice what the Psi Cops had done, and reached out before Colin
and Gene could stop them, grabbing each other's naked hands and gestalting their own minds together in a desperate attempt to protect themselves against the onslaught they knew was coming. Their defenses coalesced around their conjoined minds before the Psi Cops could simply overwhelm them. Colin's consciousness directed the attack and Gene their shared-defenses, and Colin wasn't in a mood for finesse or to play around. He attacked with pure righteous anger. These two people, one man and one woman he felt, had attacked his home, tried to murder his closest family members and probably had killed at least one. It didn't matter that they were telepaths, if anything that made it worse. He struck out with that anger and it hit a powerful barrier, but not a very sophisticated one. These two were never in the Corps, they hadn't been trained by it, they'd been propagandized their entire lives by mundane society to fear the Psi Corps so it was only natural for them to join the rogue telepath underground and attempt to 'liberate' their people from their own family and culture.

Gene understood that too, and their combined anger fell away after the initial attack. They'd been mislead, it wasn't their fault. Even if their actions demanded some sort of punishment or rehabilitation, both men could reject what they'd done and not reject them.

The rogues lashed out with their minds, desperate to defend themselves against what they thought, admittedly with good reason, were two Psi Cops come to annihilate them; but Gene deflected it away with that same conception of himself and Colin as protectors. It was as if he took their attack and held it like he would have a frightened child.

<We don't want to hurt you.> Gene told them <You've attacked our home, you've hurt or killed our families, but we still don't want to. Don't make us, please.>

Colin went on the offensive, but not to break them. He bombarded them with memories; glyphing family dinners at them, his and Gene's wedding, insult broadsides with Gerald, everyone in the Annex banding together to help Zara and twenty other children, getting the fantastic news that there was no longer a single child on Sleepers on the entire planet. All of it, asking them the implicit question: why, what did we do to you that you would take this from us?

He got an answer. The woman's brother killed himself on Sleepers, and the young man blamed the Psi Corps for the death of the dream of a telepath homeland outside the Earth Alliance. They didn't believe him that the people inside the Annex were innocent of that; as far as they were concerned no one who wore the gloves could ever be innocent except maybe children. Both of them shook off his pleas and attacked again, bringing the full force of their minds against Gene's defensive construct. Normally Colin would just try to out-last them, but the Bloodhounds might need his help, and they certainly needed to know the snipers were neutralized.

<I'm sorry.> he told them both, and then attacked with brutal efficiency. He probed their defenses for weaknesses with a rapid sequence of probes, faster than their barely-trained minds could adapt and change tacks to cover them. He found one, Instead of attacking with harnessed emotions he used an attack-probe forged out of higher mathematics borrowed from Gene; it was the concept that the acceleration of a ball changes as a function of air-resistance, which is a function of velocity and thus changed as a function of time as the ball falls. They weren't expecting differential equations and while they could have blocked out the probe by hardening their will to resist against it as a default, it was such a change in approach from emotional constructs that they didn't think to do it in time. Colin was in, but instead of ravaging their minds or hurting them, he just turned off the lights, sending them into a comatose state. They both fell to the floor like puppets that just had their strings cut.

Immediately after it was done, they sent a message to Marcel booming through the void between minds that the snipers were neutralized. A moment later, Bloodhounds came pouring out of the
Annex and began systematically scouring every nook and cranny for the remaining four rogue telepaths and hauling in the two survivors from the general store.

Neither Psi Cop wasted any time, they picked up the two rogues in a pair of fireman's carries and descended, using the elevator this time because neither wanted to haul them down five flights of stairs. The sirens of emergency services were on approach by the time they got down, and with one last chattering burst of gunfire, it was over. The attack had been repulsed. They carried their pair down into the basement cells and locked them inside, separately and blind-folded, then went back upstairs at a trot. Colin *had* to find Gerald. Hoping beyond hope he was alive and trapped in rubble. Marcel met them at the top of the stairs back up to the first floor and he wasn't kidding about being torn up by glass. He still had a piece sticking out of the arm he'd used to shield his face and throat.

<Emilia?> Colin asked, already focusing his mind for a search and rescue scan.

<Concussion from a piece of the balcony hitting her in the head.> Marcel replied. <She'll be okay.>

<Hoshi?> Gene asked <Hassan and Franklin?>

<Hoshi was hit by ball-bearings, her legs are... Hassan and Franklin have over-pressure injuries, they'll recover with medical attention.> Marcel was also bleeding out of his ears. His eardrums had ruptured. He couldn't actually hear them if they were to speak verbally.

Colin got to the gaping hole that used to be Gerald's office and scanned through it, hoping against hope that he was fine and trapped under debris, only being a P4 he couldn't reach out for help unaided so there was a chance. But there was noth...wait, there was something there. It was faint, very faint, but Gerald was alive! Spurned on by real hope, Colin tore at the debris in desperation, Gene and Marcel helped and after what seemed like an eternity they found the source. It was Gerald's body, broken and riddled with holes from ball-bearings that had punched through the wall. The presence was still there, just a death-trace, nothing more than the remnants of his soul or mind scattered across the place where he took his final breaths under that pile of rubble; terrified, alone, gasping for breath as blood filled his lungs.

Gene knelt down next to him and helped Colin uncover Gerald's body so he could be laid out decently, Colin didn't care if he covered himself in blood pulling the body out, he felt too numb, operating on autopilot; he didn't even register that both himself and Gene were weeping as they worked. After a moment, they weren't alone, and every telepath who could stand who wasn't guarding prisoners or tending wounded formed a line to lift and carry rubble out until the space immediately around Gerald was clear. Geralds face was frozen in his final expression of surprise and pain, he didn't die instantly but he didn't really have time to know what happened to him before he died. His world just exploded and he wasn't able to piece together that he was murdered by his own people before he was gone.

"I'm sorry Gerald, you mangy cockwomble." Colin told him. "I should have seen this coming, I should have done a better job fortifying our home, I should have... should've..." He pulled Gerald's corpse into his arms and held him there, drenching his uniform in blood and not caring as he burst into uncontrollable tears and sorrow. Gene was weeping, but still had enough control to put his arms around his husband.

<This isn't your fault. There was no specific intelligence, nothing. We knew we were a target but... not like this.> Colin felt another thought too, something Gene didn't broadcast. Nothing as large as Corps-wide attack could be coordinated without signals going back and forth, someone should have known. Someone in Earth Alliance Intelligence. Maybe they did warn the Corps but it
was too late for the information to get to all of Metapol and Security division. Gene didn't think that likely, the terror alert would have been triggered Corps-Wide with as little as ten minutes notice. <We still need to look after everyone else. Come on.> Gene finished, and Colin knew Gene was maintaining control almost entirely for Colin's benefit and for everyone else present. Gene was holding his own grief in abeyance. A wave of love and support washed over Colin's mind from his husband, and his brother. Max, Erika, Eduardo, and Su all cried inconsolably, while Bloodhounds tried their best to comfort them. Colin knew he had to pull himself together for their sake, so he gathered up that need and desire to do what was right everyone else, and shielded his mind against his own grief, sadness, and anger, and like he was throwing off intrusion into his mind, he hedged them out of his consciousness.

<Gene is right Colin. We're not secure here and EMS is on the way. We need to get the wounded, myself included, ready for triage and transport.>

Colin dried his tears and put on a stoic face. He set Gerald down, closed his eyes, and re-folded his arms across his chest. He couldn't tell who did it, it was all he could do to keep himself together, but someone passed him a black sheet and he draped it over Gerald's body.

<Okay.> Colin replied, collecting himself.

... The atrium was a complete wreck and there was a line of absolute destruction from Gerald's office door across the atrium through the door of the common lounge. The first blast weakened the external wall and the second had sprayed ball-bearings through like a giant shotgun blast. They tore up the plants on the way and then completely destroyed the leg-rest of the recliner Hoshi had been sitting in watching a documentary; and took her legs with it at the knees. All the severely wounded had been collected there and were being tended by Alexia who was their combat medic. Tourniquets were tightened high on both Hoshi's thighs and she was mercifully unconscious, occupying the only actual stretcher they had. Hassan and Franklin were unconscious and bleeding from the ears. All three of them had oxygen masks on to compensate for the lung-damage caused by blast-overpressure, and were laid out on makeshift stretchers made from broom and mop handles and folded sheets. Emilia was just starting to wake up from her position sprawled out on the couch.

"What happened?" She asked. "I heard the alert sound and then... Oh God. We were attacked, weren't we?" she gasped. "Is everyone?" Marcel crossed the distance and sat down next to her.

<No.> He told he, p'hearing rather than hearing her. <Gerald is dead, we have wounded. Rogues in custody. We don't know for sure, but we think they hit us across the entire Earth Alliance, like the fucking Tet Offensive.>

<Jesus, Marcel you're hurt, you still have glass in you!>

<I know, but I'm more worried about your head injury.> He took out a pen light and checked her eyes, scowling. The sirens were close and the Bloodhounds started moving the wounded out so that EMS could get to them more easily. Colin and Gene were the ones who picked up Hoshi, whose skin was pale from blood loss and her breathing was shallow. They had to step through the rubble of the front door to get out. A crowd was starting to gather, gawking at the damage and the surviving telepaths. Some with sympathy, some with anger, some with anger at them for bringing this destruction on their colony, and others quietly thinking they deserve it. Gene could hardly stand it. What the hell had they done but simply exist and try to build a life? He glared across the street toward the crowd like he could reach out and kill them. He could, though not all at once, and he was sorely tempted. He didn't do that though. Instead, he put himself between Alexia and Colin
who were going around to the injured mundanes. They checked each one and pinned colored tags on them. There were a few dozen, some in cars, some on foot. Green was for minor injuries, yellow was for major injuries that weren't immediately life-threatening, red was for critical but savable, black was for those on death’s door. Hoshi was red-tagged, Hassan and Franklin were both yellow, Emilia and Marcel were green. Most of the mundanes though were black-tagged. The ball-bearings were meant to riddle the inside of the Annex with death, with the building containing the blast. Instead, the bombs went off in the open and it was like hitting every pedestrian and nearby driver with a barrage of canister shot. The walking-wounded were assembled on a section of sidewalk just outside the annex, including Marcel and Emilia who were ordered not to move. Anyone who couldn't walk was left where they were.

Su, Max, Erika, and Eduardo passed out medical kits and the six bloodhounds who were uninjured, not guarding prisoners or wounded themselves split into three groups. Two of them stepped up next to Gene to provide overwatch and crowd control if necessary. The other two took their own kits and got to work. Two with Colin, two with Alexia. They started trying to stabilize the red-cards. Colin had never done this before, not with living people. He knew how academically but had no hands-on practice with the living.

Colin used a clean scalpel blade and cut into the woman's flesh, then inserted a sterile tube into the opening. He ran the tube into a flask filled with some sort of blue liquid that stopped air from traveling back up the tube, and blood started to drain out of the woman's chest into the flask. Almost immediately she was able to take a deep shuddering breath. She could still bleed to death, but that would happen long after she suffocated.

Even as they worked, another mundane shuffled loose from the mortal coil and every telepath cringed at the open-shut sensation of their soul passing beyond the liminality.

The pain and suffering of the mundanes was starting to wear on Gene's blocks and leak through. All the bloodhounds were feeling the strain too. After everyone was tagged, Colin and Alexia started using telepathy to block out pain perception for every mundane in sight. The pressure on his blocks slackened and Gene was able to, if not relax, refrain from giving himself a migraine. Gene's heart ached. Gerald had been his friend, his brother. Hoshi was his crazy-nerdy little sister and she might not make it if the blood loss was any indication. And yet, he couldn't let himself mourn, or cry, or shred the minds of those fucking mundanes who thought Gerald deserved to die because he wore the gloves. Colin needed him, Zara needed him, everyone did. They needed him as an implacable rock to help stabilize them, so instead of merely being there physically, he reached out with his mind and touched every other. Su and Erika were already on the brink of breaking and touched every other. Su and Erika were already on the brink of breaking and touched every other. Su and Erika were already on the brink of breaking and touched every other. Su and Erika were already on the brink of breaking and touched every other. Su and Erika were already on the brink of breaking and touched every other. Su and Erika were already on the brink of breaking and touched every other. Su and Erika were already on the brink of breaking and touched every other. Su and Erika were already on the brink of breaking and touched every other. Su and Erika were already on the brink of breaking and touched every other. Su and Erika were already on the brink of breaking and touched every other.

When the ambulances arrived, the crowd parted to let them through. It was slow going thanks to crowd dynamics, but they made it.

'Ambulances plural, thank God.' Gene thought to himself. The EMTs were from both major
hospitals and they got work inspecting each tag. They passed over the black-tags and started
taking the red-tags, including Hoshi. There were only five vehicles with more audibly on the way
to take the yellows.

"Hey!" One of the mundanes in the crowd shouted, stocky white guy with an accent that made
Gene think of New York or possibly New Jersey "What are you just leaving those people there
for!? Why are you taking her when there are people still alive?" He was referring to Hoshi and
pointed at some of the black-tags who were still breathing. One of them just died though even as
the man pointed and Gene cringed with Colin. Open-Shut.

"Sir" the EMT explained as Hoshi was loaded up "It's protocol, we can save her, we can't save
anyone with black-tags"

"It was the damn mind-fuckers who put the tags on! You gonna let them be a fucking death-
panel? What about them!?!" he pointed at the yellow-tagged mundanes who for the most part
couldn't walk to the assembly area where Franklin and Hassan were on litters.

"They're stable, they can make it out with the next group." That wasn't good enough for the new
yorker, and the crowd was getting more agitated. Even the ones who'd been sympathetic before
were starting to turn because that's simply how crowds of people worked.

"Nuh uh. We're not letting you out until you take more of them." he said. The EMT did his best to
be professional but he was starting to lose his nerve looking at a crowd of angry people, some of
whom were starting to pick up debris. They didn't consider telepaths to be people, not as a group.
Not when they were riled up and angry. Something in Gene snapped. No. It wasn't him, it was
Colin.

'Why did we even bother to stabilize them? Should have just let them degrade to black-cards if
we're going to get mobbed like we'd executed them ourselves. The idiots are going to kill their own
and blame us for it. Fuck. These. People.'

"Bloodhounds!" Colin shouted "Stand to!" All six bloodhounds stopped what they were doing and
made their way at a trot stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Gene and the two who were already
with him. Su, Erika, Max, and Eduardo joined them on the line. Gene followed Colin's lead and
momentarily gestalted with him. Colin was in a cold fury, so angry he was perfectly rational, it
was something Gene had never seen before and it almost frightened him.

"Bloodhounds, prepare for crowd control!" his own voice boomed both physically and mentally
over the throng, through their ears and in their minds.

"You are impeding emergency response and violating public order! You have ten seconds to
disperse, or we will make you disperse!" Colin shouted out, again, with his voice and telepathically
to the entire crowd, momentarily forming a gestalt with Gene to make it work with a crowd that
large simultaneously. That the two Psi Cops could speak into that many minds at once, seemingly
as individuals, gave many of them pause and they started to falter. Many near the back started to
leave. Gene started counting down.

"Ten...Nine...Eight...Seven...Six...Five..." the fear of exactly what making them disperse meant was
starting to mount "Four...Three...Two...One..."
ranks broke and bolted first, minimizing the risk of trampling. The panic behind them caused the ones in the front to turn tail and run without the telepaths having to touch them.

Colin strode up to the first agitator and the lead paramedic. "It's clear. Go." The paramedic looked at Colin like he was cornered by a pissed off mother tiger, but the first agitator hadn't been touched; he went from angry to terrified and his panic response went toward fight. He tried to punch Colin in the face but his fist never connected. Instead he froze in place. Gene felt Colin tighten down on his motor cortex like a vice. Colin spoke directly into his mind.

<My home's been attacked. My family is dead and wounded. Count yourself lucky I don't kill you where you stand.> Then Colin threw him; or rather didn't throw him, but made him throw himself. His muscles jerked and the man who's name was apparently Phil launched himself out of the ambulance's way, hitting the rough glass-covered pavement like he'd been tossed out of a slow-moving car without rolling. Colin turned to the lead EMT. "Go John. They might come back."

"Uh. Yeah. Thanks...." John replied and got into the back of the vehicle as fast as humanely possible as much to get away from Colin as to do his job, shutting the double doors behind him. A few seconds later, the ambulances left just in time for the second group of emergency vehicles to arrive. Colin walked up to Phil's supine groaning form and pinned a green tag to his shirt.

The prisoners were comatose and guarded, they'd keep for a while; so once again, Colin found himself at Omega Mercy with it's terrible institutional culture and level one trauma facility staring down Mr. Patel. He'd changed into something less blood-soaked but his rage hadn't abated and he knew Gene was disturbed by it, but there was nothing he could do. He wanted to collapse into tears, he wanted to fall to the ground and start screaming, but he couldn't. Him and Gene weren't alone. There were mundanes, and the survivors of the attack were right behind them and counting on both of them to know what to do and help get them through the nightmare they were now living in. So instead of collapsing, instead of merely suppressing his grief, Colin harnessed it and made himself angry. So angry it cycled around into a cold and rational fury that crowded out all other emotions. Gene was simply more emotionally resilient to this kind of pain than Colin was and could suspend his emotions more easily, but he also broke more spectacularly when he did finally release them. Colin knew he'd finally scream and cry, Gene would be there to pick up the pieces, then their roles would reverse. Until then though, Colin was contemplating the notion of simply hating Mr. Patel to death as the insufferable prick slow-walked updating him on Hoshi's medical status.

ISN-Local was playing on a vid-screen in the reception and waiting room of the Emergency Department, showing footage of the smoking wreck of his home and talking about how the Metapol couldn't be reached for comment in sinister tones like the Corps was hiding something, deserved it, like the people who would normally field such requests weren't dead or waiting to see if their little sister was going to survive traumatic amputation and blood loss.

"Sorry this is taking so long." Mr. Patel said "It doesn't look like the servers have updated her location and status yet." He was lying. Without preamble of any kind, Colin killed the ISN feed, and the vid-screen in a shower of sparks and ozone. The low-level adminbody noticed and slowly turned his head toward Colin, and behind him Gene, Eduardo, Su, Max, and Erika, who were all staring daggers at him as if to say 'That could be you.' Colin saw his own mask of fury through Mr. Patel's eyes, and felt his suddenly-realized terror.

"I'm not dealing with your petty bullshit." Mr. Patel gulped, and started typing in queries.

"She's on-sides, out of the primary trauma bay, unconscious still, but stable. She has to wait her
"Turn for a bed to open up." by which he meant that the mundanes were prioritized over her now that she was going to live.

"Misters Okumba and Hussein?" Colin growled.

"Non-critical, waiting on an open bed, but they're being given tissue regenerators to repair their lungs. Please don't kill me..."

"I won't." Colin assured him and considered adding 'now' to the end but decided against it.

<Come on Colin, there's nothing more we can do here.> Gene said. <Marcel and Emilia will be fine, he just messaged me, they were taken to Alliance Arms.>

<He's right Colin, nothing to do but wait, and they won't let anyone into the trauma bays> Erika added.

Colin knew what he had to do, he just couldn't do it. He'd updated the Fenrir on their status and she stood ready to interdict any ship carrying telepaths, he needed to call Zara. But he couldn't face her. How could he promise to keep her safe when he couldn't protect their home, or Hoshi, Gerald. His own brother.

<Sweetheart, she's not gonna care about that. She's probably going out of her mind right now.> Gene was right, but calling wasn't sufficient.

"Alright. There's nothing we can do here. The Annex isn't... it isn't safe. Do you all have a place to stay?" Colin asked, turning around to address the others.

"No, but we can take care of that. Go. Hug your daughter, get some rest. Don't worry about us." Erika replied, speaking for the others as much as herself. Max nodded in agreement.

"And tomorrow, hunt down the rest of the people responsible." Su commanded.

"That's gonna happen pretty definitely." Gene agreed.

...

Colin was in no emotional position to drive, Gene was afraid he might kill someone if they cut him off in traffic, and Colin knew that too so he sat in the back. Gene got in beside him.

"Autonomous driving mode, Activate." Gene told the vehicle.

"Specify Destination." It asked in that familiar neutrally feminine voice.

"Cadre School."

"Affirmative." The computer replied and the ignition started automatically. Radar, Lidar, GPS, and visible light cameras fed into the powerful computer at the heart of the vehicle and it got itself into gear and started making the half-hour-long trip to Zara's school. Colin was still staring daggers into the middle distance and Gene figured that it was about time. Everyone else was safe, no one needed them as emotional anchors to keep themselves functional through each other's grief. He stretched an arm around Colin's shoulders and pulled him to his chest, wrapping the other arm around his husband. He didn't need to project anything, the physical affection was enough encouragement for Colin's body and his mind to relax and let it out. The dam in Colin's mind burst; thoughts, memories flooded into Gene's own consciousness, and he let them in as Colin sobbed uncontrollably.
The first time Colin met his support staff, almost everyone had been apprehensive about the sort of Psi Cop they'd be working with, worrying about whether they'd be getting one of the brutal ones, or the one's so broken inside they were shut down emotionally. Gerald wasn't. Colin had walked in the door and Gerald walked up and embraced him. There were other memories, a year of them, before Colin's mind pulled up the ones Gene knew about or remembered directly. The affectionate insult exchanges, Gerald entertaining and comforting children, becoming one of Zara's uncles, showing up in full battle gear even though a hostile telepath could crush him like an grape; giving them their wedding gift. Colin's sense of emptiness that Gerald wasn't going to be there anymore, would never paint anything, would never be there to call him a mingy cunt caused Gene's own walls to shatter and he broke down into his own body-shaking grief.

<He died alone. Alone, scared, confused, and drowning in his own blood. I felt it Gene, in the Death Trace. He shouldn't have died like that.> For mundanes, dying alone was normal, because they were alone, isolated inside their own minds. For a telepath to die that way was terrible. Reaching out for help, comfort, anything with their minds and receiving only silence in return except the background chittering, possibly for the first time in their entire lives. It was awful. Even the ones they'd killed that morning didn't die so isolated. The thought that it might happen to him made Gene shudder. It didn't take either of them long to simply lose consciousness, crying themselves to sleep in physical and emotional exhaustion.

They were woken up by a polite knock on the window. Gene kissed Colin on the top of the head and rolled the window down to see one of the Security division telepaths visibly relax upon seeing him.

"Hi Wallace. Any rumors of our death have been overblown." Gene said, trying to keep something like good cheer. It didn't work.

"I'm sorry blokes..." the bespectacled Scottish man replied in apology for their losing people and temporarily becoming homeless. "But I'm sure Zara will be happy to see you, and we have the guest cabin open and ready for you. We uh, detected the car and went into lock-down, I'll go ahead and give the all-clear."

"Thanks. Really." Colin mumbled and disentangled himself from Gene just enough to let Gene get out and followed. They were just outside the wrought iron gate of the walled compound that was the Cadre School. Built of reinforced concrete with a facade of brick masonry, the wall was about four meters tall and a half meter thick, and Colin knew from the design plans that there were automated gun emplacements built into the walls, ready to pop out from concealed bays. There was also a crash-barrier in front of the gate, no vehicles could be admitted at all. Wallace buzzed them in and the gate opened, letting them in, then closed behind them. The prefabs were nice, but still prefabs, arranged in four triplets and currently well under-capacity, with room to grow inside the compound. There was also a central administration building, a playground, indoor recreation facility, a greenhouse, and a guest cabin in the form of an approximately thirty square meter tiny house with a loft bedroom. Solar panels covered every flat rooftop surface, feeding batteries in the event of loss of grid-power.

Both Psi Cops made their way across the artificial-grass lawn to Zara's house, and Colin knocked on the door. It opened almost immediately to reveal a middle-aged black woman who looked like she'd be very kind under better circumstances but today looked stressed and haggard.

"Thank God." Janice said and hugged them both. "Zara has been out of her mind I'll go g-" she was cut off by Zara's voice.

"DAD!" she bolted from one of the interior rooms across the front living-room. Colin and Gene
intercepted her, catching her between them in a Zara-sandwich hug. She was crying tears of happiness "You're alive! Is every..." she was going to ask the question but Colin couldn't or wouldn't keep the answer shielded and she knew. "No... no no no..." Zara burst into tears; her own sadness, her memories, and the sense of emptiness that accompanied them bounced between both her parents and brought their own grief back into their minds afresh.

Thursday April 16th, 2263

Colin stood at the door to the first cell in the block with a lunchbox in his hand, staring at the cell door. The mind inside the cell wasn't comatose anymore, the Bloodhounds had been waking them up to meet their biological needs on a rotating basis and this one was in up-time. One of the sappers, he couldn't be more powerful than P6, and Colin knew he could crack the guy like an egg if he wanted, and some part of him wanted to. It was chomping at the bit for retribution for what Raymond Lewis had helped do to his family and home, but he fought it back. Doing that would be wrong by any standard, and in the Corps, there was always forgiveness. Even if he couldn't do it himself, the Corps would. He opened the door, revealing a white guy skinny enough he could almost be considered gaunt, with red hair and blue eyes.

<You okay doing this alone?> Gene asked, he was helping the Bloodhounds clean up all the broken glass on the second floor.

<Yeah. I've got this.> Colin replied. At least Marcel and Emilia were recovered. Some tissue regeneration therapy, and they were back to fighting trim and ready to kick ass as soon as they had a target.

Raymond looked at him in absolute terror. The Bloodhounds were scary enough but a Psi Cop was something else, he lashed out with his mind and Colin simply hardened his habitual defenses against the clumsy attack probe. "Sit down please. I'm not going to hurt you." Raymond didn't sit, he stayed standing and got as far away from Colin as he could, in the far corner of the room away from the table and chairs in the center of the cell. "No? Okay. I'll sit then." Colin sat down, looked at him, and sighed. "Hungry? You've got to be thirsty..." Raymond tried to pretend he wasn't, but it didn't work. He hadn't ever been trained very well and his thoughts leaked. Colin pulled a turkey sandwich and a bottle of water out of the lunchbox and set them on the table.

"You think you can get me to give up what's in my head with fucking lunch?" Raymond asked, eyeing the water and the food, hungry and thirsty, but not trusting it.

"No." Colin replied "You're a telepath, I'm not going to let a telepath go hungry in my house. Will this make you feel safer?" Colin opened up the bottle of water and took a swig. He also bit into the sandwich. After he swallowed it, he spoke again. "A little dry but perfectly safe. If I wanted to kill you I'd just do it, I wouldn't bother poisoning you." Raymond couldn't take his eyes off the food. He really was ravenously hungry, and Colin could understand why, he didn't have much of anything in terms of body fat reserves. After a moment Raymond's stomach won out over his brain and he sat down, wolfing down the sandwich greedily and taking his fill of water.

"You know," Colin remarked "I really should have seen this coming. In retrospect it's obvious."

"Hm?" Raymond paused, his mouth full of food and looked up at the Colin with renewed trepidation.
"Historically, insurgencies and terrorist groups kill the moderates, the peace-makers, the world-builders first. Barring that they'll attack the vulnerable and helpless. Do you know why?"

"Bullshit. We hit Psi Cops and Bloodhounds. Don't try to tell me you're vulnerable or some sort of peace-maker, I know what you people do!" Raymond replied in rebuke. Colin took it in stride. "You drag people off to camps, put us on Sleepers. You're a bunch of fascist pigs," he growled.

"So why didn't you attack Metapol across the entire Alliance yesterday?" Colin replied. He removed his comm from his pocket and slid it across the table. "You mostly hit our education facilities. Children. Some your friends killed, some they kidnapped..." Raymond hadn't known that, which told Colin that the rogues compartmentalized their cells.

"Better to grow up with us on the run but free or be dead than be brainwashed into a drone..." but it was clear he was disgusted.

"Don't lie to me or yourself!" Colin snapped back. Raymond looked at the list of attacks and their locations and didn't like what he saw. Mostly schools and hospitals, a few Metapol stations but mostly the young and vulnerable. "The real reason you do it that way, the reason your leaders don't tell you, is because doing things like that makes us angry. It makes us want to retaliate, and you can use the resulting crackdown for propaganda purposes. You come after people like me because we get in the way of that, and we're well-loved so it creates more anger when we die."

"I'm still calling bullshit on that." Raymond replied in utter contempt. Colin sighed.

"You know how many kids we have on Sleepers on this planet?" Colin asked, he didn't let Raymond answer. "Zero. None. You know how many homeless and scared telepaths there are? Also zero. You know how many telepaths I've sent to a re-education camp in my entire career?"

"Zero?" Raymond asked, not believing his own answer.

"Fifteen, all of them criminally insane and the facilities I sent them to are actually secure psychiatric hospitals. For instance, there was a guy addicted to necroscans... My husband and I have pulled telepath children out of the most gut-wrenching and vile slavery you can imagine. On top of that, we helped rebuild our infrastructure on this planet and extracted justice from mundanes for the many crimes they've committed against our people. Until yesterday, I've only ever had to kill one other telepath, and yesterday both of us bent over backwards to avoid taking life, despite you killing someone very dear to us, and taking Hoshi's legs, and injuring my brother and his girlfriend. You missed killing or traumatizing our daughter by two hours. And yet, despite having you in my power, despite having the legal right to execute you right here or consign you to a re-education camp administered by mundanes, I'm not going to do those things if I can help it. Does that seem like the work of a fascist thug to you?"

Raymond thought about it. He wasn't sure he believed Colin, about any of it, but the simple fact was Colin hadn't so much as scanned him yet and he expected he would have been scanned within an inch of his life the second the door opened. And the Psi Cop fed him. "No... it doesn't. I'll bite. How do you explain why I think that way?"

"Because a lot of us are broken inside. We have two jobs. The first is protecting telepaths from mundanes and sometimes each other. The second is enforcing the laws mundanes force us at gunpoint to obey." Raymond scoffed again, but there was less bite to it and Colin continued. "We adopted our daughter after I pulled her out of a slaver's cage and her parents rejected her for what she is. She watched another girl get raped and then sold to people who vivisected her." Colin said flatly. "None of the people responsible for that will ever go to prison because none of the evidence is admissible. A couple months ago we caught some people who beat a commercial telepath into a
bloody pulp and killed him, the jury hung despite video evidence and accomplice testimony. Yet, I also have to hunt my own people, eventually, I won't be able to avoid sending some of them to camps. And because my job is to protect rogue telepaths as much as those in the Corps, I hold back even though you're trying to kill me. Chances are I won't see forty. How do you think you'd cope with that?"

For the first time in his life, Raymond thought about how the other side felt. He thought about how he might feel if he had to put his body between a telepath and harm one day, and then have to hunt another one the next. He thought about how he might respond to having his own people fear his presence while also being happy to see him, being praised and rewarded by mundanes for killing a telepath when it was the last thing he ever wanted to do. Not wanting to send someone he'd come to care about to a camp, but having no choice. "I'm not sure." he finally replied. "Maybe I couldn't."

"Exactly. The two roles are in conflict. "A lot of Psi Cops never find a way to cope. They burn out and can't do it anymore, or they shut down emotionally and end up being brutalized in every sense of the term. Some eat a PPG. Others have a strong emotional anchor and can focus on that. Maybe it's someone they care about, maybe it's a community they build around themselves or or they find some ideological justification that lets them sleep at night. Others... stop doing one of those jobs.""

"Which are you?"

"A little of column B and C. I root myself in my husband, my daughter, the rest of my family; and I do everything I can to take power back from mundanes rather than enforce their laws."

Raymond gulped "And yesterday I helped kill someone you cared about... Fuck. I don't want to think about what that might make you want to do..." Raymond shored up his blocks as best he could; and having been reminded Colin found it so tempting to crush him like a bug. He had to take a deep calming breath and hide his shaking right hand under the table.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you. That doesn't mean you won't suffer, but it's not going to be revenge for that..." Colin said. 'I won't be what he fears. I'm better than that. I won't give in to terrorist tactics and give them what they want by becoming a brute.'

"What do you mean?" Raymond asked, shaking slightly.

"The Psi Corps never turns a telepath away, never rejects them. We do however reject what you've done... and you're going to understand exactly what you've done. What I'm going to do is show you who you've killed, who you've hurt, as I knew them. I'm going to show you what the Corps really is. That's the suffering. After that we'll see how you react but whatever it is that happens after is your choice."

Raymond knew he didn't have a choice, he was going to get a bunch of memories shoved into his head and there was sweet-fuck-all he could do about it, Colin could feel his helplessness even if he couldn't tell from the way Raymond's naked hands were trembling. Even so, he faced whatever fate that was like an adult, and nodded assent, dropping his blocks. Colin poured a year of memories into Raymond who was forced to see the people he'd hurt as human beings; real, living, decent people. Colin added a selection of his own memories, going forward in time from the moment of his own birth and the mournfulness of his parents as they were forced to leave him in the Creche, never to return. He showed Raymond himself as a very small child meeting some of the older kids including Lyta for the first time when he was six years old. It wasn't complete, he didn't give Raymond his entire life, just important moments; but there were thirty four years of them. When he was done, Raymond was a mess, his head was down on the table and he was bawling his eyes out, wracked with guilt for what he'd done. His own thoughts and memories were
leaking everywhere. His entire life he'd been lied to about what the Corps was, about the people in it. When he'd manifested he was afraid he'd be turned into a carbon-copy drone on top of everything else that was happening to him, and he ran. He managed to avoid slavers and find a small community of other unregistered telepaths in the so-called Underground Railroad. He'd spent a year with a Narn bodyguard, fighting in the same war Colin had. When Byron martyred himself, he'd grown incensed rather than afraid.

Colin reached across the space with his mind, but didn't speak verbally. He simply forgave, on behalf of the entire Corps, though not himself. He flooded Raymond's mind with compassion and understanding. It wasn't Raymond's fault, after all. He'd simply been a decent kid who'd been systematically lied to his entire life and made decisions on false information. At least that's what Colin told himself to soothe his rage and let himself do his duty. Raymond had the wrong target, and if he killed the man he would be guilty of the same offense. Raymond wasn't his enemy, no rogue telepath was. The system EarthGov built to oppress and gaslight telepaths; that was the enemy that needed to be destroyed.

"How?" Raymond asked, still in tears. "How can you forgive me after that?" Colin hadn't, couldn't. The Corps on the other hand could and did.

"You're a telepath." Was all the answer Colin gave as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a badge and gloves. 

...

Colin trudged up the stairs and Gene was waiting for him, he didn't need to see the look on Colin's face. The turmoil in his mind was enough and he did what made sense to him at the time. He drew his husband in held him against his chest.

"How many?" Gene asked.

"Four of six. The snipers are fucking fanatics. They'd rather go to the worst of the camps than join the Corps, even after I showed them. They just assumed it was lies. So I scanned them, and have the information we need." Colin wasn't looking forward to making that call to Transport, but if they didn't join the Corps he couldn't extend any protection to them. It was as simple as that. If they joined the Corps he could make the case that they were mislead, but once they were given a truly informed choice going to a re-education camp was something they literally and knowingly brought upon themselves. Better to kill them, but then that would just make them martyrs. None of that reasoning was something he needed to explain, Gene already knew.

"I'm sorry" Gene kissed Colin on the top of the head and held him while Colin gathered his thoughts, sorted through memories got a picture of what they'd need. Everyone else was upstairs making the upper floors livable again so they had a moment to themselves. "But I think I have something that might, well, if not make you feel better, warm the soul a little."

"What's that?" Gene took him by the hand and lead him upstairs, to Gerald's room. Colin gave him a look, he wasn't ready to go in there. "Trust me babe. He never let anyone in here for a reason but... well, you'll see." Colin did, so Gene opened the door and took Colin inside.

What Colin saw inside boggled his mind. Gerald had turned his living room into a studio, and a lifetime of work lined every available space. Colin knew he contributed prints from time to time to the Corps' strictly-internal art periodicals, but nothing like this. A gorgeous painting of Sandoval Bey drawn in the soviet style pointing leftward with the words 'The Future is Our
Liberation'. There was also a four meter long canvas dominating one wall that had telepaths of every color imaginable to human skin, all holding hands with the words 'stronger together' in every language Colin could recognize written in various colors. Others were clearly inspired by Warsaw Pact and NATO allied nations propaganda posters from the early Cold War, but others were entirely different. One was a stunning likeness of Hoshi running a DNA sample through the sequencer, but she wasn't surrounded merely by the furniture and equipment in her lab, but by a landscape of colors radiating out of her and from the spaces outside the frame. Colin studied more of them, and found one of a mundane meditating on a park bench. Surrounded by the explosion of color around herself, her mind was blank, hedging out all the other thoughts. Another one depicted the scene outside Ronald Jenkins' warehouse, twenty scared children being led out of bondage by Earth Force Security officers who were checking their own fear of telepaths at the door to help, taking them into the waiting arms of telepaths; some his support staff, others were Education telepaths including Carlos and Valerie. Colin noticed himself in the background, holding a small form that would have to be Zara.

"These are..." Colin started to comment but he couldn't think of words to describe them. "I didn't know he was this prolific, or a synesthete."

"Drawn from memory too. Take a look at this one." Gene held up another one that was the first group movie night they had with Zara and the perspective was the recliner. The rendering was brilliant and Gerald didn't have paints and canvas in the room.

"The Corps can't lose these. We need to scan them in." Colin declared "But... I think I know what we should do with the originals." Gene read his mind and completed the thought.

"Yeah, the motivational posters go in the common areas, the rest... his office is being rebuilt as a memorial. We'll use the office on the other side of the door for reception from now on." Gene had been right, it did warm the soul, but it didn't precisely make him feel better. Just different. Knowing that Gerald had this many deeply personal works, works he'd never shared with anyone, it exposed a depth to the man that Colin wished he'd known while Gerald was alive. The sense of emptiness became more profound but it wasn't gut-wrenching anymore, it was bittersweet and Colin sighed in regret. He leaned back into Gene who wrapped his arms around Colin's chest.

"We have work to do." Colin remarked, reminding himself that he couldn't wallow in grief.

"Yeah we do, but they're not going anywhere, they can't get off-world and if they do they have a surprise waiting for them just on the other side of the jumpgate." Gene knew they had work to do, but his heart still wasn't in it. His heart was leaden and while he knew they couldn't let it paralyze them, he was going to procrastinate to mourn, just a little bit.

... Two hours later, Colin, Gene, and the Bloodhounds were preparing to storm a townhouse. Bloodhounds took up positions on the rooftops with sniper rifles, and had the utility tunnels watched and guarded. Colin, Gene, Marcel, and Emilia were taking cover behind the engine block of a truck on the other side of the street from the front door. There were six rogue telepaths inside, Colin and Gene could feel their minds inside; afraid but ready to go down in a blaze of glory. A rooftop sniper had already taken down one of the original seven, which dissuaded the rest from going anywhere near the windows.

"They're more powerful than the ones they sent out, on average, and there are six of them. In the open I'd say we take them with a gestalt probe, but through the walls they could defend themselves too easily." Marcel said. "We'll have to breach."
"Not looking forward to that." Gene complained. He never liked breaching prepared positions. Marcel gave him a look.

"We're trained for it. They're not. It isn't like we're attacking something prepared by a military-trained opponent."

"I know I know, I'm just grousing."

... The four of them stacked against the front door. Marcel figured the largest concentration would be there where a breach would be expected, and while it was counter-intuitive, Gene liked the idea so Colin ran with it. He placed the breaching charge on the door's lock and they stood back against the sandstone walls. The little shaped charge blasted out the door's internal mechanism cleanly and sent it inward like a small cannonball. No one was in a direct line with it so no one inside was hurt, otherwise Colin would have felt them. Then Colin and Emilia rolled in a pair of flashbangs. The flash of light and deafening sound caught two of the six people in the townhouse by surprise, disorienting them and disrupting their mental defenses. Gene went in first, and was immediately pinned in place defending himself from the other two. Marcel and Emilia went in second and took out the disoriented ones with their minds, shattering the frayed and flimsy defenses they had left and putting them to sleep. Colin entered last and let his perception shift.

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The pair of women his husband was engaged with were strong and they were trained. Gene was doing everything he could merely to hold off their anger-constructed attack probes. Colin couldn't see them through the smoke of the flashbangs and the furniture they were undoubtedly using as cover, but he didn't need to. Colin felt their minds through their connection with Gene's consciousness and tracked them back. They were in different places and weren't gestaled together, so Colin simply picked the one on the left and laid siege to her mind opening up with a barrage of attack probes aimed to disable; a tentacular construct to put her to sleep, a simple fugue probe aimed to lock her brain on a single thought. Her opalescent defensive construct blocked them all out, but the attack forced her to pay attention to him and not his husband, which gave Gene the space he needed to counter-attack.

Gene hit his opponent like an artillery barrage, naval, because that was the construct he used, a sequence of rapidly changing explosive emotions that would strain any multi-layered defense. Her mindshield held, but before she could respond she felt a brief sharp pain and lost consciousness. So did the other woman Colin was engaged with. Both Psi Cops came back to themselves then, saw Marcel and Emilia standing up on other sides of the room, transdermal injectors in their hands.

"Sedatives?" Colin asked. Marcel shrugged.

"Better than the half an hour it would have taken you to bring down a pair of P11s." Emilia replied.

< I think I know why they went rogue too.> Marcel noted. <But we can hand-wring about that once the building is secure. The other two are upstairs.>

A flash of loathing from Gene. He hated trying to attack up stair-cases, then he realized he didn't have to. He didn't have to try to get up a flight of stairs while under fire or while having grenades rolled down on gravity assist. Rogue telepaths weren't counting on a married couple who could easily slip into and out of a gestalt consciousness and avoid the need for line of sight.

< Good idea.> Colin replied to his unvoiced thought, and they solidified their ever-present connection again. For a moment, Colin thought it was almost unfair. Their joint-mind entered the
upper floor like Belgium in the Congo and chomped down on the first one's mind-shields and crushing them in like a seven tonne dinosaur simply stepping on the roof of a car. The second one tried very hard to mask his presence, to simply blank his mind in a meditative trance to avoid detection, but it didn't work. Between both Psi Cops they were sensitive enough to detect his brain stem, even if he weren't busy trying to keep pure terror under control. Their joint-will battered his now-undefended mind into unconsciousness.

Colin mentally separated from Gene's mind, essentially stepping back into himself again

"We're clear." He said for Marcel and Emilia's benefit. "I swear, our ability to do that just... isn't fair."

"Would you prefer a fair fight?" Emilia asked with something of a wry grin.

"God no. I want to see my-forty first birthday."

"Yeah, never fight fair if you can avoid it." Gene agreed, and walked over to where one of the sedated telepaths was lying on the floor. "Oh Christ. Colin we have to help them." Colin slipped into his husband's mind and looked through his eyes. The women they'd fought were evidently males. Dressed as women and with long black hair, but definitely male, and they were identical. He immediately understood exactly why they'd left the Corps and why they attacked it.

"The child who does not know the love of the village may burn it down to feel it's warmth." Colin recited an old African proverb, empathy and anger still warring in his soul.

Colin entered the interrogation room; he only had four cells and they were starting to get crowded so the overflow was going into interrogation rooms. This time though, Gene went with him. Both captive telepaths were braced for what they thought would be rough treatment. They were in their chairs staring defiantly at the married Psi Cops. It wasn't even unfair, Colin felt torn between his desire to help the two women-who-looked-like-men before him and his desire for bloody revenge for the death of his friend. He would never stop being pissed at them. He could never personally forgive them. Ultimately though he had the choice between satiating his base desires and doing the right thing; which was to forgive them in his official capacity as the representative of the Psi Corps. He looked over at his husband and let Gene take the lead.

"Yeah." Gene confirmed for them. "We're not your enemy but we know why you think we are. We are so sorry the Corps failed you like this."

"How could either of you possibly understand?" The one on the left demanded. Colin nodded, and both himself and Gene pulled the chains holding their wedding bands out from under their shirts.

"This is how." Colin answered, letting a hint of frustrated anger enter his voice. "I was in the closet for twenty years, but at least I could be me. Comfortable in my own skin. You're identical twins and you were both raised in the Corps. No one ever told either of you that being trans was okay, and you grew up torn apart over the breeding program and everything it meant, caught between who you are and not wanting to break solidarity with the Corps. You tried to transition, but getting it done was blocked by high-Admin for reasons you couldn't understand, and no mundane doctor would treat you. So you left. And you're trying to bring down the Corps so that no one else ever has to have the experiences you did, you view the system as oppressive and you want to burn it down." The woman on the right looked at him for a moment.

"That isn't in our file... there's no way that's in our file, did you scan us while we were out?" She
felt offended at the invasion but resigned to it.

"No." Colin replied "I'm a forensic psychologist. It's not hard to put together."

"And I take it you're going to tell us how we just need to grin and bear it because the Corps is Mother, the Corps is Father, and knows what's best for us?" She asked with absolute contempt.

"Fuck that. No." Gene snapped at the aspersion upon his character. "You deserve better than that. We all do. You're also both right, the system is oppressive as fuck and needs to be burned down. You just picked the wrong targets for reasons I will never understand. You want to fight to free your people, clearly. So that's what you're going to do. The only camp either of you are going to is boot camp."

"After you transition." Colin added. "The official record will be that we killed you. In reality, I'll put you into the system as deep-cover operatives under completely legit identities and send you up to the fleet. You want to fight? You want to free our people? Here's your chance. You can make up for the completely innocent life you took by saving millions."

"Hold on, wait just one god damned minute. Boot camp? Fleet?" The woman on the left asked completely dumbstruck.

"Both the work of decades. With a fleet and a Marine Corps we certainly have a better chance than five percent of the telepath population waging war on the other ninety-five and then trying to convince EarthGov to do the right thing. Because clearly, that's a great fucking plan. So, what are your names? I have your dead-names but I'd like to put you into the system under your real ones."

"Allison." The one on the left said.

"Sarah." From the one on the right.

"Okay, Allison and Sarah... hmm Farris isn't going to work, need different last names. Does Fischer work for you?" Colin asked, tapping information into a datapad. The two twins shared a look and exchanged thoughts.

"Sure?" Still confused. "But, aren't you going to like, punish us? I mean, letting us join the Navy after we attacked you that's just..." Sarah spoke up, voicing that confusion.

"Oh, you planned and executed a successful attack on our well-defended home. You won't just be joining Transport's fleet. You're gonna wear aiguillettes. You're going to put your talents to use as staff officers and learn some responsibility for your choices." Gene told her, referencing the knotted cords worn on the right shoulders of staff officers.

"But yes, we are going to punish you." Colin paused and basked in the wave of fear. He didn't like himself for it, but it was the only little piece of revenge he'd get. "Like the grins used to. You are going to remember what you let yourself forget: what the Psi Corps is. Drop your defenses please, I'd rather not breach them."

"Wait wait waitwaitwait!" Allison protested "Before you do that, how did you gestalt like that earlier? We're identical twins, we can't even do that." The question got Colin into teacher-mode despite himself.

"You spent your early years trying to differentiate yourselves. You're twins you were never going to not be close, but you can only do what we can do if your souls aren't entirely separate anymore."

"How do you even get like that?" She followed up.
"You're about to find out. Drop your blocks." Colin told her flatly. They both did, with no small amount of trepidation. Colin and Gene joined minds again, drawing forth both women's own memories into the front of their minds. All the lessons about collective unity they learned in the cadres, all the unconditional love and acceptance they received even if no one could openly acknowledge their gender for fear of reprisals. Then they added their own, piling memory after memory into both women's minds until they wept tears of guilt and shame. Colin put a matched set of badges and gloves on the table and stood up. Gene followed suit and spoke.

"We'll give you a few minutes to think about things." Then, both Psi Cops stepped out and shut the door.

"Colin... you okay?" Gene asked, and Colin felt Gene wrap his arms around him before Gene actually did it. Gene knew he wasn't okay, but it was the sort of question you asked just to show you cared.

"No." Colin answered "The Corps can forgive them, you can. I can't. Let Sueng take them and turn them back into decent telepaths - human beings - but I never want to see those two again until that's done, if ever. Let's just get them off planet, then we can visit Hoshi, get our home put back together and safe again, and mourn Gerald properly." Colin finally figured out why Sarah and Allison pissed him off more than the other four they'd managed to recruit. The others had been raised by mundanes. They didn't know any better. Hell, he could even almost respect the dedication of the six they couldn't turn and would have to send to prison-camps. He even made sure they'd be the humane ones run by the Corps itself the mundanes didn't know about. But no matter what happened to them, Sarah and Allison most certainly did know better, or should have. Gene caught that thought and hugged him tighter.

<Betrayal sucks.> was all Gene said, but it carried with it a silent validation of how Colin felt that meant the world to him right then. <You want to head outside and cool down for a minute while I make arrangements with Sueng?>

<Please.> Colin answered and Gene pulled away just enough to kiss him. <Love you too Gene.>

... 

Hoshi was in a hospital bed in the recovery ward, finally out of critical condition and stable. Monitors were still attached to her body through a variety of electrodes, cuffs, and tubes to measure heart rate, blood-pressure, blood-oxygenation, brain activity, and a few other things. She wasn't receiving transfusions anymore, and for the most part she looked almost healthy. Except for the fact that the lump that was her body cut off above the knees. She was wearing black exam gloves and wasn't on Sleepers though, so there was that. The hospital must have updated its procedures to avoid being sued. Her room might as well have been a flower garden too considering the number of bouquets.

"Hi Colin, Hi Gene. Oh hi Zara!" Hoshi beamed, somehow managing to be cheerful. "I get to be a cyborg! Cool huh?"

"Sure, but I wish the circumstances had been different." Gene replied while bathing her mind in affection. She returned it.

"Aw, you're just too sweet, you know that right?" She sighed "All the nice ones are gay..."

"She's more machine now than woman. Twisted and evil." Zara told the audience in wizardly exposition.
"That is just some luddite-ableist bullshit right there." Hoshi replied without venom. "Always interesting how early science fiction demonized robotics. I guess they were trying to speak to anxieties about industrial automation, but all they ended up doing was stigmatizing the people who needed new limbs. God, the phantom limb thing is so weird. I know they're not there anymore but I still feel my toes." Colin found the pair of visitor chairs in the room and pulled them up next to the hospital bed and sat in one. Gene ignored the second one and sat on his lap and so did Zara. He gave them affectionately rueful thoughts and while he couldn't see it, he knew his daughter grinned. Hoshi might have been putting on a brave and cheerful face, but she was still mostly-alone in a hospital room without her legs. She was hurting but trying not to let it show. Zara put out a hand and Hoshi took it, feeling all three of their hands take hers.

"Did you get 'em?" Hoshi asked.

"Yeah. We got 'em. Even turned half." Colin answered, and he felt Hoshi's momentary flash of anger through the connection of their minds before he saw it for a brief instant across her face.

"I felt a mind-scream Colin. Just before I lost consciousness, but no one will tell me who it was." Colin couldn't say it, he felt the tears forming in Zara's eyes and the knot in her chest, or were those his own? He couldn't tell. He decided it was both. He dropped his defenses and let Hoshi in so she could p'see for herself.

"Oh God. No..." she croaked just before she broke into sobs, she'd been in denial, she was a forensic scientist she'd known that those ball-bearings had come from the direction of Gerald's office. Her grief and pain washed over them and Zara broke into tears first, then Colin and Gene simultaneously. When it did stop, minutes later when their bodies and minds couldn't handle it anymore, Hoshi asked another question. "You said you turned half of them?"

Colin nodded. "Most were simply mislead and we managed to convince them they had the wrong targets. They're going to the fleet. Only killed four in the initial counter-attack. The rest are on their way to one our prisons. Terrorists or no, I'm not inflicting mundanes on them, no matter how much I might want to."

Zara wasn't sure she was okay with that for a moment. Then she remembered her lone personal encounter with the Grins and understood. <Revenge isn't for us to take personally Hoshi. Any punishment has to be dispassionate, or it becomes toxic. Corrodes who we are. Uncle Gerald wouldn't have wanted that.> Hoshi looked at Zara and swallowed her own anger. She didn't kill it, she just bit it back and locked it up.

"Yeah. He'd have given them the shirt off his back." she sobbed again. "What about everyone else?"

"Franklin and Hassan should be out of here tonight." Gene told her. "We still need to arrange Gerald's funeral. No, he'd prefer a wake. God, we're still locked down, we can't even fly his kids in for it so we'll probably have to send them the ashes and just hold a memorial. He was also nominally Anglican, and we can't find a priest on this planet." Colin p'heard Gene's scattered thoughts. On that subject he was all over the place. He was still worrying about the fact that his home wasn't safe, the window glass was all gone and so were the doors and chunks of wall. They were so vulnerable while they slept the bloodhounds set watches. Did they even have insurance for that?

Hoshi shook her head in rejection of even trying "Then the Church of England can eat a dick. He might have vaguely believed in Jesus, but he believed in us more. Whatever we do, he'll like, wherever he is." Their prior funeral, for the victims of the Narn, had just been a sad spreading of ashes; and the Corps had been excluded from the funerals of those they'd had to exhume from
shallow graves. There hadn't been anything else they could do. Gerald though, him they knew, his body was right there and still mostly intact. They could give him a proper send off, so they would, but Colin would be damned if he knew how. Something passed between Hoshi and Zara.

<We'll figure it out Dad. Hoshi and me. You have enough to worry about right now.>

<She's not even out of her hospital bed?>

<She'll be in here for a while and needs something to do, and she's already agreed.>

<Okay.> Colin agreed, and Gene did too over their constant low-level connection, and not only that, but he was so proud of her he could burst. <We love you Zara, you're awesome you know that right?>

<Love you too Dads, and yeah. I know.> She grinned at them and even in their minds it felt a bit strained. She needed to do something too. Gene kissed her head and wrapped his arms around her for both of them.

...

When Colin and Gene got home after taking Zara back to school - they'd be damned if they were exposing her to the safe place that was the Annex with a gaping hole in it - there were already contractors swarming over the building, clearing rubble and evening out rough edges so they could commence repairs. Colin was confused.

"Honey did you?" he asked.

"No." At that moment Francois exited the ruined doorway and walked up to them, he wasn't happy exactly, but satisfied that he'd done something good.

"Francois, I take it this is your doing?" Colin felt more gratitude than he thought possible toward an administrator.

" 'From each according to their ability, to each according to their need.' " Colin understood. Arranging for contractors was something Francois did, he knew how to do it in a hurry. Neither Colin nor Gene knew how to do that but needed it done. So he'd done it, like any good comrade or brother would. Both of them had been thinking like a pair of homeowners after a disaster, not like members of an institution with division of labor. "Besides, it's not like we carry homeowners insurance." Francois continued. "Acts of war are excluded in every insurance policy ever."

"Thanks Francois." Gene gave the Frenchman a hug which was happily returned.

"C'est mon plaisir" he replied. "The estimate is three weeks. It would be four days but we're adding some upgrades. I don't know where the budget came from but someone decided militarizing our presence here was a good idea and I can't disagree. Do you have a place to stay in the mean time?"

"We were planning on staying here, the bloodhounds are on watch shifts, we didn't want to abandon them to do that alone." Colin informed him.

"Nonsense. Besides, you can't stay here during construction. Do you have a place to stay until the funeral?"

"Uh, yeah I suppose so. The guest house at the school." Gene filled him in. "Granted, we just got back from there but we can go back."
"Bon! It's settled then." Francois gripped them both on the shoulders. "You took this so none of the rest of us would have to. Now the rest of us are going to take care of you. That's how this works. Oh! After the funeral, you're taking some actual leave. You and your entire staff. You two are going to take Zara, and you're going somewhere nice for at least two weeks. Net, including travel time. Admin's orders. I don't care where so long as it's not here. We'll square it with Education, and honestly she's far enough ahead in everything from Math to Self-Defense that it's not going to matter anyway."

"Francois, we can't just..." Colin protested.

"Nonsense! You can. The bloodhounds are fresh, they can cover for you. You're entitled to the leave time, and you desperately need it. I'm not asking, I'm telling. I'm admin, human-resources are my dominion."

"I..." Colin wanted to protest but he couldn't. He hadn't taken leave in six years. He knew Gene hadn't in at least that long. Off-duty rotations weren't leave they were professional maintenance. "Alright, alright. I won't argue." then he had a thought. A place Gene showed him once. "Gene?" He asked, glancing behind him.

"Yeah love?" Gene replied, kissing the back of his head and snaking his arms around Colin's waist

"I wouldn't mind Wyoming... I'm sure Zara will go hog-wild with the wildlife..."

"She's gonna end up riding a bear..."

Friday April 17th, 2263

Colin got the summons that morning and by afternoon he was in a rage again, and Gene with him. Standing in front of the door to the Cabinet chamber for the second time in a month they mentally Steeleed themselves for whatever bullshit the mundane government would throw at them, and it was sure to be bullshit. Both men could feel the malice and greed through the door, and something else. A desire for petty revenge from a familiar mind. Trisha Nguyen was on the other side of the door.

"Fucking bastards..." Gene muttered. "What the hell are going to do about Trisha? You know she'll edit us into oblivion."

"No, she won't. We're not playing their games. We're not playing any of their games anymore. We'll deal with it."

The door opened and revealed a cabinet meeting that wasn't full. They still had a quorum, but Doctors Chaudry and Golberg were missing, and Colin was forced to wonder if they'd been excluded or if they'd boycotted. He figured he would have been warned if it was a boycott, so placed his bet on exclusion. Sure enough Trisha was there with a camera crew.

"We do not consent to be filmed by her." Colin said dryly. "A media appearance has not been, to my knowledge, cleared by the Corps."

"Tough luck for you then, because you can't leave until we're through. This is official testimony
and all official testimony is public record and subject to recording and public broadcast as per our transparency laws." Prime Minister Kotze replied, a wolfish predatory grin played across her face. "Didn't you get the update to your summons? We decided this wouldn't be an informal chat."

Colin checked. Sure enough there had been an update three minutes prior. They had him, he'd shown up.

"Nice trick, but we're still entitled to the presence of legal council." It was a desperate gambit, and Colin knew it.

"Only when criminal jeopardy attaches. You are not subject to the criminal jurisdiction of the planetary government." Alisson Cantwell informed him.

<What kind of horseshit is this?> Gene asked. <A procedural mugging?>

<That's exactly what it is.>

"Very well, it appears we have no choice unless we want to the Corps to be found in contempt and fined into oblivion. That about right?>

"Correct." Alisson confirmed. Gene looked at her, turned his iron gaze to all of them. Then looked down toward their end of the table. Still no chairs, however the seats for the Minsters of Health and Education were still there, just empty. It was a show of disrespect to force someone to stand while everyone else sat, and Gene wasn't having it. He walked around the table and grabbed Rebecca's chair, while Colin did the same with Adhira's.

"What the hell are you doing?" Adia asked.

"Pretty sure you don't have procedural rules about standing and these seats are strangely empty." Gene let them know that he and Colin saw what they did, and managed force-feed contempt into that sentence. There wasn't any vocal protest after that, but plenty of mental grumbling. They were on camera too and if they were such giant dicks it might get noticed no matter how much Trisha edited the footage. Chairs in place, the two telepaths sat down.

<I have a plan for what to do about the camera> Gene said <It uses off-site storage.> Colin understood what Gene was getting at.

<Do it.>

They sat down next to each other, not bothering with sort of professional distance, their wedding bands were prominently displayed from the chains around their necks, distinct from the engagement rings they'd worn the last time they were in that same room. The Sergeant at Arms walked up from the back of the room carrying a bible and set it before them.

"Neither of us are religious." Gene said. "We'll swear on this though." He pulled his badge off and set it down on the table. "I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Matri nostrae ac Patri semper fidelis." He took his hand off and Colin repeated the oath before Gene put the badge back on. The mundanes looked unnerved.

The Prime Minister cleared her throat "We have some questions for you about the recent terrorist attack that killed..." she checked her notes "Thirty people and wounded a dozen others at the intersection of Eighth Avenue and Fourteenth Street."

"Thirty-one." Colin corrected her. "Gerald Foresythe was one of ours, he was killed in the initial attack. You also missed three serious injures, there were a total of fifteen. Hoshi Tanaka lost both of her legs. Franklin Okumba and Hassan Hussein suffered damage to their lungs from..."
overpressure. That isn't even counting the rogue telepaths." His response was dry, tone strictly factual, but she'd left them out intentionally. He gave her a hard stare. "Maybe it might be a good idea for all of you to swear yourselves in too, or maybe get accurate counts."

"Either way, we gave you permission to bring in additional security to prevent exactly this from happening! What the hell do you have to say for yourselves?" From the Security Minister John Foster.

"Well, they only got in a few days before an attack that was weeks in planning. It was coordinated across the entire Earth Alliance through the use of broadcasts with unsecured metadata, and possibly unsecured contents." Gene commented. "Now, I can't imagine how the various intelligence agencies dropped the ball in warning us, we don't have the SIGINT capability to intercept that sort of traffic. What interests me is how they got weapons and plastic explosives through customs..." Gene glared at Mr. Foster. "We could investigate that for you if you like." Both telepaths could feel the glee from Trisha. The inflammatory soundbite potential was fantastic, but the joke was on her. The cabinet minister's walrus mustache was displeased, scandalized by the insinuation. He personally wasn't complicit, both Gene and Colin knew that, but turning a blind eye to problems was something else.

"Are you insinuating that my office was somehow complicit in a terrorist attack?"

"No, no. Of course not!" Gene denied. "But during the civil war it's only natural that planetary customs officials and Earth Force defectors would develop relationships with smugglers. They were feeding the colony and bringing in weapons to help you fend off a ground invasion after all. But there's always an element of mutual back-scratching."

"Clearly, Mr. McCrime isn't up to no good when he smuggles a bunch of unlicensed demolition charges and PPG carbines into a colony with strict control of weapons nastier than a PPG pistol. Pay no attention to the cargo container full of 'unaccompanied minors' in the corner." Colin followed up, with particular emphasis. "The problem obviously exists, and perhaps it might not be a bad idea for us to post a few Bloodhounds in the port. We should have done that before to be perfectly honest with you. However, and I know this might come as a surprise, we didn't have permission from the planetary government to have Bloodhounds on planet during the period in which the smuggling for this attack was carried out."

Prime Minister Kotze glared at them, but then looked to Trisha who nodded encouragingly, so she decided to continue the hearing. "So, how do you answer charges that you were ill-prepared for an attack and that lack of preparedness cost the lives of thirty innocent people?" The loaded question made Colin angry, so angry his body tensed and Gene had to tighten his grip on Colin's knee to remind him that he probably shouldn't stand and start yelling. Colin took a deep breath and when he did reply his voice was tightly controlled.

"Do you know of a way to stop someone with a vehicle and a remote-detonated bomb?" Colin asked, and paused for a moment before continuing. "It's okay. I'll wait." The cabinet discussed the matter, trusting in Ms. Nguyen to edit it out of the inevitable leak or open broadcast.

<How sure are you that you disabled the transmitter?> Colin asked.

<Oh I didn't do that... the camera man doesn't know he isn't recording.>

"Last I checked Mister Meier, we were the ones asking the questions." Minister Foster finally said in an aggressive tone.

"That's Doctor Meier." Colin politely corrected before Gene continued for him.
"You can stop them from hitting their target, but unless you have heavy weapons or jamming equipment up in advance you're not stopping the bomb from detonating. So unless you want to admit that we're occupying hostile territory and the disruption of all civilian transmissions for hundreds of meters around all our facilities is justified, I don't see the point of this line of questioning. The reality is, by any reasonable standard, their attack failed."

"Thirty innocent people died. How can you call that a failure?" From Minister Cantwell. Her voice was angry and her mind was both frustrated and pissed, she didn't consider thirty deaths a failure, and her mind simply skipped over Gerald and didn't count him despite the earlier correction of the numbers.

"They weren't targeting you. They intended to drive that car inside the Annex and detonate inside, killing everyone. Instead, the demarcation posts stopped them because they're built as crash-barriers to prevent exactly that." Gene countered. "Not meeting your objectives is a failure. Ask Misters Foster and Korolev." Gene swallowed his anger at skipping over Gerald's existence. Colin didn't. His anger bubbles over, unwilling to sit an accept their entire narrative framing and line of questioning. 'Fuck these people and everything they stand for.'

"Oh, and that was thirty one. Gerald was completely innocent. He never hurt anyone in his life."

"We waded through misery and death. We could all hear their screams and cries in our minds even though most couldn't speak. Many of them told us their names and begged for comfort. Comfort we couldn't give them because we were too busy working on people who could be saved. We heard their final screams as they died, felt their souls pass beyond The Doorway into whatever the hell is after this world. And here you all are, treating us like we're the criminals for what? Failing to decide, in advance, to just open our doors and let people kill us while we're having our morning coffee? What do you want from us exactly?"

Security Minister Foster was furious, but Korolev was reconsidering his position, just like he probably had during the Metapol vote. The rest of the lines were largely similar to the earlier vote. Foreign Minister Abas was quietly pro Psi Corps. He'd grown up in Bahrain where human trafficking in telepaths was rampant, and while he didn't say anything he respected the defiance of the two Psi Cops. Chen Zhau knew the Corps was absolutely economically essential, and while he hated telepaths he was a pragmatist just like the Prime Minister was and Colin picked up he'd abstained from the last vote. The rest were irredeemable human trash as far as Colin was concerned.

'We want you to relearn your place you uppity mind-fucker.' Foster thought, but didn't say, and because it was outwardly directed and angry both telepaths caught it. 'Aren't you people supposed to be willing to give your lives to protect us?'

Gene had been keeping his composure so he could help Colin keep his as well as he had. That stopped and Colin felt the switch flip in his husband's mind. They both glared daggers at John Foster who immediately suspected his thought had been noticed, but one look in the eyes of both telepaths told him everything he needed to know about how willing to be pushed on that they were. Still, he was so outraged at the invasion of his privacy that he didn't care much and was about to speak before Gene did it for him.

"Professional tip Mr. Foster, we can't always block out every vile petulant dehumanizing thought
"How dar-" Foster tried to say something but Gene cut him off.

"No how dare you?! No matter what laws we're governed under we're sapient beings. We have rights, and dignity, no matter how hard you try to take both from us. The next time you want to think something like that, say it to yourself instead of shouting it at the top of your mind. That way, we don't know exactly what kind of piece of shit you are."

"What the hell did you say John?" Foreign Minister Abas asked him, his tone full of revulsion.

"I didn't say anything. How can you sit there and let him accuse me of thought crime? He violated my privacy!"

"No. He didn't. He just didn't ignore you. What the hell did you say?"

"We want you to relearn your place you uppity mind-fucker. Aren't you people supposed to be willing to give your lives to protect us?" Gene repeated, his voice dripping with contempt. He looked at the rest of them. With the exception of the Prime Minister who didn't like the Corps but was apathetic toward telepaths in general and Defense Minister Korolev, Mohammad was alone in the room in being revolted by that. They only saw Gene's reaction to it as ammunition. Colin spoke up again then. Both were so angry they could almost literally hate half the mundanes in the room to death, it was only their mutual commitment to not becoming monsters, to be better than that, that prevented them from doing it.

"Telepaths have fought for the Earth Alliance in every war since Centauri Contact. My parents were medical telepaths. They were killed finding soldiers trapped in rubble on Balos. We fought the Minbari too. Thousands of us died fighting the Minbari on the ground and there were telepaths on the Line helping your gun crews target Minbari ships. Every last one of them died. For that service we're what? Allowed to exist until it's convenient for us to die?" Colin got up. "We won't be complicit on our own procedural lynching. If you want to find the Corps in contempt, do it, but I know as well as you do that you can't hold that vote with Doctors Chaudry and Goldberg conveniently missing. If you want to speak with us further, do it through our lawyer. And if you think you can kick us off world again, be prepared because we'll take every telepath with us when we go. Good luck having an economy." Gene got up just after him and they walked out of the room.

Behind them, the enraged and mortified Security minister raised his voice "Tell me you got that?"

"Of course we did. They got really political too, we can use this to nail them to the wall. I don't even have to splice their comments together!" Trisha replied, still within earshot.

"Um... Ms. Nguyen... there's a problem." Came the nervous voice of the camera man.

"Of course we did. They got really political too, we can use this to nail them to the wall. I don't even have to splice their comments together!" Trisha replied, still within earshot.

"Um... Ms. Nguyen... there's a problem." Came the nervous voice of the camera man.

"What? What kind of problem Alan?"

"I'm sorry! I thought I hit record but I've been staring into the preview the whole time and I must have forgotten to hit it. I don't know how, I swear this has never happened before!" he answered in a panic.

"What? How... They knew! Jesus H. Fucking Christ, I knew that outburst was too good to be true. Last time they were so guarded I couldn't get anything I could use. I should have known they had an ace up their sleeve that we could never prove." Trisha reasoned. Minister Korolev laughed in Russian. It was a deep and genuine belly laugh and the first time he actually spoke in
"Given what you were trying to do, good for them. Every last one of you is disgusting. Except you Mohammad, you're okay. Trying to provoke these two into something you could selectively edit into a charter breach and you didn't expect they'd defend themselves? Not only are you revolting, you're stupid and I have no idea how you got elected. Oh wait, it was through rank populism."

"I didn't expect you to be some kind of teep-lover Anton." Minister Cantwell shot back.

"I'm not, I don't like someone inside my head any more than any of you. I'm just not so inflexible I can't change my mind, and I'm certainly not going to abuse my position to slander someone!"

"Oh come on! You know what they did during the war better than anyone! They're fascists like Clark, collaborators!" Cantwell replied. Finally Mohammad had enough.

"The only fascists I see are people like you. We've taken every right they have including the right to say no to the state. What did you expect them to do? Commit ritual suicide as a population openly defying the Clarkist regime? What about you Noriko? Should they have committed Seppuku for your cause? What do telepaths care for the Earth Alliance Senate and constitution? They can't vote for the former and don't have the protection of the latter!" Just after that, someone noticed that the door was open while Colin and Gene stood just out of sight enjoying the argument, and shut the door.

...
"Probably the obituary sweetheart. Some people are just garbage, but we've got you. No one is going to hurt you, or they'll answer to us." Colin reassured her.

"Yep. Anyone to tries to hurt you or anyone else is going straight to the hospital or the morgue." Gene said, he didn't exactly think that promise through but he meant it. He was so angry that mundanes were defiling Gerald's funeral like this and scaring his daughter that he resolved right then and there that if someone crossed the line there wasn't going to be any forbearance or understanding. Not from him. He took up a position directly between his husband and daughter and the chanting throng. He felt hostility behind him and turned his head to see a young man and woman carrying protest signs, they couldn't be more than twenty five on approach and glaring at them.

"I can't believe you people." The young man said, identifying them as Psi Cops due to their being in full dress uniform "What did you do to get the synagogue to agree to hosting your fascist love-in? Hell, what are you teaching that little girl you Nazi fuck? How to annex Poland?" Gene wheeled on them both and Colin stood up, putting himself between Zara and them by reflex before speaking.

"She's our daughter you moron, wha-" Colin started before the young woman cut him off.

"Your 'daughter' huh? She doesn't look anything like either of you, who did you steal her from?!" Gene had just about had it, and was ready to give both of them a piece of his mind in an aggressive way when Zara's fear and anger transformed into pure rage at that particular bit of blood libel.

"They're my dads they didn't steal me!"

"You don't have to repeat their lies sweetheart..." her voice was kind, she really did believe what she was saying, but Zara didn't care. She wanted to force-feed them both her memories, but Colin dropped down and hugged her.

<Don't. They're not worth the guilt you'll feel later little monkey.> he told her, gently caressing her mind with all the warmth and parental affection he had. She folded her mind into it like a protective cloak and the memories she was calling up to weaponize melted into the background to be used as words rather than attacks to literally drive them mad.

"My birth-parents rejected me after my dad rescued me from three months in a cage." Zara said coldly, snuggling with Colin but staring at the mundanes with death in her eyes she knew she could make good on but chose not to. "What were you doing to help telepaths after the Corps got kicked off-world?" she asked, and caught the response in their surface thoughts just like her parents did "Oh! Nothing! The fascists have been cleansed! No need to do any actual work to fill the void to make sure kids don't get enslaved! " Gene was so very proud of her.

That reaction, the vehement rage from a small child was not what either of them expected, and they got the distinct impression, maybe from her eyes or maybe from the way she was being both comforted and gently restrained, that the shorter Psi Cop had intervened to save them from something terrible. They backed away, and moved on to join the Anti-Clarkist protest. They hadn't listened. Gene knew it was their first time talking to a real-live telepath and he could feel their arrogance unperturbed by the experience. They assumed they knew better than the telepaths what the telepaths wanted and needed.

'What the hell does she know? She's too young to know what's best for her.' The young man thought to himself.

'Wow, doesn't she realize we're just trying to help her people? Jesus! Probably
brainwashed.' Mused his girlfriend as they both retreated. Neither of them let their own preconceptions or opinions be moved an inch, rationalizing what they'd just heard away, convinced of their own righteousness. When everything was said and done, despite her not being a child anymore, Zara was still a kid and she had her limits and they'd been passed. Her anger collapsed into tears of grief, frustration, and inner pain at the absolute knowledge that the ire of so many people was directed squarely at her.

<How can they do that? Just... not care? They want to help telepaths but then don't listen to what we have to say just... ignore us.>

Gene got down on his knees and completed the family embrace. <Because it isn't about us sweetheart. It's about making themselves feel good, not actually helping.> Footsteps behind him had Gene turning his head, and what he saw made his heart swell. People were exiting the synagogue, rolling out about two hundred meters of blue butcher paper with dowels stapled to it as handles. They formed a visually occlusive wall with it, blocking off a path from the main doors to the parking lot. The barrier, more a conceptual one rather than an actual wall, still helped take the edge off the hatred he felt from the crowd. Zara saw it too. Gene couldn't thank them individually, there were about four dozen men and women who decided to be good, and they were outnumbered by the Clarkists who shouted things like 'Teep-Lover' and other more typically antisemitic things at them. But they held firm. What Gene could do is reach out and touch all of their minds, sending his and Colin's silent gratitude. Most of them mentally scoffed at the idea that they deserved gratitude for doing the only thing that could be considered decent, but it was the kind scoff of self-deprecation rather than of derision. <That's what helping looks like.>

... The service was a modification of Jewish tradition. Gerald was an Anglican, but a Jewish ceremony was something Rabbi Liebgott knew how to do, and and they both prayed to the same God.

Under normal circumstances, cremation was not permitted, but it was customary for the Corps and it would be almost impossible to ship a casket back to Earth for Gerald's family to kids in their own way. All hundred telepaths in attendance, wore black cloths around their arms, marking them in Jewish tradition as mourners. Steve and his wife were present, their baby was adorable and fast asleep in a little sling around Lizz's chest. Serena was there too, sitting next to Hoshi in their wheelchairs. There had been other mundanes, mostly members of the Jewish community who'd befriend telepaths, but they were outside. None of the mundanes wore the cloths, as they were not family to the deceased the way telepaths were.

Rabbi Liebgott emerged from the rectory and took up position behind a raised podium.

"We are gathered here to celebrate the life and mourn the loss of Gerald Foresythe. I didn't know him as well as I would have liked. I didn't know his thoughts, I couldn't see his soul. Honestly I only ever really talked to him this past Monday. What I saw though was a mensch. In German it just means a person but it has a deeper meaning in Yiddish. It means a salt-of-the-earth good person. He obviously cared about others and brought joy to those around him." Isaac looked over toward a display area where some of Gerald's paintings were posted on stands "More than that, he was an artist who captured the essence of the world you live in, a world I can only begin to imagine by looking at what he deftly captured on canvas. It's nothing short of a crime against humanity that our laws prevent his work from being widely circulated, from being known. His murder damaged the fabric of your community, of your existence. It left a hole that can't ever be mended." As if it were a cue, because that's exactly what it was, Max stood up and with tears in his eyes took the black cloth from his arm and tore it lengthwise so it was frayed and almost in two
pieces before tying it back on. As he did, he spoke in Hebrew for everyone.

"Baruch atah Adonai, Dayan Ha-Emet". Everyone else, Colin, Gene, and Zara included did the same thing including the Hebrew recitation, almost in unison, before sitting back down collectively.

The rabbi cleared his throat again "Now, if you would please join me in song and turn your hymnals to Psalm 23." To Colin's surprise, it was in english, hebrew, and transliterated into latin characters, but because so few spoke Hebrew, Isaac sang in English and was joined by a hundred voices, taking vocal cues from either the sheet music or his mind.

"A song of David. The L-rd is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He causes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul; He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Even as I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

You set a table before me in the presence of my adversaries; You anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows.

May only goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the L-rd for length of days."

There were a few minutes carefully devoted to silence after that, quiet reflection, prayer, memory. Whatever those in attendance wanted to think about. Colin kept wondering what he could have done differently, what he would have done if he'd known the attack were coming, who knew and said nothing. Zara sat between him and Gene, remembering that afternoon in the art museum, and before that one of her first days at the Annex where Gerald devoted himself to making her and the other rescued kids laugh, to forget what they'd gone through for as little as a few minutes. Gene was looking at Gerald's paintings and tried to imagine what Gerald felt when he decided to suit up and arm himself to help rescue Carlos. People often though people like him and Colin were the heart and soul of the Corps, but Gene didn't think that was actually true. From where Gene was sitting, the heart and soul of the Corps were the people like Gerald who didn't have the power Gene did, but who nonetheless put themselves in harm's way for others, or who did the work of maintaining the Corps' existence and stability.

After that few moments of silent reflection Rabbi Liebgott started delivering the Eulogy. He'd collected little stories about Gerald from everyone present and wove together a verbal tapestry about who Gerald was. In many funerals the loved ones of the deceased gave those, but not in the Corps and not necessarily within Judaism. While Isaac recited the stories verbally, telepaths displayed the memories for all to p'see and p'hear and thus experience for themselves. Colin gave everyone the memory of meeting Gerald for the first time, and in response Hoshi shared that same memory from her own perspective including how Gerald's reaction to the new Psi Cop reassured her that Colin was still a good and kind person. If Gerald wasn't nervous how could the rest of them be? Max shared one of his, the memory of Gerald going downstairs and coming back up armed to the teeth. He asked "Aren't the rest of you coming?". Zara shared her most precious. Gerald called ahead and got a private tour through the art museum, free of all mundanes but a single curator who walked them through the exhibits. It was exactly what she'd needed, a quiet respite from everything but learning about how people thought and lived and felt.

"If I can request that everyone stand, I do apologize but this part does need to be in Hebrew, though
it is my understanding that Max can translate, and you all have my permission to translate from my mind." The rabbi cleared his throat and started to sing. He was an able Cantor in addition to a rabbi. Perhaps not as good a singer as the regular Cantor, but Jacob was outside.

"Al molay rachamim, shochayn bam’romim, ham-tzay m’nuchah

n’chona al kanfay Hash’china, b’ma-alot k’doshim ut-horim

k’zo-har haraki-a mazhirim, et nishmat Gerald Foresythe she-halach l-olama,

ba-avur shenodvu tz’dakah b’ad hazkarat nishmata. B’Gan

Ayden t’hay m’nuchata; la-chayn Ba-al Harachamim yas-tire-ha

b’sayer k’nafav l’olamim, v’yitz-ror bitz-ror ha’chayim et nishmatah,


One he concluded the prayer for Gerald's soul, Isaac allowed another moment of silent reflection, or prayers in whatever languages or whatever faiths those present wished. Colin could p'hear them all; some were Christian, a few Muslim, others Hindu or Buddhist. Colin didn't believe in a benevolent God. He believed in souls, something that looked like an afterlife; he couldn't not believe in those, but a benevolent God? No. Maybe there was something but it wasn't a personified entity. As a result neither himself nor Gene prayed, but they did hope. They hoped that whatever was on the other side of the liminality was paradise.

Thursday April 23rd, 2263

Eight days after the attack and life was starting to become normal again. Everyone had a place to stay somewhere in Omega VII's telepath community for the last week, but the mandatory leave beckoned and Colin's little family was at the spaceport again. Something about the port made Colin nervous, like he was waiting for a shoe to drop and for something else terrible to happen; but it didn't. All that happened was waiting for a civilian transport to begin it's boarding call. He'd sprung for a first-class sleeper compartment to avoid having to share a space with mundanes who might complain about their existence. There were so many mundanes though, and given the disgusting display at the funeral, Zara was a little nervous. She sat on Gene's lap in a hypervigilant state, looking around like a chickadee at a bird feeder, watchful for threats even as she went about her other business.

"So I've never been to Montana, or Wyoming." she said "What's it like?"

"Well..." Gene tried to figure out a way to explain it "It varies a lot. In the eastern part of both states it's mostly grassland. Prairie grassland with very few people as far as the eye can see. But we'll be in the West, which is actually a lot like the alps, but without as many small villages or big cities."

"Cool!" She exclaimed, especially liking the idea of very few people.

"Oh it will be!" Gene punned at her. It was bad instead of actually funny so she gave him a look. "There might still be winter storms in early May, but it should be okay. There's a reason we packed the cold-weather gear."

"So if it snap-freezes I get my own ushanka?" Zara asked
"Corps standard issue, yep!" Colin replied happily. He'd fallen in love with his during a trip to Alaska in 2252. "Especially because we'll be doing a lot of camping. Not the whole time, but there will be some camping." Zara considered that for a minute and a grin broadened across her face.

"So there are gonna be bears? They'll just be coming out of hibernation with cubs right? Because bear cubs are just so cute..." she had a mental image of herself playing with bear cubs that Gene instinctually wanted to dissuade her from because that could be unspeakably dangerous and even though he knew bears wouldn't be a danger of any kind it was still a strongly ingrained habit to be cautious of bears and to not do anything that might piss off a mother grizzly bear.

"Just don't feed them." he finally cautioned. "We'll be fine if we run into bears, but we don't want them thinking humans are a good source of food."

"Oh! No. That would be bad." Zara concurred. "Or...would it? I mean, mundanes."

"Zara..." Colin chided.

"I know, I know..." And she did, but that mental image of the protesters played through her thoughts and Colin had to add the other half. The ones who helped. She felt just a little bit ashamed then, not too ashamed, but just enough. "Right. They don't deserve to be eaten by bears and we can't exactly teach the bears how to tell the difference."

"Right." Colin agreed, though he could sense from Gene that the mental image still amused him.

"Psi Corps Bear Cavalry?"

"I don't think cavalry is combat-effective anymore Dad."

"Damn it, I know...." Gene bemoaned that fact because the mental image of Psi Corps Marines wearing usankas and riding bears into Moscow Idaho was just too damn good to let go.

Tuesday April 28th, 2263

The Asimov class liner made it to Earth in five days, and from there it was a descent by shuttle to Geneva and from there a trans-orbital jaunt to Missoula. Telepaths couldn't actually get rental vehicles but the Corps kept a motor pool for that very reason. Unmarked of course. With that, they let the computer system drive them to the entrance to Yellowstone National Park, and from there to check in.

"Hello-" the receptionist started until he saw their badges and gloves, it threw him off and despite his own prejudices he knew he wasn't permitted to turn them away so he faked it as best he could. "Uh, welcome to Mammoth Hot Springs." it was a bit listless but acceptable. He was a younger man who looked like the quasi-western attire he was in came naturally to him. For their part, Colin and Gene were in black BDU pants with hiking boots and gray long-sleeve shirts; a matching pair because everything was standard issue, though Gene was also in a brown leather jacket. Zara dressed identically except that the shirt was in black and she wore a gray vest with lots of pockets.

"Hi, three for check in, the reservation is under Hendriks." Gene said.

'Huh. Didn't they just check out last week?' The receptionist thought to himself, but he looked it up and found the reservation. 'Ah, Eugene Hendriks, not Jeremy.' Gene momentarily froze in place. It couldn't be his father, could it? Colin caught that internal question and tried to reassure him.
<No way. That coincidence would be too large.>

<Yeah dad, they didn't stain our vacation by getting here first.>

Mark the receptionist had no idea what was going on inside their heads, he simply looked at the information and frowned. Two men and a little girl who looked nothing like them in a hot-tub cabin?

"Hold that fucking thought right there." Colin growled. "I swear to fucking God if one more mundane thinks that..."

"They're my parents, asshole." Mark didn't know whether to be offended that they were reading his mind or mortified that he'd made the suggestion. However, the apologetic customer service drone inside his head put him on autopilot.

'I'm so sorry! Really I have no idea where that came from. If you can just hand me your Identicaards we can get you into your rooms.' 'And the hell away from me.' The two men showed him their Identicaards and when he ran them his jaw dropped. Did Psi Cops even take vacations?

"Yes. We do." Gene informed him. "Not very often but it does sometimes occur."

"Right! Uh... um... your cabin is number thirty two, take a left and head down the hill, can't miss it!" he desperately wanted them gone now, and they obliged him, taking the keys he slid across the counter and exiting the building. The view was amazing, the hot springs themselves were formed as a set of terraces on a slope. Water percolated down into the rock of the Yellowstone caldera where it was heated by the magma chamber and loaded with carbon dioxide, forming carbonic acid. As the acidic water rose through fissures in the rock it dissolved limestone, and when it came out on the slope itself, carbon dioxide left solution and with it the dissolved limestone. The resulting deposits formed the terraces. Steam carried with it faint hints of sulfur. The weather was amazingly, not a cloud in the sky and about ten degrees Celsius. It would probably get to around freezing at night, which made the hot tub perfect.

Colin opened up the cabin and it was absolutely lovely. There was a computer terminal and vidscreen, but even better was the wall of books on geology, natural history, and archaeology in a reading nook, the comfortable lounge chairs, kitchenette and queen sized bed. There was also a small fenced in yard with a hot tub.

"This is... a suitable home-base." Zara declared, surveying the rustic decor. "I can work with this but what do we have for wildlife outside... " she went to the back patio and stood on one of the lawn chairs to look over the fence. The snow had melted and turned the ground muddy, but the plants were starting to green and spring flowers were blooming. Deciduous trees were getting leaf buds. She'd never seen this and she openly marveled at it.

"It's like... nature being reborn. Geneva wasn't like this but I guess it was just too early and the head island kept it warmer."

"Yeah." Gene replied "But the winters here are beautiful to, in a stark and forbidding kind of way."

"What is that some kind giant deer?" Gene gave it a look, it was just strolling through the resort between cabins down toward some beaver ponds in a creek bed.

"Moose. But yeah, giant vaguely semi-aquatic deer. Really aggressive defending their young but I think that one is a male." As she looked, Zara could see a few more browsing from aquatic plants, some of them in water up their necks and ducking down beneath the surface.
"Cool..." then she felt a stab of fear and oriented toward it to a nearby tree. A squirrel was being chased up a tree by some small fuzzy predator. "Predator vision!" She exclaimed and borrowed the eyes of the Marten chasing that squirrel. It scrambled up the tree and she grinned as it caught up to its prey. Though it, she could smell the squirrel's fear, hear every detail of its little claws gripping bark, desperate to escape its doom. However, before the marten could make a kill the rodent jumped and spread out its legs revealing membranes that stretched from paw to paw. It sailed through the air to another tree some twenty meters away, and she felt the predator's hungry disappointment as its lunch escaped. "Oh I'm gonna have a lot of fun here."

"Oh just wait until tomorrow's hike..." Colin told her "Fewer people, better wildlife opportunities."

 Later that night, after dinner, all three of them lounged in water at a balmy forty degrees Celsius. The pool gloves were visually occlusive but made of a fine mesh that let water slip in and out easily, and weren't much of a barrier to touch. The same was true of the shirts and pants they wore. There might be a fence but they were still in public and as a result had to wear gloves, and it was too ridiculous to wear gloves by themselves.

The thought that his parents might have been there the week before was still bothering Gene, and he couldn't put a finger on why, or rather, there were a lot of things and he couldn't pin down what was the most important. It was subtle, the occasional little thought, a remembered hurt. The thought that maybe they'd touched the sidewalk or the bit of grass he trod upon and thus polluted it; remembering his mom baking a cake on his original birthday just for him because she loved him. Loved, in the past tense, not anymore. He felt Colin's concern. His husband knew as well as Gene did that he'd never gotten over it in the intervening years but even Gene didn't think it would bother him like this. Being so physically and temporally close. So he sat there in the tub while Colin ran gloved fingers over his neck the back of his scalp, gently comforting him.

"Have you ever considered just showing up and telling them to fuck off and die?" Colin asked. Zara nodded in approval.

"I'd do it with my own birth parents but I can't drive and it seems like an adult thing." Zara added. Gene thought it over, turning the idea over in his head. He had a few choice things he'd say, things he wanted to say for thirteen years. Zara pushed off from her spot on the other side of the tub and clambered up on his back, hugging him she was his personal jet-pack. "Love you Dad." It was her turn to make him feel loved and the invincible kind of untouchable, and Colin joined in.

"Love you too sweetheart" and Gene was speaking to both of them. He decided they were probably right. It was something he could do at least, even if it didn't make the pain stop it would be closure of some sort. "Alright, we'll make a stop in Hamilton on our way back to Missoula." Just committing to it made him feel a little better.

"Good man. Love you Gene."

"Love you too babe." Gene replied. At a wordless signal, Zara slipped off his back and Gene slid over onto Colin's lap. Something clicked in Gene's mind he tried to suppress and failed. Colin caught it and got a hungry look on his face that Zara couldn't help but notice. Gene caught a thought from her. *The landslide has started, and it's too late for the pebbles to vote*. It was originally avalanche, but an avalanche was snow so she made sure the phrase was etiologically correct. She was getting tired, she was well-past her usual bedtime, but she was enjoying herself. Still, she figured she could bow out for them, it was only right that she not be selfish.

"Well dads, I think it's my bedtime..." She'd thought her stream of consciousness openly and both
men were touched by it, but at the same time they didn't want her to feel like she needed to leave if she didn't really want to.

"Sorry little monkey. You don't have to go to bed you know, this is a vacation and you should be able to enjoy the night air without having to retreat from our... urges." Colin apologized, there was no point in hiding what was going through their heads. "It's just been a while..."

"It's okay Dad, you two just got married and spent what should have been your honeymoon dealing with..." she waved a hand "Everything. Since then we've been living in a one room guest cabin. I know what goes through your heads in the morning."

"Oh. Shit." Gene muttered. He didn't want his daughter to p'see or p'hear those thoughts, she was only ten and though she'd seen it before it was traumatic and he wanted to spare her any reminder of it.

"Ugh. Dad you're so American. I can handle the facts of life..." Her word was final and she got out of the tub and dried off quickly in the night air, before her hair could freeze. Zara got inside and closed the blinds, accommodating or not, she didn't want line of sight.

"Well... that settles that." Gene remarked a little ruefully. "I never expected Zara to excuse herself to so we could defile a jacuzzi but apparently that's a thing now." Colin chuckled.

"Well, she does know... unlike mundane kids she can't pretend we're sexless beings, and it...well..." the mirth disappeared thinking about that.

"Yeah, she... bou...I don't know if bouncing back is the right term?"

"It's not, I'm not really sure there is a word for it but age-appropriate doesn't really have meaning anymore." Gene sighed at that. Worried.

"We're good parents, right?"

"I think so?" Colin replied, he couldn't stop himself anymore. He transitioned to thought and started laying a line of kisses down Gene's neck. <We love her to pieces, protect her while respecting her autonomy and intellect... I think everything else flows from that, but I'm not sure.> Gene arched his back as Colin ran his fingers down his sides and snaked his hands around.

<That's good enough for me...> Gene replied

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**Thursday April 30th, 2263**

The Springs were home base, but that didn't preclude hiking and camping, it was just where they were going to return every few days to rest after walking for a total of twenty miles and camping in tends. Zara decided she liked camping but she hadn't seen any bears yet. Gene-Dad was almost paranoid about camp cleanliness and making lots of noise so they didn't show up.

"Hey Dad" Zara finally asked and he knew it was referring to him.

"Yeah?"

"You know I want to see grizzly bears and yet you take every precaution so I don't. What gives?
You hang all the food, sing while we walk. You have a good voice but come on!"

"Do I really?" Gene asked. He was serious too, he wasn't messing with her. It's just what he did. Zara laughed. She couldn't help it. She had a mental image of her dad hanging up the food on some uninhabited world that didn't have large predators, because it's just what he always did while rough camping and hadn't thought about the reason why he did it ever since he was younger than she was.

"You do, dear." Colin confirmed for him. Then Gene got contemplative.

"Huh. I guess I do." then he smirked "But if you want to be less safe at night, I can arrange that. I mean, if you want a hungry bear to come crashing through your tent, I can take extra special care to make that happen. I'll spread fish guts all over the campsight for you." She gave him a steady look.

"Reverse psychology doesn't work on me Dad."

"Damn it. I've been found out... Alright alright. I'll stop singing some of the time, but I'm still hanging up the food at night. Good compromise?" Zara thought it over. She didn't necessarily want to be woken up by a hungry bear in the middle of the night, she just didn't want to scare them all off during the day.

"Works for me." She declared.

Several hours later, and the sun was starting to get low on the horizon, it wasn't dusk yet, not by any stretch, but it was around four in the afternoon and the shadows were getting a bit longer. That's when Zara caught it. A hungry thought, not from her parents, but from a nearby patch of blueberries. She looked over, and camouflaged against the earth was a great big bear. It had to mass in at three hundred kilos, and he was barely twenty meters away. Both Colin and Gene turned and froze. They were way too close to comfort and they both marveled about how they missed it while they instinctively put themselves between the bear and her, which she wasn't about to tolerate.

<Come on Dads, he's not going to hurt me. In fact...> Zara extended her mind outward and into the bear. He didn't have a care in the world, he wasn't afraid and he wasn't so hungry that he wanted to go after the cub of one of the strangely shaped ones. Especially when they were confidently standing their ground like that. Zara started by making him inquisitive, suggesting that they might have food that wasn't theirs. After all, the strangely shaped ones sometimes produced sweet crunchy things. The memory that came to the animals mind seemed to Zara like granola bars. The bear got up and shambled over. It might have been a shamble to the bear but with legs that long he covered the distance fast, sniffing and snuffling for the sweet crunchies. She had them but they were sealed and she didn't exactly want to reinforce that bad behavior.

<Zara, what's your plan? That bear is making me nervous...> Gene asked. He was poised to put the animal down if things started to go wrong, but strangely enough Zara seemed to have things under control.

<Bear cavalry.>

The bear, who she named Ashton for some reason, was within five meters and wondering where the food was. Instead, she stepped up and approached. Ashton was confused, the strange ones didn't do that, they usually ran or threw food at that point. Confusion lead to fear and he stood up
and gave her a warning bellow not to come any closer. Zara suggested to him that he was perfectly safe and that she wasn't food either. He stood down back on all fours. She reached out with her hands and scratched his ears, and that felt *amazing*. Ashton didn't have a concept for the word but he really liked that and leaned his head - a head that was as big as her torso - into her dexterous little fingers.

<Success!>

<Just remember to make sure he doesn't approach other people like this.> Colin told her <It'll get him killed. I'd do it but you need to take responsibility for things like this.>

<I know Dad. It's okay. I've got this.> Zara replied, and starting giving Ashton neck scratches. It was like petting a really big dog, and petting a big dog was always so satisfying... At the same time she slipped deeper into his mind and stopped the association forming between people and getting head and neck pets. Instead, it was just her and parents, recognized by scent. Ashton felt something like a brain freeze and sneezed, shaking his head a little bit in confusion, but he wasn't uncomfortable or scared. Then Zara clambered up on his back.

"Who's a good boy!? Yes you are, you're the best most biggest boy!" she cooed at him, and he made a happy rumbling sound. "So... shall we continue the hike?"

"I'm blaming Colin for this." Gene remarked, standing down from his defensive posture, clearly as insane as it was, she had it under control. He thought they'd been kidding about Zara riding a bear, but apparently she just took that as a challenge.

"Well he did teach me how to manipulate the minds of animals and birds are a lot smarter than bears..." Zara answered him.

"Yep. This is on me. I'm not taking the blame though, I'm taking the credit." When Colin started giving scratching the top of Ashton's head and Ashton started panting like a happy puppy, Zara knew she'd won. When Gene joined in and they started walking along the path guiding Ashton along like squires leading a knight's noble steed, Zara felt like she was at the top of the world. She wished Gerald were there to see it, but she also figured that he was wherever that door went and could maybe see it anyway.

About an hour later, with shadows lengthening, they came across their first mundane; a park ranger in the dark khaki of the US Forest Service coming from the other direction on horseback. She took one look at the three telepaths and Ashton the bear and brought her horse to an abrupt stop as she tried to get her thoughts to go somewhere other than 'What the hell am I seeing?'. Ashton took official notice and was momentarily displeased until Zara made absolutely certain that the bear wasn't afraid, and Colin calmed the horse. Buttercup was used to the smell of bears but this close was a big No-No for any herbivore. The two animals stared at each other across the fifteen meters of space between them; both confused because their normal reactions were being tamped down by telepaths.

"Hello officer!" Gene was cheerful, reveling in her confusion "What's your name?"

"Uh. Madeline?" she continued to stare. "Do... do you have any idea how dangerous what you're doing is?" She hadn't registered that they were telepaths.

"It's fine." Gene said "We're actually Psi Cops, trust me, the bear is perfectly friendly right now, and we've taken precautions to make sure he stays away from people in the future." Madeline's eyes finally saw the badges and gloves.
"You can do that?"

"Oh yeah. Our daughter Zara is a specialist when it comes to mucking around in the minds of animals. We're perfectly safe." It was at that point she realized her horse was calm when Buttercup really shouldn't have been. She believed him but all the same she couldn't let this continue.

"Okay, I hear you." Madeline was so taken aback by everything she just rolled with it to preserve her sense of order in the world. "But I can't let this continue. If nothing else if you run across someone else they're gonna run screaming, I guess. Either from you or... your friend." Zara was a bit disappointed but not upset. She knew the ranger was right.

"Yeah, I know." Zara said "It's just something I had to do the once." she slid off Ashton's back and nuzzled his forehead with hers. "Okay buddy, it's time for us to go." she accessed his sensory system to see what she could use as an excuse. She found it, far away there was some carrion. A wolf-kill maybe. She amplified that knowledge inside Ashton's mind to entice him to go investigate. It helped that he was pretty hungry. "I'll miss you." she hugged his big furry face and then let go. Ashton sauntered off into the underbrush in the direction of the smell.

"...Why the hell don't more telepaths become park rangers and wildlife biologists?" Madeline asked "The ability to do that is just...useful."

"We're not allowed." Zara replied evenly "Your laws prevent it otherwise I probably would. We're more useful to the state propping up capitalism or in the service of the military and intelligence services." it was bitter, but also a matter of public EarthGov policy. Madeline got it.

'Well it looks like conservation gets thrown under a bus with you guys' she thought to herself. Zara caught it.

"Yeah." then she caught Madeline's look "Sorry, the thought was outward-directed. Mental replies like that, we tend to pick up more than you having a conversation with yourself, if that makes sense."

"It's okay. And yeah, I think that makes sense."


Thursday May 7th, 2263

Walking through the Grant Tetons in spring was every bit as gorgeous as Yellowstone, but in a slightly different way. It was a rugged montane landscape, not a volcanic caldera. It was fertile because of the ash, but wasn't as affected by volcanism. Gene was reliving the good parts of his childhood, walking his husband and daughter through the places he once enjoyed, and trying to ignore the parental elephant in the woods.

"See that ridge up there?" he asked. Colin and Zara nodded "That's the one i took you to that one time. We're coming up the back side."

"Holy shit, really?" Colin was a bit incredulous, but then, Gene had never lied to him before.

"Yeah. Take a look over to the left. Same river."

"This is gonna be awesome." Colin commented. The season was different, the time of day was going to be different, but looking out over the valley with his own eyes just tickled him. That same valley Gene had showed him to give him some space from pain and death. Zara hadn't seen yet, and she openly questioned what the big deal was.
"This is a thing for you, isn't it Dad?" she asked.

"Yeah. It's something Gene shared with me when I really needed a distraction, and the view is gorgeous."

"Ah. I get it. It's like a couple's song, but instead it's a view you have to go to another planet to see together. Gotcha." Colin chuckled. It was exactly like that. It was a few miles and something of a climb, so it took them a while to get there. Zara got tired eventually with the incline so Gene gave her a piggyback as they climbed the ridge, but then, they turned around. Zara slipped off Gene's back and the two men held hands as they gazed across the valley floor.

"You were right." Zara smiled faintly, looking out over the whole vista, across the river toward the mountains, the forest on the other side. It was stunning to her in its simple beauty and as usual, her dads were in her thought loop.

**Monday May 11th, 2263**

There were trees everywhere, mostly deciduous trees that were currently barren of leaves. Gene looked at one of the houses, an older one, maintained well but clearly a few centuries out of architectural style. A massive ancient tree stood tall in the front yard with a treehouse - his treehouse - still in its branches. A treehouse that had been maintained. His memory flashed to the last time he'd seen it. He'd turned around just long enough to see his the door shut.

"The hell? You'd think they'd have torn that down." He remarked to Colin who'd wrapped an arm comforting around his waist.

"Maybe appropriated by the local kids?" Zara asked.

"Maybe, or maybe they left and someone else moved in..."

Gene closed his eyes and sensed. "Three minds inside. Two are my birth parents, the other..." he went white as a sheet, and Colin knew why. So did Zara. Colin had to gently restrain Gene from charging through the door.

Gene's thoughts, his very soul, boiled over in a mixture of anguish and rage. I have a little brother and they've... they've done That to him!? HE CAN'T BE MORE THAN FIVE!!! his mind screamed while his actual screams were muffled against Colin's coat. He wanted to tear the house apart with his bare hands, to feel his parent's minds wink out, and pull the little brother he'd never known from the shattered wreckage.

<We can't. God I want to but we really can't.> Colin told him <But we can get him out. That we can do. But if we start killing then our own people will have to hunt us down. Besides, you don't want his first memory of you to be seeing that.>

<And I can't lose you Dad. Not that way.>

That got his attention. He didn't want that. He forced himself to calm down, running differential equations in his head until the world snapped back into focus. He took a deep breath and disentangled himself from Colin's arms. "You're right. Let's do this." Christ does he even know what he is? Does he even know why? Does he know he has a brother?

Gene tied the cheek-pieces of his Ushanka up on the cap so they'd be sure to recognize his face
when they got to the door, then he stabbed the doorbell with a gloved finger and struck the door with his other hand. The gloves muffled the rapping, but he used his knuckle to minimize the effect. There was nothing at all polite about his seeking entry. The door opened and revealed his father. Jeremy Hendriks was taller than his son, with brown hair and a beard flecked with grey hairs.

"Good afternoon." Gene said. "I'm Eugene Hendriks and this is my partner Colin Meier, and your granddaughter Zara Tam." He saw the recognition on his father's face and in his mind, even as his own father tried to gaslight him.

"How dare you use that name." Jeremy growled "Gene is dead." subtext, 'to me'.

"Clearly, he isn't." Zara spat as Jeremy tried to close the door in their face, but the wonderful think about steel toed and shod boots was the protection they offered to Gene's foot when he put a stop to that bullshit.

"I came to introduce you to your son in law and granddaughter, and maybe tell you to fuck yourself, but it seems that's not all I'm here for you fucking monster."

Jeremy tried to force the door closed against that resistance, but a wooden door against steel would only be a losing proposition for the door, and it started to crack under the man's weight. Zara gave her grandfather a hard look and triggered his motor cortex to lock into a contraction of his right gastrocnemius, the resulting painful muscle spasm forced Jeremy to the floor, trying to massage out the kink in his calf muscle. Gene forced the door. A thumping sound from the stairs, and his mother was at the landing with a shotgun.

"Jer, what's going on?!" then she saw her son and another man in full Metapol uniforms with a very angry little girl behind them and gasped. A part of her wanted to level the shotgun and remove the threat from her home, another part of her was seeing someone she'd half-convinced herself was actually dead, and the other, mostly silent part, was ripped apart by the guilt of having turned away her - at the time - only child. Gene pulled his brother's name from her mind while Colin made sure his father didn't do anything stupid.

"Hi mom!" Gene said with the sort of cheer that dripped with contempt. "Let me guess, when Richard was a baby he just wouldn't stop crying."

Elizabeth Hendriks froze in place as Gene continued, he didn't even need to pull it from her thoughts. He could guess what being a manifesting telepath would be like for an infant and what the sequence of events would look like. "The only way he'd sleep is if she slept with you and Daddy Dearest." He spat both those last words, and almost spat on his father, who Colin was keeping supine with nothing but a hostile glare. "Finally, Richard stopped crying after months and he picked up language and how to walk absurdly quickly. That's when you noticed. When he'd answer your questions before you asked them, and saw things that only you could see, like the piece of paper on the counter. You didn't even try to hide it, did you? To keep him from joining the Corps or having to take drugs?" The answer his mother thought was No. They put him on Sleepers immediately, at less than two years old.

"It was too late for you! We can save him!" his mom yelled "We'll do it, even if it means letting those damned freaks into our home once a week!" She meant damned literally.

"Save him? You're stealing his birthright and putting chemical shackles on Richard's soul. It's going to stop, and if you object don't think for a picosecond that I can't force the issue."
To prove the point, he reached out, felt Richard's mind. Felt how every thought, every action, felt like it was being shoved through thick half-congealed gelatin, how his mind rebelled against the flatness of the world, knowing there was more but unable to perceive it; feeling like his body was being piloted rather than lived in. He took that and forced his parents to experience it, fixed it in a loop in both their minds so it was their entire existence, and left them there in the front room to cope with it however they wanted.

Colin and Zara followed Gene upstairs after helping Elizabeth into a nice safe fetal position on the floor; and Gene took him straight to a closet in the master bedroom. His mom must have heard the commotion downstairs and stashed Richard there when she grabbed the shotgun. Gene opened the closet and there was a little boy in there; but he wasn't five or six, he was closer to Zara's age physically, but Gene could p'see and Colin could diagnose the developmental delay brought on by Sleepers. The cocktail of drugs did terrible things to a developing mind, cutting off the binding of serotonin, dopamine, and acetylcholine to neurons necessary for brain function and development. Richard's Sleeper-addled brain was scared and mostly operating on instinct, and he recoiled from the strange men silhouetted against the bedroom lights. A child who used to to run and draw on the walls and yabber in full sentences at every adult in sight and who at ten should be growing into their own personality was reduced to a clumsy and clinically depressed six year old, consigned to special education programs when he should have been as sharp as Gene was.

"Mommy... Daddy..." Richard's call for help was listless and half-hearted, and it broke both men's hearts. Then he saw Zara there, and through the foggy cloud of his mind he felt a little bit safer. She looked nice, and if they had a kid with them they couldn't be that bad, could they?

"Richard" Zara started, picking up on that line of thought and running with it "I'm Zara, and I suppose I'm your niece because these are my dads, Gene and Colin. Gene is your older brother and Colin is his husband."

"Hey there buddy." Gene croaked, in the most soothing tones he could while trying to hold tears back and get the frog out of his throat.

"It's good to finally meet you." Colin added while simultaneously joining Gene and Zara in projecting an aura of love and comfort toward him. His mind instinctively reached out for it, tried to return it, but couldn't. Richard's telepathy sputtered like an engine that was simply out of gas. Still, he felt safer and that's what mattered.

"But..." he couldn't articulate the concept of 'mom and dad said my brother was dead' very well, but he was able to think it.

"They lied. I left just before you were born."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I'm like you. Remember when you could hear the voices?" Telepaths had better memories than mundanes, and Zara had to help Richard retrieve them but he had the memories and nodded. He remembered; he remembered being able to do a lot of things, but couldn't understand why he couldn't anymore. "We're here to take you somewhere else. Somewhere where you can be you. Where you'll feel better and be able to run and hear the voices again."

"Are mommy and daddy coming?" Gene shook his head.

"No little buddy. They can't. But they might come visit!" he tried to say that as cheerfully as he could and it was a bald-faced lie. He'd never see them again, but by the time he was old enough to
understand what had been done to him, Richard wouldn't want to. Gene half stood and went to pick him up. He didn't resist, and even helped as much as he could. Richard didn't need to know that his parents didn't want her to go, so Gene gently put him to sleep in his arms.

<Colin, have you drawn up the paperwork?>

<Yeah. The documents are drafted, they just need thumbprints. I'll be legal witness.>

<Thanks love.>

<No need to thank me. If we could get away with it, I'd help you hide the bodies.>

<I'd help you make them.> Zara added, and both her parents gave her a look.

<What? My grandparents are human trash!>

When they got downstairs, both of Gene's parents were still floored, literally. They hadn't moved. Gene considered them for a moment before bringing them out of their stupor just enough to function, just enough that it wasn't their entire life and more like Richard's life was.

"Now lets see which one of you breaks first. If you really think your religious bullshit is true and letting your son live like that is worth his soul, then we'll just do this illegally and you can keep living like you are for the rest of your lives. Afterall, parents should be willing to sacrifice for their children. We'll even eat the legal consequences if you somehow manage to find the energy to report this to anyone. Alternatively, you can save yourselves and we can do this whole thing nice and legal. What do you say?"

Neither of them had that kind of moral courage. The prospect of a living-death was so utterly terrifying to both of them that they signed the documents transferring custody of Richard Hendriks to the Psi Corps, with Gene and Colin as his legal guardians. Colin countersigned in his legal capacity within Metapol. Then both telepaths got to work ensuring that neither parent would ever regret that decision, wiping the memory and replacing it with a 'come to Jesus' moment after a candid soul-search with their elder child. Then, and only then, were they allowed to be something more than living zombies.

Despite everything, Gene left strangely happy. He strapped his little brother into a seat in the back of the car with Zara, glad in the knowledge that his little brother would grow up loved unconditionally in the Corps like he wished he had been and like his daughter was.

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