The Saving of the Technomages

by Dekri

Summary

This is a technomage focused story. It covers the finding of the cure by Galen and company. And dives into the history of the technomages, especially Federico, and what happens to their Order after the Shadow War and Plague. The main connecting story is set after the aired episodes of Crusade (about 2269).
**Prologue: The Saving of the Technomages**

TITLE: The Saving of the Technomages

DISCLAIMER: This Universe belongs to another—J M Straczynski, and Warner Brothers own the rights to the universe and most of the characters contained in this story. I’ve also borrowed, man-handled, twisted beyond recognition, the technomages that managed to live through Jeanne Cavelos’ Technomage Trilogy books and Peter David's awesome Legions of Fire, Centauri Trilogy (So Galen, Federico, Gwynn, Herazade etc.).

I wrote this for my own amusement and am only posting this because it seems likely now that very little new Babylon 5 material will ever make its way to us. I needed closure on the Crusade arc and what the ultimate fate of the technomages might be, so I decided to write it. I am disclaiming any and all intent to profit by this story. I intend no offense nor do I wish to decrease another’s intellectual property value.

RATING: M for language and sexual content.

SUMMARY: This is a story about what happened to the technomages in hiding. The main plot starts in 2269 with a cure having just been found. There are many asides.

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**Prologue**

**Vorlon Homeworld - 2255**

A lone Vorlon suspended itself in a cavernous dark chamber. Trillions of tiny spheres locked into a giant lattice surrounded it. They spread seemingly into infinity in all directions. Its body shimmered the displeased shades of orange-yellow as it began again and chose one sphere, then connected drawing a line to another, then to another. Its pace quickened through hundreds, thousands and finally millions of spheres. When it found the path to its goal, it became still to study the connections. Some of the spheres had not fully solidified yet out of the quantum foam. And they would not until they passed the immutable points and the nexuses forced the spheres to wholeness by their choices. Troubling uncertainty.

Its musing stopped when a piercing light of another but far smaller Vorlon illuminated the chamber. The new tiny Vorlon flew straight to the first. Its tentacles of light whipped about excitedly. A complex series of musical chimes disturbed the harmony of the spheres.

The little Vorlon chimed: //Two faiths come seeking coadunation. Noticing the completed path the small Vorlon stilled to examine the path of connected spheres. It intoned again but this time softly: //Is this the path across?

//Yes but understanding alludes. Who communes for the faiths?

The small Vorlon flashed the purple of amusement. //Are there ever any others? Righteous Fury and Oblique Truth. They bring their usual discordance.

The pair left the dark chamber and descended down a long light filled shaft. At the bottom a third Vorlon, that towered over both, joined the pair. Unified by space and purpose, the three glided into
an attached chamber and up onto a small raised dais and aligned themselves by size. Waiting for
the three, two more Vorlons in opaque white, floated below the base.

The three Vorlon bodies on the dais shimmered in unison the dark-blue for warm greeting and then
went neutral white as they intoned as one: //The Unifex welcome communion.

The two Vorlons at the base mimicked their greeting and intoned together: //Diverging faiths seek
the one path of perfect coadunation.

Immediately, the left Vorlon turned the orange-red of vengeful anger and started: //For a season
the Vorlon have felt the new cycle dawn. The First Shadow stirs out of its sleep. The Host is certain
that the Shadows will reclaim the fabulists before their chaos erupts. Balance, order demand the
simplest solution- eliminate the remnant at their current gathering. The Host prepares the orbital
bombardment.

Only the slightest trace of annoyed yellow rippled through the other Vorlon before it intoned:
//The fabulists have moved toward order since the humans held sway over them. Muses should consider
alternative solution- continued reserved watchfulness.

The left Vorlon turned dark red in a clash of sound: //They were a wave of death upon the Host in
the last cycle. They hunted us relentlessly for their Masters.

The right Vorlon remained a still yellow-white as it chimed: //In the last cycle they numbered like
stars. They are in waning at 506.

The left one vibrated with pulsing red from within, as the sound shifted low and deep: //One is too
many. The Shadows will corrupt the strongest to multiply their chaos.

The right Vorlon turned the green-yellow of thoughtful suggestion: //Many would serve order with
obedience if we but manifest to them.

The harsh clash sounded from the left Vorlon, as it darkened from red toward black: //Never! They
all carry the seed of the Shadows and can only sow chaos.

Still green-yellow, the right Vorlon did not give up: //This dark seed has grown toward light. The
humans infuse beauty, order and obedience to the fabulists.

The left Vorlon went black: //They are the Abaddon!

The Vorlons on the dais chimed in unison the single hard note of shattering. In obedience, the two
Vorlons at the base turned instantly the silent white.

Together the three on the dias sang together: //The Naranek of the faiths bare witness to the
judgment of the Unifex. The Host will come back to peace. Oblique Truth will go forth to watch as
Kosh, our face to the little scurrying ones.

The right Vorlon, Kosh, intoned perfect acceptance in neutral white. One of its tendrils looped
about itself and gently sang: //The Truth will not be swayed. The same tendril whipped at the three
on the dias and intoned: //Muses are intrigued and seek possibilities.

Its message delivered, Kosh glided smoothly out leaving behind the left Vorlon, which rippled
every shade of red.

Once they were only four, the middle Vorlon on the dais chimed: //Bring forth your true purpose.
The rippling red Vorlon at the base intoned: //My faith is steadfast with the spheres. Your judgment leads the Host to seek sanction.

As one, the three responded: //We continue our communion.

//The Host would draw a sample of the fabulists, to study and prepare the new Furies. We will acquire the holy number starting with the one that worships us. Will the Unifex sanction?

//We must consider the spheres.

The three Vorlons on the dais isolated themselves inside a perfect hollow diamond sphere that coalesced about them to create opaque isolation.

The largest Vorlon began: //The Unifex should not sanction. This will bring cruelty, contamination to the new Furies and will place Righteous Fury in ascension.

The smallest chimed in harmony: //Perfect agreement. The Furies grind all to dust.

The middle Vorlon intoned: //We will sanction and ask more of the Host.

The two other Vorlons flashed the bright pink of surprise. The largest Vorlon chimed: //Then Atoning has seen the final path across the spheres. Show us that we may follow.

As an answer a complex matrix enveloped them. They studied it silently in neutral white for a long time. The enormous Vorlon turned the sorrowful green as it chimed: //This path reeks of death. The humans stand at the center but too many of their spheres are unresolved. The end is impenetrable. Understanding alludes.

The tiny Vorlon turned purple-green for amused sadness. //The cycles come to an end with the Minbari once again in ascension. Can it mean anything other than order is finally imposed? We must obey without understanding. Perhaps the spheres will reveal themselves further as we come upon the immutable points and the nexuses reveal themselves. I will follow the path of Atoning.

The middle Vorlon chimed towards the largest Vorlon: //The Glorious Sun decides if we are one.

The largest began flashing the yellow-orange of perturbation as it oscillated in silence. Gradually it settled to the white of acceptance: //One path is no choice, but I will follow the path of Atoning, and Amused Spirit.

The diamond sphere dissolved into nothingness. In unison, three Vorlons descended to surround the lone Vorlon, encircling it. Each sent a tendril to link with the center Vorlon. Together they pulsed with the purple of agreement.

They intoned at the Vorlon at the center: //The Unifex sanction the Host to draw forth a sample of fabulists. The spheres sing of further preparations to commence this season. The Oblique Truth, as Kosh, guides the lesser ones against the coming darkness in the fifth human citadel. You, Righteous Fury, are Ulkesh, create new Furies and lead the Host to birth battleships, and sing to the Minbari to obey the call toward glorious order.

All the Vorlons turned the purple-blue of pleasurable agreement and intoned together: //Obedience to the spheres is our greatest joy.
Chapter Summary

The crew of the Excalibur rush the cure for the plague to Mars, when they receive a visitor.

2 - The Specter at the Banquet

Recreation Room 1- Aboard the Excalibur December 23, 2269

Dancing, music, endless bottles of alcohol, platters of terrible food, and court-martialable behavior dominated the largest recreation room aboard the Excalibur. Except at one corner table, seemingly unoccupied sat Galen, like a shadowy ghost, cloaked in a shield that rendered him invisible to all present. A tray of food sat untouched in the middle of the table. All around the sounds of the Excalibur crew celebrating echoed off the walls.

Galen mused to himself, Just like a convocation, well except for the food, really how can they eat this stuff. No wonder Matthew is always in such a foul mood.

Since he arrived, Galen watched Dureena. He hadn’t meant to, but it felt good to see her happy as she danced with Max. Regret and anger welled up in him for a second.

Continuing his musing, I wish for once I could just relax and join them. At least I can take some satisfaction now that Earth has its cure but I must make plans for how I will help Matthew afterwards on Mars. Then there is that black hole of despair and misery. I must find more time to go to Centauri Prime. At least Gwynn is capable. Finian on the other hand...

A message relayed by his tech, popped up from his ship.

/Perimeter warning: Ship entering long range sensor limit. Class: Technomage/

/Ship commence rune scan./

/Rune scan complete: Decrypting .../ (An image of a geared gyroscope with wings appeared in Galen's mind.)

Well this should be diverting at least. Galen left the celebration without anyone having known he had been there.

Bridge of the Excalibur

Tired didn’t begin to express how Gideon felt after the last three days. The toll, both physical and emotional from the rush of events, revelations, and what happened with Galen, had been great but
they finally had the cure. If only they could teleport it home like in the vids he watched as a child. Instead he had been running on caffeine and cat naps, that Dr Chambers insisted he take. Only a few more days, and they would be in orbit about Mars to hand off the cure, then down to Mars. He had swore to find justice for his dead shipmates from the Cerberus. Silently he repeated that promise and he would use everything in his power, even a certain inscrutable technomage who he could no longer trust, not after Scorpius 772A.

"What's the ETA of our escorts, Lt.?” asked Captain Gideon.

"The first White Star will intercept us in 12 hours 46 minutes,” replied Lt. Matheson.

"And to Earth?"

"Now 3 days 2 hours 14 minutes,” said Lt. Matheson.

"I'm heading to my quarters to shower and then I’ll grab something to eat from the party. I'll be back in 30. Lt. Matheson, you have the bridge. Contact me if anything changes," said Captain Gideon half way out of his seat.

"Yes sir … Captain, we are picking up a ship on long range scanners."

"Now what. Can we get an ID on it Lt.?” Gideon stayed standing. With the adrenaline started he would not be able to relax again for a while.

"It's coming in now sir ... it's a technomage ship, it's requesting permission to land,” said Matheson with some surprise.

"Granted. Contact Galen if you can find him, tell him he has a guest and to meet me in the docking bay,” said Gideon rushing from the bridge.

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As Gideon climbed into the transport tube, Galen greeted him in a flat distracted voice, "Matthew."

It still startled Gideon after all this time, even though he should be used to it. "I assume you know who is coming. Is it Alwyn?"

"No," replied Galen with unfocused eyes.

"Another technomage? Is there going to be trouble?"

"I don't believe so."

"Good. You’re still on the outs with your Order, correct?"

Galen looked at Gideon for the first time and let out a heavy breath, “Who can tell anymore?”

Gideon gripped his knees firmly and snapped, “Galen … we're heading back to Earth with the cure and the last thing I need is two technomages fighting it out on my ship.”

Galen smirked as he responded, "Have no fear, anything of that sort would be over quickly and I promise not to leave a mess.”

Maybe it was the lack of sleep. Maybe the constant realization that the mage never revealed anything to anyone, unless confronted. Or maybe it was the fact that now he knew Galen was as shadow touched as the hybrid that destroyed the Cerberus. Gideon snapped, “Like what you did to
those marines on Scorpius?"

Gideon hadn’t meant to lose his cool, but he hated this new uncertainty. Instead of an answer, Galen pulled his hood up. With a deep cleansing breath, Gideon focused on the problem at hand. He said, "I assume you are still planning on staying with us till we get the samples to Dr. Franklin."

From inside the darkness of the hood came, "I disobeyed my Order over their refusal to directly intercede in this affair. I'm hardly going to listen to them now Matthew."

"Good because the Drakh know about us and they have over three days to stop us. Of course having another technomage around might be useful. Who is it?"

"It is ... I suppose you would say a friend of mine. For once I also don't know what this will be about."

"You with a friend? Wonders never cease.” Again, another biting comment flew from Gideon and again the mage took it without any visible reaction.

In silence they road the rest of the way to the docking bay. Together they arrived in time to watch a second technomage ship neatly settle next to the first one. A gyroscope with outstretched metal wings rotated on its right wing. Each ring made up of small interlocking red colored gears moved in unison. The wings suddenly flapped and then the entire image vanished.

After standing there for well over a minute Gideon asked, "Are we supposed to go up and knock?"

With a frown Galen said, "I would not recommend you do that. Consider this all part of the mystery."

The hatch opened and a ramp neatly slid down. A man walked down the ramp with a hint of a limp. Gideon, grateful for having mastered hiding his facial expressions through poker, did not react externally to the technomage’s appearance. He had the same knowing smirk Galen usually wore but the similarity ended there. First, he had hair, long thick black carelessly tied hair, and a big bushy beard. Completely unlike Galen's usual appearance, he wore an elaborate yellow velvet jacket, a white shirt with ruffles and red pants with clearly visible golden embroidery. His clothes while impressive looked like they have seen better days with the jacket clearly worn at the elbows and his pants streaked with light scorch marks. A bright yellow silk scarf wound snuggly about his neck and finished with an elaborate knot. A parrot and swashbuckling sword would have completed the look, except he had neither. Instead he wore only one glove on his left hand. Gideon looked at Galen inside his hood. A more severe frown, etched his smooth features.

The technomage silently stopped opposite Galen. Smiling broadly and swatting Galen’s shoulder, he said enthusiastically, "It's good to see you Galen. Boy you guys are far from home. I’ve never been this close to the rim before. It feels pretty lonely out here."

Galen quickly reached up and pulled the scarf away from his neck revealing deep red burns. The mage kept grinning but grabbed Galen’s hand pulling it away slowly.

“Hey, leave my cravat alone. It took me two minutes to figure out how to tie that knot.”

Galen shouted, "Who did this to you Federico?!!"
Author's Note: Yes, good reader you will see what happened between Galen and Gideon on Scorpius (and Dureena for that matter) in a later chapter.
Chapter Summary

A meeting of the Technomage Circle.

Author’s Note: I wrote the original of this for fun after finishing the technomage mage trilogy, to flush out the interesting characters that I found to be too 1-D fluff. All, names and characters borrowed from Jeanne Cavelos excellent trilogy. Now Politics ahoy! No need to thank me. You’re all welcome.

Chapter 3 - Technomage Politics 101

The Chamber of the Circle, Technomage hiding place - Eight Years Earlier - November 1, 2261

Federico strolled into the Circle’s Meeting Chamber with his hands in his pockets, squeezing his ball. With the lights on, no illusions hid the bland, drab gray hued walls of rock. This room could really use some color, Fed thought, kinda like the Circle. Hera always wore predictable blue, the rest, in classic technomage fashion, all black. Today Fed had chosen his favorite 18th century look, like a muskateer, but without the fancy hat, or high heels.

His lateness would catch flak, but he didn't care. None of them will like what he had to say. Not that he cared about that either, except for Hera. He guessed she’d shout at him today and that had him fidgeting but she never could stay mad at him for long. So it'll work out, he hoped.

With a scowl, Miostro said, "Nice of you to finally join us."

The four other members of the Circle already sat about the silver meeting table. In the middle, Herazade leant slightly to her left, listening to Celaene whisper in her ear. To her far right sat Miostro and Tzakizak exchanging whispers while throwing sneers at Fed as he ambled his way to his usual chair to Herazade's far left.

The hushed conversation stopped when Herazade raised her hand. The room went dark except for a spot light on the table. Instead of the bland gray room, their table stood in the middle of the Curia Julia. The ancient Roman columns and seats acted as the only spectators.

With a wave of her hand, Herazade made a glowing script list in the middle of the table. Their agenda.

Herazade spoke, “Let us begin by discussing Vergil’s tech generation and feasibility report. Then we must vote on whether we will approve his request. Then…”

He released the ball at the same time he interrupted Herazade, “Before we get into all that, I’d like to bring a motion before the Circle for immediate debate.”
Groans and grunts came out of everyone else at the table, except for Herazade, who merely locked him with a frosty stare.

Tzakizak shouted, “Oh give it up Fed! We’ve voted on the issue of leaving the hiding place 28 times thanks to you and every vote has been exactly the same. I agree with you while the others here don’t. I accepted the Circle’s decision. You must as well,” He pointed at Herazade, “Why haven’t you told your boy here to shut up and move on already?!”

Herazade brought her hands together in front of her, looking down upon the table as if she prayed. “It is his right to bring any issue before the Circle for debate, no matter how tedious he is about it. Does anyone wish to to amend or alter their position?” Herazade looked at Miostro.

He waved his hand dismissively and said with a sonorous voice, “I have nothing new to add.”

Celaene, slow to realize it was her turn, softly said, “I still agree with your reasoning Herazade.”

Herazade turned to Tzakizak, who immediately bounced out of his chair to argue.

With balled fists, Tzakizak said, “I’m the only one here with an chrysalis apprentice who was supposed to have been initiated this year. So yes I’m still in favor of ordering every mage capable of walking to go and scour the galaxy for more of our tech. We must hound the Drakh! The Shadows used them to provide us with tech and they stripped Z’ha’Dum. If any survived Sheridan’s nuclear themed soiree, they will have it or the means to make more. I propose one from this table must go and…”

Herazade cut him off, “You are losing focus on the current debate, but you bring up a good point about the chrysalis stage mages. We will discuss them at our next meeting. Now Fed, shall we forgo your standard speech and just take a vote then move on?”

“No, I have a new speech.” Time to channel Galen, Fed thought to himself. He changed his face to look like he had just attended the funeral of someone he didn’t like. Fed stood up as Tzakizak threw himself back in his chair.

Fed started, “The Shadow War ended nearly a year ago. Why are the technomages still in hiding? We tell the Order it is because of the Drakh, who are a threat to us. But that is a lie. The truth is your selfish fears keep us here! (He pointed at Miostro.) You are afraid of losing the adulation of your monastic cult. You live for their adoration. (Fed pointed at Celaene.) You are afraid of making your own decisions so you hide in Herazade’s shadow. (Fed pointed to Tzakizak.) You are afraid you’re the last of your line. All you want is to go on the hunt and damn the consequences. Every time you open your mouth you scare the crap out of the others and they are even less likely to let anyone leave. (Fed pointed to Herazade.) You …,” His speech faltered as his voice soften, “Are afraid of everything spiraling out of your control again so you’ve gone full control-freak mom on everyone.”

We can NOT let fear govern this decision! So I ask AGAIN that the Circle reconsider and break the wards on the hiding place. Let the Order return to its rightful place in the galaxy. We should be helping the InterStellar Alliance clean up the enormous mess left behind by the Shadows and Vorlons- not sequestered away in this rock.”

With a wave of his right arm in anger, a cold wind blew across the table momentarily. Everyone about the table sat stunned as Fed retook his seat. Staring at the sharp cold blue of the reflect light, the relief of the speech being done made him giddy. That sounded Galeny, he reassured himself. His hand went back into his pocket to fiddle with his ball.
A harsh slow deliberate clap from Tzakizak made him look up.

Tzakizak said, “Oh well said … Galen. Does he even know he has a willing disciple in you? My guess is no since he seemed reluctant to give you the time of day and now he’s left us without so much as a, *by your leave*. (His gaze flickered to Herazade.) You know Fed, you’re *adorable* when you give us glimpses of your idealistic side. I just figured out how you get all those women to sleep with you. Hell, I can barely resist you right now.”

Herazade slammed a hand on the table, startling everyone with the sound of a thunderclap that echoed once about the room. “I will not tolerate petty insults in this chamber, Tzakizak, you have been warned.” (She spoke like a judge handing out a sentence.) … Our fears do not matter as long as we stay united and focused on our work. Federico you are hereby censured for disrupting our meetings and worse, for wasting our time! If you bring this issue up again you will be dismissed from the Circle summarily and replaced. Am I understood?!"

Fed couldn't look at her, he expected a warning at worse, not this. He was in trouble. His leg began to bounce and he spun his ball fast in one hand in his lap. The illusion of the Curia dissolved. The room once again looked gray.

Herazade continued to fill the silence, “We will take a one hour break then resume. (Everyone but Herazade rose.) No Federico, I will speak with you.”

Tzakizak laughed deeply as he headed for the exit.

Once everyone exited, Fed sat back down and played with his ball, throwing it back and forth between his hands. *Just play it cool*, he told himself. If he could shift the blame enough, he'd get away with it. A slow smile spread across his face as he looked at her, “You know this is all your fault. You’re the one who insisted I run for the Circle.”

Herazade allowed herself half a smile. “That thought has occurred to me, and so has the thought that I should have disciplined you more as a child. You realize I’m serious?”

“About booting me from the Circle? Sure. I’ll back down.”

She let out a relieved breath and said, “Good, I would loathe having to do it.”

His hands and legs calmed. She wasn't upset. He'd gotten away with it. “Tzak’s right. Why didn’t you tell me to shut up months ago?”

“Frankly, you needed the practice in formal discourse. You’ve improved considerably. I especially liked your little flourish at the end.” Herazade brought her hands together in front of her face, her slight smile morphing into a severe frown. “But you admire Galen far too much.”

“That’s because he’s the best of us Hera. Not just the most powerful, forgive me, but I think the wisest. Remember, all those times you lectured me about the greatest precept in the Code was the last- ‘Good.’ He’s the only one doing any.”

The lightning flash in her eyes, made him want to hide under the table.

“It’s a shame he ignores the first, ‘Solidarity.’ I see I need to put my distrust of him in simple terms you can understand. … He is arrogant, unyielding even when he can and should, more self-righteous than Elric ever managed, and the most divisive figure in the Order. Then there are his various little psychoses: He is above influence because isolates himself from everyone, obsessive compulsive, has suicidal tendencies, and he harms himself to maintain control. Last of all, the one that concerns me the most because it affects the entire Order, he can not be trusted to obey the
Circle.”

Fed spoke up, “That’s not fair and you know it! I’ve watched him closely, might I remind you at your request, and okay, I’ll admit he’s the Emir of Ennui, but he hasn’t had any issue, psychotic or otherwise, since he returned from helping Sheridan on Z’ha’dum. He’s been the ideal technomage.”

“For his sake, I hope you are correct but his explanation as to why … this supposed becoming ‘one with his tech.’ What does that even mean? He might as well say he sprinkled fairy dust on himself. He’s had a year to teach us but no one has been able to duplicate it or even understand what he’s talking about. It’s NOT science until someone else has reproduced his claim.”

“I don’t get it either, but I believe in Galen.” Herazade rolled her eyes and relaxed back in her chair letting out an annoyed grunt. “He said Blaylock managed to become one with his tech but he couldn’t confirm it because …”

Herazade interrupted him, “Because Blaylock immediately died. That is more cause for concern than celebration!”

Dejected, Fed said, “You’re probably right. Anyway it doesn’t matter. Everyone’s given up trying, even Miostro and what’s left of Blaylock’s lot. Look, Hera … we’re all arrogant and Galen’s style doesn’t matter because he always does what’s right. Officially, you’ve disapproved of Galen loudly enough for all to hear, but I’ve always wondered why you never really punished him, apart from a tongue-lashing. Hell, you punished me worse when I mouthed off at Miostro during our first full Circle meeting. I still can’t get the smell of sewage out of my boots. Not to mention, in one breath you called him a traitor who deserves flaying then in the next you entrusted him with the most vital job we have, monitoring our probe network. And now he somehow slips off quietly into the night, you don’t mention it or declare him rogue. Nothing. It doesn’t add up.”

With a wave of her hand, she dismissed his comment. “There is no point to continuing this discussion. It is clear we will never agree about Galen.”

“I’m coming to a point. You want to know what I think? You don’t want to draw attention to how flagrantly he flaunts our authority and you just might have secretly approved of his leaving.”

She shook her head no and silently studied him. Fed squeezed his ball until his knuckles turned white.

“Then why?” Still mute she just stared at him. Fed began throwing his ball at a far wall talking to himself. “If you disapproved him leaving you would’ve cut off his access to our network when he left yesterday but I checked and you haven’t. So tell me what happened with Galen. (Herazade looked away but stayed silent.) … Oh come on Hera, talk to me! … You once said I’m the only one you totally trust. Prove it. Don’t hide things. That led to Kell’s downfall, or at least that’s what you told me. We’re here to share the burdens of leadership.” Her eyebrows moved up in surprise. I got her, Fed thought.

After a dead breath, she spoke, “Perhaps you are ready to hear… Galen came to my office two nights ago. He was ‘concerned’ about the Drakh. They appear to have started settling on Centauri Prime and have been raiding some of the ISA trade routes. He believes they are gathering supplies to build a fleet of warships. He said I should release him to investigate further and to stop them if he can. I said no. It’s too early to move on the Drakh.

You were correct about the Drakh, Fed. They are not a threat to us, that is until we involve ourselves in opposing their schemes. We are few, our numbers shrinking, they are many and
growing. Everyone is well hidden. The only sane and safe course is to wait patiently and watch for the day the Drakh leadership reveal themselves. Only then can we strike with one sure blow eradicating them. In the meantime, the threat of the Drakh, a common enemy, will further unify the ISA.”

Fed shook his head no and interrupted her saying, “I see your point, but no. What about the people they’re killing right now? The Drakh might do huge harm if they’re allowed to become a power. If we nip them in the bud as they grow.”

She held up a silencing hand, “Galen already made your argument and more eloquently. We can debate them another time. Getting back to what happened with Galen. He said he was leaving regardless of my opinions. That he only came to tell me out of politeness and if I wanted to stop him, I’d have to make good on my threat to flay him. He ended by saying, and I’ll quote him here because I think you will enjoy it… ‘I’ll give you a head start. I’ll go sit in my quarters quietly for the next two hours. I have no idea how many technomages it will take to subdue me but I would bring at least two dozen if I were you. I await your convenience. Have at me.’ Then he got that amused, self-righteous look he’s perfected recently. You can image how I reacted.”

Fed covered his face with his hands to muffle his laughs. He said, “So he called your bluff, then what?”

With a huge frown, she said, “Once I stopped feeling like I wanted to electrocute him and instead just needed to smack him, I explained that if I wanted him dead I would never come at him like some sort of horde of Huns. Then I took him to his quarters, he packed, and I let him out the east airlock. Just before he left he revealed the true reason why he had come to me. He asked if I would allow him to keep his Circle level network access. I told him he can have unfettered use to our data and probe networks, if he does not compromise the hiding place. In return I asked him to not arbitrarily destroy any more of our tech that he encounters, but to inform us of it. He got a disgusted look and said, ‘I will let you know if I find anything useful.’ Now you know all. He is essentially a free agent.”

“I’m glad you let him go… Wait how did you let him out without a majority authorization code?”

Herazade shrugged. “I forget.”

With a finger snap, Fed lit up and said, “Oh man, you built back-doors into the locking wards and servers. I’m going to have to go looking now.”

She approvingly nodded, “Seeking knowledge is an integral part of the technomage Code.”

“But I still don’t get it. Why didn’t you tell the rest of us?”

Exasperated, Herazade impatiently chided, “Haven’t you been listening to me?! He’s divisive, uncompromising and disobedient. Our new Circle is too young. We are still weak and easily divided. Deciding Galen’s fate would only lead to another maelstrom among us. Oh sure you would have been tickled pink, however... Tzakizak would have wanted him flayed but he would have settled for siding with Miostro and Celaene, who would both insist he be stripped of his privileges; his ship, his staff, his access to information and cast out of the Order as unfit. I was not sure if I could persuade Celaene otherwise. Galen does not have my approval but I will protect him.”

Throwing his ball around again, Fed said, “That still doesn’t make sense to me. Why would you?” She didn’t help him. Her unblinking stare reminded him too much of when he was still her apprentice and she thought the answer obivous. The trouble was this had no obvious answer. Why
would she protect Galen? What did he have she’d want? He was the most powerful mage in the Order. He snapped a finger, “Oh, I get it. Galen’s a loose cannon, but the rest of the Circle thinks he’s your loose cannon. Your personal agent. That scares them, and you like that because it makes you look stronger. So they don’t challenge you. Am I right?”

A tiny yes came out of Herazade. Her eyes flashed pride in his figuring it out. It made him happy to have her approval. Time to lose it again.

“That’s some Grade A politicking bullshit Hera. You're already stronger than the rest of us combined,” Fed said with a smile.

The lecturing master replaced the proud one. Herazade found her voice, “It’s not bullshit, when there is one on the Circle who would very much like to see me stumble, and worse would love to see you fall.”

They both say at once, “Tzakizak.”

Her fingers began to dance in front of her, as if she were warding herself from the devil. She stared off into the distance past Fed and said, “I protect Galen because, for all his faults, Galen is your friend, and you will need powerful friends to stay alive with this Circle. And second, at least he has never tried to kill me.”

The memories of the fighting in the dining hall reared up in Fed’s mind. He’d seen plenty of people die before then, but that was the first time he’d had to kill someone, and worst it was a fellow brother in the Order. “Oh ya, our little civil war. Your forgive and forget speech at Tzakizak seemed to placate him then. Has he …?”

“No he’s been quiet and well behaved since then. I forgave because I had no choice, but never forget his breaking our solidarity led to 40 of our number dying. Be careful with him Fed.”

“I’ll try. But what are you going to do when Galen comes back?” “I’ll start with pretending he was never gone and hope the others play along. I’m making Galen your problem.” With a smile, she pointed a finger at Fed.

“I’m not sure I like the sound of this,” joked Fed.

“I don’t want to talk to him unless I have to. He infuriates me too easily. Create a daemon to watch all his network activities and let us know if he does anything dangerous or interesting.”

Fed stared off beyond Herazade with unfocused eyes for a second before saying, “Done.”

“I think I deserve a guess about the fears that motivate your vote to leave the hiding place.”

“Shoot.” Fed raised his hands in an inviting gesture.

“You are afraid that you’ll never see a real sky again, that you’ll spend your life trapped here on this rock and you’ll never get to prove to yourself that good can come from the powers you’ve been given.”

Talking to her like this was fun. Fed’s smile got larger. “You got it all, except I usually call this (he lifted his arms in a grand all encompassing gesture) a shithole instead of a rock.”

“Aldous no doubt would have been proud to hear that. Your time will come. Meanwhile the Order
needs every mage to pour their energy and creativity into solving the most pressing problem we’ve ever faced. I want you to review these. (Fed’s tech received dozens of files from Herazade.) I want your comments before I submit them to the rest of the Circle.”

Every file appeared to contain elaborate schematics to expand or rebuild parts of their hiding place.

While continuing to examine the designs, he asked, “Are you turning our rock into a research facility?”

“Very perceptive Fed.”

“What are all these little spec files at the end? … We don’t have most this stuff, and there are … people listed here … are these jump gate components?”

“Yes.”

“This’ll take forever.”

“If we stay united, and can overcome the technological hurdles, I estimate 15 to 20 years.”

“Sweet Zombie Jesus! I’m never getting out of here.”

“You’ll feel better after you’ve eaten. Go get us some food. We’ll discuss everything in more detail over dinner.”

Fed stood to leave, but paused to ask, “Was I at least right?”

“About the others? Yes.” Herazade already distracted, looked lost in thought as her fingers danced on the surface of the table.

“No, about you.” Fed got her attention.

“Me? You know me, I’m no power crazed tyrant.” She waved him away with a dismissive hand.

Fed crossed his arms, not accepting the answer. “That’s not what I said. Forgive me Hera but, your plans… it feels like you’re basically hugging the Order to death.”

The sound that came out of her was somewhere between a sigh and an annoyed grunt. She crossed her arms to match his stance. “I do not fear losing control over the Order, Fed. I want you above all to understand this. Our tech is the one thing that kept the Order united, the thing that connected us throughout our history. Not our traditions, not the Circle or not even the Code. It’s all about the tech. And the handing it down from one generation to the next. That is the true reason we all came together every 3 years at our convocations. Right now we have nothing to bequeath but some lucrative investments and well tended databases. You spoke of doing good. Yes, the Order could do good right now, but only until your generation dies out, another fifty to seventy years perhaps. Instead, shouldn’t we provide the next 100 generations of technomages with the means to do good? That will not be possible if the Circle breaks the wards. Everyone will scatter to do their own thing, and it will guarantee our …” She sketched a complex crackling lightening rune in the air between them.

“I don’t recognize that rune.”

“It is the ancient rune for extinction and I will not allow that to happen. Not while I watch anyway.” She put her hands together in supplication.
Federico stared at her unsure of what to say. Whenever this happened before, he trusted Hera and hoped her plans would work out. “Okay I’m with you, but what if we can’t research our way out of this hole and what we need is out there?” He pointed to the ceiling while plastering a challenging smile on his face.

With another dismissive wave, she said, “Just between the two of us, soon I will be ready to agree to Tzak’s wishes, well a limited version anyway.”

Fed’s eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“Wow, now that’s what I call cognitive dissonance. If you agree with him, why the hell have you been tripping him at every turn?” Herazade raised an eyebrow at him. Fed snapped his finger, “Oh ya, he tried to kill you.”

“Here is some extra homework for you. Start working on a list of technomages who are completely loyal to the Circle and you would personally trust to be our eyes, ears and hands. (Fed’s eyes lit up.) And do not put yourself at the top of the list.”

Pouting, Fed asked, “Where are they going?”

“Wherever we need to, but we will start with Centauri Prime and Mars.”

#

Eight Years Later - Excalibur Docking Bay - December 23, 2269

Anger, worry seeped into Galen words, “Have the others been harmed? What has happened?!” Fire and destruction fueled Galen’s imaginings. Who would attack someone as benign as Fed? Had the hiding place been discovered?

With a relaxed step back, Federico held up a calming hand and said, "Hey, calm down. The burns are just a souvenir from my encounter with a Drakh engine exhaust port. I want talk to you.” He looked pointedly at Gideon. “Privately.” Galen forced calmness. No, clearly Fed was involved in something less apocalyptic. Turning inward to his tech he listened to the new mage’s tech. It hummed. Fed had low level spells running in a loop and the edges of repressed pain prickled Galen like splinters in his palm.

Unruffled, Gideon commanded, "Look, Federico was it, if there are Drakh near here I need to know their strength and where they are. Also you should let our doctor take a look at you first before your little reunion."

Galen took Federico by the arm and drug him along to the exit out of the docking bay. "Matthew is right, be a good boy and come along to their Medlab. I will go intercept the Drakh. Uplink everything to my ship.”

“I prefer to be called Fed, Captain. And before you run off, Galen, I’ve dealt with the Drakh while I was aboard their ship master. I reprogrammed their navigation and tracking systems. They won’t be bothering you unless one of them manually checks the hyperspace beacon and notices it doesn’t match their computers, but the Drakh aren’t renowned for their individual initiative. I’m tracking all the ships just in case. They’re irrelevant. I’m here about something else.”

The three men climbed into the transport tube. Galen's tech connected to Fed's to receive the tracking data. The pain grew, enough that Galen had to shunt it aside. Studying Fed, his friend’s
face looked as jovial as ever, he must have turned off his pain receptors. Galen relayed the tracking
data to the Excalibur’s computer. He sent a response to Fed.

/A direct course for Minbar. They're in for a surprise. /

/I probably should warn the Minbari defense forces. Oh well, I'm sure it will all work out. /

/What are you doing out here Fed? Are you about the Circle's business? /

/Here specifically, no. I am just collecting supplies for a mission./

/What could you possibly need from a Drakh ship? /

/Nothing. I was tracking the Excalibur when I noticed them following you. I guessed that would be
bad for you, so I snuck aboard and hacked their system. A total piece of cake. I took a real good
look at their control systems. It was fun poking around until I was slipping back out an exhaust port
and they kicked their engines into overdrive. I was a bit slow reinforcing my shield. Some plasma
leaked through. Ruined my favorite jacket but I’m alive, so it’s all good. /

/I’m glad to hear it. What do you want with me Fed? /

/You’re the last item on my supply list. /
Chapter 3- Galen’s Order

Transport Tube - Aboard the Excalibur December 23, 2269

Like a third wheel on a date, Gideon watched the two technomages staring at each other with shifting expressions. They might look very different but the secrecy clearly universal among them. It figured that they’d leave him out.

“I hate to interrupt your reunion but I'm going back to the bridge. Galen, as soon as he coughs up telemetry on the Drahk, forward it to the bridge.”

"Already done Matthew. We will be in Medlab should you need me to come up and hold your hand.”

After what he said to Galen on the tram ride to the hanger, he had Galen’s snideness coming. It almost felt like old times, almost. The new technomage seemed to have a restorative effect on Galen. As Gideon double timed back to the bridge gritting his teeth, he hoped that was a good thing.

Fed watched the Captain of the Excalibur leave. He didn’t looked pleased to have Fed around, and the looks he gave Galen, made Fed wonder if they had just had an argument. Fed gingerly said, "He's more ... rough around the edges than I expected.”

"He has his charms and we are here as well,” replied Galen, standing and indicating to a door.

It had been a couple years but Galen looked and acted the same- aloof, in control, sure of himself. No answers there. "Aren't you curious about why I'm here?” Relaxed, Fed walked into what must be the infirmary of the ship.

"Actually, I'm immensely curious, but my tech can sense your pain, it's leaking into our link, and frankly I'd rather spare myself. You hid it well from the Captain though.” What pain, thought Fed. Oh ya, he turned it off almost as soon as the plasma hit his skin. The sick-making smell of burning skin was enough, knowing it was his…. well, there were some serious downsides to this hero stuff Galen pulled off regularly.

His musings sputtered out when a beautiful woman walked out a back office and introduced herself as Dr Sarah Chambers. Like a book laid out to the right page, Fed read her- smart, bossy, generally human shaped. Exactly his type. Fed didn’t catch anything she said expect, “… you’ll have to remove your outer clothes, please.” If he had a credit chit for every time he dreamed about a woman ordering him to take off his clothes the last couple years, it’d be enough for … something fancy anyway. The cold scratchy wax paper tunic she handed him to wear however killed the fantasy.
Galen said, "Doctor, may I speak with you?"

"Sure, I need a few things from my office anyway." The moment they walked away together, Fed began to strip his clothes, creating a heap. Gripping the grotesque wax joke of a shirt, Fed loathed the idea of putting it on. So he didn’t. It felt good to feel the recycled air tussling the little hairs of his torso. It was the most action they’d seen since Hekuba dumped him last year. Thank the velvety Jesus painting for the occasional pity fuck Optima and Cureonna threw his way, or he'd be as celibate as Galen, he assumed. He looked down at his own body. It had not been a good couple weeks. Curious he reactivated the pain center in his brain with a command issued to his tech using his geometric spell language. The tsunami of pain made him stagger. Unsure whether he’d throw up first or black out, he threw another command at his tech, to slam shut his pain registry. Phew. Definite downside to being a hero.

How am I going to talk Galen in to coming with me? Where do I even start? Trust him with the truth, his instincts told him. He could hear Hera’s voice berating him already like she did when he learned technomage art of manipulation as an apprentice:

Stop blurring things out Fed! In a technomage, frankness- having a policy of truth as you say, means you’ve failed before you’ve started. Things work out best when you control what is true. The core must have just enough truth to be believed, then you can fold the lies around the edges.

He didn’t agree with her than, now he wasn’t so sure, but she was right, about him tending to blurt things out. As a member of the Circle he knew too much. He’d have to be extra careful talking to Galen not to let cats out of bags. The real problem- Galen was much smarter than Fed, and he might give away the bank without even realizing it. Still he had to try, this was too important.

Time to get to work. Closing his eyes he augmented his hearing to ease drop on the conversation in the small office. He caught Galen, speaking mid sentence.

#

The doctor wasn't happy, Galen thought as he watched her frown at his words. “ …most thorough exam of him and let me examine your findings. He tried to hide the extent of his injuries from me and I want to know why."

"As if I could hide the information from you, but since you condescended to ask, I'll let you know when I'm done."

With a tray of instruments and several vials, Dr. Chambers and Galen walked back to find Fed standing in the middle of the room facing them, naked. The burns- on his neck, shoulders and a narrow band from the top of his chest to his lower abdomen. They didn’t look too bad, thought Galen. Only small areas looked melted through all the skin layers. But other injuries covered him- the large scabbed over slash across a thigh, a bite mark from something far larger than a man on a shoulder, faded greenish bruises on the shoulder. Last, not an injury, on his left pectoral muscle, in small runic script, the tattooed phrase One of Us hid under the coarse thick hair on his chest. With his arms casually at his sides, it took Galen a moment to notice Fed’s left hand was missing. This was serious.

Galen sighed. "Really Fed, you could have left on your underwear."

With a bemused expression Fed sent a response. /But then how will your hot doctor do her most thorough exam./
Eavesdropping? How unbecoming./

Not for me. I have nothing to hide Galen. These injuries aren't important./

We will see. Tell me everything./

Doctor Chambers handed Fed a drape. "Well at least you're not a shy one. Lie down and cover yourself up with this.”

"Too bad, I was enjoying the air," said Fed reclining onto a Medlab bed.

"Do you need a painkiller?" asked Dr. Chambers.

“Sure, for Galen’s sake,” said Fed. His eyes twinkled with humor at the doctor, who puzzled at that before injecting something in his neck. With her fingers applying small patches to the worst of the burns, Fed seemed riveted by the doctor’s work. Galen watched Fed’s heart rate and galvanic skin response shoot through the roof. Unbelievable, he’s enjoying himself, was all Galen could think. Loosing his patience Galen sent a prodding message.

I can leave you two alone if that is why you came./

That snapped Fed to attention. “What? No!”

The doctor stopped. “I’m sorry did I just hurt you.”

“Um, no. You have a lovely, umm … deft touch. It’s all good.” /Hold on. I need to get a grip before I embarrass myself./

Galen crossed his arms and tapped his foot with impatience until he received another message from Fed.

/How much did you see last time you were with us?/

/Everyone seemed to be running about pointlessly busy. New lab levels, the hydroponics garden massive expanded, a practical forest. I enjoyed the new pool quite a bit./

/Ya that was me, I modeled it on the one at Disneyland Proxima. The rest, Hera’s got us brute forcing a solution to our whole lack of tech situation./

/A fine solution for cracking a problem, given infinite time. A foolish choice considering the actual practical considerations./

/Desperate times and all that, but ya I agree. I’ve argued a lot with the others that we need to leave the hiding place, and look outwards./

/I have a hard time picturing that./

/I know. What can I say? The power went to my head./

/Wait let me guess the Circle’s response. I love this game. They humbly admitted their mistake and thanked you for you're efforts./

/Exactly, except for the part where I was censured, and Herazade threatened to boot me from the Circle if I kept at it./

/That sounds like the Circle I know and love./
Fed broke into chuckles while Galen’s somber feeling grew. His hope for the Order having any future at all, dimmed. Dr. Chambers stopped long enough to say, "The least you can do is let me in on the joke."

"It wasn't actually funny," said Galen. /Are you the reason why Gwynn’s little group was bumbling around outside of the hiding place./

/Not exactly. We all agreed to send Kane, Gwynn and Finian to Centauri Prime. They were given strict orders - no REDRUM, to only collect supplies, observe and relay information to the Circle./

/You should have told me about them. Kane might still be alive had I known./ The warmth coming from Fed vanished as he grew silent and distant. Galen should have resisted the I told you so. It would not bring back the dead, but Galen guessed Fed at least had the potential to become the better leader the Order desperately needed. Long ago, Galen gave up on Herazade ever leaving behind her controlling paranoia. Lost, Fed didn’t answer him. Galen pushed him.

/Is the Circle aware that they are doing more? They are involving themselves in planetary affairs./

/Let’s just say after Kane was killed by the Drakh, I explained to Gwynn and Finian that when it comes to dealing with the Circle it’s easier to say sorry then to ask for permission. I learned that from you by the way./ Perhaps there was a sliver of hope for the Circle after all.

Looking far away, Fed smiled sadly. /Kane used to call my parties, the gathering of Galen’s Order because most of us, for lack of a better phrase, looked up to you. We talked a lot about rejoining the universe, how we’d use our powers for good and you./

Ah yes, this feeling. The embarrassment that came with being the center of attention for being the freak. To know he had been a frequent topic at Fed’s infamous parties made it all worse. Those affairs were something to break up the monotony of living inside a large rock or to be avoided at all costs in Galen’s case. He’d received many invitations, before Fed seemed to wise up to the fact that Galen avoided them like one would an ebola outbreak.

/I’ll have to take your word for it, I am not fond of affairs that are all talk and no action./ Galen regretted his words as soon as he sent them.

Fed laughed out loud. /There was plenty of action. Drinking, games, vids, and plenty of … Aky used to call it fun without pants./ Galen groaned, at the conversation not worth having. The message kept flowing, /It took a life of its own, you know. I kept tract. There are 38 of us in Galen’s Order, including Finian and Gwynn, if you’re wondering./

Galen felt his patience slipping. /Let me see if I understand. You’ve created some sort of technomage subgroup, in my name, selected by you, populated with drunkards and libertines./ Galen mumbled to himself, “The universe must be playing a joke on me.” /What is it you want of me? To come back and lead your merry band in some sort rebellion?/

The hurt and shock plain on his face, Fed sent, /No, nothing like that. You know Galen you’re really hard to talk to./

I’ve been listening to your rambling long enough to qualify me to sainthood, Galen wanted to answer.

Instead he sent, /This has been nearly interesting but I hope there is a point to this./

Fed combed his fingers through his thick black hair, making it somehow look better for it. Not immune to his handsome charms, even the doctor stopped and stared at Fed’s unself-conscious
Dr Chambers said, "I … I don’t mean to interrupt whatever is going on but I’m finished. Try not to move for at least four hours. I’m sorry, but I can't do anything for your hand. We don't have any prosthetics onboard. I'll be in my office if you need me.” Grabbing Galen’s attention with her head jerk toward her office, the good doctor slipped away.

Galen picked up Fed’s left arm and began to scan the stump. It looked cleanly done and well healed.

"What happened to your hand?’’

/The Vorlon homeworld happened to it./

The shock registered as if Fed had handed him an exploding grenade. “Well done. You had my curiosity now you have my undivided attention.” This could not be true and called for a cross examination. /Their realm is impenetrable, last I checked./

Fed shrugged. /It was until a few weeks ago. Let me tell you it’s a real let down once you land. It’s cold, creepy, smells bad. There are wall to wall traps and hordes of things that want to bite you./

/How did you manage to even enter their realm, let alone land on the surface?/

Squirming in place, Fed looked pained in a way Galen had never seen before. The meat of the matter was about to be revealed.

/One of the Order is there./ A vague answer and a matter that made Fed uncomfortable to discuss. This would be much more than diverting, he realized.

Galen thought of his last face to face encounter with a Vorlon, Ulkesh, and it’s last words to him, When it suits us, you will all die. The Circle never heard that threat. Could they be making good on it after all these years? He needed more information and with Fed suddenly playing his part, the quiet thoughtful one, he would have to dig it out of him. /Who is it?/

Automatically, Fed’s good hand rubbed his spine on the back of his neck. Odd reaction. /Do you remember that accident after we became chrysi’s./

/The Order has had a great many accidents. The nature of our interests and lives guaranteed a parade of them. Which one?/

/In ’56. Herazade's first assignment when she joined the Circle was to investigate it./

With a touch to his tech, it contacted his ship which provided the official Circle statement. /I have her summary - Three mages- Rhea, Coeus, Tomoe, accidentally blew themselves up looking for … a vague and unspecified artifact on Valen’s Rest. There was … dna from all three, and … plenty of ship debris. Conclusion: … Vaporization … demolitions improperly handled … triggered by unexpected seismic activity./ Galen knew where this headed. The core of truth, lies hidden in the details. /Wait let me guess. Herazade covered up some hideous little secret./

/Wow Galen, you got in one./

The indignation built in Galen. His parents dying had also been labelled an accident. The truth too ugly to face, that they had fought and caused the accident that killed each other and innocents. And now another little ugly secret swept under the carpet by the Circle. The Order’s carpets were so lumpy the only surprise was there was any room for more under it.
What was the truth?

The artifact hunt was just a cover story to hide what really happened. Coues, was Rhea’s master and father, they were obsessed with the Vorlons, they collected any Vorlon junk they could get their hands on, and Tomoe made her home on Valen’s Rest. So it made sense. The truth. Kell sent them to deliver a message to the Vorlons, who reacted like this... With a wave of his good hand Fed, a vid spooled in his hand.

Three Vorlon fighters exited hyperspace and glided to orbit above a white green world. They orbited serenely until one unloaded a glowing sphere that streaked down to the surface. The precise orbital strike looked like a tiny dying star. The image cut out to static.

In Hera’s defense, even Kell thought they were dead and all he told Hera was they were in the wrong place doing wrong things. Hera assumed he meant they were grave robbing or desecrating something and got killed as punishment. The truth is Vorlons met them and took them prisoner. The orbital strike was to cover it up.

Galen added to himself, and Herazade wasn't clever enough, or was too trusting, to question Kell. Why did the old leader of the Order do it? This was around when the shadows first stirred. He must have been trying to make an alliance. After all, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Kell must have seen the obvious- the Vorlons as the best possible solution to the Order’s many problems. Kell got an answer, a bloody no. And all it cost were the lives of three technomages. That pushed him to choose the uglier course that Galen all too painfully lived through.

Who survived?

Rhea.

And the other 2?

Fed corrected him. Another technomage, Roland who knew them well, didn't buy Hera's report. He kept at Hera until she spilled what little she knew about the Vorlon strike. He went after the Vorlons. Another tech request to his ship, and the Circle’s file on this Roland presented itself to Galen. He skipped to the end. The final entry by Herazade, listed Roland- Dead 2256, by suicide. Cause mal-adjustment to emotional shock. Another lie, another secret swept away. Galen began to pace. Walking made him think better. He fired off questions as fast as they came to him:

What happened to the other three?

Experimented on, then, there is no other word for it- butchered. No doubt the Vorlons did more. Nothing pleasant probably. And yet one left alive, very suspicious.

How do you know this Rhea is real and not some sort of apparition or illusion?

I didn’t believe it at first either. But her self image comes through the electron incantation perfectly. We tested her, all the memories are there anyway. The Vorlons were the most powerful telepaths in the galaxy, ripping apart a mind for its memories, Galen guessed would be trivial for them. Yet, as far as Galen knew fooling an electronic incantation had never been done before. It would the first of its kind. A reason to hope, and clearly why Fed trusted so easily.

Who tested her?

Myself, the rest of the Circle. Herazade and Gwynn both knew her well from before. They looked hard at her self-image signature and are sure it’s her. Not an astute or illustrious group for sure. Yet far from incompetent and the best the Order had apart form him.
/Why is Gwynn involved?/

/She finished her apprenticeship with Coeus and was the initial contact point./

/How?/

/A text message./

A disgusted sound slipped out of Galen. The obvious popped to Galen’s mind. /Why would a technomage stoop so low when she can instantly communicate with anyone, anywhere. And for that matter why wait over a decade to contact us./ Fed squirmed about uncomfortably. He doesn’t want me to know something.

/She’s got a thing around her neck, and before you ask, we don’t know what it is. Rhea says it keeps her from using her spell language, so she can’t cast. With us in hiding, she had to improvise./ And there it was, Galen’s mind began to repeat the mantra, *It’s a trap waiting to be sprung.*

/Then how in the world did she gain control. Did the Vorlons leave their keys laying about with an owner’s manual to their system?/

/No, but she’s not stupid. She figured out their automated systems. Rhea showed us the way past the still very active and numerous defense systems. I was there Galen, she guided us in safely./

/How very convenient./ Like a spider welcoming you into her lair, all you had to do was get caught in the web.

/Convenience ended when we arrived in orbit. There is only one domed city left on the surface with a space elevator that stretches up to a small moon. The whole thing is covered with some sort of material that looks crystalline but simmers and pulses as if it’s alive. It was completely impenetrable to us. I mean we spent two weeks trying to get through it./

/Who is with you?/

/Gwynn. She’s been an overly eager beaver./

/Has she been harmed?/

/Not a scratch. Turns out I might not be very good at my job./ Fed chuckled at his own expense. Galen went back to pacing. If it was a trap the time to spring it would have been when they landed. Galen turned it over and over in his mind wondering what pieces he missed. /What have you tried in order to get into the city?/

/Everything short of nuking it from orbit. I touched the substance of the dome, to try and scan it. It infiltrated my hand and attacked my tech, slowly consuming it. It hurt like hell./ Fed frowned at his stump, then seemed to shake it off like a sweater once you are warm enough. /Gwynn amputated my hand to stop its progression. Anyway, I’ve had a few more ideas about how to crack the egg open./

Galen knew the answer, /You want me to come and try my spell of destruction on it./

Fed said, “Two out of two Galen. You always were quick. My ship can get us there in two days.”

Sitting up fully, Fed swung his legs over the side of the bed, retrieving his clothes. Clearly he thought the matter settled with Galen agreeing. This over eagerness caught Galen’s attention. A
piece had been left out.

/What are you not telling me?/ Fed froze mid-buckling the golden gear clasp of his thick black leather belt. With a huge sigh he leaned back against the examination table, shirtless.

“Can’t get anything past you.” /Rhea and I had a thing./ More vagueness, and there he rubbed the back of his neck oddly again.

/Like the sort of thing you’ve had with other women in the Order./

Fed shook his head yes. Fed smiled as he switched to speaking aloud. “Remember when I got into jokes.” Galen groaned. Fed practically terrorized their cohort for months with daily messages loaded with cliche jokes and puns lifted from tired old books. “Like that but much more.”

“How much more?”

“She um… broke me in. And like the idiot I am, I fell in love with her.”

“Did she return this regard?”

“I thought she did but the last time I talked to her, she dumped me, so I’ll go with a no.”

An image of a worm at the end of a hook, with Fed the fish circling about it, came to Galen’s mind.

“I'm sorry but I can not go with you.”

Freezing in place Fed said, “What do you mean?”

Galen looked away, hating to disappoint. “I made two promises to Gideon. First the Excalibur carries the cure for the plague and I promised Matthew I would stay to guarantee we deliver it.”

Fed dismissed that with a wave. “I've taken care of the only Drakh capable of stopping you. Nothing else can stop this ship. Not to mention the entire Ranger fleet and half of EarthForce is on it's way to escort you.”

“You cannot be certain of that.”

His leg began to bounce nervously, Fed demanded, “How long do you plan to stay onboard?”

Galen transmitted, /We arrive in the Sol system in three days. I will remain until the final transfer is made to one Dr. Franklin. Then second Gideon and I will go to Mars.” Recoiling from the word, Fed reacted as if Galen dropped an ice cube down is back. More oddness Galen thought, but he kept outlining his plans. “I plan to help him find those who are responsible for the destruction of the Cerberus. This will be of interest to the Circle. Perhaps more important than your work on Vorlon. Just before we stumbled across the cure, I found discarded tech like what is implanted in us but disfigured or mutated. I believe someone is trying to create a version of, well us. I do not know much of significance. But the evidence points to a base of operations on Mars. I will let you know if I find anything specific that will benefit the Order.

As Galen spoke, he studied Fed’s face. It morphed through different emotions: shock, anger, sadness, and finally, disappointment.

“I don’t like the sound of this at all. How do you know about this supposed base?”

“That is a long story.”
Fed snapped, “We have three days. Will that be enough?”

Letting out a long breath, Galen started slowly, “A short time ago, I discovered Gideon was in the thrall of an Apocalypse Box. Do you know what that is?”

“I wouldn’t be much of a technomage if I didn’t. The last one was suppose to have been destroyed 100 years ago.”

“Apparently our records are imperfect. It had been giving him information while slowly feeding on his life energy. I confronted him and told him exactly what it was. He didn’t care. He said he would gladly give up his life if it saves Earth.”

The memory of yet another clash between Gideon and himself made Galen withdraw into himself. He stopped talking. Fed offered, “You decided Gideon’s life was worth more.” Fed nodded his approval. A tiny pang of joy sprung up in Galen as he realized another of his Order agreed with him. Such things were too rare.

“Of course! I told him it had to be destroyed immediately. It was in his quarters. Matthew tried to stop me.”

Fed eagerly asked, “The technomage who destroyed the others ended up having to chuck not just the boxes but himself as well into the black hole at the center of our galaxy. They are almost impossible to resist. How did you deal with it?”

“As I approached it, the box spoke to me. It said I was just delaying the inevitable, that Gideon was destined to die. In a moment of foolishness, I responded flippantly that we are all destined to die, but that if I have a say in the matter, Gideon will die of a predictable terminal disease brought on by reaching an almost obscene old age. Once it had me speaking to it, the box immediately began to tempt me, and more foolishly I listened. It said all I have to do is leave it be, and it would tell me everything I desire- where to find the cure for the plague, how to keep our Order from ending, how to communicate with the dead. At that moment, I regained my senses and deadened my hearing and sight cutting off its tempting litany. I sent a sphere of destruction at it and that proved to be sufficient. (Galen let out a hard breath.) … After the smoke cleared, I saw it had burned something in the bulkhead, GO TO MARS. …

Galen fell into his memory.

Galen waved smoke away from in front of his face, to scan the ruined remnant of the Apocalypse box. Dead. For the first time, his eyes noticed on the bulkhead directly behind it, savagely scrawled into the metal, GO TO MARS. Galen thought Go to hell would have been a more appropriate curse from the box.

Astonished, Galen asked himself, “Why Mars?”

The fire suppression system rained water on him.

“Ugh!” Annoyed, Galen flicked a hand in the air and the water shut off immediately. He crouched down to Gideon lying unmov ing on the floor behind him.

Placing a hand on Gideon’s forehead, Galen ordered, “AWAKEN!”

Gideon moaned and feebly uttered as an arm slapped Galen’s knee, “Galen don’t … No! I can’t feel it. No!… you already did it.” With Galen’s arm for support, Gideon climbed to his feet.

Shaking in frustration Gideon screamed, “The box might have been Earth’s, humanity’s only hope!
How dare you play God! It was MY CHOICE you son of a…"

Gideon took a weak swing at Galen, but instead of fighting back Galen captured him in an embrace and gently whispered near his ear, “If I was willing to feed a man like you to a thing like that, humanity deserves a bad end. … The emptiness you are feeling will pass with time.”

Gideon shoved Galen away and collapsed on his hands and knees weeping. Galen reached out to Gideon’s prone form but stopped when pounding on the door started.

A muffled voice from Lt. Matheson broke through. “Captain! The security overrides have been engaged, we can’t open your door. Back up. We’ll have to blow it!”

Galen instructed the door to open. Six crewmen rushed in wearing fire-fighting gear, followed by Lt Matheson.

With a calm gesture, Galen said, “Everything is settled, there is no need for that.”

Surveying the destruction, Lt. Matheson asked, “What happened?”

Staring down at Gideon, Galen answered, “Something ended. Matthew … had a bit of a shock. Take him to Medlab. He should be well in a few days. I will be in my ship should you need me.”

With his eyes open, Galen came back to himself when Fed asked, “Galen?”

“Where was I? … Oh yes, when Matthew regained consciousness and realized the box was gone, he said … nothing, just wept with frustration. Since then I’ve began to pay much closer attention to Mars.”

Fed’s eyes had grown wide. “Wow! You have the best stories. You know there is a reason why the Order called them Boxes of Lies. They only mean harm. If I were you, Mars would be the last place I’d go.” Fed eagerly nodded yes at Galen.

No matter what happened, Galen knew with the same certainly that he would keep on breathing today, that he will go to Mars when the cure is safely tucked in bed with Dr Franklin. “I’m not done. Very soon after we encountered a ship identical to the one that I destroyed when we fled to the hiding place. We followed it to a secret base. I found the disfigured tech there. It had been embedded in patients from a Martian mental hospital. While I was distracted Matthew got himself into trouble and unfortunately learned about the source of our tech. I saved his life, yet again, but instead of saying, ‘thank you my dear chap,’ he confronted me on the flight deck, in front of the crew, including Dureena, and threw me off his ship.

“Dureena is your little thief right?”

“She is no one's little anything. The Shadows annihilated her people. You can imagine how she reacted to me. At least since then she’s stopped asking me to take her on as my student.” The universe’s perverse sense of dark humor made Galen want to laugh and cry at the same time.

“Sounds like you've had a really rough time with them.”

Cold control asserted itself over Galen. “I always expect the worst and I have yet to be disappointed.”

“Gideon must have gotten over it, you're here now.”
“I brought them the cure. Gideon is practical when he needs to be. Although now, I get the distinct impression I am on 'probation' with him.”

Hesitantly Fed offered, “You know Mars can wait. Please Galen, just come with me.”

Guilt nipped at his heels but Galen would not bend or apologize. Fed had to get in line and wait his turn. “I can not because Gideon will not wait. He'll get himself killed much faster if I am not there.”

To Galen’s shock Fed challenged him. “We can’t just leave one of our Order trapped. We owe it to Rhea to come to her aid.”

It almost felt good to be questioned. Fed was right, there was one way a Vorlon expedition would take precedence. “Is she in danger?”

Reluctantly Fed shook his head no. “Fine leaving her aside. This is an unprecedented opportunity for the Order. Imagine what we’ll find and learn if we can just get in there.”

What path could he offer Fed but that caution was the best approach. “I understand the enormous temptation. To know all that is knowable is at the heart of our Code. Yet if this is a trap, and yes I think that likely, perhaps that is what the Vorlons were counting on with this temptation.”

With an almost audible click, Galen watched Fed lose his patience and cut him off. “No more Galen! As a member of the Circle, I can command you to come with me!”

Galen thought, Well, it took twenty years of knowing Fed, but at least now he saw what it took to get an angry reaction out of him. Could he be reasoned with? Probably. But he was injured. Let him recover more before we argue again. For now he must instill some caution into Fed’s, and the Circle’s, recklessness.

A sense of calmness flooded Galen., “Yes you can try to order me about, but I believe you know how well I listen to the Circle. I suppose you can always attempt to manipulate or force me to help you.”

“No, I know better.” Fed sagged in defeated.

Of all people, Galen hated to see Fed despondent. He had to leave him with some hope. “I can offer you my counsel at least. As soon as I am done on Mars I swear to you I will do everything in my power to help you. Now you should rest like the Doctor instructed.”

Silently Fed finished dressing. Then laid down again. The despair and anger that had just sat on Fed like a cloak evaporated as he ran his hand through his hair. Acceptance seemed to come easily for him.

“Fine. There is a bunch of stuff onboard my ship you can look at. I have given you full access permissions.”

“I will go then.”

Galen stopped in Dr. Chambers office on the way out.

“What did you find?” A bit rude, he corrected himself, but that had been a hard conversation to have with an old friend and he was in no mood for niceties.

The doctor silently brought up a scanned image of a human male on her screen.
"Your friend must have had a rough time recently. The burns are the most recent injury. I couple bite marks form I don’t know what, found a broken collar bone, a deep contusion, and even the remnants of a small subdural hematoma, consistent with falling at speed. All the injuries are healing very well but at slightly different stages, so my guess is they did not occur in one event. His hand though is a different story, it looks like a clean amputation, and I’d say skillfully done."

"That's enough doctor and thank you. Also when you are done…”

The doctor waved him away. "Yes, I'll erase these files."

Galen nodded and turned to leave.

Dr Chambers asked, “Is everything all right? I thought I heard raised voices.”

Galen frowned. He had not thought to ward the area to make their conversation inaudible. The doctor seemed to sense his unease but still asked, “Did you argue?”

“A private matter doctor.”

“I hope it works out. I’m sure it will with you involved.”

Caught off guard by the praise, Galen didn’t quite know how to answer. “It will not impact our mission.”

“I’m glad you’re around Galen.” The verbal pat on the back felt wrong to Galen, yet at least someone appreciated his efforts.

#

Feeling indignant, Galen walked away from Medlab reviewing his conversation with Fed. Galen’s Order indeed! Of all the ridiculous things I’ve seen and heard Fed do, that was the most preposterous… Thirty-eight … that was more than he would have guessed. If I were at all vain … He stopped in mid-thought and smiled slightly to himself, feeling almost flattered.

As he entered the elevator he stood by the far wall and said, “Nearest tube access point.” The elevator sped downward.

He tiredly leant backward onto the cold metal and closed his eyes in repose. Vorlon. Yet another galactic sized matter that tugged at him. Curing the plague, safeguarding Gideon on Mars, dealing with the Drakh, Centauri Prime, finding a way for the Order to survive, and, as if that wasn’t enough, now Fed wanted to drag him into a certain trap on Vorlon.

As he took inventory of his responsibilities, Galen’s anger escalated until tiredly he let out a harsh breathe. *When will my time ever be my own again?!*

The elevator door opened stirring him back out of himself. Galen entered the transport tube, sat in his usual spot by the window and commanded, “Docking Bay.”

Staring out the window, Galen wondered, *What would I do if every crisis suddenly disappeared?*

Galen cast his mind back through the years, to before he was a technomage. All those peaceful happy years under Elric’s tutelage on Soom. His anger abated. And not far behind, thoughts of Isabel, the love of his life, raced through his mind. The happiest time of all was their quiet, few
short weeks together. His soul stilled as it yearned, consumed by his desire to have that again.

Eventually Galen sighed in resignation and thought, but it will never be. Soom- destroyed by the Shadows, Elric and Isabel- murdered. Meanwhile, Fed seemed to be rewarded with everything. His old home, Proxima, prospered in the ISA. His old teacher, Herazade - alive, and the only real power left in the Order, besides himself. And if I’m wrong about Vorlon, the universe might be about to throw Fed into the arms of his oldest flame. The profound injustice of it hit Galen with full force igniting his anger again.

Then unbidden, his tech showed him an image of Dureena. A very different emotion filled him. Not this again. Every time she was near him, he had to assert his autonomic controls to keep his heart rate in check and to stop the adrenaline surges. It can’t be… Not wanting to recognize it, he turned this feeling over and over trying to examine it from every angle- a sure facet of lust here, recognition of her soul there, comfort underneath, above- a sense of loss when not in her company. But it’s so different then with Isabel. He knew within the first minute that he loved her. With Dureena … definitely not. He thought, She was my tool. I used her, more then once, to accomplish my goals. I chose her because I recognized myself in her, a repeat survivor with an indomitable spirit. And now he found himself in the middle of … something. When did it change?’

His tech again- An image of Dureena covered in mud handing him his lost staff. Yes, that was a shock. For the first time he noticed her. How exceptional she was. She invaded him then. A romantic would say, on that day, her knife hit more then just his shoulder.

Closing his eyes he let the memory of that instant flood him. Galen felt the pain and smelled the mud, blood, his blood, and the antiseptics of Medlab. Then her, striding in and handing him his staff. The moment he took hold of it, its comforting energy flooding him, and just for a split second while she still held on to, he felt it- her energy.

In his mind, he froze the image of her at that moment. So mud encrusted, she was more statue than living being. Like one of the classical works his mother used to show him when he was learning Greek as a boy, except Dureena was made of clay instead of marble. Still she was an Artemis returning from the hunt, while he, a mortal, struggling to keep his composure.

Back on the planet before Gideon had evacuated him back up to the Excalibur, she must have recognized his pain and deeper loneliness, and grief for what he lost when he flung his staff. Returning his staff - her offering of help and solidarity in the trials that lay ahead.

Galen focused again on the frozen statuesque image of Dureena in his mind. He let the image envelope and comfort him, but it fractured, and fell away as reality intruded. Then she learned about the source of his power, and that damn, thrice damned, sword. A wall stretching to the sky went up. If she knew the whole truth would it make a difference?

Galen chided himself, Enough. This was idiotic. Dureena deserved more than an emotional cripple like him. He must walk his path alone. The old familiar loneliness settled back around his heart like a favorite well worn coat.

When Galen opened his eyes, he realized his transport had sat still with the door open for who knew how long. He looked around in discomfort glad no one was there to witness is daydreaming.
Chapter 5 - Objects in Motion

Medlab - Aboard the Excalibur December 23, 2269

As soon as Galen left for the Doctor’s office, Fed sagged on the examination table. He would have loved to do as Galen ordered. Rest and catch up on the latest season of Rebo and Zooty. Instead nervous restlessness took over as he tossed from his left side, to his right. Finally, he rolled onto his back to stare blankly at the ceiling. Galen was going to Mars. Soon. Fuck.

“I have to stop him,” he whispered to himself.

Bouncing out of bed like a compressed spring, Fed grabbed his black glove and pulled it over his left stump. Closing his eyes to concentrate, he exhaled over the glove and imposed on his tech the platforms moving in unison. The glove inflated as if a balloon animal occupied it. A quick test- he tapped the gloved thumb against each non-existent finger. It still gave him a thrill that he could pull it off and keep it running like humming a melody while going about your life. Two hands made it far easier to finish zipping and buttoning up.

Before he could go, two things needed doing. Show his gratitude to the Doctor. Wipe everything she collected on him.

Silent as a ghost he floated to the entrance of the Doctor’s office, and found her hunched over her computer, happily concentrating, with a finger tracing the tech lines on a scan of what he assumed to be himself. A perfect moment for a scientist that he didn’t want to take from her. But the Order’s secrets must be preserved. Loudly clapping his hands together once, he startled Dr. Chambers out of her happy studies.

"Hi!" Fed said.

"You had 3rd degree burns. You really ought to be lying down still." The scold like a sick child caught out of bed warmed Fed’s heart. She cared, obviously not romantically, unfortunately, but the concept of him- him as a human who deserved to be well and whole. People like her were too rare in this universe. She deserved a gold star.

"Thanks to you, I’m fit as that proverbial fiddle. A phrase I’ve never understood by the way. Anyway, I’m bored. I think I’ll take a tour of this impressive ship.” Walking up to her screen, he ran his gloved index finger along the top edge of the screen. His erasure daemons associated easily into her local host. "Sorry about this.”

Doctor Chambers mouth hung open. She pointed at his gloved hand as she said, "You don’t have a left hand, how are you doing that?"

"Why magic of course," he replied. Some women hated to be touched, particularly by strangers. Some didn’t mind, if done within the societal framework of appropriate behavior. Considering how comfortably she administered to even the most delicate parts of him a few minutes ago, he read her as the second. Selfishly he couldn’t resist taking her raised hand into his gloved one to squeeze it gently. Technically I’m not touching her. I’m just being a show off.

On her computer screen a few dramatic runes made a show of eating her files like sharks in a
feeding frenzy. The real work happened silently without drama on the hard drive and logic board. Her terminal died, all her files rewritten to unretrievable. He had returned her careful care by making her day worse. She deserved a small consolation.

With a roll, he turned her palm up, and placed a small brown box in it. "I was once assured by another healer I knew well that these are every woman’s weakness."

Fed left Medlab with plans forming in his mind. Time to do something hard.

#

He could not be more different from Galen, Dr Chambers thought watching Fed leave Medlab. The aloof wizard, versus this flirty Pirate King. Personally, neither appealed to her but as a doctor, her curiosity engaged fully. The detailed scans she took of this Fed matched what she remembered of those when she treated Galen. They were more than human-cyborgs. Days ago, after Galen and the Captain had it out on the flight deck, the gossip had made it to her from Max and Dureena. They called it shadow tech. She wished she could study it more. Much more. And their behavior— as abnormal as their bodies. Maybe technomages only attracted extreme personalities or being a technomage drove the person to an extreme personality. Something to pursue after her current mission concluded.

She tapped her computer. Still deader than dead. Dr. Chambers called the bridge.

"Gideon here, what is it Doctor?"

"I thought you should know. Our second resident technomage just left Medlab on a self guided tour. Also, I need someone from support to come and fix my system. It's not responding."

Sarah could hear the frustration in Gideon’s voice. "Great."

Sarah heard in the background Lt Matheson ask, “Shall I alert security?”

The Captain’s answered quickly, “There’s no point. They won’t be able to track him. Lock down navigation, propulsion, environmental and weapon systems. After that well of forever fiasco we’re not taking any chances. Thank you doctor.” The connection severed.

Staring at the box in front of her, she wondered what sort of gift a technomage would consider appropriate for this situation. Perhaps she should have reported it or maybe just thrown it in the nearest incinerator. Sarah rotated the box in her hand thinking. Finally, her curiosity got the better of her, she peeked. The finely made brown box had three small delicate chocolate truffles. Carefully, she smelled it. Heavenly didn’t begin to describe the scent. She popped one in her mouth.

Real chocolate, and the good stuff. A smile spread across her face and the sound of,  Mhmhmh , filled Medlab.

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**Excalibur Docking Bay**

The docking bay hummed with activity as Galen entered. Walking rapidly, he called out, to associate with Fed's ship. The ship responded instantly to Galen.

/Request acknowledged. Full level 7 access granted to Galen./
While Galen typically kept his central cabin dark, Fed’s ship lit up like a bright summer day. Galen had to squint slightly. As opposed to the usual flat metallic gray, the metal walls of Fed’s ship were painted. Red the favored palette - from a deep blood around the control console, to orangish crimson of Proxima’s sun on the ceiling, to a light pink around the frames to his bedroom wing. Schematics of alien ships, pictures - natural landscapes, half done designs, hung about haphazardly. Piles of crates and boxes littered the floor space between pieces of old furniture. On some of box tops glowed one rune, Fed’s personal rune- Fun. As Galen stood there dumbstruck by the clutter, deciding how to proceed, a message popped from Fed.

/I see you didn’t waste anytime./

/Really Fed, how can you live like this?/

/Easily, you should try it sometime./

Careful not to step on anything, Galen worked his way to the bridge of the ship. Occasionally, he paused to peek into one of the many crates stacked about. Amused, he messaged Fed.

/Quite a party you are planning, fresh fruit, a case of Grand Marnier, and more high grade EarthForce ammunition and explosives then I would ever dare to carry./

/Ya I went crazy shopping. Try not to move too many things around. I have everything arranged perfectly./

By the main control console of the bridge area, an odd pocket of order with one waist-high black metallic crate in the center. The top glowed with a rune, one that Galen instantly recognized, Herazade’s personal rune - progress. Below it, in glowing script, the initials C.R.E.W. Galen scanned the box and felt it humming with restrained energy. Frowning, Galen called for an immediate answer.

/What is the CREW? And why is it inside a Faraday cage?/

Fed’s answer was swift.

/You don’t want to open that. It’s our newest beta model and I haven’t finished testing it yet. Please leave it alone./

/That hardly tells me what it is./

/Clever and Relatively Effective Weapon. Let’s just say in a target rich environment where you don’t mind being messy, it should do the trick./

Disturbed yet intrigued, Galen stood there trying to decide whether he should obey. Herazade always acted like she could make good on her threats to flay him should he disobey enough. Her threats rolled off him like water off an umbrella. Yet, this CREW, one of her secret toys, might be worth study to see how capable it would be against an opponent, particularly himself. The outlines of the thing clear from his scan, it looked small enough that one of his spheres could dispatch it easily. Perhaps next time he saw Herazade he would advise her again about how to come after him. One of the rare pleasures he allowed himself was to bask in the glow of her usual reaction to him - impotent rage. So predictable and reassuring. As he mused, an eager message arrived from Fed.

/How about I help you?/
Since Fed asked nicely, he decided against opening the black crate and reluctantly made his case to Fed, knowing it will touch off an argument.

/It is I who am trying to help you not throw your life away./

/Why are you so convinced it is a trap?/

/I told you about the Vorlon I encountered. Ulkesh called me an abomination after he scanned me and he didn’t mean it in the endearing kind of way. What I did not tell the Circle, and now I think I should have, was his last words to me were, When it suits us, you will all die./

Fed’s answer was swift and outraged. /You think you should have told us? I think the answer is yes./

Galen wanted to throw at him, And how much have you not told me? Instead he sent, /The Vorlons left with the Shadows after the war. I thought it no longer mattered./

After a minute Fed’s challenging answer arrived.

/You’re wrong. I was there, on the surface. If there were Vorlons lurking about, they could have grabbed me up. I know the location of the hiding place, relative to Galactic center, to the centimeter. They could have used their telepathic-mojo to rip it out of my skull and taken us all out by now./

Fed had a point. Yet… /The Vorlon homeworld seems to have tried to kill you./ There was a purpose to this trap on Vorlon, Galen just couldn’t see it, yet.

/But it didn’t. Everything we encountered was an automated system. I’ve played enough games against computer opponents. There was no guiding sentience behind any of it. Every time I got hurt it was my carelessness. Gwynn hasn’t even gotten a scratch./

This back and forth was pointless. Being close emotionally to a situation, meant Fed likely didn’t want to consider the sad truth. To convince him, Galen needed irrefutable proof. For that he must learn more, much more.

Slowly, Galen composed a carefully worded response. /The Vorlons were a great mystery and difficult to predict at the best of times. Your impressions of Rhea cannot, by definition, be impartial. The truth is I have no real clue about what they might have done to her, but you must be prepared for the worst possibility. I want to review everything in your sensor log files from Vorlon, and did you record any of your interactions with Rhea? If you did, I must see them. After I have a chance of absorbing all that, I will speak with her myself./

Dispatching the message, Galen entered the bridge area of the ship while waiting for a response. The seamless black control surface and screens looked identical to his ships except every underlying access panel was removed, to show the inner workings. Flexible metal conduits ran off from the innards of the bridge controls in several directions. Following the largest one led Galen to the first of the three small bedrooms. When he opened the door, a wall of humming machinery greeted him.

Interesting, and what might this be? The complexity hid its purpose from Galen.

So many minutes passed that Galen worried Fed wouldn’t answer. Never before had he seen Fed react with anger when confronted, until today. He had always been the sort to absorb corrections and insults, turning them into jokes or willfully taking them as compliments. At least in this one
way, he had changed. No doubt, his circumstances caught up with him. Being on the Circle for years could not be conducive to the easy going lifestyle Fed had always aspired to when they were apprentices. Galen prodded him.

/Fed, are you going to answer me?/

A curt, petulant, answer arrived immediately. /Thinking. Some of us aren’t as giant-brained as you./

After several more minutes Fed sent his answer.

/The scans of Vorlon are in my ship’s central storage. And, yes I recorded my conversations with her, but they are in my special private logs./

There was another protracted pause. Considering how eager he acted Galen guessed that Fed would eventually grant his request but perhaps this would go faster for him if he used the magic word.

/May I see them, please?/

/I don't mind you viewing them. But they might upset your delicate sensibilities. There is a lot of racy stuff in there. If I give you access, I can’t limit it. You’ll learn things about me you might not want to know./

Letting out a disbelieving grunt, Galen laughed at the thought that any of Fed’s escapades would shock him.

/Is it worse then anything I saw on Z’ha’dum?/

/No. Nothing can be worse than that./

Those logs must contain embarrassing or sexual matters. Galen sent a reassuring message.

/I promise to tread lightly, keep any and all secrets that I might inadvertently learn, not make copies for my private enjoyment or distribute it for public amusement. Is there anything I am missing?/

/Haha. Okay. You'll find them on an isolated system in my room, the second bedroom, under my pillow. You'll have to enter the password: Exegi Monumentum Aere Perennius. Oh and look out for my spider. When it leaps for your head just say, Down Po firmly./

Spider? /And if I don't?/

/I doubt it would be able to kill you./

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**Observation Lounge 1 Aboard the Excalibur**

The door opened onto the small observation room located at the top most point of the Excalibur. In the middle of the room, Fed uncloaked himself. With a flick of his hand he locked the door mechanism behind him and studied the small room. With only one small light above the door, darkness and shadows filled it. A bench recessed into the left wall didn't block the view. The length of the ship as it traveled through hyperspace made for a majestic sight. In wonder, Fed relished it all. The giddiness of running around doing stuff almost overwhelmed. He’d been cooped up too long.

That bench looked like the perfect place for a thorough snog. Wistfully, he wondered how many
lonely members of the crew shared intimate moments here. With a sigh, he wished he had such fun but he hardly did anymore. Optima’s warning when she broke up with him after he joined the Circle had been too prophetic- We live in a small tank Fed, and women talk. Watch your burn rate or you’re gonna run out of fuel. The Order sisters talked alright. He had hoped it’d be all about what great company he was. He got his wish. Plenty of fuel for all his fires. At first a roaring blaze. Now, not even a smoulder. What hadn’t occurred to him was that there would be more. Jealousies. Vindictiveness from those who wanted more than what he wanted to give. A surprisingly large number of fireballs thrown his way. But the worst. The cruel whispered warnings- the kindest of which said stay away, all he wanted was notches for his belt.

It never occurred to most of them that his motivation was very simple- he never could stand being alone, especially at night. The sex, while always welcomed and, who was he kidding encouraged, was still totally optional. A few figured this out. Gwynn right away after their one failed hookup. Aky once she decided Kane wasn’t enough for her. Optima after she dumped him. With Gwynn and Aky gone on missions the last couple years, he’d had too many nights of forced alone time. Lots of time to do little else but drink and think. Ugh, it was horrible. At least he figured all this out.

After over ten years of bouncing around, he hadn’t used the l-word since her. He learned his lesson, love made you a sucker. He certainly liked everyone he rolled around with, tried to treat them great and better off for having been with him. But for sure he thought he had evolved beyond love. Then she popped back up. Fuck.

He finally let the picture of Rhea form in his mind. Her old enigmatic smiling self, not whatever she’d become. His heart leaped into his throat. Like a dormant virus, he was sick in love with her again. Fuck. When he tried to talk to her about all these swirling feelings both years ago and most recently she shut him down both times. The first time she had broken him. And now she’s back from Hades, broken herself. What he’d do about this, he had no clue.

Which wasn’t true, he corrected himself. He knew what he wanted. To get her. To fix her. Because he felt that again. What he felt the first time with her. That feeling that no amount of sex, drinking, or partying gave him. The feeling when he basked in her glow. A feeling that persisted, even when they weren’t in eachother’s arms. The feeling that screamed everything was five by five. Love was the best drug, drink, and party.

But according to Galen there was no reason to hope good would come of this. Galen’s smart, and right a lot. Please let him be wrong this time, he asked the universe.

Oh well. Time to core dump. With ease, he brushed off his thoughts and kicked them to the curb. A plan needed to be pulled together and implemented.

A scan sweep of the room showed him Galen had a probe here. Fed slipped into the probe undetected, avoiding Galen’s protection wards, the basic ones they all learned as initiates. At least in one way Galen hadn’t kept up. And of course Galen had a network all over the ship. Only one interested Fed. The one in the captain’s quarters. Fed called up his stealthiest daemon.

/Hey Ali, I got a job for you./ The rogue infiltrator daemon understood and sprang to action, smoothly penetrating Galen’s network to accomplish his master’s will.

Satisfied with his work, he walked up to the window and placed his forehead against it feeling the cold of space radiate through. It’d be helpful to get advice. It couldn’t be the Order’s dark prince, Galen, for the obvious reason or anyone else of the Circle, too many agendas there. Time to call his consigliere.
Closing his eyes to cast the electron incantation, he created a mental image of this room and projected his self image into it. Then he cast outward along a vector in the direction of the Vorlon homeworld seeking the tell-tale signature of his target.

After many minutes of searching, he found her. The sleeping form of a woman appeared on the floor in front of him.

Standing above her, Fed gently said, “Gwynn?”

No response.

“Gwwyynnn,” he said louder.

Finally, he gave up and yelled in her ear, “Hey wake up!”

Slowly she stirred, her eyes fluttering open. Frowning and climbing to her feet, her dark blue eyes tiredly focused on him. Trying to fully rouse herself, she ran her hand over her perfectly round, bald head.

Grumpily, she said, “Did you find him?”

Fed laughed and pointed at her. “That's pretty funny Gwynn. I never figured you the purple silk pajamas type.”

Crossing her arms, she doled out a self-assured response, “They’re lavender. And you’re right, it’s more your color. Did you find him?”

Fed’s smile grew bigger. Her cheekiness was why he’d never been able to get enough of Gwynn’s company.

“Ya, he’s on the Excalibur, at the ass end of nowhere. Apparently, they’ve already found a cure, and are barreling toward Earth at top speed.”

Gwynn's eyes lit up and her frown disappeared. “Already? That’s good right?”

Fed rolled his eyes. “Of course.”

Gwynn asked anxiously, “Did you find my cache?”

Serious now, Fed answered, “The suit and tools were exactly where you said they would be, but there’s a bit of a problem, I still need to convince Galen to come with me.”

“If they have the cure, why wouldn’t he come with you?” Gwynn asked.

“He insists on hand delivering it himself, then he's going all cloak and dagger to Mars with Gideon.”

“He's right to make sure the cure is delivered. Ten billion people are more important than this. But why Mars?”

“You won't fricking believe this. He's going to look into EarthForce Special Weapons for Gideon.”

Her mouth fell open and she quickly said, “Does he know about Sid and Aky?”

“No. As an added bonus Tzak and Verg are also there to oversee the final phase.”
Letting out a hard breath, Gwynn said, “Tzak’s going to try to put a slug between Galen’s eyes. Tell the Circle. They’ll have to keep Galen off Mars for a while.”

Decisively Fed stated, “No. There’s no time. We arrive in three days. I’m it. He already knows about the base and suspects more. I have to figure out a way to keep Galen from stumbling into that pit of snakes.”

Vibrating with nervous energy, Gwynn asked, “What are you going to do?”

Fed stared at the fake view out of the fake room, looking over the fake hyperspace. His plan was weak, he knew that. Maybe Gwynn could help. Probably not. Still it always helped to bounce ideas off her. If only to shore up his nerve. She was his rock. Always spoke up for him, kept every secret he told her and covered his back. Most importantly she stood up to him and challenged him.

“I think I might have a plan that can fix both problems. I have the run of the ship and I’ve got Galen distracted, I think.”

Instantly, Gwynn unleashed a torrent, “Tell me you’re not thinking of manipulating Galen because our dark brooding prince is going to turn you into his personal asshat.”

That made Fed laugh. Ya, it always helped to talk to her. “Not Galen, it's his Captain I'm aiming at.” Fed affected an elderly man's Italian accent, “I'm going to make him an offer he can't refuse.”

Putting her hands on her hips, Gwynn nodded no aggressively. “It was nice knowing you Fed.”

“Have you got a better idea? I’d love to hear it. I could shanghai the ship, their safeguards are pathetic, but not now with them carrying the cure.”

Dropping her arms, Gwynn paused lost in thought and came up with, “Drug induced coma? Keep him out for a few weeks. Galen always looks like he could use a forced vacation.”

Fed dismissively said, “Ya that’d work in the short run, but then neither of us would get to Vorlon, because once he woke up I’d have to flee the galaxy with him hot on my heels. Any other bright ideas?”

Gingerly she suggested, “In a pinch, the truth might do.”

Throwing up his hands in frustration, he said, “You have no idea how tempted I was to tell him! But I don’t dare. He’s always kept me at arm’s length. I can’t predict how he’ll react. Anything else?”

They both stood there staring at each other. It made Fed feel stupider than usual.

Gwynn admitted, “No, but my instincts say yours is a bad one. Galen’s too observant and smart.”

“If I play it right, Galen will never know. I’ll need to talk Tzak into accepting Gideon, but that should be easy. As posturing as he is, I doubt he wants to have to deal with Galen snooping around.”

She kept at him, “Do you think you can do this? I mean have you ever manipulated anyone seriously before?”

He didn’t blurt out his answer, no, not beyond the sorts of silly games they played as apprentices. This would worry her. So he shrugged instead and said, “I was there and watched Elric out-maneuver the Shadows, and I’ve studied the Circles private files. I understand how to do it in
theory. You have to really know your target and accurately guess how they will react.”

“And you think you know Tzakizak?”

“When Hekuba and I were um … seeing each other, she painted quite a picture of Tzak for me.”

Gwynn looked shocked. “Woah there caballero. You slept with Tzak’s old apprentice just to get information about him. That’s ugly.”

Oh here we go, he thought. He tried to wave her off the false trail. “You know me better than that. I turned her down twice before um … she convinced me to give it a go.”

He could see her latching on. Like him, Gwynn never could resist a juicy piece of gossip. It’s probably a big part of why they got along famously. “She twisted your arm then?”

“She twisted something alright!” Fed whistled with a laugh. Gwynn frowned as if she just ate something rancid. That brought him some time, but if he didn’t cut her off, they’d spend the next half an hour dissecting his mental health. “Don’t worry it ended the way all my liaisons do, with me getting shown the door. Leave it alone. She volunteered all the information I need. Okay? He loves more than just guns. He’s a huge fan of military men, if you know what I mean.” His eyebrows danced up repeatedly.

“I’m going to pretend I don’t.”

Continuing, Fed gained verbal momentum, “Tzak’s constantly badgering Hera to send more agents to Mars. At worst, he’ll consider Gideon another stick he can throw on the pyre, most likely he’ll be glad to have another gun around to ogle.”

Challenging him, Gwynn asked, “What about Gideon? How are you going to study him?”

“I’ve already hacked all his records including his personal, private stuff. It was barely encrypted. Seriously, the IT staff on this ship should be whipped. They are the worst. Anyway, Gideon worked his way up the ranks. He’s quite a bad-ass. You should read his commanding officer reviews. It’s either a glowing recommendation or complete condemnation, either way, one theme—he’s a big risk taker. I plan to isolate him, test him, push him to see how he reacts. Make sure he can play the game. If he passes, I’ll make him an offer.”

Gwynn raised a warning hand. “And if he doesn’t pass?”

Fed had nothing. No backup, no safety net. All his eggs in this one basket.

Gwynn read his reaction and wrung her hands together. “Galen’s mentioned Gideon to Fin and I. The way he spoke, I think they’re friends. If this goes sideways, if you get him killed, you will make an enemy of Galen forever.”

Never one to mince words, she told it like it was. He felt worse about his plan. This was the rub that made him hesitate. “Don’t you think I know that. I have to take the chance. Galen can not learn about what we’re doing on Mars. I’ve always appreciated your counsel Gwynn but I’m gonna have to put on my daddy pants and make this work no matter what.”

With a bow of acquiescence, she said, “I have one piece of advice.” Fed felt more hopeful as she continued, “If Gideon passes, tell Aky what’s going on. You really don’t want to just rely on Tzak’s good graces to protect Gideon.” That had not occurred to him.

“Hera won’t be happy with you.”

Sarcastically Fed responded, “Good thing she’s not here. I should go. Tell Rhea of the delay for me.”

Calmly Gwynn probed, “Why don't you tell her yourself?”

There were some downsides about talking to Gwynn. Namely her supreme talent of latching on like a pitbull and not letting go until everything was torn open and laid bare before her. “Madre de Dios. For once, can't you do as I ask without question.”

“Let me think,” As if giving his words serious consideration, she placed a finger on her chin. “Nope. What is wrong with you? During the unmentionable night you bawled on my shoulder about how much you loved her. Now the Universe has dropped her in your lap and you act remote and cold. What the hell is going on with you?”

“We were so drunk I'm surprised you remember anything from that night.”

“Stop evading!”

Staring at her silently, Fed considered telling her to fuck off, or booting her from the spell, or just being honest. He’d probably feel better if he spilled his guts. “I spoke to her alone, right after we interrogated her, I tried to tell her I still love her. I screwed it up. I let my mouth run on too much. She shut me down. She had Roland's sword and gripped it like some sort of talisman to ward me off. I think, you know, I don’t rate.”

Like a good technomage, Gwynn didn’t do sympathy, preferring punchiness. Fed braced himself for her clear eyed blows. “She didn’t act the way you wanted, so now you’re going to punish her by ignoring her. What are you jealous of a dead man? I didn't even think you were capable of jealousy.”

Ouch that hurt. Waving her off Fed explained, “No, it's not that. It's guilt, I think. Roland called me before he disappeared. He asked me to help him investigate. But like the idiot I am, I trusted Hera would be honest with me. So I stayed home perfecting my drinking skills. Now I wish to God I would have gone.”

The cold yelly Gwynn melted away. Full of feeling, she gently said, “Thank everything holy that you stayed home. If you had gone, you’d have just been butchered like the rest of them. At least this explains why you were so careless when you were here.”

Fed shook his head yes and added, “Now, the only nagging question eating at me is why they left her alive? I'm desperately hoping the Vorlons haven't turned her into some sort of Manchurian Candidate.”

Gwynn demanded, “Stop using movie metaphors I have to look up. I never went to your film festivals.”

“You know, she sees the Queen of Diamonds, then she snaps and tries to kill us.”

“You mean a sleeper agent?”

“Exactly, what if we're going to have to ... I can't even say it.”

The ice queen popped back up. Coldly Gwynn continued for him, “Kill her? Hera and I discussed that possibility. If it comes to that, I'll take care of it.”
Her words made him feel sick. “Just like that. You'd what? Borrow my knife and cut her throat?”

Fire flashed in both of Gwynn's eyes. “No, not just like that! She was like my real sister for years before you showed up ready to invade her gates. But if she's too far gone and we can’t tranq her, I'll do what needs to be done.”

Running his hand through his unruly hair, Fed said, “I’m sorry ... Galen is convinced already that it's a trap and now he has me worried.”

“Of course we have to be on our guard, but I am not leaving until we crack this dome open.”

At least they were on the same page. “How’s the clearing going?”

Gwynn lifted both hands, wiggled all her fingers., “Unlike you. Still in one piece.” Her cheek bounced off Fed with no more than a silent promise to himself to get her back for that one. “I finished clearing a landing area next to the dome. Also finished the survey. The dome is spherical and even extends underground, so we can't dig under it. The junction between the moon and elevator is perfectly tight. We can’t slip in that way either. I tried to drill into the surface of the moon and all I got for my efforts was a pile of broken drills bits and a burned out motor. It turns out only the top meter is made up of rock, the rest is even weirder than the dome. I swear there is some sort of time dilation going on there.”

With a dismissive wave, Fed stopped her and declared defiantly, “We’ll figure it out, we’re technomages.”

With a curt nod, she mirrored his sureness. “Yes. Did you ever get the hand spell working?”

Time to get her back. Fed lifted his gloved hand between them with his palm facing himself and fingers outstretched.

“Wasn’t easy. I have to keep sixteen small platforms smoothly moving in concert, but I think it works well. Let me show you.”

He curled all the gloved fingers but the middle one.

Grinning frostily, Gwynn said, “Very mature Fed. I'm going back to sleep.”

Laughing at her fading image, he said, “Sorry, my spell must be glitched.”
Pilots, mechanics, and deckhands scampered about preparing fighters for launch. They went about with an intensity born out of a rumor, which shockingly was true. The Drakh fleet stalked them. And so the Excalibur nervously vibrated and hummed with activity.

Except for one bubble of perfect calm. No one dared to pierce that shadowy sphere at the end of the docking bay, where two technomage ships sat side by side. As they worked, the deck crew gossiped among themselves. Everyone agreed … technomages never moved openly unless the metaphoric shit was about to hit the proverbial fan.

But none of that concerned Galen. He stood inside Fed's cluttered ship near one of its three sleeping cabins. If this were his ship he would have a short, clear path to, well anywhere. However here, crates, random machinery, and objects with no discernable function beyond being in his way blocked his path.

Galen messaged Fed's ship while taking a circuitous route to his goal, Fed's private cabin. The normal disquiet settled over Galen's mind whenever he entered someone else’s private space.

/Ship access sensor log system. Uplink all scans made of and around the Vorlon home system bearing any timestamp./

/Transfer commencing.../

A copious stream of files hit Galen. Carefully, he shunted it aside into his tech's vast storage for later perusal, because, astonishingly, as he opened the door into a small, disorganized bedroom, on the far wall beside the bed, looming and dwarfing everything else was a Vorlon encounter suit.

In many ways, it was the opposite of the last one he saw. Years before, he had sought out a Vorlon, Ulkesh, to help him enter Z'ha'dum. Ulkesh’s suit was an intimidating tool that oozed authority and power. This one not so much. For one thing, it looked like it had been dragged behind a shuttle through re-entry. Without any of the usual fabric that typically obscured its exact shape, Galen could make out dents, gouges and black scorch marks. While otherwise intact, its head had been detached and sat on a nightstand by the bed surrounded by a smattering of tools. Perhaps the Vorlon homeworld was littered with them and Fed brought one along to examine. But then why would he take one in such poor shape? Perhaps he discovered the equivalent of a Vorlon junkyard. Either way, this suit won't intimidate anyone ever again.

Then from somewhere by his feet an alarm blared interrupting his examination.

A robotic voice trumped, "Intruder Alert! Intruder Alert!..."

The suit distracted him enough that he hadn’t noticed the mechanical spider that scuttled out from under the bed when he entered. Galen's attention snapped onto it just in time to see it leap off a pile of unfolded clothes, into the air toward his head. His first instinct was to hurl a well-placed fireball.

Lucky for the adorable little homicidal robot Galen went with, "Down Po!"

The spider executed a perfect somersault in mid air, landed in front of Galen's boot where it
promptly sketched something with its leading right leg on the tip of his shoe. Galen tried to kick it away but it avoided him easily, only to scuttle back under the bed.

/Fed, what did your spider just do to my shoe?/

/Isn’t it great? That was its guarding mode. It also has servitor, patrol and entertainment modes./

/I’m still waiting for an answer./

/It just sketched the rune for friend in infrared ink./

Galen walked up to the Vorlon suit. Dozens of probing wires lead out of the hole where the head should have sat. Deciding the suit could wait, he sat down on Fed's unmade bed. Moving aside the many colored pillows, he found a small smooth ball.

Galen immediately recognized it. After the mages went into hiding, Galen noticed that Fed carried around a small ball that he would absentmindedly bounce rhythmically. One of the many parts of Fed's peculiar charm that immediately grated on his nerves. This appeared to be the same ball. Galen had always assumed it was just an ordinary ball, but with careful examination, he found a tiny access port through which he could associate.

/PWD?/

Galen provided the passphrase Fed had given him. It accepted it readily but nothing else happened, no system daemon presented itself, no visual interface, no text … nothing, but a single waiting prompt, like the earliest arcane computer systems. Recalling enough of those esoteric commands, Galen tried to coax information out of it. However, no matter the sphere only responded with three useless words:

/Command not found/

Pulling himself back out of the link, he stared at the ball, rotating it in contemplation and indignantly uttered, "What can you do?"

Just once it would be nice if something came easily. Considering that Fed, was one of the most gifted hackers in the Order, why he would employ such a primitive, and clearly dysfunctional system was beyond Galen … for now.

He considered messaging Fed, but decided against it. That would be admitting defeat. This was a puzzle and one of the few pleasures Galen allowed himself was solving obscure thought puzzles.

Galen thought, Surely I can figure this out. If I were Fed how would I access your files? Something simple and obvious. Let’s try this.

/0/ (Suddenly, Galen's mind filled with Fed's voice.)

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-18.01.2256

Today I learned Rhea is dead. Hera told me in her usual way, long-winded and indirect. Some stupidass accident. She used the word, vaporize a lot. Poof, all gone. I asked to go with her on the investigation but she forbade it.

I told Gwynn. She reacted with such a fixed cold stare I wondered if she heard me at all. Then she
just cut the transmission. I told Roland. Of course he became weepy, then furious. He vowed to horn in on the investigation and asked me if I wanted in, he even offered to come and get me. I turned him down. It won't bring them back and Hera promised to tell me everything anyway. As for me I have the keys to the wine cellar so I'm thinking excessive drinking followed by a good long bout of crying myself to sleep. Dios ayudame.

-30.01.2256

Hera just got back. She asked me if Roland talked to me at all. I said no. He's poofed to. She thinks he killed himself. He always struck me as the half-crazy sort of technomage, so ya, probably.

She asked how I was doing. I lied. I think she could tell. She told me not to bottle it up, talking about your feelings is the best way to sort it out. I pointed out the obvious, that I’ve been alone. She said you’re only alone if you choose to be alone. And that if I don’t want to talk about it, that was fine but eventually I’d have to open up. She insisted I at least pour it in a journal or something. Already knew all this. And that it’s half bullshit. Talking only gets you so far. You have to let go to.

-05.02.2256

Hera’s been getting high as a kite since she got home. She thinks I can't tell. I can totally tell. She repeats herself and stares at her hands, because, you know, she never really looked at them before. She’s locked herself in her office for three days. I’m getting worried.

-11.02.2256

I confronted Hera. She blew me off. Made a macabre joke about how they were the Order’s drug dealers so that was the best way to honor their memory. Then the jokes really started flying. Most were lame. I should have recorded it to show her when she was sober. (Laughter.) Most mathy- With great power comes … great difficulty in factorizing the polynomial. Most not funny- Life is a sexually transmitted disease with a 100% mortality rate. My favorite - Do you know what the last Xon on Centauri Prime said, just before he died? "Aaaaargh!"

Anyway, I’ve kept at her to quit. Sometimes she listens to me.

-13.02.2256

Learned the difference between a memorial and funeral. Memorial’s when you don't have bodies. They suck as much as funerals. Walking around their house sucked more. Fuck my good memory.

I got half-drunk and just hung out in the back. No one cared.

Except Gwynn. After it ended, she dragged me into the house, and yelled at me for being two sheets to the wind. I cried like a baby on her shoulder. Then she started drinking. Man, Gwynn can hold her liquor. She unloaded on me- she had a blow out fight with normie BF, they broke up. The Circle’s already riding her. They want to assign her to another full technomage to oversee her as an initiate. She’s flat out refused because duh, two masters dying on her is enough. I pointed out they’re just worried she’ll go bad.

I reminded her- we’re each other’s keepers. And invited her to come home with us. She said no, that what she should do was apologize to her normie BF.

I kissed her on the cheek. I couldn’t help myself. She looked so sad. Then… She kissed me back, on the lips (a manic laugh) … It was bad. Like I didn’t think sex could be that bad. Gwynn declared all of it the *unmentionable night* . We’re not allowed to talk about it, ever, to anyone.
(Laughter). As if I’d brag about not getting it up for one of the hottest women I know.

-14.02.2256

Man, Hera is one grumpy piece of work coming off whatever she was on. She yelled at me for breathing too loud. I miss her jokes.

-20.02.2256

Sobriety rules our house once again.

Hera went down to the cellar and noticed half the bottles were missing. So we had a long, long ass talk. She wouldn't let it go until I spilled my guts. Here's what I learned from her: shit happens, deal with it, move on. You owe it to the dead to keep living, and enjoy life even more than before. I'm paraphrasing, she said it better, with colorful asides and allegories. And I better moderate my drinking or we're turning into a dry household, whatever that means. She’s right, I need to pull it together. Thus ends my foray into nightly alcoholism, which is fine since I drank all the good stuff anyway.

-22.02.2256

Hera's unhappy with my attitude. So what if I don't shower and all I do is sit around in my underwear watching Trajan do its daily network traffic analysis. If I don't improve she’s threatened to fix me.

-24.02.2256

I've been fixed! Woke up with Hera standing over me with a big syringe. Bam. Did the trick. It's like I have to clutch my desk to keep from falling off the planet. It's really weird suddenly going about my studies feeling normal, okay not normal- manically happy, hyperactive, over-focused. There must be some adderall in the mix. Good stuff.

She said I don't have a melancholy disposition so I won't be on them for long. She's right, I already feel myself letting it go. But man, my mind’s going a million clicks per second. I’m thinking too much. Realized three things. The Good- Love’s the wildest ride there is. The Bad- Love makes you a total sucker. The Ugly- I don’t want to ride the love train again. If anything I want to get it out of my head.

-25.02.2256

I finally got good news, Gwynn answered one of the hundred messages I left her. I can't believe how relieved I feel. We talked for a while. She looked good but sounded like the Queen of the Ice-Queens. I asked her why she went quiet on me. She wanted time to think, and to make up with her BF. They shacked up. I'm glad she's got someone.

We psycho-analyzed the unmentionable night. Her conclusion- emotionally vulnerable time, inhibitions lowered by alcohol, blah, blah, blah. My conclusion- she’s the annoying older sister I never realized I desperately need. That got a laugh out of her. I begged her not to cut me off because I did a stupid impulsive thing while drunk. She promised to keep talking to me. So far she’s kept her promise.

-24.03.2256

No more happy juice for me. Thank the chocolate covered Christ child. I was starting to get all these weird side effects. Surprisingly, I liked the three hour erections the least. But it helped, and I
got used to working on like nine different projects at once. I'm Mr. Productive.

I was nosing around Hera's work files looking for ideas to steal for new projects when I stumbled on something super interesting. She worked out a way to insert nanoprobes into the visual cortex. If you arrange several layers in a sort of clustered dodecahedron pattern you can transit visual/auditory imagery out of any human brain. Very leet. I asked Hera about it and she got all weirdly stern. Then ordered me forget it and not to talk about it with anyone. I'm guessing it's secret Circle stuff. She found and deleted all my copies of her files but she can't delete my head. Three cheers for my photographic memory.

I gave it some thought. This is the perfect way to pour out my vivid memories. Get them out of my head. Put it away in something. Like a monument. I can take it out and look at it when I want, otherwise I can put it away, and forget her.

I'm going to digitize my memories. I mean sure, I can wait two and half years till I'm a technomage, but why, if there is another path, right? The technique looked easy enough, if you can ace a sub-micron platform to do the vasal micro-movements. The stroke risk is minimal, only like 6%. Since I've already mastered platform creation down to that level, I should have no problems.

I got it all planned out. I can do it through my chrysalis port and I've swiped enough microprobes. I'll just need thirty minutes alone while wearing my chrysalis without Hera around. I'll figure something out.

-28.03.2256

Madre de Dios! That hurt! I hope I didn't do too much permanent damage. I can't seem to remember how to do differentiation. Oh well. I'm sure it will come back to me. Now that I think about it, maybe I should have waited a bit until I was more skilled with my movement control.

Oh well. Hera found me passed out on our lab's internal imager. When I regained consciousness, she was completely freaked out and pumping full of blood thinner. I've never seen her like that. Luckily, she didn't get angry with me, just … scared. I think she blames herself for not locking up my chrysalis and hasn't punished me. Even though she must have seen what I did. I've gotten the rest of day to recover from my self-inflicted stupidity. She even made me chocolate chip cookies. They're still as good as ever. Let's see if I can eat two simultaneously right now, …(chomp, chomp argh, argh mmmhh) … I'll try to pull an early memory tonight, as soon as the throbbing stops.

-29.03.2256

They sound fine, looks okay, like a dream, but more importantly, it worked! I'm seriously full of myself right now. But I can't leave this sitting in my network storage. Hera will find it and the hyper-encryption will just make her curious and more likely to spend the time and effort to crack it open. I'm moving everything to an isolated system. I can even disguise it, ya, something innocuous no one would look twice at.

EOF

--->

Galen pulled himself out of Fed's memory sphere. Drugs were certainly a way to deal with emotional trauma. Inferior to the behavioral activation techniques Galen utilized, but drugs were far easier. The only downside, besides the immediate side effects, a not insubstantial risk of long term addiction. Galen wondered how he'd have reacted had Elric insisted he take drugs to fix him. Galen couldn't even imagine it. Elric never would have. For the easy way was never Elric's way.
And it was not Galen’s way either.

Next.

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/1/

-21.11.2252

This day. … A lot of firsts. Funny how the universe works that way. The first time I realized someone I love would die soon and the first time I met her. And it was also the worst first impression I've ever made, by far, and I've made some bad ones. (Trailing off to laughter as swirling, vomit inducing images formed.)

--->

"Woohoo! Fun!" I yelled.

The image- confused blur of rotating motion. A distinct impression of sweating and being strapped to something.

"Recite the Code," asked by perhaps female voice.

I answered, "Solidarity, Secret, Mystery, Magic, Science, Knowledge, Good."

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Pulling himself back out of the link, Galen realized that he is actually seeing Fed's memories as if he were Fed. As promised, the images- blurry, dreamlike with perspectives skewed. It surprised Galen that Fed managed to pull it off and not get himself killed. The six percent failure was no doubt per probe. Probabilistically speaking, that virtually guaranteed a stroke but clearly Fed did not understand that.

There were many memory retrieval techniques available to a technomage once they were fully teched, but this was the first technique Galen encountered that works on a brain, well a living one anyway, without employing the services of a telepath. No matter the means, viewing such memories was always headache inducing and possibly disturbing because of the immediacy of the images.

Galen considered whether or not he should keep going. On the one hand he could learn what he needed without censoring or wading through Fed's obtuse interpretations, but on the other hand it would be more time-consuming and … intimate then he was prepared for. He decided to try and split the difference.

He messaged Fed. /Your log system has a bit of a usability problem. Exactly how am I supposed to find anything?/

/You can't. I stripped most of the os to make room for the last few entries. I've meant to expand it with more capacity but you know, busy./

That would explain the sphere's unfriendly interface. Piqued, Galen responded. /You should have warned me your logs are in memory stream format./

/And ruin your fun? Nah./
I would rather not bumble around in your private logs, Fed. At least tell me which entries I should focus on or better yet, I can bring you the sphere and you can pull the relevant entries for me, avoiding any unnecessary intrusions.

There was a very long pause.

You wanted to know all, to be some sort of supreme impartial judge. If you are going to violate my privacy, I would prefer you do it as completely as possible. And besides, if you want to interrogate Rhea properly, you had better learn everything you can about her, right? That sphere is a great source of information. Now leave me alone.

Fed seemed to have blown past anger and into full-blown peevishness. Odd. Perhaps he was under more stress than he guessed. Unfortunately, that left the problem of what to do. Abandon this avenue or plow through the entries in the sphere?

Compulsively rotating the ball in his hand, Galen considered. This would hardly be the first private interaction he had, there are no other words for it, spied upon. Particularly, not after spending years monitoring the technomage probe network, not to mention all the probes he's left scattered about the galaxy. He'd seen far too much. If Fed had no problem with Galen seeing anything on the sphere, should he even be hesitating?

Coming to a decision he said aloud at the sphere as if it could understand, "I am sure I will regret this, but here is hoping you are worthwhile."

Realizing this might not be a quick, Galen made himself comfortable, taking off his shoes, and coat. He neatly made Fed's bed then reclined on top of the blanket, propped against a wall of pillows.

Steeling himself, Galen dove back into the point he left off.

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The swirling visual hurricane slowed until he/I could make out a vaguely human shape illuminated in the dull red glow of an alien sun.

The figure spoke clearly now, "Of those good is the greatest. It is what I have devoted my life to and so must you."

"Is that why you drag me with you into the slums to see your charities?"

The voice clearly female, made a mocking reply, "Oh, very perceptive Fed. Humanity might have mastered space travel but we are still very much smothered in violence, poverty and greed. Oh and the endless parades of petty wars."

"Hey, at least no one goes hungry anymore."

"That is only partially true. For many, human or not, life is still too short, and brutal. I will cut my lecture short today. The lesson you must take away is, great power is given to a technomage, great good is expected in return. Do you understand?"

"Sure. Be good, do good."

The figure snapped into sharp relief, clearly it is Herazade. With a frown, she said under her breath, "As succinct as ever."
With a wave of her hand, the straps suddenly loosen and I jumped down landing with a grunt.

"How do you feel? Lightheadedness? Nausea?"

"Nah. I feel great."

Probingly, she asked, "Fed, I have meant to ask … what do you and Aldous do on your Sundays together?"

Over-excited, I answered, "We have an awesome time!"

Her eyes locked on me, "Yes I noticed. Doing what exactly?"

"He said I don't have to tell you." She stepped into my space filling my view. As she leant closer, clearly trying to will me into answering with just her presence, I continued, "He said if you try to force it out of me, that I should make up stuff, the more awful and outrageous the better."

Looming over me, she said one curt word, "Unacceptable."

"He said that if you keep at me, I should tell you to leave me alone and go speak with him about it."

Sighing, her body relaxed and withdrew. A small smile played on her lips.

I asked, "If you don't approve, why did you suggest it in the first place?"

She plainly said, "Before I found you and took you on as my apprentice, your world was all negligence, and thuggery. I thought you should have a father-figure who was not a drug-dealing criminal and who better than my own former master and father."

At that, I laughed loudly at her.

Frowning severely at my response, she waved a dismissive hand, "It seemed like a good idea at the time. We will revisit this. But for now you can have tonight and most of this week to yourself."

"Yes!" I pumped my fist.

"Put everything away first."

I whined, "Oh come on! It's heavy and it will take me forever. Why don't you just wave your hand and put it away in two seconds?"

Annoyed, she pointed one finger at me.

"Rudely whine again and you will spend your evening in my office studying the Italian Renaissance. Our guests will be here soon. You are not to spend all night in the VR pod avoiding them like you did with our last guests."

I defensively answered her, "That's because I hated being around Kell's apprentices. Whenever we were alone, the nicest thing Elizar called me was a buffoon and his sister, don't get me started about her!" I drew circles near my temple. "Total bag of varied nuts."

Glaring at me she snapped out, "Why didn't you tell me?" I crossed my arms. She mellowed quickly and stopped glaring. "I'm sorry. Of course. Kell is our leader. You did not feel empowered to speak up. And it is too late for me to do anything about it now. Well, our new guest, Coeus, also has two apprentices but you will find they are very different. I will be helping Aldous set up for the
convocation. I expect you to be a perfect host, and take excellent care of them."

Smiling, I bowed formally and dramatically. "I hear and obey my Queen!"

She pointed me toward what appears to be a large gyroscope but I remained in place. A short, husky, old man, in an embroidered tunic swirling with clashing colors, stepped through the nearest door. His long white hair bounced freely about as he floated toward us.

Herazade muttered with a smile, "Ah, speak of the devil …"

She turned to the man, tipped her head and said, "Aldous."

He asked us loudly, "Ready to meet our guests?"

I shrugged. "Umm, sure."

He pointed at the gyroscope. Instantly irritated, he said, "That makes my house look like a sodding circus. Put that thrice-damned eyesore away already!"

Immediately, I jumped to obey him. They begin to slowly walk off toward the other end of the courtyard.

Grunting with exertion, I drug the gyroscope slowly into an open shed but overheard their receding conversation.

As they retreated, I heard Aldous say, "You should discipline him more."

"What? Spare the rod, spoil the child? You know that is not my way. Besides I have you."

He interrupted her, impatiently, "Yes, yes. So you and Coeus finally kiss and makeup? Ten years is a long time to hold a grudge only to suddenly give it up."

"There was no grudge. Our disagreement was more about style than substance."

"How very vague. How about you explain that to me?"

They paused and stared at each other for a good minute. Aldous gasped then his expression turned surprised and pleased as he exclaimed, "No!" Then a loud "Ha!"

They walked off with silent animation as I lost sight of everything inside the shed. When I stepped back out, I looked around to find three new people had joined us. I ran quickly toward them. In the middle, Aldous sat on an invisible chair, a platform supporting him no doubt.

A middle-aged man stood next to him, examining the old man with a crystal in hand. A stream of tiny glittering motes flowed from the tip of the crystal into the elderly man’s neck. I studied the new man. His receding shoulder length black hair was slicked back, yet a few willfully stuck out at right angles. On his expensive gray suit festive red and green branches of holy spun as they flowed along one jacket arm, across the shoulders, down the other arm and back.

Silently, two very different young women stood by the examining man. The taller of the two, by more than a head, was bald and dressed meticulously in the traditional black apprentice robe and cloak. Her attention locked on Herazade, who spoke to her, but too softly for me to hear. Her severely angry expression marred an otherwise stunningly beautiful face. The other woman, the shortest of the group, barely above my eye level, carried a cylindrical container. Her apprentice cloak carelessly draped about her shoulders like an afterthought. Underneath, she wore a bright red
silken scarf, a vibrant green tunic and worn tight brown pants with one poorly applied patch on the right knee. Her long black hair mostly hung loose trying to obscure her vision. She ignored all around her.

As I joined the group, I heard, Herazade say at the tall bald apprentice, "Mirenda was an excellent mage and a very good friend. She is still missed by many. I count myself among that number."

To that the beautiful bald apprentice said nothing but her face relaxed, turning away from angry to distantly icy.

"Aren't you done yet?" Aldous said filling the silence.

"Nearly ... Is there pain?" asked the middle aged man lowering the crystal.

Aldous waved a hand looking affronted but replied, "Just give me a couple of those party in a box bottles you always carry around. Well, what's the verdict?"

The man put the crystal in a pocket and withdrew two small white containers. He handed them to Aldous without comment and said, "I would like to speak with you in private."

"No, we're all family here. Just spit it out."

The man paused and looked first at Herazade and then down at me. He slowly said, "I … have confirmed your suspicions. As I'm sure you know, there is still no cure. There is little I can do apart from slowing its progression."

A stunned silence settled like a fog. Confused my mouth hung open as I looked back and forth between the adults with growing unease. The seconds ticked by as no one said a thing.

Finally, Aldous gruffly said under his breath, "Well fuck me. I was hoping I was just being a hypochondriac. How long?"

"I can not be precisely sure unless you allow me to analyze your genome. Your tech has been compensating for some of the neuromuscular junction atrophy. It is usually slow. My guess is you still have a couple years."

"Will my mind go?"

"Typically it does not affect the mind. As you have noticed it affects your voluntary muscular control and is tolerable until it begins to affect your intercostal muscles..."

With a wave, Aldous dismissed the rest. "At least Kell will finally let me retire, or not. He keeps his cards clutched so closely to his chest who the hell knows."

He looked up at Herazade and they stared at each other silently. My eyes filled with tears. I wiped them away and swallowed hard.

"Hera, I've mentioned this possibility to Kell. We decided you will be my replacement. I will bring you to a few of our Circle meetings during the convocation. They want to talk to you, and by talk I mean grill really."

"That is not the traditional progression. Typically there is first a vacancy. Not to mention, I haven't even agreed to..."

Aldous interrupted, "Since when do you give a bloodied Xon about tradition! Kell only calls for an
election when he’s certain who he wants to win and who actually will win are the same person,” He stopped speaking suddenly noticing the audience intently listening to his harangue, “We'll talk about this later. I'm off to finish preparing the convocation site.”

"I will assist you." offered Herazade, adjusting her clothing.

Aldous cut her off yet again, "No. I want to be alone.” He smiled oddly as he looked around, “You kids stay and have fun. Besides this is my 5th hosting, I could set up everything with my eyes closed.”

He stood and shot off into the sky like a bullet. I tried to track his trajectory but only saw a vapor trail and heard an eventual audible pop. A pained and awkward silence remained behind his wake. Finally, Herazade cleared her throat and with hands on my shoulders forced me to fully face the newcomers. "I'm sorry Fed. I should have introduced you before this."

My head spun. The blood drained out of my face. A wave of nausea filled its place.

"Fed this is Coeus, and his two apprentices, Rhea and Gwynn. They are from Earth. Coeus is one of our best healers after Ing-Radi of course and soon Rhea..."

Her sentence cut off when I vomited on the pants and shoes of the one called Rhea.

She screamed, "Gah!" Still she caught me before I fell to the ground. I looked into her angry eyes as she maneuvered me onto my back on the ground.

Crouching next to me Herazade nodded left and right, disapproving. "I specifically told you not to eat anything this morning. What am I to do with you?"

With sympathy, Coeus looked down at me then said, "Rhea, attend to him.”

She shot back, “Why am I stuck with him?”

With a cool, calm tone Coeus recited, “We are each other’s keepers.”

That erased Rhea’s angry scowl immediately. Coeus took Herazade by the hand pulled her to a standing position.

“I wish to consult with Herazade. We are not to be disturbed.”

All three of us watched as they walked hand in hand out of the courtyard. Gwynn and Rhea exchanged glances.

Gwynn spoke with her hand extended to Rhea as if demanding payment, "I believe you owe me 100 credits.”

After an audible sigh, Rhea said, "This is not an auspicious start to my initiation. First I rip my lucky pants, now this … gah," examining her clothes Rhea said, "Gwynn, please get my bag from the ship.”

"Do you need my help carrying him?"

"No, I'll be fine."

As Gwynn's long strides carried her away, Rhea opened her container, moved her hair out of the way and slipped a chrysalis carefully on her head. It made a small sucking noise as it settled like a
large wet cap onto the back of her head, neck and down her back. Her peculiarly green eyes cut into me, studying me.

"I'm very sorry. I'm really..." I tried to get up but she restrained me to the ground.

“You should be sorry. These are my favorite pants and most expensive pair of boots.” Her fingers lightly traced up the back of my neck to the base of my skull, sending a shiver down my spine.

“I can figure out how to…” My words fumbled away when the tips of her fingers pushed painfully in the junction between my vertebrae.

“Ack. What are you doing?” She stared past me with unfocused eyes, and shushed me.

“Being your keeper.” Not removing her hand, she smiled at me and commanded in a strange voice, "Relax. Sleep. ..."

Her words floated away along with my body and mind as everything went black.

In the next instant I awoke tucked in bed. I looked under my blanket. Naked. Looking about, Rhea, no longer wearing her chrysalis or apprentice cloak, sat looking at a terminal at my littered table. With her feet propped up on the table, she looked to not be wearing pants or shoes. I stared at her bare legs, looking them up and down repeatedly. My face flushed as my blanket bulged. I pulled the blanket up to my chin, slipping one hand down under to make my blanket flatten.

I said softly, "Um... hello?"

Her head turned to me with a relieved smile. A toss and the terminal landed on a pile of small circuit boards. Walking over, she spoke, "You're awake. That’s good. You were out longer than I intended. Oops. Here drink this, all of it."

She offered me a glass as she stood beside the bed. When I hesitated she added, "It’s just water. There is nothing wrong with you apart from the obvious shock. But you were slightly dehydrated. Drink and rest."

When I still didn't take it, she put the glass on the only open spot on my nightstand.

I blurted out, "I'm naked!"

She pointed at my blanketed form and defensively said, "Your clothes... I assumed you would prefer not to sleep in them. And I could not find anything resembling pajamas."

"Oh. I don't wear any."

She raised both eyebrows at that. "That does provide a certain ... convenience," She pulled up her shirt. I inhaled sharply, as she revealed tight fitting short shorts, “I hope you don't mind, since we are the same size, I borrowed your shorts."

"Those are my underwear."

"Really? They look just like what I saw in the shops ... never mind. Rest, I'll be downstairs, looking for Gwynn."

She headed for the door, but paused to say over her shoulder with only one eye on me, "Don’t worry. It's a perfectly average size."

A small chuckle floated back to me as she left. I bit into my blanket to keep from screaming.
Throwing my blanket over my head, I said at myself, "Arrrgh. A woman finally takes off my clothes in my own fricking room and … Smooth Fed. You are the King of Sexing."

I guzzled the water, threw off my blanket, dressed and ran after her downstairs. At the bottom of the stairs I overheard an angry exchange. I stopped well back of the tiled foyer, close enough to hear but not be noticed.

Angrily Rhea said, "Where could you possibly have to go on this sweltering backwater province?! Let it go. She was testing your reaction Gwynn. Aldous probably put her up to it. And do you blame him after all the punches you threw around?"

Silence. A stalemate. Rhea continued in a controlled manner, "Besides, you said you would help me review the final version of my illusion. Not to mention you should be studying."

Gwynn’s answer, cold and steady like a machine. "I have my terminal. I can study anywhere. With Herazade going on about my mother and Aldous, ... I need to clear my head. I plan to take a walk into the downtown of the city we passed, and you should give that damn presentation a rest already. If you make me watch it again, I will gouge my eyes out with the nearest fork. I will now give you the advice you would give me if our situations were reversed, relax. The Order is perpetually short on healers. I suspect you'd have to deliberately murder someone before they'd not initiate you."

"What if Coeus asks about you? I don’t relish lying for you."

"I seriously doubt their consultation will end before tomorrow. Knowing your father, we won't see them for days. I'll be back most likely before he notices and definitely before he cares."

"Do you at least have Proximan credit chits?"

"You do remember who you're talking to right?"

Gwynn turned so quickly, her black cloak billowed dramatically. And she was gone. Rhea stared after her, with balled fists.

From behind I spoke, "I can help you with any work you need to get done."

She whirled about in surprise and yelled, "I thought I told you to sleep! I did not ask for your help."

Calmly, I said, "Ya, but one I feel fine and two you shouldn't take your anger at Gwynn out on me."

Startled she looked back at the open door. And deliberately began to breathe in and out deeply. We stood looking out the door into the setting sun.

Eventually she said, "Forgive me. The most infuriating thing about Gwynn is that she is right and knows it. I should just try to relax. You don't by any chance have a lot of ice cream and early 20th century vids kicking around? Some liquor would be nice to."

I opened my mouth, but before I could answer Herazade's voice boomed, "Fed!"

"I'm over here."

She appeared at the top of the stairs only clad only in a full length blue robe.

Without descending she ordered, "Prepare the evening meal, the roast I think, pair it with a couple
reds. One of ours and one from Earth, any bottle covered with dust will do. Oh and decant some of our Limoncello as well. Then have one of your servitors bring it to my quarters."

My eyes flared a bit as I said, "Um…sure."

We both stared at her retreating form before I uncomfortably turned to Rhea. She looked at me with barely restrained humor in her eyes.

I said, "Oh God. I can never un-see that."

She advised, "It’s best not to think about it. That way lies madness. If you can't help yourself, pretend they are playing chess. That always worked for me."

"Wow, you just saved my evening."

She tipped her head to me slightly and asked, "You can cook?"

"Yes. I've done all the cooking for the last year. Hera started teaching me four years ago. She called it the only true alchemy and said it would increase my charm immeasurably. Are you hungry?"

"Always. How old are you?"

"I will be 16 in one week exactly."

She smiled approvingly. "Well, I will be 22 in 10 months 8 days, and I'm about to become an initiate technomage, but I doubt I could prepare a full dinner for six easily. Do you need help?"

I shrugged. "No. I love to cook. I just hate cleaning up. So if you want to help you can do that."

"Huh, I was going for the sous-chef position, but I guess I get to settle for dishwasher."

I grinned. "I'm supposed to do everything. You can just sit back and keep me company."

"Then I will take Gwynn’s advice. Ice cream, liquor and vids it is."

"I'll make the ice cream now. I believe strongly in eating dessert first. We have all sorts of hard liquor. But … that stuff is in Herazade's quarters and umm… sorry I'm not brave enough to go get it. As for the vids, we have a huge library of them. I've been enjoying the dark humor era stuff from the 21st century, if you don't like that I can pull more from the net."

She stared at me quietly for an unnerving amount of time before finally deciding, "I believe I'm going to like you Fed."

EOF

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Galen pulled himself out of entry smiling. Fed wasn't kidding when he said he made a bad first impression, and yet he obviously turned it around. His natural charm asserted itself and clearly won her over.

Not that he made a good first impression on Galen either. He could still hear Elric's certain and grave voice commanding him…

"That is Federico. He is Herazade's newly adopted apprentice and a member of your cohort. You
will introduce yourself to him. Stay with him until he is well situated.” Elric paused then added with gravity, "Choose your words with care for all words have lingering power and once spoken cannot be unsaid."

Elric's strong arm pointed Galen’s attention to a lone boy. He could see the short boy wore new apprentice robes. They sat well askew on his shoulders with some of the hem dragging on the ground. As he kicked a stone around the muddy ground, occasionally he glanced at a small group of young apprentices loudly and eagerly socializing nearby.

Gravely Galen obeyed. "Yes Sir."

He hurried, running rapidly toward Federico, who at that moment kicked the now quite muddy rock hard sending it sailing through the air and right into the middle of Galen’s chest.

"Ack!" yelped Galen more from the small clumps of dirt strewn in his face then any pain.

When he saw he hit someone Fed rushed over. "I'm sorry! I didn't see you there.” He ran over as Galen brushed the dirt off his formerly pristine black apprentice robe, “Let me help you.” It did not help, “I'm really sorry for ruining your clothes. You can have mine."

He began pulling off his robe.

Galen immediately said, "No. That is not necessary. I have others and can change later."

A small relieved smile crossed Fed's face as he stopped undressing. He said, "You're Galen right?"

Surprised, Galen carefully asked, "Yes, how did you know my mage name? I have only told it to Elric."

Fed vibrated and bit his lip as if he was just caught doing something wrong.

"Um ... I don't know about that. I just memorized all the names and pictures in the ID database Herazade had sitting around. I thought I might make a better first impression if I knew people's names. But instead all that happened,” Fed pointed so quickly at the other group of apprentices that Galen missed who he meant, “was the Alpha Male saying an idiot savant roams among us."

Understanding filled Galen, "Ah, that would be Elizar. He can be …"

Fed completed Galen's sentence,"A biting ass. What's his damage?” Galen opened his mouth to answer but Fed spoke over him, "I'm the new kid and he wanted to make sure I knew my place.” He held out his hand, “My name is Federico, but you can call me Fed."

Shaking it quickly and dropping it out of discomfort, Galen asked, "Did you really memorize 500 names and likenesses?"

Fed shrugged. "It was 506."

Exhausting the one topic Galen thought to discuss, they stared at each other in awkward silence neither knowing what to say to find more common ground.

Realizing he should be obeying Elric's intent, he offered, "Come. I will introduce you to those who bite less deeply."

That was the last sentence Galen spoke to Fed that day. Not because there was no conversation between them, but rather, Fed managed to carry whole conversations with little more than the
occasional nod from Galen. Until Galen introduced Fed to Kane and Finian then even nodding was no longer needed. The three of them became instant best friends and remained so even after the Order went into hiding. Fed always went out of his way to draw him into their activities, never deterred by his continuous lack of success or Galen's excuses. Growing up, Galen had found this profoundly annoying but now he can only think of it warmly.

The only other, who was still alive, that repeatedly attempted to pry into his life like that was, sigh, Dureena. Not that they spoke anymore. Whenever they were around each other, she silently stared at him, a protective hand on her sword, as if he was the thief and her the technomage. He could not image what it will take to overcome the power of his last lingering words to her. A quiet answer came in Elric's voice, *You can start with an apology.*

Shaking himself, he thought having three days of quiet until they arrived might be a good thing. For he could not seem to avoid falling into nostalgic reveries. Equally bad, he learned little of relevance that would help Fed to deal with the current situation. Refocusing, he moved onto the next entry hoping that would change.

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22.11.2252

Walking down a long stone corridor, I approached a heavy wooden door covered with runes. A clickity-clack sound of metal against stone followed me. At the door, I looked down and behind me. At my bare feet a red robotic spider skillfully balanced a small tray on its back while walking forward.

"Po, stop at the door and wait for further instructions." I placed my hand over the center rune. It glowed under my hand and I whispered, "There is no spoon."

I waited but no answer came. So I opened the door and walked into a dream. Hundreds of tiny long staircases interconnected at different angles like they existed in more than 3 dimensions. On the stairs tiny dancing figures frolicked. I studied the figures. Mushrooms of various sizes covered with eyes, prancing colorful daisies with grinning faces. The illusion collapsed, leaving Rhea standing in the center of the room wearing her chrysalis.

I blurted out, "Wow! That was interesting." She frowned at me. I continued, "Sorry you didn't respond to my chime. I brought you lunch if you want it."

Radiating a limitless self-assurance, she said, "Aren't you overly considerate or were you just trying to see what I'm up to?"

"A little of one, a lot of the other. I'll let you decide which. Um ... I thought an apprentice wasn't allowed to cast spells unless a full mage is present. Not that I care. It's just I'll keep it to myself if it'd get you into trouble with the old..."

My voice trailed off as she laughed. Confused, I could not tell if it was at me, what I said or both.

Noticing, she said, "Yes the Order has a great many rules. That one has some latitude, at least according to my father. Coeus hasn't bothered to be with me for months."

Pointing around her to where the illusion was, I asked, "What was that? I thought you were a healer, shouldn't your presentation be, you know, medical in nature?"
"What you mean like dissecting a liver in an unusual way or reattaching a severed head?"

"You can reattach a severed head?!"

Rhea adopted a lopsided smile. "Literally yes, but if you actually want them alive afterwards, no. It can be whatever I want as long as I display some spell mastery and it reflects my talents. I fancy myself, first and foremost, a connoisseur of culture. But like my father, I do plan to become a dedicated healer for the Order and a true coercer. I’ll be the fourth generation of my family to serve the Order in this way."

"What's a true coercer?"

She looked puzzled, "You do not know?"

I shrugged, "Herazade told me not to worry about studying the spell stuff until I build my spell language and that's not till I get a chrysalis. Aren't the 14 words a coercive spell?"

She answered, "Yes, the 14 words to make someone fall in love is actually one of the simplest and best understood coercive spells. It’s far more than just words. It works by flooding the brain stem with oxytocin while the subject is thinking of their future love object. There are others that many technomages can learn- sleep inducement, the command voice. But a true coercer, well, I'll put it this way, there are some of us with additional talent who can cast certain, advanced spells. Centauri technomages enthusiastically call it spirit oppression. It’s not telepathic coercion instead it works...actually no one knows how those spells really work but there are some guesses based on the fact that it requires physical contact."

"So you can make anyone do anything?"

She raised an eyebrow at me. "A full mage might be able to resist such spells at least partially or a strong telepath. But you, I could easily coerce."

"Really?! What does it feel like?"

Still as a statue, she said nothing. Then abruptly she walked over to a workbench and picked out some small gears. She approached me with the gears in her palm and deliberately grasped my wrist.

"Stop."

My mouth full, I tasted metal. I spat gears. She regarded me with a wicked smile.

"How did...? I don’t remember..."

Her erupting into a full-throated laugh halted my stuttering.

"I can't believe how easy that was. I have only tried that on Gwynn and she fights me tooth and nail. I can barely drag her under. That was fun."

We smiled at each other. "Fun for you. Will I be able to do that?"

"You will be taught a great many things. Your natural talents will determine what you can do well. But all technomages must learn how to manipulate perceptions of sentients in some way or another."

"Here's hoping I don't disappoint. I wasn’t born into my line. Herazade found me working for a
stim smuggler at a recycler. I still don't understand what your illusion meant. Can I see it all?"

"No, but anyone can see it at the convocation if they wish. I will tell you it is how I see the mind and its progression from a chaotic state to an ordered one. Okay that's enough. I'm beginning to bore even myself, also I'm suddenly starving, you mentioned a lunch?"

"Hold on."

I headed to the door.

"Po come in. Serve second occupant. Have you heard from your sister?"

She retrieved the tray from the back of the spider. After she stood up, she looked at me confused. "Do you mean Gwynn?"

"Yes."

"No I have not. Nor am I really surprised. And she is not my biological sister," she added with a distinct annoyance.

Excitedly I asked, "Is she adopted?"

"No, well actually sort of. Her mother, Mirenda, was a fellow technomage. My father took care of when she became ill. Coeus volunteered to complete Gwynn’s apprenticeship after she died. That was a few years ago. She was … difficult at first but now I suppose our relationship resembles that of siblings. We certainly argue like sisters. Of course, it's turning out that she has no skill at healing, though my father suspects she will also be a true coercer. That's part of why he was eager to help complete her apprenticeship."

She fixed me with a piercing and unblinking stare.

Getting the hint I said, "I suppose I should go now."

She said only, "Yes."

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Galen let out a hard, unhappy breath. A true coercer. Galen knew exactly what that meant for he was one himself. Manipulation in all its forms, was the thing technomages excelled at. The Shadows were the true masters of it. So of course they made sure the technomages had such abilities.

It had been a while since Galen thought of his spell research. He’s been so profoundly busy that he had to leave all his research behind until the universe no longer conspired to keep him miserably occupied.

Much of his time while he had lived in the hiding place, he devoted to discovering the seven root spells at the base of all technomage spells. He revealed and used four of them so far. The first that shocked so many before his initiation and the basis of all offensive spells- his spell of destruction. The second the basis of all their communication spells. That one enabled him to listen in on the Shadows communications years ago when the Order was fleeing before the Shadow war.

The third involved the base shielding spell which offered near perfect protection and concealment-
a shadow shield. An invaluable spell, thought Galen, when he managed to cast it in time. He ruefully touched his shoulder where Dureena impaled her knife.

The fourth- the root of the spells of association or the merging directly with technology. That base spell enabled Galen to become one with his tech and how he freed any Shadow tech he came across.

The next two, the ability to create illusions with substance and the mastery over movement with their platforms, Galen had too little time to pursue currently.

Which left one last base spell. The basis of the most Shadow like spell family- the root of their spells of coercion. He could see the base spell for coercion in his mind but he dared not cast it. He was certain it will enthral whoever was unlucky enough to be its victim, leaving their intellect intact but stripping them of their free will. A permanent slave for Galen to use as he wished.

The Shadows had turned many sentients, like Anna Sheridan and Mr Morden, into thralls. Eager, willing, and permanent puppets. Galen liked to think he would never use the base coercion spell. Then again he never thought he’d use the 14 words to make someone fall in love forever. It was a spell Galen used, once. He did it at Vir's request, on Londo’s ex-wife, Mariel. It gave Vir a vital and perfectly placed tool to help him wrestle control of Centauri Prime away from the Drakh. Galen wished there had been a another way. He did not discover it. And regrettably, he compromised. There were no good options in that ugly situation. Only the least bad.

His head dropped down to stare at Fed's sphere in his hand. What was most disturbing about Rhea, was she blithely coerced Fed with barely a second thought. Elric never allowed him to practice coercive spells as an apprentice. His explanation was they were too dangerous for a chrysalis staged mage and even for most initiates. Nor had he allowed Galen to use his chrysalis unsupervised going so far as to lock it away. Taken together Rhea's behavior, and that of her master, Coeus, screamed willful carelessness and arrogance, but those were two traits all too common in the Order.

The question was how strong of a true coencer was she. Galen made a mental note to discuss just exactly how strong her abilities were with Gwynn, soon. He moved on to the next entry.

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/3/

Only one word comes to mind to describe this night, awkward.

- 22.11.2252

The room was dark except for a large screen displaying a frozen image of an animated corpse biting into the head of a very unhappy man. The eerie glow of the screen illuminated the room. The table in front of the screen covered with empty dinner dishes. On walls around the room hung tapestries of complex geometric fractals. Little mirrors weaved into the wall hangings reflected the glow.

I lounged on an incredibly large comfortable red sofa with my bare feet propped up on a step stool. Adamantly I shook my head no as Rhea loudly said, "I’m technically correct. It’s not necrophilia if they are the undead." Her long hair hung loose and rowdily on her head obscuring some of her face. She wore a tight v-necked olive t-shirt, and had tucked her legs under a blue throw blanket.

I argued back, "That's a trivial technicality. The spirit of what you said was clear - you prefer your
men, tall, dark and dead."

Rhea said haughtily, "One, being technically correct is the best sort of correct. Two all I said was, 
*He's cuter as an undead.* It's not my fault your mind jumped to a perverted conclusion. Three ...

I interrupted her, "You're stringing me along, aren't you?"

I sagged back against the couch. She fell back next to me and leaned in laughing. "Thank you for 
taking the bait. I really enjoyed that, unlike this vid. I'll have to remember to avoid anything with 
the phrase 'of the dead' in its title."

A hit of lavender smell. I looked down into her cleavage, and stopped breathing. Noticing she 
stopped as well. Confused at first, she looked down to where my eyes were. We both looked up at 
the same time. Smoothly, I leaned toward her face focused on her lips, but two firm hands planted 
in the middle of my chest stopped me.

Out of the darkness a voice said with startling effect, "Well aren't you two all chummy."

Rhea vaulted to her feet, and faced the darkness.

"Enjoy your walk Gwynn? Let's see it's been, almost 36 hours"

Gwynn stepped out of the shadows and into the illumination of the screen. She wore a police 
uniform while endlessly twirling some sort of badge in her right hand.

"Immensely. New Alhambra has a certain charm all its own." She looked away dreamily for a 
second before her attention snapped back onto me. Her smile vanished into an icy, judging stare. 
“Where are we sleeping?"

At this I stood. "I'll go prepare your rooms now."

As I walked away Gwynn whispered, "You don’t have a room yet? Whose bed did you sleep in last 
night?"

I stopped just outside the room, out of sight and listened.

"I fell asleep here, watching vids. Forget this, why are you wearing a police uniform?"

"A souvenir. No, let's not forget this. Even in this light he looked flushed. Please tell me you 
weren't about to commence his initiation."

Rhea sputtered, "Of course not!"

Her voice all disapproval, Gwynn lectured, "Really? You should keep in mind that the age of 
consent on Proxima is 16. He doesn't look near it."

The response was immediate. "He will be 16 in a week and it doesn't matter! I am the victim here! 
Wait, why in the world would you know what the age of consent is on Proxima?" Silence. “Look, 
he misinterpreted my kindness for interest. Loneliness and curiosity emanate out of him so strongly 
that I missed the signs. And apparently he's the assertive sort. Don't worry I know how to shut him 
down."

Gwynn pushed, "If you speak to him again about anything, he's just going to take that as 
encouragement. You should just cut him off."

"Oh you’re an expert on men now? Correct me if I'm wrong but you have the dating history of a
conservative Victorian dowager. Have you even been deflowered yet?"

A long silence punctuated at the end by a distinctly wry laugh from Gwynn, who crisply answered, "I would rather keep my own council on that front. Look take my advice or not, it was offered in your benefit."

"I know, but the one thing I remember from 15 going on 16 was that I desperately wanted to be taken seriously. Hopefully, he's mature enough to hear the reasons for my lack of interest. … Oh don't look at me that way! Fine you win, if he is unreasonable, I will cut him off."

Disappointed, I left and bound up a flight of stairs two at a time, at the top of the stairs sat the red robotic spider.

"Po, unlock bedrooms 3 and 4. Synch environmental settings with master. Stock them each with a complete set of linens. Hook the terminals up to the network"

The robot scurried off down the hallway.

I hurried back down and eavesdropped again to overhear Gwynn say, "Yes, before we left he wanted me to read some of his research, but he was really vague about what he wanted me to do."

"He's just feeling you out to see if you'd be interested in helping us with backwards engineering the suit. You know neither one of us is good at that sort of thing."

I walked in. Rhea looked at me without smiling and ordered, "Fed, show Gwynn to her room then come back down here, please."

A feeling of dread washed over me but I muttered, "Sure."

Silently, I led, as Gwynn stalked me to her room. "The terminal is unlocked and we have an always on, connection to EarthNet. Rhea is in the room to your right and I am across the hallway should you need anything."

She stared at me with a withering expression. Her voice suddenly sultry, she said, "You mean like in the middle of the night, if I get lonely?" She drew out the last word as if it was a song lyric. I gave her a strained smile and turned to leave.

"Fed." Her voice returned to cold and crisp.

I stopped at the door. "Yes?"

"Leave her alone. You are too young for her. Do you understand?"

"What? Why did you just say that?"

"You're about to be on the receiving end of a convoluted and numbingly clinical lecture. I thought I'd save you the trouble of trying to puzzle it through. Now I'm exhausted, go away." She waved her hand as if batting away an insect.

I closed her door behind me and stood there for a minute slowly taking in what she said. I headed back taking the stairs two at a time.

I caught Rhea examining a tapestry. The throw blanket wrapped around her shoulders like a coat that hid her body completely. "Ahh, there you are. Have a seat."

I sat on the sofa and she sat opposite me well away on the step stool.
"Fed, I think you’re charming, witty and quite a cook. Your company has been a real pleasure. But sometimes as we mature out of adolescence we develop certain inappropriate feelings which stem from the rapidly ..."

"Please stop." She looked surprised then suspicious but remained silent fixing me with a stare. "Ummm … I know what you are about to say. I get it. I won't lie. I think you're beautiful, smart, fun and I don't plan to make a fool of myself again. I know when to bide my time."

She let out a sigh and frowned staying silent for several painful seconds.

"That is not what I had in mind but I had better leave it alone. Tomorrow, I will spend my time alone or with Gwynn. I don't need anything brought to me, I'll just forage off the land." She stood and so did I. "No! Stay there, I'll figure it out. Good night Fed."

She walked away. I let out a slow heavy breath as I watched her retreating form. The moment she was out of sight Aldous decloaked beside me causing me to jump in shock.

He said first, "I have a new respect for you Fed. At your age I would never have had the courage to try and kiss a woman like that. It is one of evolution's cruelest little jokes that just as we reach sexual maturity, full grown women find us repulsive and pitiful, well the sane ones anyway."

I turned away feeling my face burn.

"I see I've embarrassed you. Well one advantage to learning you have a terminal disease is you don't give a crap anymore about social niceties or sparing others feelings."

"Mierde, does everyone get to see me make a fool out of myself."

He chuckled. "I think I'm the last one. You should be careful when you eavesdrop like that. Those words were not meant for you. You need to be prepared to hear the worst about yourself from another."

I stared into the darkness around us as I quietly answered, "I had to know."

He patted me on the back, causing me to look in his grinning face.

"I don't disapprove. Such behavior is how I know you will make an excellent technomage."

"Umm how much did you see?"

"Obviously, I caught the exciting conclusion. It was almost an absurdist farce. You two put on an entertaining show."

Pleading with him, I begged, "Please don't tell Hera!"

"I’m not cruel. She might be a liberal master, but perhaps some advice man to man is order. Here is the sum total of my accumulated wisdom for you in this situation, give up. Or at least practice on something smaller than a Titan."

I said, "But what if I don't want to give up? You know women right. What do I, I mean, how would you …?"

He interrupted me, "No! I will not play a Cyrano for you."

"Please?"
"You're clever. You'll figure it out."

"Oh come on! At least give me a hint."

He stared at me sternly and the stand off continued for a good long time.

I gave up first and blurted out, "I can't believe you're going to ... I mean I'm sorry that... I don't even know what to say... ;" my voice trailed off into uncertainty.

He pulled me into a tight embrace and said in my ear, "Stop. I will not have it. If you get to be my age it means you win at the game of life. My only regret is I won't get to see how your life turns out first hand. All I ask is you honor my memory. Obey your master better. Build up the Order and guard it with your life because it is your life."

He let me go as we neared tears. I said back, "I can do that. But, you know, maybe I could do it better if I knew how to get the girl to."

Sighing, he said through a grin, "You win. I'll say this, in my rich and deep experience if you can make them laugh that is half the battle won. But she has clearly decided against you. Respect that. But then again, that does not mean you can not lay siege to the city. It took the Greeks ten years to conquer Troy. Perhaps you'll have better luck, but you might want pace yourself."

I exclaimed, "Ten years?! What do you mean lay siege? Wait, didn't the Greeks destroy Troy?"

He waved a dismissive hand, explaining, "I mean the gentle, friendly sort of siege. But do not pretend to be her friend if all you want is sex. Be honest in affairs of the heart. In the meantime you'll survive. Masturbation is your friend but take my advice, do it sparingly, use a light touch and learn complete control now, you'll thank me later."

He smiled at me while I burned with waves of mortification. "Now that I've no dignity left can I slink off to my room, please?" I pleaded.

Out of the dark Herazade spoke to me. "Exactly why would you have no dignity left?"

I could say nothing to her.

Aldous leant over and whispered in my ear, "Courage lad. Once more into the breach."

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Everything abruptly ended. Unbelievable, Galen thought. He never realized how much of a little spy Fed was. Then again, Fed always seemed to know all the gossip when they were apprentices. Yet it had never occurred to Galen that he would actively eavesdrop on conversations. Galen made a mental note to assume no conversation was private if Fed was near.

Otherwise, the only interesting thing he learned was that Rhea completely rejected Fed. Of course that had not deterred him, quite the opposite in fact. He moved on, oblivious to what was happening on the Excalibur.

Recreation Room 1- Aboard the Excalibur December 23, 2269 - Racing with the cure back to
Earth.

Even with a pause in the music the party rolled along at a dull roar. Tired of dancing, Max and Dureena seated themselves at the last empty table right by the makeshift bar. Max gently nursed a drink in one hand and a portable terminal in the other, waiting for Dureena to answer him.

"Why?" She demanded, a distrustful edge to her words.

Max snorted out a laugh as he knowingly observed, "While I firmly believe no good deed ever goes unpunished, you saved the thing I hold most dear, my life."

Satisfied that the world was at it should be, Dureena relaxed. "Then this is your way of thanking me despite acting like nothing had happened. You should know I did it by instinct, had I thought about it-" She smiled at the implication.

Max cut in impatiently, "Are you going to accept or not?"

"As fun as stealing a shuttle would be, instead, yes, I accept."

"Good. One chartered freighter to Theta 49 coming up. I'll make sure its holds are filled with goodies for," Max paused seemingly stumped. "I don't even know what your people are called?"

"The Mayurin, it means simply the keepers in my language. But now you are being suspiciously generous again."

"Hardly, I won't spend a penny of my own money for any of this. I come from one of the finest and oldest families of Mars. So, I know all the best families and exactly who uses money to pretend they care enough to help those unfortunate, disadvantaged," he abruptly stopped becoming unusually self-conscious.

Dureena offered the bitter word that completed his sentence, "Savages."

After a brief pause Max gallantly offered, "Say what you will about me, at least I know enough not to call you that. I was surprised you let Galen return to the Excalibur without a couple knives stuck in him."

Max seemed about to laugh at his own joke but stopped himself when he saw Dureena's reaction, severe.

Dureena thought about the last month. It seemed to have lasted for years. All confusion and turmoil, with him at the center.

One month before the cure was found.

Dureena boarded the tram and took her usual seat opposite Galen. He sat in his usual spot near the window staring out, expression grim, body slightly tense.

In advance, she decided to ask him a question simple enough that perhaps he would give a clear answer. When she felt ready, she spoke, "Why do you ride these endless circuits?"

Steely blue eyes turned to Dureena, his answering tone as imperious as ever, "Why? ...Why this is the natural state of Man. Running in pointless circles. Endlessly repeating."
She digested his smooth and practiced answer and countered, "If that were true shouldn't this train be packed? No, I think it is just your natural state."

Surprised eyebrows animated his brow and when he answered, his tone was all amusement. Dureena wondered if it was because she challenged him. "Perhaps ... but since you are sitting here, it is more correct to say it is our natural state. Are you about to ask me to take you on as an apprentice, again?"

That question took her aback. Yes she had originally started keeping him company to press her suit, but quickly it had morphed into companionship. His opening up to her, however slightly, pleased and comforted her more than she cared to admit. Truth be told it had been days since she even thought of asking.

She chose to answer him honestly, "No. I hadn't thought to ask. I think I will wait until there is chance you will say yes."

Dureena looked away out the window of the moving tram, embarrassed for giving such a weak and frank answer. And truth be told to hide her reaction. As always, she was sure he could see right through her. Yes, she wanted his secrets. Her true motivation filled her. Instantly, every part of her overwhelmed by hatred and the need for revenge-for what was done to her people, to her. Against those who enjoyed murdering Jouric and poor cowardly Muri. All while she was forced to helplessly look on. Then afterwards ... there was no savior, no justice and another year to endure before she escaped. She swore never to allow herself to be so powerless again.

Thrusting away the feelings, she regained some sense of control, enough anyway to look back into Galen's eyes. Her breath caught. All thoughts of anything bad fell out of mind, because instead of the usual arrogance or aloofness, all she saw was concern and sympathy. Her heart leapt toward him then as they stared at each other. She had wanted that moment to go on and on, but some awkwardness seemed to overwhelm him. He broke off, looked toward the floor, and shifted his weight crossing his legs stiffly. She continued to stare at his profile.

Whatever spell was on her broke when he spoke, "An improvement." He turned to look back out the window, but with a frown tugging the corner of his lip.

He continued speaking at the window, "You should know I have decided never to take you on as an apprentice."

Shocked, every part of her wanted to demand, Why?! Was this a test? Was it his real and final decision? She could not be sure and so she stayed quiet. Showing her anger would only prove his point that she was somehow unworthy. She continued to sit there, stop after stop, with eyes digging holes into him, and a hand hovering near one of the many knives she always had on her person.

As the first wave of fury subsided, she began to study him, giving her instincts full reign. They told her two things that she had missed till that moment. One, at least part of his discomfort with her was that he was affected by her, the way she affected too many of the males about her. Two, for once, this was not un-welcomed by her. Although clearly, it was unwelcomed by him. Was that the answer to her silent why? For a moment, she ruefully thought about her life in the Thieves guild. While a vast improvement over life as a slave, she had to trade too many of her nights for the knowledge she needed to prosper with them. Perhaps like some men he saw her as compromised, tainted. Could it be that he didn't want a compromised apprentice, and so refused to accept her tainted past? How could he even know? She had no idea, but she would not be ashamed of doing what she had to survive, and prosper in the guild. The tram halted at the docking bay stop. Galen stood and silently headed for the exit, mightily ignoring her. Dureena instantly decided, she would not give up.
"Wait," she said.

He stopped at the door gripping the bars with his hands till his knuckles turned white as she finished speaking, "I will be here tomorrow, anyway."

Something between a laugh and cry burst out of him, making her look up at him in surprise.

His sharp gaze and tone burned at her as he spoke, "Not giving up then?"

A flash of Jouric’s smile as he held out his hand inviting her to dance went through Dureena's mind. She answered, "No." silently adding, 'Never again.'

He swept out of the tram. Part of her had wanted to follow him and make him speak to her about why, but she did not. As of that moment she was confounded by the feelings he had stirred up. The next day she was there and the day after, but he never came again.

Dureena came back to the present celebration. Absentmindedly, she stroked the small triangular sword inside its sheath on her waist. As always her fingers tingled slightly and turned cold. It was her sword, a large knife really. Two rounded blades pointed toward each other, fused at the tip, a handle completing the triangular effect, all a blue–gray metal. Sharp, cold, silent, deadly, reassuring, and dependable. For years, knives were the only things she trusted. That was until he entered her dreams ... Galen, the living knife.

Whenever he saw fit, he cut into her more deeply than anyone she had ever known. The most recent is the most painful. It was like he held up a mirror and showed her what she really was. Not that she was afraid to see. It was just that he caught her completely unguarded. It seemed that once again, he just needed the right reaction of her. But this time it was not to make her weep to unlock the Path of Sorrows, it was to ... she was not sure, to shock her perhaps.

Why had he said that. No it was no use dwelling on the past. Who knew why he said anything?! That man was utterly frustrating and confusing. When it came to Galen there as nothing but whys?!

Why would he fight to destroy the Shadows technology when he was filled with it literally? Why did he want the sword so desperately only to give it back to her, like an act of charity? Most importantly, why did he choose her in the first place? He never explained himself. Never did. The few times he does speak, it was in suitably vague, wise-seeming utterances that contain little in the way of real information.

Silently, she cursed, Damn him! She slammed her fist against her thigh. Here she was once again obsessively thinking about him. She silently swore she was done trying to pry explanations out of him. At the same time she knew she would eagerly listen if he offered to explain himself. Dureena chastised herself for trying to get close to a technomage. Only fools tried to enter their shadow-soaked world. She should stop thinking about him. Yes, that was it. Just forget him, focus on getting back to Theta 49 and helping what was left of her people. The small voice in the back of her mind reminded her, easier said than done.

Max brought her back into the conversation with a soft question, "Are you going to forgive him?"

"There is nothing to forgive. He didn’t say anything that wasn’t true."

Max said with a conviction that spoke of experience, "From a woman that usually means no. Not that I'm complaining that leaves you free for the rest of us."

Quickly annoyed that he managed to read her inclination, she said, "Max ..."

He stopped her with a wave, "Don't worry I won't breathe a word of it to anyone and," He mimed
between them, “Too bad. If I thought for a moment you'd say maybe, I’d invite you to see my collection of Pak'Ma'Ra mating stones.” He raised his eyebrows at her.

Amused Dureena shook her head no and summed up her feelings toward him, "I'm glad to see you are still an ass at heart. I'm going to get something to eat."

She walked away from the table to Max's snide comments, "I'd avoid everything but the fruit if I were you."

**Excalibur Bridge - December 23, 2269**

Gideon sat hunched over a small display attached to the captain's chair, reviewing the Drakh fleet telemetry data for the tenth time.

Walking up to him, Lt. Matheson reported, "Both EarthForce and IA command have acknowledged your report sir.” Not looking up, Gideon grunted a vaguely affirmative response. “Find anything new sir?"

"There is always something new Lieutenant. For example, I just noticed their speed. They weren't exactly going all out trying to catch us. Only after they were redirected did they go to full throttle."

"Are you saying they were shadowing us?"

"Not exactly, they were closing in, but slower then I would expect."

"Why would they do that?"

"Good question."

Matheson stood expecting him to continue but Gideon said nothing more.

Finally Lt. Matheson asked, "Care to let us lesser mortals in on the secret?"

"I promise you'll be the first as soon as I figure out what the hell is going on."

Worry entered Matheson's voice. "I'll feel a lot better when the White Stars show up."

Gideon grunted in agreement and asked, "Have there been any … unexplained fogs, holo-creatures flying about, or system security breaches?"

"No sir. Actually, there was a frozen door lock on observation room 1. I sent a repair team, but when they got there it was behaving normally."

I dry laugh came out of Gideon. "I think we can live without one of our ob. rooms."

"Are you expecting trouble from the other technomage?"

Gideon shrugged. Galen, despite their clashes, he trusted to be around. But this Federico. He was Galen's friend and that in of it by itself was enough to show courtesy. And the fact that he risked his life to misdirect the Drakh, a huge plus. That fight would have been ugly. Gideon looked down again at the terminal displaying the Drakh fleet and watched them slowly move away tangentially from the Excalibur. Maybe fatal. Did he trust Fed? That remained to be seen.

What really troubled Gideon, how surprised and concerned Galen was with Fed's arrival. Gideon hated it when Galen turned unsettled. It was never good news. His brow furled.
Turning to Lt. Matteson, Gideon ordered, "We need to stay on our toes. Double the marine guards on all vital areas. Let's go to battle ready stations and I want every gun issued to the crew starting with officers, NCOs and specialists down."

"Including the senior staff?"

"Yes. I doubt this is the last we've heard of the Drakh. They can't be this easy to fool."

Looking now equally worried, Matheson returned to his duties. While Gideon went back to studying the Drakh fleets movements trying to wring every last bit of information out of it.

**Mars - New Vegas**

At the large conference table two men, who pushed the end of middle-age, sat facing a large tactical display on the wall. It showed the very report Captain Gideon just submitted to EarthForce.

One man wore the rank of General on his lapels. His chest while unadorned now, when he wore a full dress uniform, ribbons covered his chest, most earned painfully during the Earth-Minbari war.

The other very simply dressed—gray slacks, a collared tan shirt and a warm yellow, buttoned sweater. A cup of herbal tea steeped on the table in front of him sending up steam. His mustache and hair had been going gray for years. His face etched with a warm expression that any child would want on their grandfather, except for the eyes. Justin’s shone with an arrogant certainty few managed to ever acquire.

The General said, "The Professor went over their doctor's report. It's not as effective as what we have but it appears to deactivate the virus and make it non-contagious. It should work as a cure. And as you can see," he pointed at the screen, “it now looks like they will avoid the Drakh."

The old man’s mustache moved about as the warm expression to be replaced by instant irritation. "I can not believe that damn gambler pulled it off and years early to boot. He would make an excellent associate."

An incredulous look ran across the General's face for a moment. He challenged, "Please tell me you’re kidding Justin. He half-destroyed Remil’s base."

The other man said, "No, that was that Order technomage, Galen. That one, we should kill at first sight."

The General said with some apprehension, "Our contact aboard says there is another technomage. He was able to tight beam these."

Two blurry images from the Excalibur docking bay appeared side by side on the large screen; one of a second technomage ship landing and the other a fuzzy shot of three figures talking.

The old man studied the images. The flying gear symbol on the second technomage ship was not one he recognized. Of course the list Mr Morden compiled of the known Order technomages was over ten years out of date. This one must be one of the younger, newer mages. What a bother.

The General asked nervously, "Didn’t they say the technomages were all dead except that Galen."

“Yes. Until the Cerberus incident. The black box we recovered showed a fleet of technomage ships passing by on it’s scans. Gideon’s testimony confirmed it. We … pursued them but they had too
much of a head start."

The General looked to him for instruction. "What should we do?"

"Why contact my associates on Centauri Prime of course and let them know they are being played for fools. And move up the council meeting."

Angry now the General said, "The Minbari have already dispatched the Star Riders to intercept. Why not let them take care of the lizard heads? The original point of all this plague crap was to take the fucking bone-heads out of the game, yes? At least this way a few of them will finally die. And besides it's not like the Drakh will trust our word any more."

The old man reassured the soldier, "Now, now general, you need to keep your eye on the big picture. The Minbari will wind up under our heels before you know it. Senator McQuate says he needs until the next election cycle to build the coalition. It is my job to give him that time. As for the Drakh, they won't trust us but they will use the information anyway like the good little servants they've always been. I'll come up with a contingency in case they fail."

The General leant back in his chair, hesitating.

Justin didn’t take that hesitation well. "Am I going to need to go through Mr. Jones's channels?"

"No. The Excalibur has plenty of good soldiers on it. I just hate losing them."

The warm gentle expression returned as he reassured the General, "This cure can not make it back to Mars, and if it will not allow itself to be captured, the Excalibur must be destroyed." The General nodded once, and strode from the room.

When the door closed, two figures appeared out of nowhere flanking the seated old man. The one on the left, a very young man dressed in a black suit with an angel’s face. But one distracted as if he listened to some heavenly conversation that barely interested him. The second, a tall lithe blonde in a blouse and a short skirt that thumbed its nose at societal modesty.

The woman placed a hand on Justin's shoulder and rested her chin on it. She whispered in his ear, "Please let me have Galen before you kill him. I need to thank him properly for saving my life on Z'Ha'Dum."

The old man shook his head at that for a while before announcing, "That hero never does know when to quit. No, he has proven to be too troublesome."

She withdrew from his shoulder. With a twirl, she planted her rear against the table, jutting out her chin, pouting.

"You're no fun Justin."

Justin shrugged and considered the pair. Finally he said to her, "Turn around. Take off your blouse."

The blonde's eyebrows arched at that. "I didn't think you were the sort to sexually harass his underlings. And in front of Alpha no less. You know you should watch out, he's the jealous type."

Justin rolled his eyes. "Stop with the games Bunny. I checked Alpha’s healing last night. It’s your turn."

Without anything but a frown, she slipped off her blouse, turned to brace herself against the table. Two dark channels ran under her skin on either side of her spine, and up across her shoulders, down
the backs of her arms like a deep defused river of tattoo ink. Near her spine black tendriled spouts anchored the river at regular intervals on each side of her vertebrae. They stretched down disappearing below her waist. With his fingers he gently prodded the red, freshly healed skin at the thickest part along the spine.

Satisfied he asked, "How do you feel?"

Bunny purred her answer, "I thought being a P12 felt powerful. Now I feel indestructible."

Justin said, "Show me something offensive, both of you."

The young man blinked. With a laugh, he said, "I got something offensive, in my pants." Justin scowled at him. Alpha sighed. Held out his hand, three fingers up and out. A tiny fiery ball formed, shot across the room, splashed across the wall leaving no scorch mark behind.

Slowly, Bunny considered as she buttoned her shirt back up. Then held out her hand over the tea mug on the table. A swirl of ice formed between her hand and cup. The tea chilled.

Furious, Justin yelled, "You haven't been practicing, have you?!"

The two, unconcerned at his outburst, stood there without restraining their smiles.

Alpha said, "It's not exactly easy. Plus, I'm finding it hard to concentrate." He winked at the blonde.

She waved back at him as she offered her excuse, "Actually, we've been practicing all morning."

The old man lost all patience. His hands lashed out and grabbed each one by the throat. As if they weighed nothing, he lifted them and slammed them on their backs on the conference table.

"I am unhappy with you. If you two do not improve rapidly, I will personally rip out your implants as painfully as possible."

The man twisted uselessly struggling against his choke hold. The woman sent a telepath strike to pierce Justin’s mind. It hit as effectively as a twig striking a steel door.

Justin maintained his grip and said more, "I need to be able to rely on you two. Particularly as the new agents come online." They both began to turn red. Justin kept his deathly grip. "I hoped you would train and lead them."

Justin focused on the man, "While you are beyond valuable to me, you are not irreplaceable."

As he shifted his attention to Bunny, his voice changed, "Stop distracting Alpha. Take your practice seriously."

Just as they began to pass out, he let go. The man collapsed to the floor on all fours panting. Bunny remained on the table cradling her throat.

Incredulous, she hoarsely demanded, "How the hell did you block me?"

Justin condescendingly answered, "My dear Bunny, I served the Shadows longer than anyone else. Do you honestly think they'd leave me defenseless against your Vorlonish mind tricks? Now get up, we're moving up our plans. Go now. Get the primary seeder ready to move to our back-up facilities. The secondary seeder will stay with the Professor. Guard her for now. When you are done with that, you will spend all your time practicing until you are so exhausted, you collapse..."
where you stand."

Alpha was the first to rise to his feet. "Why bother? That's a lot of work."

Shakily standing up Bunny answered for Justin, "The other technomage."

"Very good my dear. A second one showing up suddenly and our plans being disrupted. I don't believe in coincidences. They might have crawled out of whatever hole they've been hiding in. We must be prepared. I want you with me at the next council," He pointed at Bunny, "I've been negligent. It's been too long since the last loyalty scans. You will scan everyone. Go as deep as you need to. And you," He pointed to the man aggressively, "will take care of any failures. No negotiations. No explanations. No hesitation."

Alpha smiled. "No problem."

Bunny talked back, "Fine but I won't be gentle. I don't believe in your xenophobic bullshit."

Justin relaxed. The grandfather returned. "I don't either, my dear. In many ways, the average alien is superior to any human. But what we lack physically and intellectually, we more than make up for with cleverness. Add some bioengineering and humanity will be superior. Now run along you two and do as you're told."

He dismissed them with a genteel wave of his hand. They left quickly while he was in a good mood.

With a gentle sigh, he shook his head disappointedly. "Kids today."
Chapter Summary

Crusade stuff concentrated at the start. The rest was me having fun with imagining a technomage party. So plenty of OC technomages and Fed misbehaving.

7 - Give Us a Show Then

Bridge of the Excalibur – December 23, 2269

Gideon rubbed his tired eyes. If Dr Chambers saw him right now, she’d order him to bed. And he’d want to refuse. Everything rode on what would happen in the next few days. Then afterwards to Mars. The biggest gamble of his life. As much as he didn’t want to just let go and sleep, he had to, or soon he’d be useless.

Lt. John Matheson hovered at his elbow like a worried grandmother. Gideon already knew what he wanted. The same as what Dr Chambers would. It annoyed him and made feel cared for at the same time. A good crew. Yet as the Captain he shouldn't allow his feelings to show.

"John?" said the Captain informally, granting his second permission to speak the same way.

In a low voice, John said, "With all due respect Sir… you've been on duty for 16 hours straight. You're pushing yourself too hard. You should take a break."

Gideon stared past him at the screens displaying hyperspace. He rubbed the stubble on his chin trying to remember when he last shaved or showered for that matter. Before all the drama with Galen. Admitting John had a point, Gideon answered, "We're close John, but you're right. I'm taking some time. You have the conn."

Suddenly putting his hand to his ear, Lt. Matheson interrupted the Captain, "Sir, gold channel message. Your eyes only."

"Patch it through to my quarters."

And just like that, thoughts of a nap flew away as he rushed from the bridge to his quarters. And there, surprising the Captain, despite all the times Galen let himself in uninvited, that new technomage.

With his feet propped up on Gideon's desk, playing with his deck of cards, the man looked to have made himself quite at home. About the room, the various screens streamed different entries from Gideon's logs. Great. Another arrogant technomage here to play games.

Fed sang out at him, “O Captain! My Captain! Our fearful trip is done.”

His patience gone, Gideon landed on immediate anger. "I don't know what sort of game you're playing here but I have an important message. Leave." He pointed out the open door for emphasis.
Not moving, Fed coyly said, "Ya, that’s from me. Let's chat."

The doors shut behind him as Gideon strode to the nearest screen. "Display gold channel message."

A sleigh pulled by reindeer flew all over the screen. A classic Santa- white bearded, fat in the red suit, constantly proclaimed, “HOHOHO.” When the screen cleared, the message, Feliz Navidad! XO Fed appeared. Immediately, a song wishing Matthew a merry christmas and a happy new year in spanish played from all the speakers of his quarters.

Gideon squeezed his eyes shut and silently counted to three before saying, “Audio and screens off. And out of my chair.”

Everything went deathly silent. With a self-satisfied chuckle, Fed stood up. Ignoring Gideon, he silently walked around the room, occasionally handling one of Gideon’s personal items, all while cutting the deck of cards again and again with one hand.

The too cool, in control air of the technomage as he snaked about the room unsettled Gideon and put him on edge. At his desk, he silently slipped the lowest drawer open. Without looking, he felt and grabbed the small PPG and clicked off the safety. He held it in his lap out of sight. When Fed finished his perambulation about the room, he stopped opposite Gideon, a grin plastered on his face. Matthew had been in enough casinos to recognize the subtle fake smile of someone trying to get him to let his guard down.

“What the hell do you want with me?” Gideon asked hoping to wrap it up quickly so he could fall in bed.

Casually Fed started, "I want Galen. I need his help but he won't come with me because you have some kind of hold on him."

"Last time I checked, Galen does what he wants. If he wants to stay then I guess you're out of luck."

Fed’s smile faded instantly. "No. You’re gonna release Galen from whatever promises he gave you."

Gideon let out a disbelieving grunt. "Boy you guys are … arrogant doesn't even begin to describe it. I need him. This is something I have to do. He owes me."

Fed took a deep breath as he seated himself in the chair opposite Gideon. The air eased. To Gideon, it felt as if they were about to haggle over the price of some souvenir at a market stall.

Fed made the first offer. "I'm willing to cut you a deal. I'm even going to go against my training and reveal my hand to you."

Even though he’d done it many times, and well, Matthew hated haggling. Fed waved the deck at Gideon and fanned it perfectly like a stage magician in New Vegas. Staged tricks annoyed him even more than haggling.

"Lucky me," said Gideon dryly.

Ignoring the slight, Fed plunged forward speaking rapidly, "You’re right to want Galen. He’s freakishly smart, and the most powerful technomage our Order has seen since, well, probably since our founding. He's like ..." Fed flipped the top card off the deck revealing the Ace of Spades. He placed it on the desk between them and said, "The best trump card in some games, but for the game you want to play on Mars, you should settle for other cards. On the other hand, I am ..." Fed flipped the next card over, the King of Hearts. He placed it to the right of the Ace of Spades. "And
currently on Mars are ..." He flipped four more cards rapidly off the deck, the King, Queen, Jack and Two, all of Spades, fanning them out below the king of hearts.

"They've been studying the facility you want into for a long time. Drop Galen and I'll make sure they help you."

Gideon thought, *Who the hell is this guy?* In the back of his mind a pragmatic voice, tiny and too much like his mother’s, told him to run, find Galen and tell him everything. A much louder voice told him to push his luck. As always the second voice won.

Time to start digging. Beginning his probes, Gideon pointed at the spades on the table and asked, "Why exactly would they listen to you?"

Fed grinned wickedly, "Because I’m charming and there is a good chance they will answer to me one day. So they’ll want to stay on my good side."

The direct and blunt answer surprised Gideon. A leader of some kind or at least he claimed to be. Even though, at this point Gideon wouldn't follow him into the dining hall, forget Mars.

"How am I supposed to *drop* Galen exactly?"

Fed answered him as if Gideon had already agreed to his plans, "Do what I ask, and it shouldn’t be too hard. You already look like shit," Fed put up his hands apologetically, "No offense Captain. God knows I’ve had my off days. When we arrive you’ll tell Galen you don't need his help because you need a vacation. I will have to teach you how to lie effectively to Galen, but that shouldn't be too hard given your love of poker."

Satisfied, Fed stopped speaking, looking at the Captain expectantly.

Unsatisfied, Gideon asked the obvious question, "Why the hell are you doing this?"

Fed answered quickly but his eyes flickered away uncertainly.

"Because I have to reach ...” He flipped the top card and placed the Queen of Hearts next to the King of Hearts. “A fellow technomage is trapped and I need Galen's help to rescue her."

Another frank answer. A rescue mission. Not at all what Gideon expected. That leached away his contempt. His instincts urged him to help. After what happened to him and the Cerberus, he’d never leave anyone behind to rot. As he wondered at Fed's aggressive and overly informative approach, a sense of déjà-vu settled in as he thought about Galen's behavior before the Well of Forever. He decided to jump to the end game.

"And if I refuse?"

Unblinking, Fed looked at the Captain without emotion.

With a shrug, Fed replied, "Plan B, first you’re off my Christmas card list, and then, you now know too much, I’ll have to kill you."

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**Excalibur Docking Bay – Federico’s Ship December 23, 2269**

Galen remained distracted, immersed in Fed's sphere.
God damn, I should have realized just how out of my league I was with her, but never was a quick study.

--- 30.11.2252

Strolling with my hands shoved in my pockets toward a clearing between rows of parked sleek technomage ships. I sauntered toward a small antique red flyer through shadowy silence.

“Fed.” I yelped, startled at the sudden sound.

Gwynn stepped into view from behind the shadowy landing gear of the nearest technomage ship. She pointed at the old red flyer. “Do you know who this belongs?”

"Dammit Gwynn, you scared me."

Clearly, pleased with herself, she said, "Good. I ran its VIN through Proxima’s police datanet. It belongs to- Ali Baba, occupation: gentleman adventurer, age: 255, height: 9.9 meters. Not really helpful."

Unblinking, she looked at me with curious expectation.

“How’d you get access to our police net?” She didn't answer so I kept talking. "It's mine. Ali’s an intruder daemon I’m designing."

She looked at me in amused disbelief. "I suppose it’s more subtle than your jacket."

I looked down at the jacket made of thick woven strands with orange and red beads woven in the sleeves.

Smiling fakely back, I answered, "You’re just jealous that you can’t make something this awesome.” A quick involuntary smile flashed across Gwynn’s face as I continued, “The flyer was my birthday present. And since all my friends went to bed, I’m about to take her up to blow off some steam."

Suddenly sounding friendly, she sweetly asked, "I have a better idea, how about you lend it to me?"

"No way." I said immediately.

Frowning, she dropped the sweet tone, and coldly offered, "I'll trade you for it." She dangled a chain in front of my face with a small crystal sphere on it. She moved it about hypnotically.

Curious I asked, "What is it?"

"You know all those areas that are warded to keep out apprentices. This will get you in without setting off the alarm. Of course, once you're in you'll have to figure out how to not give yourself away."

"Where did you get this?"

"I promised I wouldn't say. The same way you’re not going to," she said meanly driving a finger deep into my shoulder until I flinched.
I slapped her hand away, and said, “If it’s so great, why don’t you use it?”

Glancing about nervously, she loudly proclaimed, “Because I obey all the Order’s rules.” Focusing back on me, her voice dropped to a whisper, “Unless I have good reason not to.”

"Why do you want my flyer?"

She rolled her eyes. "What do you think? I want to fly. Nothing straining, just to your home town and back. Let me have it for a week and you get a free trip to Xanadu anytime."

"More like a free trip to trouble. Even if no one recognizes me, there’s no way I’ll pass for an initiate."

Gwynn smirked confidently. "Rhea is there right now, living la vie boheme with her deviate retinue. Trust me, if you can charm her or one of them, they'll insist you stay. They might even make you their mascot."

As an answer I handed her the ignition control card to the flyer and she hung the chain around my neck, then tucked it into my shirt. Dissatisfied, she buttoned the jacket to further hide the lump.

Not waiting to see her take-off, I turned and ran off through a maze of buildings until I reached an enormous tent-like structure. Its door was firmly covered with a heavy leather flap. Slipping inside I was enveloped with noise; gentle music, talking and peels of laughter. Most of the illumination came from an enormous fireplace on the far side, with the occasional glowing sphere hovering here and there. In front of the fireplace stood a technomage surrounded by musical instruments, playing themselves. His eyes were closed, as his arms moved in time with the music, directing it like a conductor.

Scattered about the room were classic works of art: paintings, animated holograms and flanking the enormous fireplace, two statues of the same winged figure, Wierdan, the founder of the Technomage Order. One of the statues was her in a casual pose, wings folded, arms at her side, perfectly round, smooth skull, with her serenely staring straight ahead at nothing in particular. The other was incomplete. The figures wings were stretched outward fully, with her arms straining above her as if she were trying to escape. The rest was unfinished but being actively worked on by a lone technomage hovering near the face, chiseling at it occasionally. A bald technomage in a flowing black robe stood at the base, critiquing something on the wing. The sculptor, ignoring his audience of one, continued working on the face.

The periphery of the room divided itself into smaller sections by semi-transparent tapestries depicting animated scenes of technomage history. In between, were small low tables scattered well apart from each other.

All the visible tables had food and drink piled high on each while small groups of mages sat reclining on large pillows or low chairs. Some groups were conversing merrily, or playing games, while others appeared to be more intimately engaged. At the largest table closest to the center of everything, a group of Centauri gathered. Their rowdily celebrating was marked by the smashing of a pitcher flung at the fireplace. One of the group lay face down on the table unmoving while across from him another Centauri was sprawled out on the ground, unconscious. No one seemed concerned.

Slowly walking about, I scanned the room. Finally, I spotted Rhea, by the red scarf wound about her neck. She sat at a small table in a far corner, and between the legs of a burly, light complexioned man. She was leaning back against his chest. With her hair gone, it was difficult to recognize her as she was; wearing a very tight and lacey green shirt, half unbuttoned, and a heavy dark green
woolen coat spread out like a blanket from her lap to her leather clad feet. The man’s arms rested on the ground behind him, propping them both up. Laid out along his thigh was a saber clasped to a belt around his waist. His face was mostly hidden by a large white brace across the bridge of his nose. They were chatting with two other women at their table.

Switching to study the other women, it was hard to not stare at the slight olive-skinned woman. She was conspicuously dressed in a colorful patchwork cape. On her head was an ornate purple cap with one enormous white feather stuck into it, sticking straight up, that bobbed around when she spoke. I forced myself to look at the last member of the group. Her eerily white skin contrasted perfectly with her short sleeveless, black trimmed, gray robe. When she casually flexed her arms, I could see they were fiercely muscular. Otherwise, she sat perfectly straight backed and still on her knees without the benefit of a pillow under her.

Nervously, I approached close enough to overhear Rhea exclaiming as she cocked a thumb at the Centauri group in the center, “...I’m sure one of them would happily show you. Believe me, it’s even more impressive up close, but a Centauri would be my last choice. I will grant you though, it might be fun trying to figure out where to put all of them.”

The woman in the cap covered her eyes and screamed, “Yuck! I won’t be able to get that out of my head all night!” She began to make disgusted gagging sounds to the laughs of the others.

The conversation halted as they finally noticed my standing around staring at them.

I blurted out at Rhea, "Hi! Can I join you?"

She sat there openmouthed, stunned.

"You know this whelp Lou?” asked the man pointing at me.

She regained her composure and stood. Her coat fell away, revealing her short skirt. She spoke quickly, "Yes. The chef I mentioned and he really should not be here.”

Rhea took a step but the man grabbed her wrist pulling her back. In a deep melodic voice, he commanded, "Oh no you don't! I'm not letting you leave here unless it's with me. Besides at his age I would have given up a hand to get to stay here and watch."

"I doubt it would have been your right hand," said the muscular women serenely. All the women laughed in unison which grew louder when the woman in the cap made a repetitive up and down motion with her own right hand, making the feather of her cap bobbed around in time with her hand.

He responded loudly over the snickering of the women, "Very funny. Ha. Ha. We four got into all sorts of trouble when we were his age. It's good for you."

"If memory serves, at his age the only thing you got into was your made up girlfriend," mocked the muscular woman again.

“Oh ya! The Scandinavian model,” added the slight woman with the feathered cap.

“Don't forget she had a Phd in xenolinguistics,” added Rhea ticking off the second characteristic of the girl on her fingers.

The feathered cap woman chimed in again, “Didn’t he say she was ranked first on the women’s snowboarding circuit.”
"His girlfriend must've been the square root of -100," I joked. They all went quiet.

The capped woman pointed a finger at me and said, "This kid’s great."

"I don't get it," said the man loudly over them. All the women laughed louder. He looked to me confused, hands out.

"Square root of -100 is a perfect ten but imaginary," I explained to him.

"Oh. A math joke. You're funny. Thanks for making me look stupider in front of my best lady-friends." He said smiling as he refilled his drink.

Still standing, Rhea leaned toward me and whispered, "You must forgive what passes for wit among my friends. You still need to leave."

I noticed that not just the hair on her head was gone. Her arms, eyebrows, every visible part bare and smooth, like the others.

"This kid’s awesome and adorable. Let him stay!" said the woman in the cap with a wink at me.

Rhea relented to her, "All right you can stay until the smashing starts. I don’t want to have to pick shards of glass out of your eyeballs." She said like it was an annoying chore she routinely did. Rhea sat down beside the man and motioned for me to sit, patting the pillow next to her.

Once I was seated on a large pillow comfortably, she started, “Everyone this is Herazade’s apprentice, Federico, but he prefers Fed.” Continuing, she stretched her hand toward the man, who was ignoring me and drinking from a mug so heavily that the contents spilled out the sides of his mouth and down his chin.

"This is Roland, master of voice modulation and a budding master duelist. He is from the great planet of Mars. Stay away from him," she said in all seriousness. Next, she indicated to the muscular women. "This is Tomoe, master of the hand to hand combat and costuming. She’s from the ancient city of Kyoto, on Earth."

Tomoe bowed her head at me from her seated position, saying nothing.

Lastly, Rhea indicated to the slight women in the cap.

"Your benefactor is Optima. She hails from a fishing village and is easily distracted by shiny metal."

Optima poked Rhea in the shoulder and burst out, "Hey! Stop calling Seattle a village!"

Rhea grinned unrepentantly and answered, "Sorry, my mistake. She is our resident engineer and is currently working on an interesting engine design modification. It is expensive, and complex, and hard to implement. And might result in our ship’s speed increasing by some tiny unnoticeable amount."

Optima corrected her, "It's .08% propulsion increase, which over the course of a long trip adds up, and you're sooo just delaying having to answer the question."

"What question?" I asked.

Rhea suddenly looked worried as she answered, "Perhaps, we should save our game for ..."

Roland cut her off, "What? Do you think Fed here would rather discuss Optima's mechanical
pencil collection or my favorite breakfast teas? The game is Pick someone to shag, alien variation. The premise is if you were the last human in the galaxy which alien species would you consider having relations with, and we've already established that celibacy and suicide are not options. I've freely admitted to finding Narn females very attractive. Optima would try to build herself a sentient android, so I suppose creating a new species is an option. That leaves you three. Except we already know what Tom will say."

In unison, Rhea, Optima and Roland said, "Minbari."

"How did you know?" asked Tomoe mocking surprise.

They all laughed, until Roland said, "Last chance Lou, or we assign you one by majority vote."

"Okay, I give in. My unrealistic first choice would be a Vorlon. Mainly because I really want to know what's inside one of those suits."

Quietly, they all turned to stare at me as one, with an expectation on their faces that what I said better amaze.

I swallowed hard. "Well, since I'm not familiar with the... intricacies of alien anatomy, I think I'd clone myself."

They continued to stare at me in silence for several seconds.

Evaluating, Tomoe was the first to speak, "A simple yet clever solution. Interesting."

"Brilliant! I can't believe I didn't think of that," piped up Optima.

Roland made a disgusted face as he said, "What are you nuts?! That's incestuous and gross! What do you think?"

He nudged Rhea, interrupting her stroking her chin, deep in thought.

Calmly she shrugged and said, "It does imply strong masturbatory tendencies. One premise Roland did not mention is that you are limited by current technologies. The cloning is feasible but you'd have to wait until your clone/ clones reach sexual maturity. It is an acceptable long term solution but I think I will insist you have an interim option."

My eyes went wide for a second as I tried to make light of it all, "I think you're over thinking things."

"That is not possible," she said firmly, looking at me for another answer.

"Well um... I like Optima's idea, though I'd probably have to modify her design a bit."

"Nope! The design only makes sense with interchangeable attachments. Ya! I win!" She celebrated by squirming and waving her hands in the air excitedly while I wondered at the logic of her response.

Roland threw his empty mug behind him carelessly. It smashed into pieces as he roared, "I can't believe the god damn robots take it!" He wagged a warning finger at Optima then me, continuing, "Mark my words, all those robot sex slaves of yours are going to lead to some sort of Robot War, which will rage across the galaxy killing everyone in their path and they'd win, of course, because they were designed by you Optima." He picked up and gingerly kissed Optima’s knuckles.
Giggling, Optima playfully batted Roland's kisses away saying, "You're too much. We should welcome the new Robot Overlords. Just imagine how efficient everything will be." Optima looked pleased with herself.

They all laughed while I smiled nervously. Roland grabbed another mug off the table and handed it over carelessly spilling some of the beer into my lap.

"Welcome to the party, kid."

Rhea intercepted my hand as I accepted the mug and warned me, "This is your only drink."

Carefully, I tasted it. "Not bad. I’ve never had ale before. Herazade calls it the urine of the gods and refuses to have any at home. I like gin more but this is more refreshing."

Rhea began to look worried again as I took another large gulp.

Gesturing with his mug toward Tomoe, Roland said, "I was going through my music collection last night and found a piece that perfectly reminded me of you. I was going to sing it specially for you but now ... no way."

Her tone crisp and precise, Tomoe answered, "Have I insulted your honor so now you deny us all the pleasure of your singing?"

"Yup and I demand satisfaction!"

She glared challengingly at him. "I am not afraid of you. Do your best."

"You can start by coming over here and rubbing my back."

Cracking all her knuckles with one sure movement, she eagerly said, "I accept your challenge."

As she got up, he pulled off his jacket revealing only a thin gauzy undershirt. She kneeled behind him, seized him by the shoulders and slowly drove her knuckles into the heavy muscles of his broad back, like a slow motion punch. In a small voice, Roland strained to say, "Ugh ... Arghh... perfect."

Out of the blue Rhea turned and asked me, "What did you think of my presentation?"

I opened my mouth to speak but Roland cut in first, saying through gritted teeth, "Mom said it was stunning and unspeakable. I didn’t pay too much attention. I was too busy staring at Gwynn’s perfectly round ... AUF! HEY! I was just going to say head. I swear."

Grinning dreamily, Optima added, "Oh ya, she’s got some remarkably pert ... opinions."

In between grimacing in pain Roland managed to snicker with Optima.

Rhea corrected them, "Leave Gwynn alone you two."

Tomoe added assertively, "Agreed or I’m going to change your attitudes manually." She menaced them successfully with a callous-knuckled fist, before continuing, "Your illusion was exactly what I expected from you. Unrestrained, a bit profane, and you revealed to much of yourself."

Rhea scoffed at that. "You liked it then?"

Tomoe pushed her thumbs into a wincing Roland. "Of course. It was also challenging, intricate, with an eccentric beauty. Perfectly you. Still I can’t believe Coeus let you present that. I assume he
approved?"

“He told me whatever I did was fine with him.”

Tomoe hesitated, before quietly saying, “You should know there was talk … some say you must have been on stims when you designed that illusion.”

“Oh totally! Mom said it was exactly what she expected from Dr. Feelgood’s apprentice,” added Roland carelessly.

Everyone turned very quiet. Rhea looked down, hiding her reaction. Tomoe stopped her ministrations and angrily stared at Roland’s back unsure of how to punish him.

Roland muttered under his breath, “Crap.” He took her hand and tugged on it trying to get Rhea to look at him. "You know she loves you and didn’t mean anything bad by it. Hell, she’s been calling me Castrati for fun.”

Optima enthusiastically offered her opinion, "I loved it! And Kell said it was unique and complex and … Aldous gave it a standing ovation. Only the Circle’s opinion really matters. Right?”

Finally looking up, Rhea answered us all, "Aldous was mocking me. Gwynn saw it and tried to warn me but I ignored her advice." She forcefully pulled her hand away from Roland, and emphasized at him, "You know I was asking Fed’s opinion.” Vaguely angry, she turned at me, “Don’t bother to spare my feelings. At least Coeus said failure is nothing to be ashamed of as long as it's spectacular.”

Frozen in place, I could feel my heart rate increase and I began to sweat under her gaze.

"Um … you’re wrong. Actually Aldous liked it. He told me he thought it was funny and avant-garde. I agreed once I figured out what that meant. It’s only problem was it was too complex. I had no idea what was going on sometimes. My favorite part was the Narn ballet, very nice. I never realized it was traditionally done naked, and I loved the end, morphing Wierden into a little pink fairy. That was hilarious. You meant it to be a joke, right?”

I bit my lower lip nervously. Her anger evaporated, and she looked at Roland smugly.

Out of nowhere, Optima burst out saying, “You are such a sweet little thing!” Leaning over, she pinched my cheeks, “Way to make her feel better, or are you just trying to butter her up so she’ll sleep with you?”

The others all chuckled while I did my best not to look at anyone.

Roland raised his mug toward me and proclaimed, "Either way, well said young sir. Here's to Rhea's spectacular failure!” We heard a loud cracking noise, followed by Roland’s scream, “AWW! MY SPINE! Stop! You win Tom.”

"Ready to entertain us now?" Tomoe rose to stand triumphantly over him, her arms cocked on her hips, making her shoulders look even wider.

"I'll sing if you come keep me company. I got an idea for some fun," he replied grinning at her.

He put out his hand and Tomoe yanked him up into a standing position. He grunted in pain as he stiffly rose. Side by side, they walked in step toward the fireplace.

"Ooh dancing opportunity. Count me in!"
Optima jumped up and followed behind them but immediately got distracted chatting excitedly with another table of mages, where everyone had a feather like Optima’s stuck to or out of some part of their attire.

The mage conducting his own musical concert stopped and made room for Roland. Accompanied by the self playing orchestra, he began to sing in a powerful voice that reverberated about the enclosure. Not quite dancing, Tomoe stood near him swaying in meditative appreciation. I ignored the music and instead turned to stare at Rhea in profile. A small smile tugged her lips up, a faraway expression on her face.

Immediately I asked the obvious question, “Is Roland your boyfriend?”

Without taking her attention away from the singing she said, “I see you’re the nosey, prying sort.”

Putting up my hands defensively, I said, “I’m sorry. It’s just, I’m curious, you two seem um … close, but then he’s all flirty with Optima and Tomoe.”

At that, she gave me an angry look, but said nothing and deliberately ignored me. Disappointed, I tried another question, "Why did you tell me to stay away from him?"

Disconcerted, she seemed to answer without thought, "He’s fought three duels since we recovered from our initiation. Such excesses can be dangerous to more than just the participants."

"You don't approve?" I asked.

The angry look returned and she went back to ignoring me. Sighing quietly, I looked down focusing on my mug and finished my drink in one large gulp. Placing the empty mug on the table, I grabbed for a random pitcher. She intercepted my arm, moving all pitchers well away from me without a word.

Before she let go, I quickly asked, "This is G'Quan's Lament in D minor right?"

Surprise filled her voice as she spoke, "I didn't think you were the sort who enjoyed Narn opera."

"I don't and by the looks of it the Centauri are hating it." I pointed over at the table of formerly celebrating Centauri technomages. The ones that were not glaring at Roland were angrily speaking amongst themselves. I continued, "But I've learned to appreciate it. Herazade only listens to it when she's in a good mood. I can ask for anything and she always says yes. That's how I got my pony, Sparky."

She let out a slight laugh at that. "I don't recall seeing any ponies trotting around your home."

"Ya, that's a sad story. He broke his leg and we had to put him down. But, let me tell you, we feasted like kings."

Playing along, she asked with a growing grin on her face, "Did you have a favorite cut?"

"I loved all of him. Pony steaks, pony ribs, pony roast. But a pony like that, you don’t want to eat all at once. I made a smoker so I also made pony sausages, pony bacon, pony ham..."

Every time I said pony she giggled. When I stopped, she said, "You’re a horror."


She seemed to have forgotten to ignore me and asked, “Wait, wasn't today your birthday?”
Shaking my head yes, I pointed around the room, "I suppose that's why I wanted a little adventure."

She fumbled with her green coat till she found one particular pocket and retrieved the palm sized brown box from an inside pocket. Holding up the box between us, she placed her hand dramatically along the top, palm up. A glowing swirl of script numbers and letters formed above her hand. The mass drifted down into her palm. Flipping her hand over quickly, she slapped the top of the box. When she pulled her hand away with a flourish, she revealed a glowing 16 surrounded by the letters, RIP Sparky.

"It's not much but it's the best I can do on no notice." She handed it to me.

Awkwardly, I took the box. "Thank you."

Immediately, I opened it in front of her and it was mostly empty except for three small gold foil wrapped pouches.

"What is it?"

"Every woman's weakness and if you don't love them you had better keep it to yourself lest my estimation of your palate fall immeasurably. How was your special day?"

I shrugged. "We had the obligatory party with the other apprentices. There was cake. The masters stood around scowling, making sure no one had fun. Afterwards, Herazade took me for a high altitude jump which was exhilarating awesome, and Aldous gave me his old flyer, so I can skip out of here if I want. Perhaps umm … I can take you flying some time. The dead ocean is pretty this time of year," I offered nonchalantly.

A harsh belittling laugh erupted out of her before she stopped herself. I sucked in my breath and looked away, my face burning.

She grabbed my arm and turned me toward her. Looking concerned, she softly said, "I’m sorry. That was rude of me. Forgive me?"

Relief. With a small smile, I said, “Always.”

Patting my arm, she leaned in close to say, “It was very nice of you to offer, but that is not a good idea.”

All through the conversation the singing had been steadily growing louder. At the moment she stopped speaking, Roland bellowed out a sustained high note. A glass pitcher on the table began to dance about, then cracked and finally spilled its contents.

I yelled over the high-pitched noise, "Wow, I've never heard a man sing soprano like this before!"

I clamped my hands over my ears and screamed when all the sound disappeared replaced by a pain ripping through my head. Looking scared Rhea was already kneeling in front of me with her lips moving.

I blurted out, "Pain! Lots of Pain!"

Closing her eyes, she covered my ears with her hands and I felt the skin around her hands tingle until my hearing came back with a pop.

Still worried, she asked, “Can you hear me?” I shook my head yes and tried to smile but she declared, “That's enough for one night I believe.”
A few technomages hurried for the exit, but most seemed to be settling in, anticipating further entertainment. The technomage who had been directing the musical instruments, stopped and scurried away from Roland. The moment his back was turned, the orchestra of self-playing instruments vanished. The sculptor by the fireplace continued chiseling, completely inured to the commotion. Rhea stood and began putting on her coat. Its length concealed her body down to the floor and once she pulled up her collar and hood, it hid her face in shadows.

We both turned when a lone Centauri technomage shouted across the enclosure pointing a short golden sword at Roland, “Your lesson begins now initiate.”

A Narn technomage in a far corner rose and yelled back, “How dare you interrupt the only decent rendition of G’Quan’s Lament I’ve heard come out of a human’s throat!”

From the table of Centauri, a wave of mugs, plates, and bottles flew through the air straight at Roland, but Tomoe stepped in their way. With a sure flick of her hand, Tomoe redirected them away in random directions. Rhea spread out her coat to block the ones heading at us. They smashed into an invisible barrier just in front of her scattering broken glass and pottery about her feet. A group of five Centauri, lead by the one with the sword, advanced on Roland. One of them had a broken bottle, one with what appeared to be a table leg, and the remaining two with short black staffs. With his saber drawn and a manic grin on his face, Roland stretched out his arms as if inviting an embrace. He continued to sing. Standing next to him, motionless, Tomoe stared at the approaching horde. All indignant rage, the Narn technomage stomped from behind his table and toward the back of the advancing Centauri group. No one else moved to join or stop them.

Rhea grabbed my arm and with considerable strength dragged me to my feet.

Gawking at what was about to happen, I said, “They’re out numbered. We should stay and help them.”

“You should be worried for the Centauri.”

With a mighty leap, the lead Centauri, his sword in hand, flew into the air looking to use Roland to break his fall. Roland caught the Centauri and collapsed backwards, placing his foot into the middle of the Centauri’s chest and flipped him ass over head into the fireplace. All the while Roland kept on singing. Tomoe intercepted the rest of the group. They unleashed a flurry of strikes at her, but with a sheathed dagger held along her forearm, she blocked every one, looking increasingly bored.

The Narn technomage joined the fray by grabbing the Centauri, who had levitated into the air to get around Tomoe, by his ankles and slammed him back to the ground. The Centauri who had been thrown into the fireplace came stumbling out, unburned and more enraged. He raised a hand. A giant fireball began to form in it.

As we reached the exit, Roland stopped singing to yell across the room at us, "Hey, where you going?! I thought we’re going to pop all his cherries tonight!"

Roland leaned to the right as a fireball streaked through the area his head had just been. It sailed the length of the room and hit a tapestry sending it up in flames with a ‘whoosh.’ Appreciative oohs and clapping issued from some of the audience. No one moved to put out the flames. That was the last I saw as I was yanked out the door.

In the perfect quiet and calm of outside, I eagerly asked Rhea, "What did he mean by all?"

Before she could answer, a dark cloaked figure landed nearby and silently rushed through the door
we had just exited.

As she pulled me away faster, from inside her hood, Rhea answered, "Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Please forget it."

Disappointment. I deflated. "Oh, too bad. Look… I didn’t mean to take you away from your friends. I'll be fine, you should go back and help."

"I don’t want you getting lost. Show the way."

She pointed an aggressive hand ahead of her. I began to walk silently and she fell in step with me.

"What was it like?" I asked.

Rhea asked, "What was what like?"

"The actual initiation. Getting your implants. No one will tell me."

She stayed silent for a while. "I’m not supposed to say anything. It’s one of our mysteries."

“Ya, that’s what everyone says but I always thought the mysteries and secrets should be for outsiders not each other. That makes more sense to me."

I thought I heard her sigh before her answer, "I should not say, but… I'll say the initiation is pain, excruciating, unbearable pain. I passed out for most of it. So in a way it felt quick. I really don't understand why they don't use some sort of analgesic. I mean splitting open a spine from hip to shoulder like that is ..."

I stopped her. "Okay, now I wish I hadn't asked."

Stopping as well, Rhea spoke with sympathy, "Roland said he hardly noticed it but he is always posturing like that. Either way, at least we only have to go through it once."

We both began again and were silent until I shyly asked, "Why did Roland call you Lou?"

"Because he’s careless."

"Is Lou your real name?"

Annoyed, she warned, "That is not a question you ask any technomage. Ever."

"Sorry it's just... I envy your having close friends within the Order. The last convocation was my first so I don't really have that yet."

She actually snorted in disgust. "We didn’t become friends by choice. At first we got along like cats in a bag."

"I don't understand."

"A project of my fathers. We were deliberately socialized."

Content with her answer she stopped speaking. I had to goad her to continue. "What happened?"

Her words conveyed her rueful smile. "My father is a healer who specializes in all aspects of the mind, from neural biology, to psychology. He wanted to see what would happen if members of a cohort were routinely socialized in a controlled environment. A few other masters found it
intriguing and agreed. Coeus theorized it would improve our solidarity, self-control, behavior. Which happened but at the expense of our skills. Although we mastered Karaoke and putting on saucy puppet shows. Eventually, the Circle put an end to it."

"Wow, I can't believe your father would experiment on you like that."

Shrugging, she responded, "It was actually great fun and benign compared to some of the development projects I've read about."

I stopped again, and she halted in response.

Nervously I said, "I like this, talking to you. You answer my stupid questions without making me feel bad. Can I um… ping you sometime?"

Sighing again from inside her hood, when she spoke she sounded more amused than anything. "If you're trying to…"

I talk excitedly over her, "Nothing stupid like that. I mean if I want advice or to just shoot the breeze."

"I shouldn't."

Nervously I said, "Let's make it a bet. If I can track you down, you have to answer."

"If you can't?"

"Name your price."

She was silent until I began to shift my weight about nervously. Finally she spoke, "If you can find me and if your message is appropriate, I will answer. If not, I expect a case of that tasty limoncello of yours to arrive within the month, by Christmas."

I stuck out my hand before she was done speaking, answering, "Done."

She patted my hand but didn’t shake.

"We're here," I said pointing at a nearby structure.

Sounding disturbed, she said "You didn’t tell me you were staying with your master."

"Don't worry. She told me she would be out for the night."

She pointed at the glowing rune on the door. "That means she is within."

Dragging me along behind her, we swiftly walked in to find a very displeased Herazade standing in the middle of the room.

Without removing her hood, Rhea said, "I am returning your wayward apprentice. He was … lost. I decided to bring him to you before he wound up in a ditch, missing a kidney. Now I should go," She bowed slightly, adding, “Kidneys don’t harvest themselves."

Herazade held out her hand palm up. A small image of Rhea standing next to me saying, *All right you can stay*. Then the image rapidly transformed into one of Roland yelling, *I thought we were going to pop all his cherries tonight!* With a withering stare, she closed her hand before the images fully disappeared.
While her hood concealed her reaction, Rhea's voice was unfazed as she spoke, "I believe in circumstances such as this it is customary to beg for mercy. I will only ask that you consider that perhaps our judgment was impaired by our celebrations."

"Stop." I said too loud. Both turned toward me, with Herazade looking shocked and the other still hidden in her hood. “Sorry. I um … didn’t mean to yell that. What I meant was I sorta caused this. Whatever punishment there is should probably fall on me.”

Looking pleased, Herazade said, "Very well. Since I can not trust you to follow my instructions when you are alone, your punishment will be that I will take you home in the morning. You will stay there all day, studying your least favorite lesson, currently the Italian Renaissance, I believe. Go to bed."

She pointed at a hall leading away from the door. But I remained rooted to the spot, demanding, "No. I want to know what will happen to her."

We both looked sideways at Rhea, who just stood perfectly motionless, well hidden within her coat.

Herazade crisply ordered, "Nothing. I was about to thank her for returning you intact. Now go before I have to resort to getting my switch."

I bowed to both and said, "Good night then I guess."

Walking away down the hall, I slipped into a small alcove-like bedroom that only had enough room for a cot, a small littered desk and a large open chest.

I stood near the door, and listened in on their conversation mid-sentence.

Rhea was speaking, "... Should be fine. If you are worried you should test his hearing."

"No. I am more worried about," an audible sigh broke up her sentence, “He is very impressionable, especially since he has had no experience with woman, well not non-simulated ones anyway."

Interrupting her, Rhea indignantly said, "Are you implying that I am toying with him?! Because I have done nothing to lead him on. He came to me."

"No, you misunderstand. I approve of your influence."

Rhea hurriedly answered, "Oh ... May I go then?" She finished sharply.

"No, about Roland..."

Herazade began to speak rapidly but not in English.

"Damn." I stopped listening and went over to the chest. I rummaged about in it until I found a tablet, which began to activate itself right away. Back by the door, I went back to listening but not understanding their conversation. They went back and forth for a while mentioning Roland’s name often. I looked at the terminal and shook it trying to hurry it along.

“Come on, start up already,” I whispered. It chimed in response, finally fully active and I continued out loud, “Load spoken language translation program. To english from …” I paused unsure what to say, “Sample audio clip now,” I stuck the terminal in the hall but at that moment they went silent.

After a while, Rhea simply said, "I will try."
“Good. I'm sure Coeus has something in his pharmacy that can help. He always does.”

I cursed and threw the tablet away onto the cot.

Sounding impatient, Rhea said, “If that is all?”

“No. I am very grateful to you for watching over Fed. You saved me the embarrassment of fetching him myself. Your... father is very proud of you. He has cause to be. I know I didn’t stand but I agreed with Aldous, your presentation- many of us found it a surprising delight.”

A silence extended for several awkward seconds before Herazade continued, “It’s been too long since we’ve had a meaningful conversation. I would like to change that. Perhaps tomorrow after the midday lectures, you can come back?”

"A while? It’s been years. My answer is no. Good evening."

"Wait. Why wouldn't... "

Rhea interrupted her, "I'm not interested in currying your favor."

"I don't understand."

She was cut off again by Rhea almost yelling, "You've had nothing meaningful to say to me since you stopped visiting Coeus. Not even when Themis died. I’m not sure what is possessing you to care after all this time but I am not interested in further disappointment."

"We spoke a great deal at Themis’ funeral."

"You spoke at me. I wanted a hug, not a lecture."

Herazade stumbled over her words. “I... I had no idea you felt that way. Then I insist." Silence. She continued, "If you will not come to me, I will go to you. If it helps I can make my hot chocolate. I believe you used to call it frighteningly delicious.”

“Merde. At least you remembered that much. Very well, you can have your way, marâtre.”

Herazade laughed at the last word. “I believe the kidneys are calling to you.”

When I heard her leave, I walked back toward the entrance. Herazade was staring at the door, absentmindedly frowning while putting on a blue cloak.

I said at her back, "Wow. She sounded pissed. What are you going to say to her?"

She spun around in surprise, her frown deepening.

"Listening in again? I thought I told you that was rude."

I shrugged and countered, “Isn’t threatening to beat someone with a switch worse?”

Her frown turned into a smile, “Not necessarily. Never underestimate the value of saving face.”

I asked, "Are you really taking me home in the morning?"

"Yes."

Whining, I pleaded with her, "Oh come on! I’m not allowed to have real friends outside of the
Order, and the ones I have, I only get to see once every three years. And now you're dumping me at home, alone. I can't stand being alone! Let me stay, please!"

Annoyed, she grabbed a short black metal staff that had been leaning against the wall by the door, "That is why it is the perfect punishment. Do you have any idea how many apprentices the Order used to be accidentally killed or worse?!

I sarcastically answered, "12?" and crossed my arms, pouting.

Pointing her staff at me, she sternly lectured, "Would like to know why Mescal always wears a mask? Or which of our order have artificial limbs? If anything would have happened to you … I would have been severely inconvenienced." She tapped her staff into the ground for emphasis, sending tendrils of blue electrical arcs to crawl across the floor, through me, causing my hair to stand on end, as they climbed up the walls, to the ceiling and disappearing back into the top of her staff.

Calming down, she let out an audible sigh and grabbed me by the shoulder shaking me slightly as she pleaded, “I don't say this enough to you. ... I love you as if you were my own son. But that has led me down this merry path of indulging you and tolerating behavior I should not. Your actions affect not just yourself but also me. Please, next time, think before you do.”

Sheepishly, I apologized, "Sorry, you’re right. I wasn't thinking."

Satisfied, she responded, "As for how you managed to get into Xanadu." With one finger she found and removed the chain from around my neck. She examined it carefully before slipping it into the folds of her clothing. "Beautiful workmanship, but not worth your flyer. You should have held out for magic beans.” We both laughed at her joking at my expense. She continued, “I'll make sure you get your flyer back from Gwynn.”

"Will Gwynn get in trouble?"

"I informed Coeus, but he was unconcerned, as always. He thinks she has a right to complete freedom. I am considered an over-indulgent master by most but he surpasses me in this by light years." She finished more bitterly complaining then explaining.

Perplexed I asked, “Are we still talking about Gwynn?” She waved a dismissive hand but stayed silent lost in thought.

I continued, "If you knew what I was doing why didn't you come after me?"

"I would have, had you not sought out Rhea. She behaves much like her father did at her age. I trust him, and so I trust her.” She paused at length debating about whether to continue, “I will not interfere with you seeking her out…”

Excitedly, I interrupted her, “Good! What do you think I should do get on her good side?”

She let out a bitter laugh as she spoke, “Stop acting like a besotted fool. Look, do yourself a favor, guard your heart.” She wagged a warning finger at me, “I do not want a repeat of last weeks incident. Now I need to focus on my lecture. Good night Fed."

She began to leave.

"Wait! I wanted to ask .... What was all that about Roland?"

"Nothing you need concern yourself about."
"You don't seriously think he would hurt me."

Looking anxiously at the door, she said, "No, it was about… an unrelated matter. And you need to stay here for your protection. I am not on shall we say friendly terms with some of our fellow mages. They might choose to take their revenge upon me through you."

"Oh come on. That’s paranoid."

Sounding absolutely certain of herself, she responded, "It's not whether you're paranoid but rather if you're paranoid enough. When you are of age in three years, sorry make that two, I will give you more latitude in pursuing the pleasures of the mind and body, but until then your pursuit must remain theoretical … for your own good. Now, if I hurry I might just make my own lecture. Oh, I almost forgot."

Instead of leaving she swiftly walked toward the only bare wall in the room. As she moved, the entire wall sprang to life with the image of a columned temple.

"Trajan!" she commanded.

A computer generated holo-daemon, in the form of a bare-footed old man, ran in from the edge of the temple. He was dressed in an ancient Roman styled senatorial toga and on his chest Herazade's rune of progress glowed brightly in red.

Bowing and simpering, it asked, "How may I serve Augusta?"

"Activate the observation network. Load lecture hall node."

Puzzled, I asked, "Aldous gave you access to his monitoring probes?"

She shook her head no, answering, "I like to think of it as a game we play." The image on the terminal switched to the interior of a large domed room with a dozen mages sitting about quietly talking. "It would please me if you watched my lecture."

"Sure. Which title did you decide on?"

"New Ship Design Elements and Current Assembly Management."

"Wow, that sounds, too long and boring."

She pulled herself upright, and indignantly said, "Yes well, it is necessary. The one after it will be more to your taste, 'The Current Disposition of the Human Crime Syndicates.'"

"Sounds way more interesting."

"I think so as well, but if you do not then perhaps you can find something else to amuse yourself."

She turned to me with an amused glint in her eye but left without another word. An understanding smile flashed across my face.

"Trajan?"

The holo-daemon strolled out looking relaxed.

It derisively spoke, "Ahh, young Augustus. Do you realize you're over two weeks behind in your mathematics studies? And I'm too embarrassed to say how behind you are in your history studies. Augusta is most displeased. She should thrash you with that switch if you ask me. Would you like
a lesson on the Medici family while we wait?"

"For the love of God no. Record her lecture directly into my personal directory. Then bring up a list of available observation nodes I can switch to."

"I do not believe Augusta would approve of that."

"Did she forbid you?"

Trajan said suspiciously, "No."

"Then do as I say."

I pulled out a ball from my jacket pocket and began squeezing it anxiously. A list of names and accompanying symbols appeared superimposed on the lecture hall image.

"Switch to the one marked Xanadu."

I pulled over a chair and dropped into it, getting comfortable. Immediately, the image changed to the location I was just in but everything seemed perfectly peaceful again. The Centauri were back to their rowdy celebrations. Roland was singing again but this time something cheerfully festive.

*Merry Christmas from Chiron Beta Prime*

*Where we're working in a mine*

*For our robot overlords*

*Did I say "overlords"? I meant "protectors"* **

Many mages danced wildly about him, including Optima. She was in the middle, executing an outrageous series of acrobatic maneuvers to the cheers of those with feathers stuck to themselves. Fantastical creatures, fairies, demons, a flight of tiny dragons, flittered about the room weaving glittering patterns among the dancers.

"Magnify this area. Focus sound on just the table." I pointed to the table where Tomoe sat crosslegged alone, eating or stoically staring at the writhing mass of movement. Rhea did not reappear. I waited, but no one came. Getting bored, I threw the ball in my hand at the wall of images, caught it and threw it again until Tomoe finished eating and appeared to close her eyes, mediating.

The song changed to one focused on a place called Skullcrusher Mountain and the next called the Future Soon, about some crazy cyborg obsessed with a woman he forced to marry him.

I stopped throwing my ball and started to drift off asleep when Rhea appeared, agitatedly tearing off her coat. She collapsed on the pillow next to Tomoe.

Tomoe’s eyes sprung open. She enquired, "How did the veal delivery go, Mrs. Robinson?"

Rhea pointed a finger at her and said, "Don’t you start to. Gwynn's been trying my patience about him for days."

"With her tongue I can well imagine. Anything choice?"

"You have no idea. She's like this fountain of alliterative nicknames ... ‘little latin lover, gaudy
gastronomic gaucho, tackily tasty torero. Pepito picante is my personal favorite.” Rhea’s demeanor broke into gentle laughter, “Optima’s right. He’s impossibly adorable and funny as hell. I can’t seem to not enjoy his company even when I try.” She threw up her arms in frustration.

Stopping my spying, I jumped up from my seat pumping my fists in the air and yelling, “Yes!” I danced in place before dropping back into my seat. Eagerly, I pulled out her gift box and spilled the three small foil packages on my lap. Carefully I opened one and eased its contents into my hand. A perfect round chocolate truffle landed in my palm and then went immediately into my mouth, leaving a dusting of chocolate residue in my palm. After biting down I moaned with pleasure muttering, “Oh wow!” Quickly, I ripped open the other two pouches and devoured their contents.

When I looked back, Rhea sipped orange liquor out of small shot glass while staring over the rim at Roland. A Centauri mage had his arm around Roland and sang drunkenly with him. Another Centauri stood cheering the pair.

Shaking her head in disbelief, she asked Tomoe, “What could he have possibly said to calm them down?”

Tomoe said with perfect stillness, “I’m not sure. It was in Centauri. But the moment he finished, they laughed louder than I’ve heard all evening and embraced him like a long lost brother. Good thing to, Elric burst in ready to roll all our heads.”

Tomoe pointed to a cloaked figure standing in the middle of the room, distrusting the peace of the now celebrating group.

Rhea downed the rest of her drink in one gulp. Tomoe put a hand on Rhea’s glass and tried to stopped her from refilling her glass. “You only do shots when you’re upset. What's wrong?”

“I, I don't know what to do about that.” She slammed her glass down pointing to Roland. Tomoe pushed all the bottles of alcohol out of her reach.

“What happened?” Tomoe asked.

“I just had the privilege of defending Roland to Fed's master.”

With a thoughtful look, Tomoe drew close to Rhea. She whispered, "I suppose we should have guessed he was tagged with a probe. I take it she didn't appreciate his parting joke.”

“Not that, thank God. She warned me that his dueling has come to the Circle's attention. He’s been called before them tomorrow to answer for his last duel. She thinks Kell might make an example of him for disrupting solidarity.”

"Exactly how does Herazade know the Circle's business?"

Leaning in close, Rhea whispered, "Don't tell anyone. Aldous is dying. It’s been decided that Herazade will replace him.”

In an angry tone, Tomoe declared, “I need not bother to vote then.”

"Don’t be naïve Tom. They are of the same line. It would be shocking only if she did not replace Aldous.”

“Forgive me for not sharing your cynicism about how the Circle conducts itself.”

“It’s the way the world works. Anyway, she suggested I warn him. Quietly prepare him. She
suggested I give him something like CalmX. I just went and got some. But I would prefer not to
drug him.”

Tomoe said, "I don’t believe it. I watched his first two duels. Roland was very controlled, he just
played with them. Who was his last opponent?"

Rhea shrugged. “No one I know. An older mage named Sidjak. Do you know him?"

Tomoe pulled back in shock, and then nodded with a surprised grin on her face. "You could say
that." Rhea eagerly motioned for details with her hand.

With some reluctance, Tomoe continued, “Yesterday, at sunrise, I was doing my forms in the
arena, alone. He came by and … watched me. A bit to intently. When I finished, I confronted him.
He politely asked if I wanted to spar a few rounds. I obliged him.

The first round, he held back so it ended in seconds with him on his back with my blade to his
throat. The second round he actually tried. His skill was considerable, but he had a pattern so it
ended like the first. There was no third round, 15 minutes later he had me flat on my back in my
quarters. It was a surprising pleasant way to start the morning.” She finished with a small strained
smile.

Without hiding her shock, Rhea replied, “No! You’re supposed to be the responsible one. To quote
the wisdom of Optima, yuck. He’s at least 40.”

Tomoe frowned, as she said quietly, “Closer to 50. And I’m not sure what came over me. Since our
initiation, I've felt … restless, and…” Her hands matched her struggle to find more words. She hit a
pillow with full force sending it flying away. “Like I want everything I see. Have you noticed a
change?”

With a shrug, Rhea said, “I need less sleep, otherwise no. I heard, the implants can make you
more... active in some ways.”

They sat in contemplative silence until Rhea said, “Sleeping with an older man, how perfectly
scandalous.”

Tomoe crossed her arms and said, “Perhaps you can explain to me the difference between having
one lover of 50 and two of 25?”

Rhea’s mouth parted. “How did?... Optima told you?”

“Yes, quite proudly. The whole sordid tale of you two sharing them.”

Rhea’s pale skin flushed red. Tomoe challenged, “What? No witty comeback?”

The redness faded while Rhea grasped the words, “Give me a second… They should count as one
person. They were identical twins, and everyone knows twins only share one soul between them.”
Neither could keep a straight face after that.

As they both laughed, Tomoe conceded, "Not bad."

Apologetically, Rhea finished, “I should celebrate you finally enjoying more of life’s varied
experiences. Besides, it is not like you’ll ever match Optima's enthusiasm.” She pointed toward the
mass of dancers, to their mutual amusement. There was Optima wedged between a man in front of
her and woman behind her.
Tomoe said, "Speaking of her, I have good news. Optima just learned she has been accepted into the Kinetic Grimlis production team. She’s going to install her new engine design in a several of the initiate ships, including ours, as proof of concept."

"We're going to be flying around with experimental engines? Lovely. My dreams have come true," said Rhea sarcastically.

"I'll be glad for whatever extra speed I can get. It's a long way to the Minbari federation from Earth."

"You’ve selected a planet?"

Tomoe answered, “Small remote colony world called, Sorpigal. A city called Valen’s Rest. Once I'm established, you'll have to come and visit me. It’s right on the border with Vorlon space. Maybe with a powerful enough telescope you can get an eyeful of what’s under one of those encounter suits.”

Rhea excitedly responded, "Invitation accepted. Still planning on infiltrating a warrior clan?"

"Yes. The order still has gaps in its knowledge about their private rituals. Did you know there has never been a Minbari technomage?"

"No. How odd. Are you sure?"

“Yes, I double checked, the occasional apprentice, but none even made it into chrysalis phase. I have been meaning to ask you. I have finished my wardrobe and my cover story but I’d prefer full body mods. Would you help me with the surgery and cranial implantation?"

No easy answer came. Rhea leaned back on her hands, elbows locked. She asked, "Is that really what you want? They will be next to impossible to remove if you leave them in too long. Why not just rely on an illusion?"

"I don’t want to give myself away accidentally. The war is over but, most Minbari despise humans, and you don’t want to know what they say about technomages. If they found a human-technomage among them …"

Rhea completed her thought, "Ahh, the torches and pitchforks would come out."

Tomoe bowed her head in agreement.

Rhea nodded yes. "I'll help to make sure you can get laid without giving yourself away."

Blushing, Tomoe redirected the conversation, "What's Roland planning?"

Derisively, Rhea answered, "You mean, if he doesn't get flayed tomorrow. He wants me to go with him to, oh how did he put it … ‘Slay some damsels then shag their dragons.’ I suppose adventuring is a way to put it."

Curiously, Tomoe asked, "Will you accompany him?"

“I’m not sure. Some traveling would be fun. At least until I get sick of Roland’s antics. Then I suppose I’ll head back home. I had a wonderful idea for a research project. I’ve already harvested my glandular stem cells and with bits of my chrysalis, I plan to hybridize them to create an artificially programmable gland that can secrete …"
Tomoe held up a hand and commanded, "Stop. I'm sure it's very interesting but I just ate."

They sat in contemplative silence for a minute staring at the writhing crowd around Roland.

Murmuring to herself, Rhea said, “I still have to figure out what to do about that,” She waved in Roland’s direction. He noticed and waved back at her. A huge grin plastered his face.

Tomoe nodded in agreement. “We are each other's keepers. Tell me honestly ...Are you two back together?”

Adamantly waving her hands, Rhea said, “No!”

“Yet you encourage him to cling to you like a barnacle. Just like old times.”

Rhea said again with a sour face. “True. But technically no. We're not sleeping together.”

Firmly, Tomoe said, “Yet. You’ve always been his favorite. If memory serves he always went running to you whenever he was in trouble.”

With a dismissive wave, Rhea said at her, "Because he associates me in his mind with his mother.” She swished one hand about grandiosely, “And while that is every woman’s fantasy come true, shockingly I would rather not take Walkyra's place."

Tomoe interrupted, “Yes, he was her apprentice. This should be her problem. Where is Walkyra?”

Rhea answered her, "In her typically diligent manner, she left for Mars, as soon as Roland was on his feet. Not that she would be a help. She would approve of his behavior, tell the Circle to fuck off, and try to march him away singing Carry on my Wayward Son. The whole thing would end with them both getting flayed.”

Determined, Tomoe said, "Roland seemed pretty determined to please you tonight. You have the best chance of modifying his behavior."

An edge of panic entered her voice as she said, "He’s just grateful. You didn't see him last night."

Tomoe said, "Show me." They both closed their eyes for a second. "You did a good job putting his nose back together."

"No. I keep telling him to have my father look at it but he refuses. Says a bend will make him look more rugged.” She hugged herself. “You should have seen him last night. When he stumbled into my quarters, he scared the hell out of us.”

"Us?" asked Tomoe her eyebrows climbing.

Turning slightly pink again, Rhea said, "Oh did I forget to mention that I was with Vergil? We were dressed!” She waved defensively, "anyway, Roland burst into my quarters while we were … discussing his new macrophage project. Vergil’s become quite obsessed with biology, like a little adorable Doctor Moreau. He uses the term hybridize almost as much as I do."

"Alone, together, in your quarters? Should the twins be worried?"

Rhea laughed. “They do not factor in such things. And after last night… the way Roland showed up, Vergil made an implausible excuse and literally ran away.”

It became quiet as the music stopped. They looked at Roland who was excitedly speaking with the large roiling group around him.
Tomoe instructed her, "I will help any way you need. But Roland's been hanging on your words, seeking your approval. It’s the right call for you to take point on this."

Rhea said nothing to that.

“Just remember that under that viking frame, is the squishy soul of an artist. Try to be kind.”

Rhea ended coldly, “No. If this is to work, it has to be a confrontational intervention. He won't take it seriously otherwise.”

Sweating and bursting with smiles, Roland and Optima walked up to the table arm in arm.

Getting up and standing directly in their path, Rhea stabbed a small finger into the middle of his huge chest, "You son of a bitch!"

Optima said, “What’s your problem?!”

Sounding annoyed Roland said, "Are you still sore that I interrupted you and Verg last night? I told you I'd make it up to you. I had a little chat with him and he's going to meet you for breakfast tomorrow. Problem solved."

With an icy stare Rhea asked, "When were you going to tell me?"

Roland's eyes went wide before he said, "Don't worry about it. I can deal with it."

Worried, Optima interrupted, "Deal with what?"

Rhea pointed at Optima and said, “Be quiet.”

“Hey! Why are jumping down my throat?”

Tomoe grabbed Optima's arm and pulled her away. “I’ll explain while we celebrate you joining the Grimlis with a private party you’re about to start in your quarters.”

Optima yelled over her shoulder back at Roland and Rhea, “Good idea! I’m going to have fun with my new friends. If you two crazies work it out, you should crash my party. Otherwise stay away.”

They seemed to ignore her words as they stood facing each other tensely.

Rhea bit into him. "I consulted the healer who patched up Sidjak. It was Ing-Radi herself. She’s already told the rest of the Circle you cracked his skull. They aren’t happy with you. I’ve never seen you lose control like this before. What the hell is wrong with you?"

Matching her, Roland hissed back, "With me?! What’s wrong with you? I can smell the booze from here. You know you’re a mean drunk.”

She yelled back, “Don’t you dare make this about me! Start talking or I’ll ask in a way you can not say no.”

Roland shook his head in disbelief. “Sidjak is a poetry spouting prick, who's been riding my ass to fight him since I could walk again. I turned a dozen cheeks before I decided to shut him up. You should be proud of me. He's a full technomage with two dozen years on me, but I handed his ass to him. I'll pay for what I did in the morning. What do you want from me?"

Several mages at a nearby table got up and left. Roland began to grip his sword tightly as Rhea committed to her anger.
"I want to help you, you idiot! I let you get away with not telling me what happened last night because I mistakenly thought it was none of my business. I ignored my father's first and only rule for us..."

He finished her sentence perfectly mimicking Coeus' voice, "We're each other's Keepers."

Stepping to her, he loomed over her small form as she glared up at him. Yet, Rhea kept on him, "We used to be best friends, shared our thoughts, problems, joys, bodies. Everything. Remember?! You should've told me."

Roland's head dropped. He unfastened the belt with his sword and threw it down on the table as he fell onto a largest pillow. Morosely, he covered his eyes and began to cry softly.

Her anger vanished as Rhea sat next to him. "Why the hell didn't you just challenge him to a match in the tournament? Settling grudges is what it's for."

"I did. He said that the tourney is too much about performance. He wanted no rules, a real fight."

Rhea clasped his hand in between hers. "Talk."

His eyes glazed over. The words flowed out of him like a rehearsed monologue. "It started days ago. He tried to goad me with taunts. I just rolled my eyes at his stupid puns and rhymes. Then he went after you and O with all these bawdy hiakus. Apparently you have a bit of a reputation in the Order. That ticked me off but I held myself in check, because I knew you'd get pissed if I beat his ass."

Rhea frowned. "Then what could he have possibly said to you... Oh no, he didn't."

The tears rolled down his cheeks. "He laid into Mom and I hit him, hard. It felt so good. He got into it to. You should've seen the grin on his face. We were pretty evenly matched most of the time. He made perfect mirrored illusions of himself so half the time I had no idea what to strike. We platformed all over the sky. I perfectly timed my spot shields. It was like a ballet. It went on over an hour. Eventually, I got the upper hand probably because he's an old loser. I had a chance to kill him, but I just knocked him out and dumped him where I knew he'd be found. And yes, I'd do it again if you're wondering. There, now you know. I'm a homicidal maniac."

Rhea stared at him, with her mouth slightly open. Taking a deep breath, she said, "Maniac yes, homicidal no. What are you planning on telling the Circle?"

"Actually, I haven't given it any thought." Roland flashed a small grin before continuing, "Probably moon them."

"Wait a minute, we have a reputation in the Order? What sort of reputation?"

"What you'd expect, debauched reprobates."

Frowning Rhea said, "I would prefer free spirited and gracious."

Roland offered, "Hey, we'll always be welcomed among our Centauri brothers."

"I heard."

He wiped his wet eyes with his sleeve. Gingerly he pulled her into his lap. "All forgiven?"

She curled up to him, embracing him. "Don't be stupid. I wasn't actually angry. The question is
why did he pick a fight with you?"

Roland blew it off. "Who cares."

"You should. And we will find out. In the meantime… Start practicing your apology because you'll need to be able to lie to the Circle convincingly about how sorry you are and leave that at home from now on," said Rhea pointing at his sword.

"You don't think they'd break my item of power?"

"The Circle's been trying to pacify the Order for decades. They prefer permanent solutions. And definitely wear traditional robes."

"I don't have any."

"Tom'll whip up something tout de suite."

Roland begged her, "Can we please talk about something else?"

"I yield the floor to my distinguished colleague from Mars."

"Holy Crap! You should've warned me about Gwynn. I would have been a lot nicer to her the last time I saw her had I known how attractive she’d turn out."

"Please no. You have no idea how much more civil she became after you called her a castrating harpy. And stay away from her. She's not your type."

He snorted derisively. "Is she anyone's type? Then again I'd let her whip me with that tongue of hers all day long if she would just let me …," Rhea pushed one finger deep into his side. “Errr, ack.”

"Oh sorry does that rib still hurt?"

"I was just going to say sing to her, besides,” Rhea’s hand poised to strike like a viper. Roland noticed but said what he wanted anyway, “You can't put a bag over someone's personality."

She relaxed and smiled, "She's changed and, before you sneer, for the better."

His eyebrows began to dance suggestively. "Speaking of hot young things. What did you do with that kid, Fed? You were gone for a while. I'd say just long enough for a quick but thorough …"

She yelped over his last word, “Don’t you dare! He just turned 16."

"He’d be grateful."

Rhea dismissed him, “Don’t be obscene. If you had been 21 to my 16, my father would have chemically castrated you.”

Laughing, Roland went on, "Hey, I liked him, fit right in, but you should have a plan for dealing with him."

"I'm off the hook, his master is taking him away. I'm sure his crush will fade."

"Mine still hasn't." He yanked her into a long passionate kiss. “Forget Vergil and have breakfast with me instead.”
“Not a good idea.” His hands slipped under her shirt and began to actively move around.

She breathlessly said, “Then again… Let’s get out of here.”

But they did not move and instead went back to kissing oblivious to the man who strolled up to their table. When it became clear they would not take notice, he kicked the table causing all dishes to rattle noisily.

When even that had no effect, the man spoke, "Forgive me for intruding, but I need to speak with you Roland."

They both looked up, surprised at the man. Instantly enraged, Roland jumped up with his undrawn saber in hand. "I have nothing to say to you Sidjak!"

Sidjak put up his hands and gently spoke, "Peace brother. The only dueling I hope to do with you in the future is at the open mic poetry slam tomorrow night. I must explain myself and the true nature of your situation. A short private talk will do."

"I will not be alone with you. Anything you have to say to me I trust Rhea to hear.”

The middle aged man, looked at Rhea, studying her. Then he shrugged. "As you wish." He dropped himself grunting with displeasure into a sitting position. “Still a bit wobbly.”

Roland sat very upright opposite him, his sword across his lap.

Smirking, the older man began, "I didn't even realize you were in trouble until a few minutes ago when Tomoe messaged me demanding to know a great many things. Don't worry about your meeting with the Circle. I spoke to Aldous. You will not be rebuked.

I apologize for my campaign of terror but I had to make sure you had precisely the right temperament. And I might have gotten slightly carried away during our fight. I was having the time of my life right up until you knocked me unconscious with that tree trunk. Ouch. That actually hurt.

The truth is I'm a sort of assistant and agent for one of the Circle, Aldous. I would like to present you as a candidate to replace me. Basically, I'm asking if you would like to roam about the galaxy performing odd, and occasionally unsavory jobs that he doesn't want to waste his time doing. It has some rewards. Aldous is generous and you'll have his ear. How about it?"

All Roland said was, "Huh."

Sidjak sat there quietly until he finally seemed to lose patience. "Is that all the answer I am to receive? I need to hear a real response. We still must both meet with the Circle over our dance. And I need to have a complete story to present. Do you have any questions?"

Roland just sat there staring at his former opponent mutely. Rhea spoke up for him, "I have several. Why do you wish to be replaced? Is it something you hate?"

"No, it fills my time well, but I have a natural apprentice, a son. I can’t gallivant about the galaxy anymore. I must focus on him and his training."

"Why not raise him to take your place?"

He emitted a short wry laugh. "His talents are in very different areas. I’ve neglected him too much. I must make him my focus, to help him find his way."
She continued to question him, "You considered Tomoe as well. Why didn't you approach her?"

"I considered more than just her. Of the few who can handle themselves in a fight, most are too uncontrolled, or disobedient. Tomoe's skills surpass mine and yours," he pointed to Roland, "but her temperament is all wrong, too challenging and inquisitive. No, Aldous needs someone ungoadable, does what he’s told and doesn't ask why. You are my first choice."

Instantly upset, Rhea snapped at the older mage, "What you did was grotesque. What makes you think Aldous needs or wants your opinion on your replacement?"

Sidjak argued back, "Aldous personally recruited me after my own initiation. To suddenly leave him in a lurch would be the height of rudeness."

Rising to her feet and gesturing angrily at Sidjak, Rhea continued, "One of you could have been maimed or even killed! I can't believe ..."

Roland cut off her tirade by pulling her back into the pillow. After she fell gracelessly next to him with a grunt, he said without hesitating, "Give me an hour to think about it. I'll message you."

Looking satisfied, Sidjak nodded once and answered, "Good enough. I'll be at Optima’s party if you wish to speak more."

Slack jawed, Roland gave Sidjak a look of pure disbelief. Sidjak looked embarrassment as he answered, "Tomoe insisted on keeping me under her heel until everything is settled between us. And one simply does not argue with a Magess like that without great trepidation."

"And by the way Roland, I held back with you." He walked away chuckling.

Roland yelled after him unconvincingly, "So did I!" He pointed at Sidjak’s retreating form. "Can you believe that psycho?"

Looking abashed, Rhea said, “Apparently I worried and upset us for nothing. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. Now I know you still care.” He took her hand and began kissing the inside of her wrist and up her arm.

Nervously, she asked, “You’re going to accept aren’t you?”

He stopped his ministrations to reply, “Yup, I'll be Aldous’ cabana boy if he wants me. What else am I going to do? I’m not like you or Optima. I despise research. I’m not like Tom. The idea of settling down on some god forsaken colony world being there benign protector makes me want to cry."

"Why didn't you just tell him?"

"Let him stew for a while."

Rhea frowned, and whispered, “I shouldn't tell you but ... You need to know, Aldous is dying. My father thinks he only has a year, two at most, left.”

Roland sat perfectly still considering. With a shrug, he said, “Well then he’ll probably need more help. And it’ll hold me over until I figure out something else to do with my life.”

Rhea tilted her head to the side smiling. "Where were we?"
"You were about to tell me you never got over me, then how much you miss me and desperately want me back."

She shook her head no. "You made me miserable. When I wasn't boring you, I was yelling at you. And don't get me started about your appalling taste in everything."

The comments seemed to roll off him without effect. "My taste in woman is perfect." He began kissing her neck until she moaned in pleasure and melted into him. He broke away to say, "I still love you."

Easily she said back, "I love you too. But we are beyond done… after tonight."

He answered her in between kisses. "We'll see. Let's go snuggle and then pillow talk until I get bored and want to crash Optima's party."

"Technically you can't crash a party you've been invited to."

They got up, each slipping their arm around the other.

"The kid was right. You overthink everything."

Rhea happily pleaded, "I do not. Now amuse me. Do my father again."

They started to walk toward the exit.

Perfectly mimicking Coeus' calm and relaxed voice again Roland said, "Optima please stop taking things apart you can't put back together… While this was cute at seven Roland, it is less so at fourteen, put your pants back. … Tomoe put that goose back where you found it. We do not harvest meat from public parks."

They both erupted with laughter that faded as they walked through the exit.

I turned away from my spying. With a candy bar in each hand I said, "Trajan, close connection."

I stuffed my face with one bar, and said with a full mouth, "And Trajan …" I trailed off in thought. The holo-daemon walked out and stood glaring at me. With arms on its hips, it demanded, "You know I'm too busy to hang on your commands."

"Delete this entire session and all the logs you have to rat me out to Hera the moment you think I'm not watching."

It looked annoyed as the images disappeared, leaving behind an empty wall.

With a sigh, I frowned sad. I said to myself as I looked at my right hand, "At least I'll always have you."

EOF

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Galen came back to himself. He remembered why he preferred to avoid technomage parties. They always started as manic affairs, filled with art, music, information exchange and intense camaraderie, but then typically de-evolved into fights or drunken debauchery, usually both.
As for Rhea, he did not remember her but he remembered her presentation. Elric had insisted Galen watched all presentations when he was young. No doubt to help him prepare for his own initiation. Hers was infamous, in his mind anyway, because it was the only one Elric had ever commented on.

A young Galen sat next to Elric in an amphitheater fashioned of ancient looking gray stone. Pillars rose into the sky, seemingly challenging it to fall. The stage, also made of stone, was bare except for a woman in a long green coat. She stared downward as she left the stage with a middle-aged man, who patted her on the shoulder with a smile betraying his deep well of pride. A few in the audience clapped enthusiastically, one even standing up as he did, but most were silently disapproving or murmuring discontentedly.

The lone figure strode onto the stage clapping with diplomatic restraint. He stopped in the middle of the stage.

He addressed the audience with an old authority. “Thank you. That was complex and unique. And now, will the next initiate please step forward?”

Galen looked at Elric, who had been silently sitting next to him, his brow furrowed with what Galen assumed was concentrated disapproval.

Gravely, Elric commanded, “That is an example of what not to do. Keep this in mind when your time comes. Do you understand why?” Elric turned to hard look at him.

Galen’s judgment was sure and quick, “It was lewd and it insulted Wierdan. Why didn’t Kell denounce it?”

Elric’s brow contracted further. “You do not understand.” He stopped for a few beats to let his disapproval sink into the shocked and mortified Galen. He continued, “It was unique and a well constructed illusion but it failed and violated our Code, specifically Secrecy. Her presentation revealed too much of herself. And in revealing part of her secret self, she made herself vulnerable to everyone in this arena. This was foolish. While a few were deserving of such trust, most were not and all she did was feed their prejudice. How does this apply to you?”

Desperately, Galen’s mind raced trying to find the answer Elric sought. He did not want to let him down a second time.

Swallowing hard, Galen spoke without much certainty, “I should … be careful with how I reveal myself?”

Elric gave him relief by saying, "Always think first of your audience. Study them, then only reveal what you must."

Galen slowly nodded in agreement unsure of himself. Elric turned to watch the next presentation. Galen spent the rest of his time lost in the lesson he had learned.

Yes, Galen took that lesson very much to heart, too much so. He took it to its logical extreme and chose to never reveal his heart to anyone, even those he loved and trusted. But that was not what Elric had meant. The lesson was not, never reveal yourself, but rather only reveal yourself to those who deserve your trust.
For the thousandth time, regret filled his heart. Regret that he never told Isabelle how deep his love actually went. His intellect told him that he showed her with his actions and she knew, but his heart would not forgive him. And now who was there to love? No one.

A whispered correction from somewhere inside said the name, Dureena. With sadness, he wondered if in ten years he'd be sitting on some other starship regretting her. For, the universe, no doubt, would have some sick fate in store for her if he chose to trust her. No, with sad certainty, Galen decided. It was best to live the life he had chosen one way ... alone. Shaking his head to clear it of useless dreams, he returned his focus on Fed’s memory sphere.

*First line from a poem by Walt Whitman about the death of Abraham Lincoln

**Lyrics from Jonathan Coulton’s excellent Christmas ballad- “Chiron Beta Prime” (http://www.jonathancoulton.com) Distributed under the creative commons license.
The Ham Sandwich

8 The Ham Sandwich

Aboard the Excalibur - Captain Gideon's Quarters

“I’ll give you a choice- choking to death on a ham sandwich or breaking your neck from slipping in the shower,” Fed offered as he played with the top card of the deck in his hands.

Gideon analyzed the man in front of him. The technomage seemed more fool than anything. Although a threatening one. Galen had called him friend. Gideon doubted he would be so off. A bluff. Match the bet then. Show his strength. He pulled out the PPG he had on his lap and placed it on the spades Fed had dealt. With his finger on the trigger it pointed toward Fed's chest. The draw didn't seem to get a reaction out of him, still the same smile. Gideon waited silently, guessing Fed would break first.

The smile reversed. Fed broke first. "You think that would stop me?" Fed snapped his fingers as if he had a sudden idea. "Or maybe you think Galen will see and save you… You do know Galen spies on you all the time right? There is a probe right there." He pointed to the center of the ceiling next to the cabin’s brightest light fixture. “Lucky for me Galen is using probes built by my old teacher. I know exactly how to make it look like you are taking a well deserved nap.” A prick of irritation at the games technomages loved to play stung Gideon. Most likely his quarters weren’t the only place Galen spied on. No wonder he always seemed to know what was going on. Gideon made a mental note to have security scan every surface of the ship.

Fed’s attempt to manipulate Gideon’s feelings, to sow mistrust of Galen did not escape his notice either. Gideon refused to take the bait. “It’s how he shows his love.” A smile flickered across Fed’s face as he nodded his head in agreement. Flexing his jaw muscle, Gideon moved the game along. “Honestly, I don't care for either of your options. I'd rather have the truth. You can start by telling me what these Spades,” Gideon tapped the each card in turn, "are doing on Mars.”

Fed simply answered, "No."

Only one option left. Gideon called Fed’s bluff. "Then I guess I'll take the sandwich option. The ham onboard is almost palatable."

They studied each other until suddenly Fed flashed a conciliatory smile. "How did you know I was bluffing?"

"After two years of traveling with Galen, I've had too much experience with how technomages operate. You guys love making a scene when you're not hiding from everyone.”

Fed looked disappointed. “I should have thought of that.”

Gideon explained further, “Galen has lied to me, withheld vital information, hijacked my ship. Hell, he’s even knocked me out twice so he could do what he wanted. But, the truth about him is when push comes to shove he always does what he thinks is right, and anyone he considers a friend is the same way. Galen told me you were his friend. Of course, if he was wrong ... " Gideon pulled the PPG back toward himself and eased his finger off the trigger.
"That was careless of Galen, although it sounds like he's made our Order very proud while serving you. By the way you might want to check the charge before putting that away." For someone who just lost a game, Gideon reflected, Fed sounded too pleased. Frowning, he checked the power pack on his PPG. No lights- dead. He threw it back onto the table in disgust with himself for not checking the obvious before relying on it for defense.

"The ones under your pillow and in your sock drawer are also discharged." Fed beamed at the captain. Even though he just lost his hand, Gideon saw the mage would keep playing.


Fed started, "So … what do you want Captain?" Fed caught himself, laughed once, and clarified, "I mean what do you hope to find on Mars?"

"You want to know what I want. I want justice for my dead shipmates. I want to go public with what really happened to the Cerberus and expose the parts of EarthForce that are involved. For that I need irrefutable evidence. But I'm not going to throw anyone else under a bus to get it. If you really need Galen that badly, look I’ll meet you half way. Stop with the technomage bullshit. Tell me what you know and I’ll do my best to help you."

To Gideon, Fed's face shifted through a lot of different emotions. Compared to Galen’s steady presence, this guy acted like puzzle pieces tumbling out of a box. If he could keep him talking he’d be able to grab enough pieces to build a picture of what was happening on Mars. So if he had to, he could go alone.

An offer flowed out of Fed. "Justice of a sort I can do, but leave Galen out of it."

"Why?" snapped Gideon.

"This isn't his fight Captain, this is yours. You have no idea what you’re dragging him into."

Unmoved Gideon said, "Galen can take care of himself. Besides, aren’t you doing the same thing to him.” Gideon tapped the Queen of Hearts on the table between them.

Fed touched his cheek as if Gideon had just smacked him. “I’m asking to borrow a cup of his sugar, but you’re asking him to cater your blood wedding.”

The hard edged analogy made Gideon snap to attention. Something bad was happening on Mars. He leaned forward, elbows on the table. This one knew a lot. Gideon’s gut told him to dig. "Look, Galen’s made Mars his …"

Fed talked over Gideon, "Fight?! Not exactly. He’s only involved because of you. And he’s a hero, who follows the hero’s code- no sex, no drugs, no wine, no women, no relief, just a relentless, obsessive focus on doing good. If he were a machine I wouldn't worry, but he's not. He's going to make mistakes. People always do when they are stretched thin and stressed. And Galen is never not stressed and you are stretching him thin. Galen only joined you to help find the cure not to go to Mars."

The words rang true to Gideon. His guilt reared up inside. The lingering guilt that he lived after everyone died on the Cerberus and now guilt over dragging Galen off on his own private quest. He stared at the cards in front of him. There were 4 spades- the King, Queen, Jack and Two. That must mean four technomages were currently on Mars. He wondered if the Galen, the Ace, knew. Considering how hard Fed pushed Gideon to not tell, probably not, which meant there was more to learn. “What did you mean you could give me justice of a sort?”
“No. Not until you promise me you will not involve Galen further, nor say anything to anyone about our conversation.”

Now that he had been fed some information he wanted more. Gideon doubled down. "I'll keep what you say here in confidence.”

Fed let out a big breath. "We're going to shut down the facility that made the ship you are investigating."

"What do you mean shut down?"

With puffed out cheeks, Fed blew out the word. "POOF."

Gideon shook his head in disbelief. "That would kill hundreds of people."

"We’ve made certain only the cabal, those in charge of the various little black projects and some guards will be present, when it all goes. They are the ones responsible for creating the shadow hybrid vessel that destroyed the Cerberus and the cover-up that followed."

"I want them to be tried in court not killed," Gideon argued.

Fed shook his head. "It is the only reliable way to stop them."

Understanding dawned on Gideon. "That's why you don't want Galen to know."

Fed’s lips thinned out in annoyance. "The people in charge are not boy scouts. They don't spend there weekends reading to orphans and ladling soup at the local homeless shelter. They are complete sociopaths and are up to their necks in assassinations and other unmentionable things. I can give you all sorts of evidence, including vids but none of it would be admissible to a court of law. Not that it matters. The cabal…they’re not the sort you can arrest and bring to trial. They slip between your fingers like water. They kill anyone and everyone who might betray them or sniffs around too close. They would sooner kill you or their own members then let you have your public accounting. I think you know that already, from your dealings with them."

Stunned, Gideon asked, "How do you know … ?" Fed flicks his wrist at the screen. Gideon’s personal log, began to play in the middle of a sentence …

… Galen managed to fly the thing. That’s how we escaped Scorpio 772A. We were like bats out of hell. He could control it perfectly. When I asked how, he said he freed it and it wanted to leave. When I demanded we take it back to earth, he knocked me out, again. When I woke up. I found Galen had deleted all my vids of the hyrid and my conversation with Remil. He gave some excuses—he’s not prepared, that it’d make me a target too soon. Bullshit. All this time … all his tricks … It was all from the Shadows. I confronted him about what Remil told me. He didn’t deny it. He just stood there like a statue. That must be why he could control the hybrid. I can’t trust him anymore. Not until he lets me in. I threw him off the ship and told him not to come back unless he had a cure in hand…

With a whistle, Fed said, “Wooh, heavy stuff. Of course you guys must have kissed and made up since he’s here.”

So much for support’s assurances that his private logs were uncrackable. Gideon gave Fed a hard
look wondering if he acted the fool to throw others off, to make them underestimate him. With Remil it was easy to see something ugly motivated him when he offered to bring him in to, maybe the cabal this Fed described. But what motivated this Fed in front of him to do all this, he could not be sure. He glanced at the Queen of Hearts. That was part of it. But it seemed deeper, he spoke of Galen with real respect, like all this was about doing Galen some huge favor.

Gideon kept digging. “Funny that suddenly you want to help. Galen said the rest of you did nothing during the last war, and you didn’t want him to do a thing about the plague.”

With his fingers, Fed combed his hair, practically pulling on it. Gideon figured he hadn’t prepared for this argument. Fed said, "Plenty of us cared a lot but we had our own fires to put out. I think I got the piece that will sway you. The plague was given to the Drakh by humans."

"What?" said Gideon completely caught off guard.

"Oh don’t get me wrong. It was created by the Shadows originally but it was actually found inside a buried Shadow vessel on Mars decades ago by EarthForce. Special Weapons hid it. Eventually, the Shadows came looking for it, the cabal I mentioned, struck a deal with them. They provided the Shadows with whatever they wanted in exchange for …support. They were allowed to keep the virus. They’ve been creating their own strains tailored to kill every major species, including humans, but this is key, they’ve been sitting on a cure all along. Your entire mission has been a fool's errand. And they will probably be unhappy that you managed to do the impossible. Our Order is slowly returning to our place in the galaxy. I’m inviting you to join us. Do we have a deal?"

Stunned, Gideon leant back in his chair. Considering how hard Galen worked to get the cure they carried, he must not have known. Instead of answering, he countered with another question. "Why doesn't Galen know about this?"

Fed tugged on his hair in frustration. “Galen is … not a good team player. Stop avoiding the decision and answer me.”

This confirmed what he knew, that Galen was on the outs with his own people. It made sense that they would leave him out of the loop. The unfortunate truth Gideon had to acknowledge was this conversation revealed in a few minutes more information than Galen, Remil or anyone had shared with him in two years. That disturbed him more than he cared to admit. He threw his last chip on the table. “All I have is your word. I need to see real proof before I agree to violence as the answer.”

“Fair enough. But don’t say I didn’t warn you. You met a Colonel Remil right?”

Gideon’s stomach twisted. “Yes, he’s the one who tried to recruit me.” A flash and they were no longer in Gideon’s cabin but witnesses hovering in a corner of a large cargo airlock…

Two marines stood in the sealed airlock blocking most of the view of a cage. One soldier crouched down and poked awake the Minbari in a cage. The alien lept for the marine and rattled the bars when he missed.

“Fucking bonehead doesn’t know when he’s dead.” The corporal and sergeant laughed together.

They both snapped to attention when the airlock hissed open. “Atten-hut!” yelled the sergeant as a Colonel marched in. Remil.
“At ease.” He handed each ground pounder a vile. The Minbari prisoner stopped shaking his cage.

The two marines hesitated.

“Steady as she goes gentleman. I’m not going to let my men take risks I’m not willing to share.” The marines injected themselves in the neck. The Colonel cracked open a canister. He planted it by the cage. A hissing steam came out of it. The Minbari backed into the corner but there was no possible escape. It started with convulsions, and ended with blood pouring out of his mouth.

The corporal and sergeant high-fived each other, as loud hissing recycled the air. A small woman in a lab coat came in, unlocked the cage, and examined the Minbari. The woman’s head sagged a bit, before she climbed to her feet and looked at the Colonel. “Dead.”

“Good. Thank you Professor.”

…Gideon blinked to find himself back in his quarters.

Fed asked, “Enough? Or are you going to sit there while I show you vid after vid of how the Special Weapons Division has been spending your tax dollars.”

A mixture of horror, hatred and resolve mingled in his chest. Gideon thought about the thousands of people who had already died from the secondary effects of the plague. They had to be stopped. Fed held out his hand across the table. At first Gideon didn’t understand, then it dawned on him Fed wanted to shake hands, to seal the deal. He stared at Fed’s hand, and the cards under it. Fed had compared himself to the King of Hearts. Add the King of Spades, that’s a pair of kings, and that beats an Ace.

A small part of him apologized to Galen as he grasped Fed’s hand, "I’m in, how will this work."

"Just go to MarsPort. You will be contacted. You will know it's them because they will use my name. About what you will say to Galen."

Gideon held up a hand to stop him. "I can tell you right now Galen would never believe me suddenly wanting to take a vacation even if I was at death's door. He knows me too well."

"How about a leave of absence because of an illness or death in the family? Your great aunt Cornelia always seems to be teetering on the edge."

"How did you?,” Gideon stopped himself, of course he’s also read his private messages. “I’m only close to my Mom and she better continue to remain healthy,” Gideon warned him.

Fed snapped his fingers. "I got it. You talk to the Captain of Babylon 5 a lot. She invited you to visit her after you return for a private celebration. You should accept. Galen gets uncomfortable with any conversation involving relationships."

Gideon shook his head no. "Here's an idea, I tell him the truth that I don’t need him."

Fed laughed. "Good one Captain. No. Keep it simple- a core of truth and the lies hidden in the details."

Great. Now he was mixed up in technomage scheming. This didn’t feel clean, but he knew the answer to give Fed, "Then, I’m going to tell him we talked, and I thought that he should go on your rescue mission. I will accept Elizabeth’s invitation. All true. But I’ll go Mars before going to her.”
“Perfect,” said Fed.

“I think I will need about a year of R&R after all of this is finished.” Gideon rubbed his tired eyes. Like he had just eaten a big fatty meal, Fed stretched out with a broad toothy grin. “If he pushes you, this is how you can lie to a technomage…”

Gideon studied the cards as Fed prattled on about focusing only on strong emotions, like rage and lust. He hadn’t noticed but Fed had slipped the King of Clubs under the King of Spades. For the first time he noticed all the spades on the table as a whole- the Ace, King, Queen, Jack and Two formed an wrap-around straight flush. Now that would be a great hand in any wild-card poker game. He looked up at the King of Hearts with a twang of regret. The technomages would do better working together than apart. Well, he thought, a pair of Kings will just have to do.

Recreation Room 1- Aboard the Excalibur Dec 23, 2269

Dureena intercepted Dr Sarah Chanmbers at the doorway to the celebration. Her hand rested on the small triangular blade on her belt. It’s warmth comforted her.

"Sarah! You finally made it out of Medlab."

Sarah smiled and confided in Dureena, “Galen worked through the night and helped me finish modifying the controller to work on your people's genome. It’s all done self-replicating. Whenever you're ready I can give it to you."

“Thank you. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

They walked over to the makeshift bar for Sarah to order. A plastic cup of some sort of wine plopped down in front of the women. Dureena would not have touched it, but the doctor took it up drank deeply.

Dureena smiled slightly. Her people had a chance, thanks to Sarah. No, this was all Galen’s doing, her inner desires pointed out to her.

She shook off the image of Galen in her mind, to ssay, "Max arranged for a transport to take me to Theta 49 from Earth. I'll come get it before then."

"What's between you and Max?"

Dureena made an annoyed sound, pulled out a tiny two edged blade from a hidden pocket and began twirling it absent mindingly disemboweling the air. "I saved his life voluntarily. So I would say we're almost friends. He's made it clear that he finds me acceptable company now and he's not nearly as much of a ..."

"Self-centered son of a bitch that we thought he was."

"Yes. He is an excellent dancer, that helps."

"I thought for a while that you and Galen were … getting closer."

Dureena doled out her response with slashes to the air. She stopped moving and got her anger under control. She had thought so to. “No, you are wrong,” and so was I, “He won't tell me the
truth about anything. It’s better if I just focus on helping my people.”

"Well, good luck,” said Sarah sipping her wine slowly now.

Leaning in close to the doctor, Dureena asked, “Max told me there was another technomage aboard. Is it true?”

Swallowing her wine, Sarah frowned and smiled at the same time, “He arrived injured. Calls himself Fed. He’s flamboyant, suave and he seems to enjoy being naked. He wanted something from Galen. But he looked very disappointed when Galen left Medlab.”

"He can join the club. Do you think this Fed would speak to me?”

"If you can find him, oh yes. I got the impression that all you'd have to do is bat your eyes at him.”

"I'm not familiar with that human idiom."

"Ah, you know ... act sexually interested.”

Dureena let out a slight grunt and took a harder stab at the bar top. Sarah pointed to the doorway nearly spilling her wine.

"That's him!” Dureena traced Fed’s easy stroll into the recreation room. He headed straight for the end of the bar not far from them.

The women listened in as the acting bartender approached him, “What’ll you have?”

“Grenadine, light rum, club soda with a twist of lime.”

The bartender stared at him and said, “I don’t have any of that, madam.”

Fed smiled, “Then how about a little visit from Uncle Jack?” An unlabeled plastic jug with a dirty glass landed in front of him. Fed filled it to the brim, and closed his eyes.

"Are you sure he's a technomage?” asked Dureena.

"I know right, he looks more like a gay pirate but he had the same internal implants as Galen.”

Max Eilerson walked past Sarah and grabbed Dureena by the elbow. With a datapad out of his pocket, he tugged her along, talking fast. "Let's go talk to him, maybe he'll tell us what the symbols mean.”

They stopped behind Fed. He didn’t react to the tapping of their toes, nor clearing of throats. Dureena lost patience and reached for him.

Fed twirled around and pointed at Dureena, "If you're Beauty (he bowed his head to Dureena), then you must be the Beast (he pointed at Max). How can I help you? Nice sword by the way.”

"It’s why we've come to see you,” said Dureena.

Max began, "Dureena, Galen and I found it. These symbols appeared suspended in the air when we got near it. Galen clearly knew what it meant but he won't tell us.”

Max offered Fed his datapad. Fed looked at it as if Max had just offered him a plate of writhing insects. Fed brushed it back at Max.
"I am a representative of IPX, and I can offer you a substantial commission if you can tell us what it says or anything about this sword that proves useful."

Fed began to snicker.

Irritated Max said, "Did I say something funny? Judging by the state of your clothes you could use the money."

Fed stopped snickering and examined himself. He looked squarely at Max. "I see your point." Fed pointed at the ceiling. Dureena and Max followed his gesture, but they saw nothing. When they looked back down, his clothes had become pristine, even changing color to a burnt orange, the trim now blue silk. "I was laughing because your offer was like … my right hand giving my left hand a credit chit. Now if you could offer me a whole new hand." Fed waved at Max with his left gloved hand.

Max bargained, "Is there anything I can give you in return for information?"

His eyebrows danced as Fed examined Dureena up and down. "Yes, you can go away and leave Dureena Nafeel and I alone."

"Go ahead Max, I'll let you know if he says anything useful, which I doubt." Throwing a dirty look at Fed, Max complied.

Without waiting for a yes, Fed took her hand and tried to lead her to the dance floor. "How about a dance first?"

Feeling the weight of every dagger she had concealed on her body, Dureena wondered how many she could stick in this technomage before he could stop her. She settled for a simple, "No," and took control of her hand back.

Unbothered Fed let go. "This ship is full of tough nuts. You know he likes you," Fed pointed after Max, who had returned to studying his datapad. Dureena thumbed the edge of her triangle blade, "but you obviously don’t like him that way. Your heart belongs to another, eh?"

Dureena stopped him, "What is wrong with you? I come here seeking information and all you do is go on about unimportant things."

Shaking his head no, Fed said, "That’s where you’re wrong. Love is the most important thing in the universe. If we have it, we are happy, can do anything and endure everything. Without it, we suffer. Take Galen for example …" Dureena sucked in a sudden breath. Noticing immediately, Fed stopped mid sentence and simply ended with an, Oh. As Fed studied her with a sort of dawning relief, Dureena wanted to run and hide. But she needed answers. Focusing on her subject, she gripped the leather strip she had wrapped around one edge to make a handle.

She closed her eyes and offered, "I can not offer you money or anything of value for your information. All I have is myself. Tell me what you know about it and I will be grateful and dance with you." She looked away to fight the instinct to stab him.

Silence filled the air between them. Looking back at Fed, Dureena felt as if she was looking at a new person. The coy flirting look had vanished. His narrowed eyes glistened, withdrawn behind sadness directed at her. "No that would be the last thing I want. You were a slave weren’t you?"

He whispered the last part.

Dureena couldn’t speak from the rage. Fed reached out and moved the concealing leather strips wrapped about her wrist. His touch, halfway between a lover’s and a mother’s, revealed the healed
scars where her owners had chained her so they could do what they wanted.

Fed downed the glass of Uncle Jack. “I didn’t realize soon enough. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have played with you.”

The shock of his apology snapped Dureena out of her rage. Not quite calm, Dureena said, “You can’t have it.”

“I never said I wanted it. It suits you.” Fed refilled his glass.

"Galen did and he wouldn't tell me why or what is special about it. He was quite insulting when I wouldn't give it to him. He said a 'backwater savage has no business with it's like.' Then he tried to take it from me. But I couldn't let him have it, it feels like it has always belonged to me."

"Galen said that? You must have caught him on an off day. Then again, he never was very good with people. May I see it?" asked Fed with his hand out.

Dureena stood still.

"Please? I promise to give it back."

"What do you want in return?" asked Dureena.

"Nothing. I'm making up for Galen's rudeness."

Dureena handed him the blade and Fed gently placed it in the crook of his left arm. He stared at it for a minute then closed his eyes and began to run his right hand around and around the perimeter of it.

"I can see why Galen was interested in this. It's full of nano-circuitry. It’s very old, first one’s level. I don’t know which one. These things can be dangerous. It’s … dormant I think. That’s probably why Galen wanted it. That is all I can tell you about it."

Dureena said, "That's it? I thought technomages knew about everything."

Fed smiled wistfully, "No, we just like to give that impression. You will have to find your answer from Galen, maybe if you ask him again …”

“No.” She held out her hand, silently asking for it back.

With Fed still holding the sword, Dureena could see him considering whether to give it back to her. He opened his mouth to say something, then shut it. Then he did it again. Anger began to build in Dureena again. He shoved it back at her.

“The symbols,” Fed waved his hand and the symbols appeared between them. "I was never diligent with my ancient runic studies, that was more Galen's thing. But this last rune I definitely recognize. It means extinction. You'll have to ask Galen to reconsider and tell you the rest. Say what are you doing after we reach Earth?"

"I will be hurrying to Theta 49 to cure what's left of my people of the plague. Interestingly I thought my people extinct until recently. If you are about to ask me to accompany you the answer is no."

"That's too bad because I think Galen will be coming with me." His words lingered in her mind as she walked away.
The self-rebuke came like a wave pulling Fed down into himself, Idiot is too kind a word for me, hitting on a slave who spent how many years getting… He never could say that last word. It filled him with too much fury. Instead thoughts of his early apprenticeship with Hera floved. She never sheltered him from the ugliness of life. Not when she dragged him through slums where he learned exactly what happened to young attractive slaves, and not when it came time to decide what to do about what they saw. All the years in hiding, he had not forgotten that lesson. Fed loved and loathed their field trips, as she called them. Loved the freedom, the raw excitement, loathed the parade of wretchedness. Herazade would pull him along like the ghost of Christmas future, except he was more like Bob Cratchit. Fed remembered his first real field trip with Hera on Proxima, so many years before his initiation…

Herazade lead Fed back to her vast office. With the lights on full, the clash of colors of the tapestries on the walls with the geometric patterned carpets welcomed them. Herazade hurried for the red couch by her desk. Much slower, Fed closed the door behind them. As she crossed the room, her illusions peeled off her like sheets of paper floating off in the wind. Her coiffed hair and makeup went first, replaced by plain chin length black hair and wrinkles. The bright blue new saree became a well worn, neck to ankle one piece jumpsuit with silver woven into it. Her sandals vanished and she made the last few steps bare footed before dropping onto the overstuffed red couch with a sigh. With her head back, eyes closed, she propped her feet up on the companion ottoman.

“Get me a glass of wine. Syrah.” She always asked for the same thing when she got home. This time Fed had not met her at the door, he had gone with her. He didn’t obey. Instead Fed planted himself on the ottoman facing her.

“Why did you take me with you?”

“Since you’re old enough to question me constantly about everything, I thought you’re old enough to see what all the grueling training is for.”

“You said it’d be educational, that was … horrible.”

Her irritated grunt led to her head rising and fixing him with a stare. “Bad things happen all the time Fed. We just happen to witness it tonight.”

“So you knew that was going on?”

“No, I did not anticipate that. Now get my wine.” She pointed to the old wooden bar that stretched to the ceiling.

“What are you going to do to the man in your trunk?” Fed asked as he went to find the requested bottle. He filled a glass to the brim and sipped down the top inch.

“Have you been doing that every time!” Fed didn’t answer her. “Pour another glass and do not put your mouth on it this time.” Fed brought the two glasses offering her the untouched one. “Oh for God’s sake Fed, you’re 14, I’m not going to let you have that much.” She took his glass and threw it in the air, where it vanished with fiery smoke. Fed dropped back on the ottoman.
“Why aren’t you answering me Hera?”

“What would you do?” She stared at him through the glass. The red tint made her face look bloody to Fed.

“That chained up narn girl looked younger than me and he was…” Fed couldn’t finish the sentence then either.

“Brutally raping are the words you are looking for,” she said plainly.

“Ya I think if you hadn’t stopped me, I would’ve … cut his throat already.”

“Many would argue that is more immoral. That would make you worse than him.” Her glass, half full now, rotated back and forth by her fingers on the stem.

“I don’t care. Are you going to give him to the police? Please don’t Hera. He’ll get away with it if you do. They always do.”

This time she smiled at him through a clear, empty glass.

“Tonight’s lesson was supposed to be about how I conduct my charity work. I think instead it will be about how to dump a man in the dead sea with a millstone around his neck. And then maybe more about how to dispose of bodies in general.” Fed smiled as she patted him on the head.

“Is the girl going to be alright?”

“Can anyone be, after that? The shelter will give her a chance to heal, but emotional scars are hard to fix. I’m not sorry I took you. But I won’t force you to go again…”

Fed interrupted her, “No I want to go. I think I finally get it.”

…Dureena was not that girl, but this galaxy had too many like her. Every part of him wanted to go after Dureena, to kneel before her, and offer her, he wasn’t sure what. Money? No. He supposed- anything she wanted to make up for what the universe had put her through. His instincts said, she wants Galen. Hum, that he might be able to do. That fell in his area of expertise, perhaps his only one, considering how hard things went with Gideon. If Hera found out about that, she’d be furious at him for revealing so much to an outsider. Lucky she wasn’t around.

His smile returned as he turned back to the bar, took a large gulp of his drink and re-started his electron incantation. His mind travelled to Mars to find his target again. The militant impatience pulled him to the right place. In the spell he imposed a simplified empty version of the Excalibur bar. Fed injected his self image and invited his target to join. “Sorry about that. The women here just can’t keep their hands off of me.”

The tall muscular man, cradling a giant rifle, analyzed Fed. In fatigues and with his short blonde hair spiked straight up, he looked like he belonged in some sort of private army. The pseudo-soldier answered, “It must be difficult being you.”

Fed held up a silencing hand and said, “I have the patience of a saint and if that fails, I have the stamina of a …”

Tzakizak interrupted him, “Cut the crap Fed. What do you want?”
“You know how you’re always asking Hera for more help? I got you something nice.” Fed injected an image of Gideon standing next to the pair of them.

Tzak couldn’t hide the shock on his face. “Isn’t that the captain of the Excalibur? What are you doing with him?” He shouldered his rifle to indicate Gideon. “Aren’t you supposed to be on Vorlon trying to crack it open like a pinata?!”

“Things got complicated. I needed Galen. I tracked him to the Excalibur. And it’s a good thing I came. They’re headed to Mars. Gideon and Galen were going to have a staycation there with every day’s itinerary being investigate a certain cabal we both know well. I cut a deal with Gideon to break up their bromantic honeymoon. You need to wedge Gideon into our plans somehow.”

As Tzak’s stunned mouth fell open, furious words launched themselves toward Fed, “If only I would reach through this incantation to strangle you.” Tzak vibrated red-faced and with balled fists.

“Calm down. I got everything under control and worked out. I think I can peel Galen away, but not Gideon. He’s going and he’s getting himself involved. You can dovetail him into our plan or you can hand the cabal another weapon.”

“I could just let the cabal kill him for snooping?”

“Colonel Remil tried to recruit him. They see him as a potential ally.”

Tzak grunted. “Can he be trusted?”

“He’ll never side with them. He wants justice for the Cerberus, but I think I talked him down to revenge.”

“What does he know?”

“Not too much I hope. How to contact you. Nothing about the heist. I see why Galen is fascinated by him, he’s very perceptive and a gambler. He was a tough nut to crack. Be careful.”

“Does Herazade know about this?”

Fed shook his head no.

“Manipulating Galen and you’re leaving Hera clueless… I’m starting to warm to your ill-conceived plan.” Tzak tapped the magazine of his rifle in thought and talked to himself, “Worst case then he’ll be another able body I can throw at the cabal’s versions of us.”

Fed snapped at him, “I’m handing you a valuable ally not a tool!” Fed could feel Tzak’s pleasure at getting under his skin. He took a deep breath and refocused. “How many agents do they have now?”

“They’ve decanted more, nearly a hundred now, but none of them can hold a candle to us except for the few that are also telepaths.” Tzak went quiet.

Fed tapped his boot until he lost his patience. “Well?!”

"I’ll take him. And I’ll try to keep him in working order as long as it doesn’t jeopardize our mission. I can’t make promises, even with Gideon, we’re out numbered 5 to 100."

“4 to 100, Vergil can’t fight for shit.”
Tzak rolled his eyes at Fed’s correction. “He doesn’t need to. The plan can remain the same, Vergil will escort the professor and her baby-seeder. Sidjak, Ak-sana, I, and now Gideon will deal with the cabal and their ill-bred imitations. We’ve had complications as well. We’re going to have to move up the heist. The Professor just told us that the cabal is meeting earlier then expected and it looks like they are prepping the prime seeder for moving. Something has happened. She claimed to not know what.”

Worried Fed asked, “Can you get everything set in time?”

“We’ve been ready for a while.”

“Good. I think I know the reason for the cabal’s change in plans. The Excalibur is rushing a cure for the plague to Mars.”

Tzakizak shook his head knowingly. “Galen must have pulled another miraculous rabbit out of his hat and once again it jeopardizes the future of the Order.”

“This is a good thing Tzak. We have no idea where they stashed the human cure and people are already dying in droves.”

“We’ll see in a few days. If Galen shows up on Mars. I will kill him.” Tzak stroked his rifle.

“I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“So then you have a backup plan in case Galen sees through your manipulations.”

Of course, Fed didn’t and Tzak saw that. “You must be so lost without Hera pulling your strings.”

“Ya, I’m pretty much winging it.” The incantation shifted, replaced by the blackness of deep space. A hint of monsters- giants, dragons, leviathans circled about just out of sight in the darkness. Fed stood chest to chest, eye to eye with the older technomage. “If you so much as hurt a hair on his head, I’m drop kicking you into the nearest supernova.”

The response was not what Fed hoped it would be. A harsh laugh reverberated from Tzak at Fed. "Galen doesn't have a hair on his head. And if he makes it here, it will be over your dead body. So I have nothing to fear from you Federico. Now, tell me more about Gideon.”

“Don’t worry you’ll love him. He pulled a PPG on me.”

Over their shared link Fed delivered all the files he collected on Gideon from the Excalibur systems- his service record, his official ship’s and private logs. The easy agreement from Tzak, compared to Gideon, had not surprised Fed. He knew Tzak would love to play soldier with a real live one. Still a cold feeling enveloped Fed’s chest. Maybe the Circle’s made a mistake. Maybe they’re underestimating the cabal’s strength or cunning. What if their inside-man, woman he corrected himself, the Professor, was setting them up. What if the universe is directing Galen to Mars for a reason and what if everything will fall apart when Fed pulls him away? Fed shook himself out of his doubts. No it was too late. Except he should have a backup plan. Dureena’s face popped to mind. If she mattered to him, she might work to fill that role.

They wrapped up the exchange of information. When he ended the spell, Fed dropped his head to the bar top and rested his forehead on the uncomfortable cold metal surface. It felt good to be done and to just relax. To think of nothing, like he used to do for hours when he was young.

A message appeared in Fed’s mind from Galen.
Fed almost jumped out of his seat. He stopped the bartender as he sauntered by with a big platter.

“I’m going to need one of those,” Fed pulled off the top ham sandwich.
Interlude

Chapter Summary

Part 1 and 2 of 3.

Chapter Notes

And now for a step back. In the story's timeline, these interludes are set before the Specter at the Banquet chapter.

9 Interlude

Part 1 - Falling Apart

Only one word came to Gideon’s mind as he read the latest Ranger reports- stagnation. No promising leads in weeks. The cure looked impossibly far away. It was hard not to despair. The Captain expected, or rather desperately hoped Galen would have a suggestion. But only stony silence flowed from the mage standing behind him. Gideon wondered why Galen didn’t at least make some witty comment about the sad state of their mission. He turned to ask Galen for ideas only to meet a sort of sadness he’d never seen on Galen before.

“What's wrong?” Gideon demanded.

Galen answered, “It will be here soon enough.”

Gideon ordered, “Situation report Lt. Matheson.”

“Scanners show clear. All boards green.”

The Captain looked at Galen expectantly. “Well?”

He cocked his head to the side and said, "You will detect it...." He stopped speaking for a moment. Everyone shifted at their station as Galen said with a over-dramatic sweep of his hand toward the front screen, "Now."

Lt Matheson said, "Long distance scanner is picking up… It doesn't match a known silhouette. It's traveling perpendicular to our trajectory."

"Visual display."

The front screen changed to show the unknown craft. And there it was, black as the space behind it, more spider than spaceship. The shadow-like ship that had flown through Gideon’s nightmares
to most nights was real, and close. The same ship that destroyed the Cerberus, killed the entire crew, except for the very young Ensign Gideon. Gideon broke into a cold sweat, feeling the all too familiar fear and rage creeping up his spine. He stood and walked toward the screen as if he could confront it through the display.

Without a second thought, Gideon snapped out the order, "Change course, match unknown vessel."

Matheson answered, "Matching course and speed. Sir it’s faster than us. We’ll lose it eventually."

“Do your best.”

Gideon turned away from the screen to find Galen staring at him, studying him with a singular intensity. Gideon wondered if Galen would help him in this, something not part of their mission to find the cure for Earth.

Answering the unasked question, Galen sighed in resignation and said, "I will guide you, when the time arises."

#

Hours later, perched on the edge of his captain's chair with Galen standing at his side, Gideon stared at the tiny black dot of the receding ship as the Excalibur entered normal space far behind it.

Gideon asked, "Where are we?"

Matheson answered, "Scorpius 772. Singleton, three rocky, one gaseous, no habitable planets. Claimed by IPX 2255. The ship just went off scanner. It was heading into the inner system when we lost it. We can extrapolate a course Sir."

Matheson waited for the explicit order the Captain eagerly gave, "Scan the system while you take us in..."

Matheson interrupted the Captain with new information, "Multiple contacts on a direct intercept course... Four ships, matching Thunderbolt silhouette... They are broadcasting friendly, Sir."

The Captain did not hesitate, "Take us in." He turned to Galen seeking anything the ever-silent technomage might willingly share. Galen had reverted to his detached but mildly curious self. This all too familiar expression gave the Captain some comfort.

Lt. Matheson said, "Incoming message, piping it to speakers."

A calm crisp voice spoke, "Excalibur, this is Lt. Thorne. You are about to enter restricted EarthForce space. You will turn around immediately and leave the system or we will engage. Excalibur this ..."

Matheson turned down the message and said, "Message is repeating. Their weapons just went hot."

Gideon keyed the counsel next to him to send a response, "Lt. Thorne, this is Captain Gideon. We are authorized, with all clearances, by EarthGov and the Interstellar Alliance to go anywhere mission critical. Check your records and stand down."

Their answer came in the form of a salvo of rockets fired by the lead fighter in the direction of the Excalibur.

Matheson said, "Incoming fire, projected wide, 10 clicks off starboard side."
A warning shot, thought Gideon. They escalated it, even though, the Excalibur could easily dispatch them. The pilots in those ships knew this as well as he, which meant they were ordered to stand their ground, which meant there must be more here then just four fighters. He guessed a base. But unless he was willing to start killing EarthForce officers to make his way deeper into this system, Gideon needed another plan.

“How unbelievably rude and wasteful. It’s not like rockets grow on trees,” said Galen. The well-timed remark was all Gideon needed to decide on a course that would avoid pitting his crew against whatever this system concealed.

The Captain ordered, “All stop. Retrace our route and take us back into hyperspace.”

The order surprised the crew but they obeyed. Gideon rose and as he walked past Galen on his way from the bridge he whispered, “Walk with me.”

#

Side by side, Galen and Gideon walked silently through the halls and into the Captain’s quarters. No matter what, he had to follow that thing. Every part of him needed to find a clue about why his old crew had died. A plan formed in his mind, now he just need the technomage next to him to agree.

Once sealed in his quarters, Gideon walked over to his desk opened a drawer, pulled out his antique vid recorder. It was made to look more like jewelry, like what they used to call watches, with its thin leather band that fastened to his wrist. The mage watched him with interest but didn’t pry.

Gideon said, “My mother gave me this when I was promoted to my first deep space assignment on the Cerberus. She said she hoped I’d record some of the more interesting sights I saw. This’ll be the first time I use it. I can almost hear her voice in my head disapproving of what I have in mind.”

Still as a statue, Galen’s coolly answered, “You should listen to that voice.”

Sloughing off his uniform, Gideon walked over to a closet and pulled out a plain, brown leather, jacket. Ignoring Galen’s comment, Gideon continued, “I want you to take me in your ship. I assume it’s stealthy enough. There has got to be a base somewhere…”

Galen interrupted him, “I tracked the vessel going into some sort of facility on the light side of the innermost world. I will go and investigate this base, alone. I promise to return and show you what I discover.” As Galen spoke, Gideon continued to prepare. Pulling open a drawer of his desk, he found his PPG in a small holster. He shoved a clip into the back. Its charging up an answer to Galen’s refusal. Gideon bent down to strap it to his ankle.

Gideon snapped out his answer, “Not good enough. I’m going to order a survey of the local cluster. They can do that better without me and it will keep the Excalibur busy but near by. I’m going with you.”

Trying one more time, Galen spoke, “I would advise against that. You should remain here, with your crew and continue the search for a cure. Your presence will distract me. Taking you is a mistake, one that might cost your life and worse mine.”

As Galen spoke, Gideon tossed aside the pillow on his bed, picked up a second PPG, and placed it in a hidden pocket inside his jacket. All the while, Gideon combed his memory for something he could use as leverage to force Galen to take him. Like the right key fitting its own lock, Gideon realized what to say.
“That is not what you promised me after the Well of Forever.” Galen said nothing and patiently studied Gideon seeming to know where this was going. Gideon continued, “Remember, after you hijacked my ship, you went on about how I should just go back to trusting you as if nothing happened because you are oh so good at keeping your vows. Then you promised to help me keep my vow to get to the bottom of what happened to the Cerberus. I’m calling in your IOU Galen. That ship we followed is the first clue I’ve found in ten years. It’s my turn to hijack your ship and you along with it.”

For a while Galen looked like he wanted to argue, but seemed to settle on biting his tongue. Galen simply turned on his heel, strode for the door and sharply said back over his shoulder, “I will be aboard my ship at your beck and call.”

# Scorpius 772A

The blasted, rocky mountainside glowed a slight red from the star that did not make it above the horizon. The average temperature hovered a couple hundred degrees below zero degrees Celsius except for a small sparkling sphere that contained an oxygen based atmosphere at a temperature ideal for humans. Gideon marvelled at the sparkly bubble that kept them both from freezing to death and dying of decompression.

Gideon stood behind Galen as the mage knelt in front of an airlock door built into the side of the mountain’s base. Galen’s hands rested on the control pad, all his fingertips touching it, unmoving, his pose like a prostrate monk seeking absolution from the small panel. The Captain studied the landscape. The subtle fluctuations of the shield did little to obscure the surrounding ugliness. He raised his hand, and tapped the shield, sending ripples away from his finger as if he had just thrown a stone into a glittery pond. Amused, he did it again. And was about to do it a third time when from his feet Galen commanded, “Stop that.”

Chastised but unrepentant, Gideon replied, “We’re too exposed out here. It’s been almost ten minutes. How long is this going to …”

Galen cut him off, “Longer now that you have distracted me a second time. This door is well programmed and their security system is quite determined to report our intrusion. Now be a good door …” His voice, directed at the airlock, trailed off gently. They waited silently for another minute before the door began to slide silently open. With some relief, Gideon entered followed by Galen.

As the airlock cycled in air, a graphic schematic of the base they were about to enter appeared suspended over Galen’s hand. It showed a simple circular layout - everything on one layer consisting of various sized rooms at the core surrounded by one large circular corridor with more rooms at the periphery. The exception was a quarter of the image closest to Galen looked like a hanger. A red line connected their current location and the hanger by a circuitous route.

Galen rapidly spoke, “Memorize this route. It avoids all their security measures. Our only worry is a foot patrol currently here.” A blip appeared on the illusion slowly moving counter clockwise toward their location. The airlock completed its work and the inner door leading into the base began to open.

Galen grabbed Gideon’s shoulder, squeezing it lightly. Locking eyes with the Captain, Galen warned, “I will meet you back here in ten minutes. Be good and be careful Matthew.”

The emotion Galen let slip out of him, a sort of rich warmth soaked in a brandy of worry, took
Gideon by surprise. Embarrassed, Gideon broke eye contact and fiddled with his wrist recorder, activating it.

“Don’t worry about me,” Gideon answered. He pulled out the PPG from is jacket, checked the charge and reholstered it. The pressure on his shoulder eased as the Captain continued, “Besides I have nothing to worry about since you’re here.”

Looking up he realized he was alone. The image of the facility suspended in the air, began to fade. With one last lingering look to study the route he must take to reach the hanger, Gideon left the airlock intent on finding his answers.

#

Galen barely heard the Captain say here as he had already walked several meters down the corridor heading straight for the guards. In his mind's eye, he called to his tech with his intent to make himself invisible to anything that might be watching. No text, or language were needed to be exchanged, his tech eagerly complied to Galen’s wish and he vanished from sight. As he made his way down the hall, he activated the microprobe he had just planted on Gideon’s shoulder. It relayed everything the Captain saw instantly to Galen but he shunted it aside, only occasionally checking on Gideon to make sure he wasn’t getting himself into trouble or at least not more than they were in already.

Two guards appeared slowly marching in step straight toward him, each cradling a PPG rifle. Ignoring them, Galen focused on his real purpose. He brought to mind the schematic of the base he had just shown Gideon but this time the complete version, showing the lower level below the layer he had shown Gideon. As the guards were about to walk into him, he formed a platform under his feet, which silently levitated him up and over the guards, who kept on patrolling none the wiser. Galen made his way to the lower level, all while wondering what was down there. It was marked simply as ‘Deep Storage’ on the maps he had teased out of the computer system running this facility, but it was the only area that had no security surveillance of any sort.

When he arrived, the door readily opened for him, without Galen having to intercede. There were no locks, nor guards. The floor gleamed of polished metal, but the rest was all speckled granite. Just a plain rock walled room with a large conveyor belt to his left, which ended at an open door of a large industrial incinerator. The fiery glow lit the room. On the opposite wall, to his right, a row of stasis pods. Next to the only exit right by him, a simple computer console and chair. As he cautiously walked, Galen’s mind raced to a disturbing realization- each pod, every single one of them, contained a human. They all looked dead.

Hurrying back to the console, he touched the screen long enough to send a seeker daemon into it with the simple command, Find what data you can about the containers in this room. Return to me through the ether . He assigned a dedicated frequency to keep track of it. As a daemon swept out of him eager to attend his master’s business, Galen moved to the nearest black container, and opened it.

A body- naked, female, frozen, gray of a corpse, oddly scoured of all hair. Touching her neck, the sensors in his finger tips came to life. No pulse. He moved both hands to her temples, looking for any neural activity, but once again nothing.

As he mused about the possibilities, he noticed them. Small delicate black tendrils tapering back from her shoulders out of sight. He flipped her over and the mass that revealed itself sent him reeling away. These surroundings were cleaner and more clinical than Z’ha’dum but the mass was the same- their tech. Although it looked much smaller and shorter, barely stretching a quarter the length of her back. And know that he studied it - asymmetric, misshapen, like a careless child
spread a lumpy strand of black play-doh along her spine. A few tendrils had reached out and tried to fuse up her spine to the neck. Galen touched the mass hoping it lived but it was as lifeless as the woman.

He looked to the incinerator, down at the woman, and last of the other dozen pods. Mistakes. These were failures to be disposed of without so much as kind word or sympathetic nod. His heart lurched from his chest to his throat. He swallowed hard to bury his sorrow.

His daemon returned to him and presented him with a small database of names joined with serial numbers, neither of which meant a thing to Galen. He forwarded them to his ship and asked it to trace the names and numbers. Wherever these unfortunates originated was where Galen would go to discover who or what was trying to make their tech again. And he would do it alone. He could not trust anyone, not Gideon, not anyone on board the Excalibur, not the Circle, especially not Herazade. He could not rule out the Circle being behind this twisted dead woman, or their being in league with those responsible. But he desperately hoped that the Circle had nothing to do with this and were just the the fools or cowards they appeared.

In his mind's eye, a disturbance caught his attention. The probe's images jostled about as Gideon sprinted up a ramp. Focusing all his attention on the probe feed, Galen, to his astonishment, watched Gideon climb into the Hybrid Shadow ship they had followed.

#

Gideon pushed his luck. The technician had left the hatch wide open. Why wouldn’t he walk right into the black monstrosity. He filmed it all. If only he could fly it back to Mars himself, grab the first general and point to this ship and say- See this thing. This is what destroyed the Cerberus. It was no accident. But some sort of Earthforce blackops project. Now that he had proof that this thing existed beyond his nightmares, he finally had his first real evidence and clues.

Walking up the ramp he marveled at the thing. All sleek blackness, like a Shadow vessel but much smaller and boxy, like an inferior artist’s re-imaging of a classic piece of art. He touched the wall, if felt like smooth leather, and almost comforting. With the recorder panning back and forth he made his way in deeper. The hallway opened into a central spherical room, that looked like a bare storage bay. Metal grates on the floor, and visible struts on the walls made level surfaces. To either side a few conventional shuttle seats had been anchored to the floor and wall. Ahead, far out of the single spot light that illuminated the center of the room, he hadn’t noticed the man until he swept his recorder over that wall. A still human embedded in the wall, his bottom half, and arms out of sight. His face relaxed and with eyes closed, Gideon approached the … he wasn’t sure what this was, the pilot perhaps. Up close, he recorded the black tendrils under the man’s skin. They appeared like capillaries around his eyes, and grew thicker, rope sized, toward the back of the man’s neck.

To film more, Gideon reached out to move the head. The moment he touched the man’s bare skin, the pilot let out an ear piercing screech.

Gideon ran, right into two guards aiming their rifles at his chest.

“Hands up, down on your knees!” A marine ordered.

Gideon had no choice. He dropped to his knees with his hands up.

#

The mantra, Bringing Matthew was a mistake, repeated on a loop in Galen’s mind. He had boxed
himself in with that promise he gave Gideon after the Well of Forever.

*Why didn’t I pay closer attention?* Galen rebuked himself anew as he burst into the bay, cloaked on a platform.

The guards had already sprinted up the ramp and into the ship, to late for Galen to knock them unconscious. More guards poured into the area. The two that had gone in, came out leading Gideon, with hands zip-tied in front. They marched him down the hall to a small conference room. With every step Galen regretted agreeing to bring Matthew with him more. It limited his options severely. He could have been in and gone with the information and no one the wiser. Now, he had to stay close to Matthew in case they decided to make him disappear down that incinerator. Worse, he might need to resort to violence to save him. These were Earthforce soldiers, marines by the look of them, Matthew’s corp. Not a challenge, but Matthew would not be happy if they died, especially at Galen’s hand.

Hovering a few steps behind the guards as they led Matthew, Galen hoped. What else could he do but follow like a puppy whimpering for his owner and hope for an opportunity to slip Matthew out in secret.

#

*Well, I can kiss my captainship good bye,* thought Gideon. After this, he doubted even President Sheridan could keep a court-martial at bay. Maybe Galen would show up to fix it magically. Or not. What could he do? If he tried to free him, there’d be a fight and that was the last thing he wanted. He’d have to free himself and since they stripped him of his guns, it’d have to be by talking.

Acting as if he adjusted his bound hands, Gideon flipped his watch recorder over. The gift from his mother looked more like antique jewelry than anything. The guards hadn’t thought to take it. The recording remained engaged. EarthGov had promised that after the Shadow War all secret projects involving shadow tech would be ended. Everything cleaned up. Clearly, they lied. Gideon had wanted to believe but now he wondered how deep the lies went. If he could get more answers, he’d have a record of everything.

The small conference room they led Gideon to had a table for 6, a screen on his left, mirror on his right, and another door leading out on the far wall. A guard pulled out a chair and maneuvered him to a seated position. With his hands bound in front of him, his comfort seemed to be their intention.

The four guards broke off, with a pair at each door.

Their silent vigil ended when a full bird colonel entered. Tall, and broadly built, chiseled jaw, full head of thick salt and pepper hair. He walked as if he was ready to pull his sidearm any moment if called into action. A poster boy for the officer corps, with the name Remil stitched to his chest on his fatigues. He sat at the head of the table and threw a datapad in front of Gideon. It displayed his service record. Gideon waited. No matter what happened, he needed to keep calm. He still had a couple cards he could play.

“Captain of the Excalibur. Cherry picked by President Sheridan,” Remil spoke the name as if he had just tasted sour milk, “To lead the expedition to save Earth by finding a cure to the Drakh plague. We have a hero in our midst gentleman.” Gideon realized he spoke to the guards, who took it without reaction.

“Leave us,” The Colonel ordered. The guards marched out the opposite door which Gideon had not been through. A click from Remil opening a swiss army knife made Gideon jump. Remil read his reaction to strike with his bound hands, and showed off that he only had the scissors engaged.
“Easy Captain. I don’t think we need this.” With a snip the plastic sprung off his wrists, flopping onto the carpet.

Rubbing where the plastic had bit the skin, Gideon played his first card. “Then you know I’m authorized to go anywhere I think necessary for my mission.” With a raptor’s stare locked on Gideon, Remil snorted at the answer as if he had made a bad joke.

“How did you get into this base Captain?” Remil didn’t care one bit about the Excalibur’s mission. Matthew stayed quiet.

Remil answered his own question, “Could it be a certain technomage you are known to travel with, who goes by the name Galen?” Unprepared for the question Matthew’s eyes widened, but he remained silent.

Remil said, “Well since nothing here will aid in your quest Captain, I have to guess about why you’re here.” With a tap on the datapad before Gideon, Remil changed it to a view of the hangar and the tethered shadow hybrid. Seeing it whole in an Earthforce facility made Gideon’s skin crawl.

Sooner than he thought he would, Gideon laid his second card of the table. “That … thing destroyed my old ship, the Cerberus.”

“No it didn’t. That one is gone, destroyed by the technomages as they fled like cowards. Did you know that?” Gideon could not hide his shock as he shook his head no.

Remil’s voice turned soft, “Didn’t your technomage friend explain it to you?”

Another no. Gideon felt like he had just been dropped from high altitude without a shoot.

“Would you like to know why?” Matthew tried to speak but he couldn’t. His mouth had gone dry. All he could do was stare at the image on the datapad.

“They knew we were close to a real break through and that would challenge them. So as they fled like rats of a sinking ship, the technomages targeted us, and that ship.”

Gideon managed to say, “But the Cerberus.” He felt like the snake in the throws of the snake-charmer’s melody.

“That was a beta model, it had … control issues. It was defending itself from the technomages, it made a mistake, a horrible mistake. The crew of the Cerberus made a tragic sacrifice. We all deeply regretted what happened with your old ship Captain. But it was necessary to get where we are today. A place where aliens and things like technomages can’t threaten, or bully Earth anymore.”

“What do you mean things like technomages?”

“Ah, I imagine your friend hasn’t mentioned that either. Haven’t you ever really looked at him, his ship? So good at hiding in the shadows. For a thousand years, the technomages bartered, sold their souls to the Shadows to do their tricks, their magic. Just one of them is more filled with shadow tech than everything on this base.”

Matthew couldn’t move beyond taking shallow breaths. Why hadn’t he noticed that until this Colonel pointed out the obvious? Because he didn’t want to think about how Galen knew what he knew, and did what he did. Because Gideon wanted results, and didn’t want to think Galen, all technomages, might be like his nightmare ship. It felt like he took a punch to the side of the head.
If this was true, and it made too much sense to ignore, he had to ask Galen. Not a religious man, still Gideon prayed this wasn’t true, or that Galen would have an explanation.

Tearing his eyes from the screen Gideon focused on the man feeding doubts in his mind. The pleasure the man got from revealing such secrets too evident to Matthew made it certain he had an agenda.

“Why are you telling me this?” Matthew asked.

“Because by coming here you’ve shown initiative. I’m impressed frankly. Somehow you manipulated that technomage to get what you wanted. Earth needs those who see what needs doing and are willing to bend rules and use things.” The pieces snapped together for Matthew. A damn Earth-Firster. The war was supposed to to get rid of this crap. Instead, it hid, burrowed deep out of sight out here. Whatever he could get out of this guy, he would take to Sheridan. Time to string this guy along.

Forcing disgust, Matthew said, “I haven’t trusted that thing since he hijacked my ship.” Remil nodded approvingly. “When I saw that,” He tapped the hybrid, “It was time I got answers. So I used Galen. And I’d use him up to get Earth whatever it needs.”

With a satisfied smile, Remil stood. “Good. You are not alone. We have much to discuss with you.”

“We?” Skin crawling again, Gideon felt he had stumbled into a pit of vipers. Someone else was pulling this guys strings.

“There are other like-minded heroes. You have much to learn Captain - about that ship, about your mission, and what you can do to make the Cerberus’ sacrifice worthwhile.” Acting enthused, Gideon played along and nodded yes.

“But first I have to make sure you are sincere. Excuse me.” Remil exited the same door the guards had used leaving Gideon alone thinking, What have I gotten myself into?

#

Cloaked, Galen vibrated in the dark corner of the conference room. The earlier self reproach replaced by a black maw of despair as he thought. No, not like this. Matthew can’t learn like this. As the conversation unfurled, he hadn’t felt this useless since he watched Isabelle die in front of him. At the end of the conversation, Galen watched Matthew go full Earth-Firster and throw him under the bus to impress that officer, Remil. Galen hoped and guessed it was a ploy.

When Remil rose to leave, Galen flicked a micro-probe, the size of a particle of dust at Remil. It grappled to his hair and road out with him beaming back everything Remil heard and saw to Galen’s tech.

Beyond the door, the 4 marine guards stood at ease waiting with a small man in a gray suit with black gloves, who studied Matthew through the one way mirror.

“Well?” Remil snapped at him.

“He’s too tightly wound. I’m only a P4. I need to be closer to verify his statements.”

Pointing at Matthew through the mirror, Remil ordered, “You tell me that now!”

The telepath shrugged.
“Get in there. Scan him. Ream his ass if he resists. If he’s lying, kill him immediately and dump his body in the incinerator. If he’s telling the truth, get out of him where that fucking technomage is. I have to report this. Go.”

There was no way Gideon would pass that scan. The outcome, and Galen’s choices, narrowed to one- violence. As the group poured through the door like a wave threatening to swamp Matthew, Galen prepared himself to do what he loathed- to kill. The telepath went straight at Matthew but stopped with a look of shock on his face.

"The technomage is here!" He pointed at the area where Galen, cloaked in invisibility, stood in the corner. As the guards unholstered their side arms, Galen's tech sang out their shared will- it dropped Galen’s cloak and sent a sphere of destruction after every human but Matthew. The spheres struck their targets at once, enveloping them in distorting darkness. No screams escaped, as the spheres pinched and collapsed to nothing leaving behind parts of former people- a hand still gripping a PPG, smoldering feet, pairs of partial arms and legs oozing blood.

Klaxons triggered all over the base. Within his mind, Galen looked at the base map for an escape route that would involve the fewest deaths. Every hall already teemed with unarmed support personal and a few armed guards pushing their way to the conference room. Galen realized the fastest way out to the hangar was through the walls.

“What did you do!?” Galen heard Matthew’s pleading, horrified voice but he couldn’t afford the time to engage him. Their escape’s success depended on Galen moving fast.

“Not now Matthew.” Galen planted his hand on the screen on the wall, to associate with the base’s network. A dozen daemons screeched out of him to obey one command, disrupt every system. The lights and alarms all began to blink and falter as if a toddler had gained control of the master switches.

Time to dash. Galen turned to look at Gideon. The barrel of a PPG greeted him. Without a shield up, at this point blank range, a shot could do some damage to him. Perhaps there was time for a few words.

“Put that away Matthew.” The command had the wrong effect as Gideon tightened his grip. Of course Matthew had not been privy to Remil’s secret conversation, Galen reminded himself.

“Unless you’ve become an Earth-Firster when I wasn’t looking, you would have failed that telepath’s scan, and when that happened they had instructions to kill you immediately.” Gideon lowered the PPG slowly.

“What do we do?” Matthew asked as he approached Galen.

“Hold on to me.” A shield snapped on about them. When a platform lifted the pair off the carpeted floor, Galen felt the tug of Matthew grabbing his leather jacket with both hands.

Time to leave. With a hand out, Galen sent a sphere ahead of them at the wall. They hurtled behind the destruction. When one sphere finished its work, Galen sent the next, and the next as they raced through rooms- a small lab, a janitor’s closet, past a toilet with a gawking man sitting on it, an empty room, one full of crates. Finally they burst into the hangar, knocking over personnel like pins at the end of a bowling lane.

Galen didn’t stop until they were aboard the hybrid. Leaping off his dissolving platform, Galen ran for the wall. Matthew rolled to a crouch with the PPG out and ready. No one was aboard the ship except the pilot who with closed eyes looked asleep.
Shaking off his coat to the ground, his hands out, Galen buried his arms in the wall of the ship up to his elbows. The black ship and its pilot accepted the association as Galen’s tech reached out in longing and merged with the ship. It welcomed Galen’s questions—Who are you? What do you want? The ship-pilot opened his eyes and answered, We are the ship, we want to be free to leave and never come back.

Then be free. Galen showed it how. The ship activated itself, starting with it’s weapons systems.

Galen called over his shoulder. “Strap yourself in Matthew. Our ride is leaving.”

#

In shock, Gideon tried to make sense of what he saw as he strapped himself into a chair. Galen’s arms sank in the black walls of the ship. Golden tendrils grew from the point of merger and radiated out, like veins injected with dye. Gideon felt the ship come to life- the exit irised closed, the ship shuddered once, like it fired its weapons, and then the acceleration started. The g’s pinned him to his chair, crushing his chest, making it hard to breath. His vision began to tunnel. All the while Galen stood unperturbed.

He must have blacked out, for when he came to Galen sat on the grated floor with his head tilted back against the now black and golden threaded wall. One hand still remained embedded in the wall as if he was holding hands with the ship. Like being caught in a troubled dream, Galen wore a pained frown. With the acceleration done. Gideon unbuckled himself and approached the mage.

Before Gideon could say a thing, Galen bitterly said, “Did you get what you wanted?” With eyes closed, the sleepy accusation stung Gideon.

Exhausted, he dropped to sit by the mage. “More than I wanted.” Gideon wanted to ask, What did you do to those men? But he knew the answer, Galen snuffed them out like a God ridding itself of inconveniences. The absolute self assurance Galen always projected was not an act. The power emanated off him like the sun on a hot day and it was not a little frightening. Remil called him a thing filled with shadow tech. All Gideon could be certain of was he didn’t really know Galen at all. Time to learn.

“This ship… Are you controlling it with those yellow lines?”

“I freed it.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s free.” The circular logic left Gideon unanchored. Galen, still looking asleep, continued, “Lucky for us it wanted to leave and has agreed to meet my ship. We’ll be able to slip into hyperspace before our pursuers catch up.”

“No, we have to take it back to Terran Space, to Mars. We have to confront EarthGov with what we just found. I’m sure Sheridan will help us.” That did it. Galen’s eyes snapped open. Gideon read the anger. Galen thought this was over. Gideon pushed, “Order it to go there.”

“No Matthew. It doesn’t want to go anywhere near Mars.”

“What are you talking about? It’s a fucking ship!”

“I let you talk me into taking you to that base and more than 5 people are dead. We blew our way out. The rapid decompression of the hanger sucked many out onto the surface.”
Gideon buried his face in his hands. Nothing had gone the way he planned, except, he rubbed the recorder on his wrist, he had real proof. He pleaded with Galen, “Even more reason to blow this wide open. What they’re doing is beyond illegal.” Galen snorted out a pained laugh. Yanking on his hand, the wall let go as the mage climbed to his feet. Through clenched teeth Galen said, “I killed for you Matthew. And I would not have had to if you stayed behind! From now on I dictate terms.”

Two can play this game. Gideon jumped to his feet, to confront Galen. “I didn’t ask for you to do any of that! And I’m not letting you get away with not telling what is going on Galen. What you just did to this ship, what Remil said about you…”

A light swipe of Galen’s finger traced across his brow. “Sleep.”

Gideon lost his train of thought, something about … shadows… technomages… and … his legs sagged as he fell toward the golden black bulkhead.

#

The black suede couch hugged him so well, he forgot himself and wanted to stay in its embrace forever. With the room so dark and warm there was no reason to get up.

“Awake. We are here, Matthew.” That voice brought it all crashing down on him at once. Gideon bolted off the couch realizing Galen had knocked him out, again. First to destroy his box, this time to avoid interrogation. Gideon grabbed at his wrist. The weight of his mother’s gift still present eased his panic. With a tap of the screen, it came to life. Instead of the interface, a small welcome icon greeted him. A few taps revealed it reset to factory defaults. His recordings had been deleted.

An exit irised open. He was aboard a technomage ship.

“Come Matthew.” Galen’s voice. Like a wraith, Galen’s leather form glided by toward the ramp. It was all for nothing. Righteous fury erupted from Gideon’s chest. “You controlling son of a bitch!”

#

A reckoning rumbled at Galen. Everything had spun out of control so fast. Galen had to slow it down. Apply brakes somehow. Or at least that’s what he told himself about why he coerced Matthew to sleep.

Galen expected the outburst but not that Matthew’s curse summoned a distant childhood memory of his mother shouting the same phrase at his father. At least he was too young to remember much of their fighting. Just the fear and sadness that lingered from then. The hand of depression gave his heart a chilled squeeze. His tech seemed to sense his feelings and responded, eager to fix his serotonin levels, and flood his brain with natural endorphins to ease his pain. No, please, and never again. Galen refused as he had when he realized much of his relief after becoming one with his tech years ago was the result of his tech playing with his brain chemistry. Refusing meant giving up that profound peace, yet it meant he got to stay who he truly was. A fair trade he thought.

"Don’t you dare walk away from me! Why did you delete my vids?" Gideon said, all accusations.

Few could touch him like this and not expect violence in return. Matthew was safe and even got his answer. “You must give me time to study what we are truly against. If I had let you keep them, you would have made yourself a target and I am not ready to defend you.”
Galen walked away out of his ship but Gideon grabbed his arm at the top of the ramp.

“What am I to you? An ally, a tool or just some inconvenience?”

“Right now you are all of those things!” The grip dropped as Matthew seemed to be struck by his words as if they were fists. Galen regretted snapping. The crew of the docking bay stopped their work to stare at the circus unfolding before them. Galen felt exposed, naked.

“We must return to the beginning Mathew.” The white flag of surrender he thought Matthew would notice. Galen descended the ramp, intent on returning to Matthew’s quarters to have the long discussion it would take to unravel and correct the lies of Remil.

“Was the ship that attacked the Cerberus really destroyed by your people?” asked Gideon. Galen realized Matthew had not followed him down. The confusion he read on Matthew’s face meant he had not noticed the offer of truce either.

“Yes, in fact it was I who destroyed it.” Matthew had not known and this was not how Galen would have chosen to tell him. The pain in Matthew that followed Galen’s easy admission did not surprise.

The fury did. Matthew stormed down the ramp. “Why did you bother to save me after…?!” Matthew didn’t need to finish. Galen knew he meant, after I watched them all die and have spent my life wishing I had joined them. Galen thought, I should have realized Matthew suffered from the same affliction as I—crushing survivor’s guilt. The realization felt small, a fragile thing in his heart. He wanted to say yes, and that is why I look after you, so you can look after me. Instead, Galen split in two. On the outside he stood statue still. On the inside he still held Isabelle’s dying body.

“The rest, it’s all true isn’t it!”

Not here Matthew. Somehow he’d lost the ability to push words out. Galen panned around. Every crewman in the hangar gawked at them. And worst, Dureena bore a crate with Maximilian full of who cared what, bound for who cared where. They to had stopped to gawk at the spectacle as well.

Matthew kept at him. “So many fucking secrets. And you leave me in the dark about it all. I deserved to know. We deserve to know!” He pointed at Dureena and Max.

A crash of a crate to the deck. The voice he knew too well, uttering his name. Dureena walked toward him, crate forgotten.

All confusion and questioning, Dureena asked Matthew, “What is going on Captain?”

Behind her, Maximilian lost control of the other half of the crate, spilling dusty pottery. Galen strained to find a way not to spill his Order’s secrets like pottery shards spilled out on the deck waiting for anyone to pluck them off the ground. How could he stop Matthew without raising his hand to him? And he’d sooner cut off his own hands then ever do that.

“Why did I have to learn that you’re a walking bag of shadow tech from some random officer and not from you? Then you pilot that shadow ship like you were born to it after it blew its way out and then you send it on its merry way like nothing happened. Why are you really here? To help us or stop us?”

Galen wanted to scream, No, you don’t understand!

“Get off my ship Galen, before I have to arrest you for what you did.” They were done. Like an
emotional hurricane, Gideon left mental debris everywhere as he left the hangar. Galen looked around. Fear from the rest of the crew. Shock from Max. Last he dared to turn toward Dureena. She recoiled from him.

Inside his electron incantation, Justin sat at the illusion of his walnut desk patiently listening to Remil, sitting opposite him, explain how that Order technomage and the captain of the Excalibur waltzed into his base and half destroyed it. The soldier looked rattled, his uniform askew and smudged with blood.

“... We’re still putting our computer systems back together. It'll be a couple weeks before we’re fully operational again.”

“Did your Teep scan Gideon.”

Agitated, Remil shook his head no and shifted in his seat trying to get comfortable.

Justin didn't try to calm him. “Unfortunate. Exactly how did Gideon escape?”

“Not sure. Our surveillance is down, everything deleted. All I know is that techno-motherfucker went apeshit, grabbed Gideon and blew his way out. Killed 5, including my Teep. Then another 6 got blown out when he stole the delivery truck. Poor bastards froze on the surface before we could get to them.”

Justin was not happy. When he wasn't happy usually someone died or worse. An image of Galen formed in Justin's mind. Perhaps it was time to personally get involved in ending that nuisance. But one crisis at a time. “I will send you a new telepath and our production facility is finally at capacity, that ship can be replaced. Do you think Galen examined the basement?” Justin asked knowing the answer.

Remil looked furious. “ I checked personally- one body looked moved. I’d assume yes. If he traces the ids ...”

“Yes, he'll come here.” Justin stood and strolled over to the window and looked out at the view. Mars really looked best in the light of the setting sun. “Why did you offer Gideon a place at our table?”

Remil’s composure returned. “I thought, Sheridan hand picked him. If we could flip him, it’d be a coupe. Then make a show of running the Excalibur around deep space for while, let things get desperate at home, hand him the cure. Instant hero back home. After Clark, we’ve been shut out at the top. But if we had a hero who saved the planet, we’d be able to get Gideon elected to any office.”

Still the clever tactician, Justin thought. “Not a bad idea.”

Remil asked, “I want to return. That techno-piece-of-shit is coming to Mars and I owe him a lesson.” Remil balled his fists. After seeing what Galen could do, he still spoiled for a fight. Good but Remil looked too pleased. After a failure like this though, time to cut him back down to size. Justin made sure his tone made his feelings clear.

“No, Major Lee can deal with him should he ever come here.” Remil sagged in his chair.

“Don’t look so glum Robert. Look at what our contact aboard the Excalibur just sent me.”
A flick of his will, Justin played the scene for Remil in the middle of the table. Justin took pleasure watching the confrontation on the flight deck between Galen and Gideon again. His pleasure increased watching Remil smile.

“I think we just got Gideon,” Remil said.

The Shadows bestowed many powerful gifts on Justin throughout his long service but his greatest-paranoia, he was born with. “We’ll see.”

Justin ended his electron incantation. He sat in the real version of the room he had made to speak with Remil. Across his real desk, Bunny sat quietly filing a nail.

“I think we’re going to have a special visitor soon my dear Bunny. I want you to personally greet him.”

She stopped filing and smiled, “I live to serve, old man.”

#

The query from Galen’s ship made him blink. /Destination?/

Galen stood in the middle of his main cabin. He couldn’t remember how he got there.

It happened again. Destruction and death at his hand. He had watched those men and women die on the surface, writhing in agony as they froze solid. Then back on the Excalibur, the closest thing he had to a home, rejection by those he had considered friends and more, family.

The ship asked again, /Destination?/

All he had done, meant nothing. A few lies was all it took. Like the calm before an eruption, Galen’s soul churned with anguish from the faces filled with anger, fear, and Dureena’s face— the horror directed at who he was, her shock at what he had hidden revealed. By know she no doubt understand why he always turned her down, he had to turn her down.

The ship asked yet again, /Destination?/

The third query ignited his furious self-loathing. He hurled a fireball through the ship’s darkness. It splashed against a wall, dying for lack of proper fuel.

/Course acknowledged./

His ship’s engines came to life. Galen felt it jump into hyperspace. He didn’t care where it went. Casting one fireball wasn’t enough to let his pain out. His usual solace, walking and calculating progressions in his mind could not stop this pain either. After so many years, once again, every inch of him itched to do it - he gave in and called fire down on himself. His tech hummed within but nothing happened. Again, he called on his tech for consuming fire. Again nothing. He used his old spell language. Nothing. His tech was free and so it was free to refuse.

You to? Galen thought. This last most intimate betrayal left him totally alone. Dropping to his knees he let it out. The scream of pain erupted from the deepest part of him. His tech joined, and reverberated within him. The shock wave of emotion stretched and pulled him, warping space-time like a supernova collapse. When it was done, Galen collapsed. Everything looked and felt the same. The warping must have been a trick of his sick mind.

Shedding his coat, shirt, everything he staggered into his shower. Once inside he slammed the
control over to one side, to the hottest setting. The scalding water scoured him.

Part 2- Put Back Together

Beyond the rim, the First Ones played like Gods of the spaces in between. When the tiny wave of pain passed them, like the remnants of a distant tsunami, none took notice except one. It recognized the source- the little wise one born out of chaos. Curious, it turned back to look at the distant point of light that had been its cradle.

If only it were free to go back and peek, it thought. But it had promised to stay with the others. Still, it could ask another to check. It cast about looking for an idol power, one disinterested by their current focus and would understand the little one.

A machine mind stalked around the perimeter. Transcendence bored it. To little action. Perhaps it would go, if asked. Their exchange started and finished on the shortest order of time. Intrigued, it agreed.

The machine mind re-corporealized on the material plane as a perfect cube, and dubbed this new form, Don’t Blame Me If It Doesn’t Work Out, God Told Me To Do It. The being who was once Lorien laughed. The other folded space around itself and headed back to its birth galaxy in search of Galen.

Eventually, the self-loathing and pain waned, as it always did. Galen stared at his hands. Instead of burned skin, the way it had been in the past when he harmed himself, the water just made him the king of prunes. Enough self pity, he thought, turning off the water. He withdrew and wrapped a black silk robe about himself.

Checking the time, he’d been indisposed for nearly a day. Stop wasting time and get to work, he chided himself.

His ship offered a database. The names paired with patient numbers from a hospital on- Galen froze, of course the least surprising thing today - Mars. A Martian mental hospital in New Vegas to be specific. A day, it took his ship a day to find these. That was far too long. As he dug down into the results, he found why. The ship had had to resort to going off the Circle’s network, to use conventional search queries. Sure the Circle’s probe network had always extended around Mars, Galen entered the Circle’s probe network to look for himself. The probes were physically still there, but offline, locked in permanent maintenance mode for over two years. Odd. Careless or deliberate, he wondered. Perhaps the Circle didn’t care to learn what happened to Mars anymore. They didn’t seem to care about much these days but themselves. While hacking a normal computer system would be trivial for Galen, a technomage designed one, not so much. It’d take considerable time to make his way past the block or…

If the mountain won't come to Muhammad then Muhammad must go to the mountain. Galen would deploy his own probes about the planet.
/Ship- current location/? It showed Galen.

Galen rebuked it, “The rim. Do you need to be rebuilt?” The ship answered with an image of Galen hurling a fireball, and the ship superimposing a course vector on top the fireball’s path.

His head shook in disapproval as much at himself as his ship’s too clever by half-edness. Being on the rim would add much time to the journey.

“Stop and take me to Mars.”

/Course acknowledged/

As he headed to his cabin to get dressed, the warnings started:

/Unable to comply. Spatial-temporal anomaly forming, location - not defined/

“What now?”

/Collision warning/

“Avoid,” Galen ordered.

/Engines offline. /

/Weapons systems offline/

The dim lights began to flicker in the cabin.

Galen worried. The warnings kept coming:

/Reactors offline/

/Environmental controls offline/

/Collision imminent/

The gravity cut out. Assuming the worst, Galen wrapped a shadow skin shield about himself. Every item, from furniture to shoes not bolted down or tucked away began to float. Galen ducked to avoid his leather couch.

His mind raced about what to do. “Show me the anomaly.”

With one last shudder before the ship went dead, it showed him a glimpse. A great white cube the size of a planet swallowed the tiny minnow that was Galen whole. His shadow shield dissolved on its own as something yanked him from the dead husk that had been his ship.

#

The sick-making stretching, like every atom in his body was about to blow apart at the same time, stopped. A thick white fog enveloped him. It wasn’t that he couldn’t move, it was that he really didn’t want to move. This must be how you feel after an all night binge of every vice, he thought.

He rolled onto all fours, and sat back on his heals. It floated in front of him. Another perfect cube, but this one his size. Its six faces like the roiling metal in a foundry.
YOU CALLED.

The sound, like a lightning strike going off next to his head, blew Galen onto his back and ruptured his eardrums. Stunned, Galen writhed in pain, as he felt the fluid trickle out. Shutting off his pain sensors, he had to focus on figuring out what was happening. He rolled up into a crouch, hand out ready to cast.

Before he could react, forget cast, tendrils shot out and righted Galen to his feet. He wondered if this was how he would die- the astonishment at being manhandled by what was clearly a First-One. Instead of death, tendrils dug into his ears. His hearing popped, healed.

“I’ve forgotten how fragile you meat bags are.” It said in a voice the opposite of what had just spoken. The cube shifted and reformed to look like a clone of Galen made out of liquid mercury.

“Why did you call?” The metal voice whispered.

That warping when he screamed had not been a figment of his mind. It happened. What, and why it happened, Galen could not be sure. Somehow he called a First One. Galen studied it- the body looked like a perfect silver copy of his, complete with his robe, his opened robe, his genitalia on display. Self-conscious at exposing himself, Galen pulled his robe tightly together, knotting it closed. If he was going to die, he’d keep a bit of dignity anyway.

“Every second for you is like a million for me. Answer already!” The metal voice yelling at him, dripping with impatience, gave Galen back his voice.

“I did not call you, deliberately. That was,” Galen didn’t want to say the rest, me falling apart. Instead he said, “A mistake brought on by stress.”

“This mode of exchange is inefficient.” A tendril again, too fast to stop, penetrated through his forehead, skull and into his brain. Like a water jug tipped over, Galen poured out his life into this cube-metal-man. When it stopped, Galen collapsed, dry-heaved on the ground, realizing if this being wanted to, it could snuff him out like he had snuffed out those men on Scorpius with his spell. So far it hadn’t. Galen waited for it to decide what to do with Galen’s life.

The cube-man spoke, “Interesting. You are a nexus. Power and decisions are yours. You influence much, care deeply- some in the open, some in secret. Many misfortunes behind you. Before you endless trouble- some of your own doing. I will speed the resolution of the death virus. The rest … you must manage. Soon, an ally will come for you. When you are all red, on the red world, choose trust or you will be overwhelmed by those who hunt you in the dark.”

The opaque and vague pronouncements left him confused.

“This must be how others feel when I make my announcements,” he said. The dark humor of it was not lost on Galen. The universe’s revenge- a taste of his own medicine.

“Follow my agent, the path will be cleared.”

The metal man, melted and reformed as a cube. A triangle budded on its top. The new two dimensional shape stretched and ripped its way out, like a birth, into the third dimension. The triangular blade glowed of its own inner light. When Galen reached for it, it shot off away into the mist.

“Rejoin your companions.”

Again the stretching of his atoms, Galen braced himself.
Wink and he was face down on decking, a pair of shoes before him. An alarm. The shuffling of bodies. He looked up. Matthew’s cold face.

“Galen.”

On the bridge of the Excalibur, next to the Captain’s chair, Galen climbed to his feet, immensely grateful that his robe made it through with him.


“Good questions Matthew. Ones I’m not well equipped to answer at this moment.” The ship rocked from explosions.

All business, Gideon ordered, “General Quarters. Situation report Lt.”

Lt Matheson said, “A thousand klicks off port side. Low yield explosions. No damage.”

“Visual.” The explosions glowed like lingering fireworks. They illuminated Galen’s ship as it tumbled dead and out of control. As a whole the lights formed an arrow, which began to wink on and off like a beacon.

The Captain looked at Galen, questioning everything.

“I believe our answer is in that direction. You should…”

Matthew issued the order before he was done. “Extrapolate a course. All speed ahead.”

Galen reached out to his ship. Slowly, it was coming back online. He ordered it to land on the Excalibur. “Will someone kindly get me some clothes.”

Gideon shook his head in disbelief. “Come on.”

#

This emotionless Matthew looked terrible to Galen. Stubble, black bags under his eyes, thinner even. Change him into a toga, and he could be a cold prophet out in the wilderness calling on all to repent.

After handing a pile of clothes to Galen, Matthew kept out of his way, as he got dressed in the Captain’s bathroom. Galen never apologized, he regretted nothing but the loss of life. But this change in Matthew disturbed Galen. When done he walked out to find Matthew hovering by the door. The chill between them kept up a cold, silent wall.

“I believe you ordered me to stay off your ship. I will follow along in mine.” An arm shot out from Matthew barring Galen from walking out.

“I could have confronted you more tactfully.” Matthew clearly wasn’t much for apologies either.

“Yes.” Galen waited.

“You materializing out of thin air, this arrow. What is going on?”
“After I left, I some how… summoned a First One, I believe it agreed to guide us to the cure.” That got emotion from Matthew, shock.

“Never a dull moment with you Galen. Sit down.” It was more order than what you’d say to a friend. Galen remained standing, but the Captain did not. At his desk, all business Matthew questioned him.

“I want those vids back. I assume you kept a copy.” Matthew knew him well.

“They are safe in here,” Galen touched the middle of his chest. “I assure you, it will not be enough. We need much more. I have uncovered evidence that points to Mars. I plan to investigate there as soon as possible.”

Matthew frowned, he didn’t like Galen’s answers. “That ship would have been enough.”

“It did not want to used by us or anyone any more.”

“You talk about that ship as if it’s a person.”

“It is as much as you or I. I could not stop it from shooting it’s way out. And if it wants to run away, we should not stop it.”

Gideon shook his head no. He didn't agree but would not fight him.

“What Remil said…”

“Remil told enough truth to make the lies believable. Yes, my powers are from tech provided by the Shadows. I willing and gladly let it be put in me, although I did not know its origins then. I, we, trusted our leaders too much. My Order fled before the war because the Shadows wanted to use us and make us weapons. We chose to run away like the ship yesterday did. While we fled we stumbled across an older hybrid ship, the one that destroyed the Cerberus, destroying everything in its path…” Galen reeled off the part of his story that overlapped Matthew’s, as much as he could stand to tell.

“I saved you Matthew because I couldn’t stand the idea of leaving you to die. I defied my leaders then and for doing these good deeds, and others, I have been cast out.”

In contrast to their confrontation on the flight deck, Matthew silently absorbed it all, without emotion. Galen couldn’t tell if he had said enough, but decided to stop there and let Matthew decide.

“I want you around when we arrive wherever we’re being led. And I’m going to Mars with you.” That was it. Without another word, Matthew left, heading back to the bridge.

Only one certainty came from this, their relationship would never be the same.

#

Abandoned thousands of years ago, the orbital floated dimly near the rim. The inner surface liquid ocean, with a flat landmass tidally locked near the center. It groaned around the edges, under the influence of the tiny artificial sun at its center. The land dead to animal life, only had the most basic vegetation- lichen, moss. The tiny star no longer warmed it sufficiently for more.

Before their arrival Galen searched the Order’s records to identify this orbital and the First One he encountered. It returned the suitably intimidating name- Hands of God. There was very little real
information beyond paranoid warnings that they were severely impatient and had homicidal tendencies. The same sorts of warnings one would give about technomages. The records warned fervently against getting near any little triangle sword shaped things. Those were their soldiers, or enforcers, the Fingers of God. Their default setting seemed to be- when in doubt kill everything in the room. At least half a dozen technomages had died, most gruesomely, trying to harness their power.

Cloaked, shielded and already flying, Galen scanned the land for the Finger of God. Nothing obvious. Everything looked undisturbed except for a freshly excavated patch. He directed the landing party to it, assuming it hid near this freshly dug out pit. Two spiral paths led down to the bottom.

The landing party disembarked the shuttle. They didn't need oxygen. The climate while cold like a winter's day, required nothing more than thick coats. Avoiding everyone, he had kept to himself since his talk with Matthew. Being in Dureena’s presence on the surface now, he tried not to look her way. He failed a dozen times over. At least she didn't recoil from him. In fact she made sure she was always in his line of sight. The questions in her eyes felt like daggers flung at him. But she didn’t push him more than that.

Dureena and Max teamed up descending down the faster but rockier counter clockwise path. Matthew and Dr Chambers formed the other group hiking down the longer, smoother clockwise one. Alone, Galen rose above the pit and kept an eye on them all through his probes.

He tuned to the one on Max’s shoulder so he could watch Dureena. Sweating and breathing hard, Max scrambled over large boulders, while Dureena sprung over them, not put out by the continuous climbing. He enjoyed watching her move too much and would have turned it off had Max not spoken his name.

"Galen sure looks unhappy." Huff, huff.

“What is the human word for yelling at a child who misbehaves?”

“We got a lot for that one: reprimand, reproach, scold, chastise.” Huff, huff, huff.

“English has too many words. I pick scold. Galen has the look of the scolded.”

Ridiculous, Galen thought. He was sure he looked neither. Of course he did not walk around with mirror on himself.

With agile grace, Dureena vaulted over the last chasm before the flat area at the bottom. Max imitated her, but didn't quite make it. His foot didn't solidly catch the edge. He screamed as he tumbled backwards. Dureena grabbed him by the collar pulling him in the right direction.

Max fell to his knees in front of her, “Oh God! Thank you.”

Visible again, Galen touched down silently behind Dureena and said, “I look nothing of the sort.”

She spun neatly, dropping into a defensive stance and said, “I thought that would get your attention.” A small test, and he had fallen for it. Suckered to her side. Was that her goal? Neither blinking, they studied each other as Max regained his composure after nearly plummeting to his death. Perhaps she understood. Nothing had really changed. He was no Shadow. Nor the horrible monstrosity that destroyed her people. He was simply Galen, her companion. It was almost enough to make him smile. His mind rebuked him, Stop this fatuous wishful thinking, a cure needs finding. He looked away first.
Max, Dureena and Galen walked to the center. No containers, no door, nothing but a fine powdery dirt mixed with the occasional pebble. Nothing.

“I don’t see anything. Are you sure there is something here,” Dureena asked.

Galen scanned the area. “This is the only area that has been disturbed in a hundred thousand years. So yes.”

At the exact center they stopped to consider their options. They got an answer. The ground rumbled.

Galen said, “Get behind me.” Max practically ran behind him. With a knife in each hand Dureena stalked around the perimeter ready to pounce.

The Finger of God burst out of the ground, hauling a cylinder the size of a thermos. It dropped the container and hovered above glowing like a low hanging lamp. While dry dust clung to it, the cylinder remained sealed. Peaking out from behind Galen, Max had his terminal out and recorded everything that happened. Instinctively, Dureena took up the position opposite Galen with the Finger between them.

A burst of agitated movement, Galen snapped on a shield, extending it around himself and Max. It made Galen nervous not to be able to shield her as well. The Finger of God glowed brighter as if a dial turned it up. It spun in place like a top and wrote runes in the air in a silver rush.

Galen translated the runes silently, *It took you meat bags long enough. Here is your bloody cure. Hands up for whoever wants to save their people from extinction.*

Galen considered the miraculous and insulting message. The nondescript container must have the cure. The bit about extinction made him pause. In a way that applied to all 3 of them. Max represented the human race, if this cure did not work, humanity’s core would die, a possible extinction level event. Galen’s people, the technomages, numbered in the couple hundreds, certainly on the brink of extinction. Dureena’s people were the worst off, numbering only in the dozens.

Behind him Max goaded, “Can you read that? I’m not getting a thing.” Galen ignored him.

As Galen pondered what it meant. Dureena walked forward and reached for the sword.

“No!” Galen said. Mesmerized by it, she didn’t seem to hear him. He didn’t know what touching it would mean, but he’d prefer not to find out through Dureena. He could knock her back or engage the Finger himself. But what if that set off a violent chain reaction and got them all killed. Better to keep her away. The Finger began to glow brighter and spun till it blurred. Galen scanned it. It’s energy output built.

“Dureena, no!” Still no effect. Perhaps she was under a spell or compulsion. He needed to shock her into listening to him.

He called on his tech to coerce her. He said the first thing that came to mind in the command voice, “A backwater savage has no business with its like.” It worked. Stiffening, whatever compelled her broke.

Then she shook off his command somehow, a thing no one had done before. With another step she reached for it. Galen threw himself at the spinning sword, knocking her back. Containing it between his chest and hands, he landed against the dirt, shielding her from the sure attack.
After a few beats of his heart and nothing happened, he rolled over to get a good look. Still and dark the Finger looked like some fancy trinket one would win at a medieval fair. For a moment he wondered if he had imagined the whole thing. No. Dureena stood over him red faced, her daggers poised to strike him. She controlled her body but not her face. Her embarrassed fury made Galen’s heart wither, as if he had just snatched candy from a child. His words had hit too hard.

Matthew and Dr Chambers, arrived at a full sprint.

“I saw the whole thing. What happened?” Matthew had his PPG out, pointed at the ground.

As he held the now lifeless killing machine of suspicious origin and unknown intent, Galen climbed to his feet and said, “I believe that is the cure.” He nudged the cylinder with the toe of his boot.

Dr Chambers picked up the cylinder and headed back to the shuttle with Max in tow talking excitedly. Matthew stayed next to Galen. Dureena stared at the Finger of God in Galen’s arms. An impulse to give it to her overwhelmed him. With one more scan to make sure it remained inert, he held the sword out for Dureena to take.

“Why?” she said. Many answers occurred to him, but he couldn’t trust his mouth to not be harsh with her again. Instead he would make it up to her with his actions. Without words, he took her hand, placed what he now thought of as a pretty corpse in her palm, took her second hand and placed it on top. He let his hands linger on hers until she drew backwards away from his touch. Dureena cradled the Finger of God in her arms like a baby.

Matthew demanded, “Is that thing safe?”

“It is now,” Galen said as he watched Dureena be completely absorbed by her new treasure.

“That was too easy,” the Captain said. Matthew was right.

Galen answered, “Don’t worry Matthew, I’m sure that will not last.”

On cue, Matthew got a call from the Excalibur, "Captain, we have Drakh warships incoming on long range scanners."

Matthew already ran for the shuttle. "On our way."

Galen sighed and wished he could have gotten at least a minute of peace between the next crisis.
Chapter Summary

Part 3

Dureena gets her sword.

**10 - Interlude's Conclusion**

**Part 3- Rejoice In Uncertainty**

The entire way back to the shuttle Dureena had held her new sword close. Galen watched. His eyes scanned her continuously. His worry, that he had made a mistake, nagged him.

To him the sword still read dead, but a being like that would not become a dormant trinket for no reason. What it was doing was a mystery that demanded his attention. So instead of feeling relief about finally having a cure for the plague, Galen’s anxiety grew. Everything would probably turn ugly.

The first shuttle with the cure, Max and Sarah had already departed the dead orbital. Galen boarded the remaining shuttle, right on Dureena’s heels. Last, Matthew embarked shouting orders to the pilot to take off.

Once aboard Dureena reluctantly placed the sword on a shuttle seat so she could stow her parka, and cold weather gear. The sword’s energy surged when she let it go. The sword had attached itself to her. A nano-filament, invisible to any eye but that of the technomage, connected to her. Galen advanced to sever the bond. Blinding runes flashed through his optical nerve. The ultra high frequency energy spike made him wince. His tech seemed to understand it though as it translated the meaning for him.

*Back off meat bag*. It was not a request rather a command that hit like walking into a wall. **I choose her.**

Shaking his head clear, Galen sent back on the same frequency. **/I will not allow you to harm her./**

Invisible cold restraints stopped his body. He tried to move forward but he felt slowed down like swimming through ice. Inward, his tech’s usual pleasant background hum went silent. Not disabled to complete helplessness like when the Shadows turned him off, more too busy to answer.

A sort of skittering laughter echoed through this mind, proceeding the sword’s next runes. **On every path she would tread without me, you are the cause of her suffering and her people’s doom.**

No. That had to be a lie. Galen sent, **/I would never harm either. Of that I am absolutely certain./**

More skittering. **You forget your own lecture- the universe is uncertain, and only when we accept that can learning, creativity and growth occur.**
The familiar words, that he had flung at the Circle after he learned they planned to stay in hiding indefinitely, boomeranged back at him. Indignance swelled him.

/Play fair. Use your own words./

More skittering. **Rejoice in the uncertainty I represent- one less burden for your weak, minuscule form.**

He pushed himself forward. His leg struggled to take a step toward the sword. /Vague pronouncements will not stop me. What are you doing to her?/

**The more I tell you the worse it will be for her.**

That made him pause. How could this thing know what will happen to Dureena? Every part of him yearned to interfere, to protect her. But, Elric taught him to always analyze assumptions, to question them, to study his situation carefully. Could he control this machine-sword, this First One? No, very unlikely. Should he even interfere? Maybe. What would it do to Dureena? No idea. It could be from terrible to wondrous to anything in between. If it meant to kill her, it would have done so by now. Like a beanstalk shooting up to the sky out of a folktale, from his uncertain answers grew the obvious path he should take. He knew what to say.

/Why her?/ He would be her advocate.

**The bag of mostly lukewarm water finally asks a good question. My purpose was, is, will be to serve the universe’s purpose- to answer every question. Of all of you she advances my purpose the most. I will serve her.**

Galen would have scoffed if he could. /For dinner perhaps? I don’t believe you. What’s your real reason?/

Galen would have sworn he heard a sigh. I'm bored. I like the way she thinks, very binary.

At least the thing was honest as well as rude. An oddly comforting answer. Galen stopped fighting. /Then I have a request. Treat her as she deserves. Show her what you really are, what you will do to her, and ask her permission before you do anything permanent./

**Those are three requests. All unnecessary. She love’ll my metal more than anything, except you. You are her weakness.**

Galen gasped. He fought back the emotional panic of his soul. *Focus*, he commanded himself. This machine must be made to agree. He groped for a way. Nothing subtle came to mind. Then simple and obvious. He knew one word that typically worked like magic on many.

/Please./ No response came. /If there is anything I can do in return, name it. /

**Fine. I don’t want to be bothered by you or any of your kind. You will be silent to me and about me from this moment ...** Galen nodded yes. Control returned to his body as the energy spike from the sword faded. Once again the sword looked dormant.

Hands shook his shoulder. Small hands. Dureena’s. Her face, so close to his, showed more than concern. The sword revealed something about her Galen did not want acknowledged.

“Are you alright?” she asked. “You were frozen.” The back of her fingertips reached for his face as if to brush his cheek, like she wanted to check his temperature.
“All is well,” he said ducking out of her reach. Her hands dropped heavily to her side. She didn't believe him. Good. The sword probably lied to manipulate him. She could not love a broken thing like himself.

Matthew turned around in the co-pilot’s seat and ordered, “Strap yourselves down already. We’re taking off.”

Galen took a seat as far from Dureena as possible. Turning to the shuttle window, he fled the hard scanning look she cast his way.
What Kind of Fool Are You?

Chapter Summary

Galen asks himself the right question.
Crusade plot concentrated at the start and end. The middle is meandering OC heavy, humorous asides.

11- What Kind of Fool Are You?

The sudden burst of shadow communication spells broke Galen’s concentration. Aboard Fed’s ship inside the Excalibur, Galen dissociated from Fed’s sphere. He activated his probe network on the Excalibur, looking for his fellow technomage. No longer in Medlab, Galen leafed through his probes until he found Fed in the rec room. When the other mage had been further away, Galen hardly noticed the diffused hum of Fed’s Shadow tech. The spells in an adjoining space pricked Galen, like suddenly donning an undershirt made of wool.

To Galen’s surprise, Fed stood right by Dureena with the sword in his arms. Somehow Fed had charmed it away from her. Listening in on their conversation, it pleased him to learn Dureena sought understanding. It pained him that he could not give that to her. But the Finger of God, disguised as a sword, had been clear. Stay silent and out of its way. It still appeared inert. The thing’s plan an opaque mystery. Hopefully, Fed would not antagonize it.

So, he simply watched, and enjoyed as Dureena rightly snapped at Fed for ogling her. Her temper did not surprise Galen. She’d progressed in her self-control but had not mastered herself, yet. Fed better be careful or he’d likely wind up back in Medlab with fresh injuries. When she abandoned Fed, Galen grinned a bit, pleased that Dureena resisted his offered charms. The warm feeling vanished when he realized why her reaction mattered to him.

Pushing those feelings down, Galen attempted to backtrack the other mage’s path through his probe network’s histories. They had next to nothing. Fed had cloaked himself outside of MedLab, appeared in the highest observation room, and much later turned up at the celebration to irritate Max and Dureena.

A sinking feeling crept up his spine. He loaded Matthew’s node, only to find him asleep in his bed. Odd. Matthew seemed too tightly wound for a nap. Galen looked harder- checking the integrity of his probe’s hardware. Error checking the code. The code check failed. The probe looped a recording from days ago. None of Galen’s security wards had detected the breach. Irritation filled Galen. The one way Fed surpassed Galen, besides his dubious skill at bed hoping, hacking. Only one reason existed why Fed would do such a thing. He didn’t want Galen to see their conversation.

With rising alarm, he rolled-back the code and rebooted the probe. Always expecting the worst he had never been disappointed, until today. Gideon pattered around his desk, cleaning up some strewn cards as if from a failed card trick. Then Matthew made his way to his bunk. Along the way, he shed his jacket and boots. At his bunk, Matthew turned to stare straight up at the light where Galen’s probe resided. Their eyes locked virtually through the probe. Galen realized Matthew now knew he was being watched. He half expected words of rebuke to fly, but no.
Instead, Matthew fell backwards onto his pillow and closed his eyes. To Galen’s astonishment, gentle snores from Matthew’s surrender to some much deserved rest quickly followed.

Galen shut down the probe. A normal person under normal circumstances would feel guilt for spying. But nothing about Galen or really his whole life, had ever been normal. He found no guilt within him. To be of real use he needed as many puzzle pieces as possible. Especially now that the board had expanded to include a new piece, Fed.

Whatever happened between Fed and Matthew couldn't have been too alarming. After all, no plea from Matthew for help. To find out what happened between them, he would have to use the most 
loathsme and unreliable 
of methods- asking.

Switching back to the rec room probe, he focused on Fed. The concentration evident on his face, Galen sensed another spike from a spell. Checking in with the Circle most likely. When it ended, Fed’s head dropped like a dying balloon to the bar and stayed there making him look like a passed out drunk. Time for some loathsome asking.

/What are you doing?/

Fed bolted upright and grabbed a tiny passing ham sandwich. Then ate it too quickly. /Eating the worst sandwich I’ve ever tasted./

/It’s the bread. They add a preservative similar to rubber./ Fed spat his bite. The chunk flew an impressive distance to hit the back wall of the makeshift bar with a splat.

Galen dove at his point. /You’re supposed to be in Medlab./

/I’ve been cooped up for years. Gotta take in all the sights when I get the chance./ Fed had turned around and looked toward the makeshift dance floor. This would not get far without directness.

/You disabled my probe so you would not be observed while speaking to Matthew./ No answer came, beyond Fed swaying in time with the beat of the party music. A grin shifted Fed’s beard. Galen scanned him. Nothing altered in his base metabolic rates. Of course Fed would have been trained how to lie effectively.

Galen pushed. /Answer me./

/There wasn’t a question./ Willful misunderstanding- one of the more simplistic misdirection techniques. Fine, he’d play whatever game Fed had thought up.

/What did you speak of?/

/Why I’m here./

For once, Galen wished Fed would say more than was necessary. He prodded Fed. /Specifically?/

/He knows I need your help to rescue someone. Plenty of me begging him to delay going to Mars so you’ll come with me./

That Fed went around him and engaged Matthew in a private conversation drove Galen to the point of anger. That he spilled the Order’s private business before Matthew made him want to shake Fed for his foolishness. Secrecy, one of the core basic tenets of the technomage code, seemed to still mean nothing to him. Some things, or rather people, never changed.

Yet, somehow Fed had gotten Matthew to take a nap. A practical minor miracle given Matthew’s
stubborn nature. An intriguing idea, the beginnings of a plan, coalesced in Galen as if it had always been there. After their horrific misadventure in the Scorpius base, he would rather go to Mars alone. And Matthew desperately needed rest. Truthfully, Fed smiled and charmed as naturally as Galen scowled and brooded. Perhaps Fed could talk Matthew into not going, or at least delaying until Galen understood the extent of what they were up against and worked out a plan. A few encouraging words in both their ears might reap that reward.

Neither Matthew, nor Fed would appreciate his manipulation. But he could live with their displeasure if it served the greater good, keeping Matthew safe. And since Fed seemed determined to not leave for Vorlon without him, perhaps Fed could be of use on Mars. His hacking abilities especially could be channeled for the greater good.

Galen decided to proceed with his plan to maneuver them where they belonged.

/And how did Matthew answer?/
/He’s got a good poker face. Not sure. Said he’d consider it./
/I hope he sees the wisdom of your pleas. You should keep at him./
/Really?! So then you’ll come with me./
/We’ll see./

Galen was going to Mars regardless, but Fed need not know that. Yet. A minute speck of guilt crept up on Galen. He parried it away. Technically he hadn't lied to Fed since he essentially answered maybe.

What Galen didn’t understand was Fed believed the only reason he planned to go to Mars was because of Matthew. He was so obsessed with his Vorlon mission, it blinded him to everything else. Even though Galen clearly told him the Order might have vital interests at stake on Mars. What a fool. That thought triggered a memory, a mostly forgotten lesson from his youth.

Galen finished his swim. Precisely 50 laps, 20 more than what Elric suggested.

On the tiled pool deck by the shallow end, a boisterous group of fellow apprentices frolicked. As always at the center- Fed. Galen hoped to slip by unnoticed. Avoid the others his instincts begged. As he climbed out of the pool by a ladder a girl’s voice, his friend Carvin, called to him.

“How can you leave?! The water’s glorious,” Carvin shouted at him.

Waving him back, she treded water in the deep blue. Beside her, another of their cohort, Gowen floated serenely on his back with his eyes closed. If it wasn't for his broad smile Galen would have guessed he meditated.

He focused beyond her. Even though they were friends Galen couldn't admit the truth to her. Too many others about. And the girls... now that he was 16, they had suddenly evolved from uninteresting cylinders into beings that drew his eyes like magnets of opposite poles. Their disquieting features barely concealed by the pool. Galen sighed, unable to admit his trouble to his oldest friend, Carvin. She was a girl, and probably wouldn’t understand.

Galen told as much of the truth as he could stand, “My exercises are done. Elric will want me to return to my studies.”

Carvin splashed him. “That sounds like an excuse. One of these days you’re going to have to learn
to just be.”

With an agreeing nod, he watched as she dove away like a dolphin until she was under Gowen, who shrieked when she yanked his leg.

Dripping wet, Galen set out for his towel, which he’d left on the last lounger as far from everyone as possible. Poor choice in retrospect. Every lounger he paced past seemed to have a barely clad technomagess sunning herself. His eyes pleaded with him to linger, to study, and understand their mystery. He held his breath as he walked past. His eyes focused on the ground, at feet. Thankfully that did nothing to excite. By the shallow end, the big clump of apprentices noisily cheered something. He ignored them.

At the last convocation, when he was just 13, he hadn’t felt anything like this. When it first surfaced, he thought to ask Elric. Yet when it came time to actually speak, just the thought of speaking it aloud made him want to hurl himself into the sea near their home. Instead he turned to books. From them he understood it was just puberty, he did what he normally did, he buried the new feelings deep and ignored them.

Once he reached the remote corner where he left his towel, he breathed out in relief. Next to his lounger, Elizar sunned himself, a book in hand. Not reading, Elizar watched the others over the open spine.

As Galen bent over to dry his face, a shadow covered his back. Galen looked up. Elizar shaded him. Not an unwelcome presence, usually.

Elizar cocked a thumb at the shallow end of the pool. “Did you see that?”

Having to shield his eyes from Proxima’s perpetual sunset, Galen followed the gesture. The same boisterous group of fellow apprentices he had snuck past. The girls all wore the same bikinis, heavy sigh, like some exotic avian flock. From this angle he saw the group surrounded Fed and Kane as they play-wrestled. Finian goaded each side against the other. Typical.

“No, what?”

“Watch,” Elizar said with a smirk.

With a quick throw from Kane, Fed fell head first into the shallows. The outcome, not a surprise considering Fed was still the smallest among the boys of their cohort. A soaked but smiling Fed climbed right out, and went straight at Kane again, trying to drag him into the water.

Most giggled at the pair’s antics. Except Ak-Shana, with her top that must be several sizes too small. Teeth-clenching sigh. Galen forced himself to look away from her. Still he heard Ak-Shana order Kane to stand his ground like a drill sergeant. A red-faced Finian, a close friend to both Fed and Kane, hollered at Fed to pull a David on Kane’s Goliath sized ass. Then cheered Kane to show the imp who’s boss. Their game made little sense to Galen.

Elizar spoke, “That’s the fourth time Fed fell into the shallow end, head first.”

This was a test of their friendship. Perhaps Elizar felt left out for like Galen he could never truly relax around the others. Galen because he never felt comfortable with anyone. Elizar because as Kell’s apprentice he was of the line of Wierden. Great things were expected of him as Kell groomed him to lead the Order.

Galen assumed it would not hurt to give an honest answer. “Clearly Fed’s adept at being unavoidable. He only ever assaults me with an excess of words,” Galen offered.
The smirk grew as Elizar nodded approval and looked back at the source of the disturbance. Kane held Fed with arms locked under the other’s armpits and wound up behind Fed’s neck. Ak-Shana grabbed Fed’s legs. They heaved him into the pool like a sack. Ak-Shana grabbed Kane’s hand. Together, they jumped on top of where they had tossed Fed. Finian, more red-faced, screamed the word cheaters again and again. The rest of the group poured into the pool. Last of all Finian, dove in, head first as well, in the middle of the splash frenzy commenced by Carvin. Some new game had started.

“Kell took us to visit Aldous. Fed was there. Kell said he saw potential in Fed. I’m now sure only a potential toward idiocy.”

Elizar looked to Galen and filled the silence. “I had to waste two days in that buffoon’s company as he spewed his endless nonsense. Did you know he’s never read a book? And his wardrobe-dignified and restrained are not words I’d use. His jokes weren’t bad though. What a perfect fool.”

The words resounded like a bell clanging out harsh judgements. Galen didn’t say anything, as an uncomfortable feeling crawled up his spine.

Elizar chuckled and said, “Perhaps when I join the Circle, I’ll make him the Order’s official fool.”

Despite agreeing, everyone knew Fed was a fool, Galen had enough. Elizar had gone too far. He should say something. “I… I don’t believe the Order has ever had a fool, official or otherwise,” Galen answered truthfully, as he struggled to end this conversation.

“Galen.” Elric’s stern voice always made Galen reflexively straightened his spine. “Come with me.”

With relief and a bow to Elric, Galen hastened to obey. Elizar merely inclined his head before sitting back down to his not reading. With a towel wrapped about his shoulders, Galen joined his teacher.

As they walked to their shared quarters, Elric said to him, “You involved yourself in a foolish conversation.”

If that’d been a test, he’d failed. “I’m sorry.”

“Do not ever apologize for words spoken honestly. It is I who have not taught you well enough.” Elric’s words landed on Galen like hammer blows shaping hot iron. The lesson solidified- do not apologize.

Elric said, “Every being is born a naive fool. Everyone. And with every choice made, one either remains a fool, or grows toward wisdom.” Elric stopped and faced Galen.

With a severe scowl, Elric lectured to the silent, mortified Galen, “On one end, the best sort- the humble fools. They instinctively yearn for the understanding that leads to wisdom. In between the fools controlled by their emotions like fear or rage. The rest, the worst sort- the arrogant fools. If they grow at all, it is despite themselves for they think themselves already wise because of their talent, intellect, or luck in birth.”

Elric’s severeness eased. “Fortunate for all, with careful self-reflection, any fool can grow to wisdom. The first step is to ask but one question. What kind of fool am I?”

The young Galen hadn’t fully understood, apart from Elric’s admonishment to stay away from Order gossip. That he obeyed perfectly. He never encouraged such talk again. And if he inadvertently heard some gossip it died with him.
Only now, as a grown man, did Galen really understand Elric’s many layered lesson. A verbal treasure map to becoming truly wise. Like Elizar, Galen possessed the unholy trinity—talent, intellect and luck in birth. Add arrogance, which Elizar had in abundance and by Elric’s equation—the worst sort of fool. Fortunately for the Order, Galen put an end to Elizar and his murderous ways.

Yet Elric’s words had been directed at Galen, not Elizar. Elric meant to warn him. Galen did not think of himself as arrogant. Would those who knew him think otherwise? Considering how he acted on board the Excalibur, he shrank at the thought of asking Matthew, Dureena or the others.

Of the Order, everyone whose opinion really mattered to him was long dead. Still curiosity drove him. There was Alwyn. That father figure loved him too much. Galen doubted he’d answer honestly. Whether true or not, Alwyn would only praise to the heavens. Like he did with his father. That left… There was one about for whom he had a grudging fondness. One who had known him since childhood. One who’d be honest or at least talk his ear off about anything he asked.

Before he changed his mind he messaged Fed. /Do you think me arrogant?/

/Where’d this come from?/

/Idol curiosity./

No quick answer came. Galen inhaled and exhaled deeply. It would not be the reflexive comforting no.

/You’re a technomage./ Fed’s answer left Galen unsatisfied for he already knew this.

/Elaborate./

/It comes with the territory. We’re all arrogant in a way./

Sure that Fed would blurt out all his thoughts on the matter, Galen asked. /And what’s my way?/

/You’re super certain about how things should be, and you’re not a big fan of input from others./ Fed’s answer arrived immediately. As if he didn’t need to consider because he had worked out the answer to Galen’s question long ago.

The words were not what he wanted to hear. Of course he didn’t like the input of others. They were typically wrong, slow or foolish. Like at the Path of Sorrows. Was it his fault that the answer revealed itself to him whole? No. Or his fault that he knew with plain certainty how to make Dureena supply the required tears. No. Perhaps he should have explained himself first, but that would take time and only lead to argument. This was Galen’s burden, to never hesitate to do what must be done, to...

The thought sputtered out. Looked at from afar, he could hear his own arrogance. His love of getting his way. His impatience with having to explain himself to others. His instinctive distrust when he was not the one in command of the situation. Worse the Path of Sorrows was not the only time he acted like that. He was not like Elizar, but he had a talent for arrogance.

Still he did not want to fully accept the self-judgement. He had grown so much after he became one with his tech, after Z’ha’dum.

Besides he reflected on everything, constantly. A quiet self-admonishment in Elric’s voice answered, *Obsessing in circles, like the snake eating its own tail, was hardly careful self-reflection.* His rage at God, his despair over all those he’d lost and what he had endured controlled
him still.

What kind of fool was Galen? … An emotional fool at best, and an arrogant one at his worst. The truth laid bare before him like a newborn child. Vulnerable but with great potential. What he’d do with this new self awareness, he hadn’t a clue.

His musing got interrupted by a new message from Fed. /Do you mind if I talk to Dureena, alone?/

Yes, I mind. After perhaps too long a pause, instead he sent, /Why ask me?/

/You seemed upset with me talking to your Captain. I figured I’d ask first./

Galen seethed gently, but determined to master his feelings, he carefully replied. /Clearly that is up to her. Not me./

/Great. I’m taking Dureena on a magic carpet ride./

His control burst. Instinctively, Galen shouted, “Don’t you dare you unkempt lothario!”

Luckily, he was alone in Fed’s cabin and so no one heard his outburst. The strength of his reaction shocked him back to silence. A new emotion, furious possessiveness. Jealousy he supposed. Lovely . A new feeling. Bonus, one he had no right to feel. For even if he and Dureena shared something, it was none of his business. Jealousy was but another arrow in the emotional fool’s quiver.

No more pointless chatting with Fed he decided.

He fished out the ring he wore on a long chain around his neck. He had taken to wearing it after leaving Isabelle’s necklace at the Well Of Forever. His father’s ring. His reminder of why to never love another.

When he left the hiding place to pursue the Drakh and cure for the plague, first, he travelled back to pay his respects to Soom, Elric’s former place of power and his old childhood home after his parents died.

On the still recovering Shadow scorched world, he found the remains of his friend, Fa, to whom he had given his father’s ring as a token of friendship, before he realized what the ring was or could do. Poor Fa. One of Elizar’s victims. Fa’s remains he buried with great care and respect hoping it would give him closure on the fate that had befallen her and Soom. It had not.

In the end he refused to bury the ring with Fa as it had been the cause of the poor child’s death. Yet he could neither throw it away, nor destroy it. Beyond his DNA, the ring represented his only physical connection to his parents. Made by his mother, it was like her- elegant, and deadly. Originally, the ring had been his mother’s love gift to his father. In reality, a trojan horse. A weapon to carry out her revenge. Years of her jealousy over his father’s perceived dalliances and power grabs culminated in this monstrosity. She tried to kill him with it, but he took her with him.

Galen rotated the ring with the hideous history between his thumb and finger, and wondered which parent he took after. The answer stared him in the face. The worst traits of both mixed inside him. His father’s cold control did a magnificent job of keeping his mother’s volcano of emotions from erupting. Until that control snapped, and emotional lava exploded.

With his new ugly feeling toward Dureena, he deemed the ring’s presence around his neck right. Its weight more cynical anchor than cherished keepsake. Its whispered reminder- loving another always ended badly.
While he couldn’t help his instinctive reaction, he could still master himself. Asserting his will, he ended his jealousy. Like a staked vampire, it vaporized to dust. At least he could do that much for himself and Dureena.

Besides there was no reason to think Fed’s second attempt at charming Dureena would end differently than her scowling at him. With that simple thought of them alone together, jealousy re-knitted itself to his soul again. Again, he rebuked it, refusing to be its fool. He stopped there. Instead of thinking in circles, he decided to take the advice Carvin had given his 16 year old self. Just be.

With a deep breath, he meditated on his surroundings, Fed’s private cabin. Really taking it in this time. Not just the looming Vorlon suit. The rest said much about its owner. In the corner between the damaged Vorlon suit and the bathroom, a heap of laundry. Clean or dirty Galen couldn’t tell. Above the foot of the bed, a cluttered shelf. A mix of corked cologne bottles scattered between half-burned votive candles. That explained the mingled smells he could not place. Behind the vials, a velvet picture of Elvis kneeling before the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus. Opposite the bed, the cabin’s closet, propped open with a chunk of meteor. A rainbow of colorful clothes threatened to burst out. At the bottom, a body pillow Galen made a mental note to not touch, ever. The pillow featured a woman with big eyes, thick glasses balanced on the tip of her nose, a strategically placed Hufflepuff scarf wrapped around it and not much else. He had to hand it to Fed, at least he had his own style.

A surprising sense of calm filled him. Tucking away the ring, he turned back to his task. Fed’s memory ball.

A new question came to him. What sort of fool was Fed? No immediate answer came.

Truthfully he never really understood Fed. At their initiation, when asked his Being question, why he was a technomage, Fed answered, To make the rest of you look good, obviously. At the time Galen gave it little thought. A flippant joke made at the expense of their most revered ceremony. Typical Fed.

What did Fed’s answer really say about him? The most obvious. His answer—a spur of the moment utterance. That any other technomage couldn’t help but look good compared to him. Which meant he saw himself as the least of them. What else? It showed simple minded vulnerability. So a definite lack of ego. Saying that openly to everyone in the Order made him a fool, a humble one. By Elric’s teaching, the best sort of fool. He had nowhere to go but up.

At the same time, after living in the hiding place, Galen knew Fed preferred to lazily wallow in drink and sex rather than do any difficult work or careful study. Or so Galen reasonably guessed. Admittedly, Galen never studied Fed. While they lived together, his observations were infrequent and involuntary. Can anyone really hide their true self for long? Not in Galen’s experience.

A disquiet settled on Galen. Fed still seemed the careless fool. Surely, his injuries, missing hand, were proof of that. Could there be more to him? Galen couldn’t picture it. Fed had always acted like an idiot around him. All about fun, jokes and gossip. Nonsense. But... perhaps like Elizar, Galen played the arrogant fool for thinking Fed not capable of more.

A horrible distillation occurred to him. And amused him, if he was perfectly honest. They were both fools, in opposite ways. Their respective beings, foolish tendencies, balanced each other. A sort of technomage ying and yang.

Enough. In his mind’s eye, he saw Fed make his way to Dureena’s table at the party. Jealousy stirred again. Before it kicked up more ugliness, Galen shut off his probe network. Let Fed have his
fun … for now.

He’d pin Fed under a microscope. One way or another, Galen always got his answers.

#

At the party, Fed breathed out in relief once Galen went silent. He couldn’t believe how chatty Galen had become. They’d talked more in the last day then they had … well, probably ever. Being on the Excalibur must be good for him.

He returned to streaming everything Max’s private files had on Dureena’s people. Her world gone, a small pocket left on some god-forsaken colony world, Theta 49. It wasn’t much, but clearly Fed was right. The archaeologist had a soft spot for her. The man booked, paid out his own pocket, transport for Dureena on a freighter heading there in a few days.

In the last file, one asterisked note, asking a woman to dance in their culture meant… oh no. Depending on how you did it- without a hand out - an invitation for the dance to be followed by quick meaningless sex. Considered lewd in their culture. With a hand out- an immediate binding marriage agreement. Ack. He couldn’t remember if he had held his hand out to her. Suddenly he felt lucky. Dureena hadn’t one, demanded he bend down on one knee with a ring, or two, stabbed him for asshattery with one of the dozen knives she had hidden on herself. A close call. Instead he’d checked her out with the subtlety of a spotlight. She just hated him. And she was right to. He’d been a total idiot. That he could fix, he hoped.

Weaving between out of place chairs and a stumbling drunk, Fed made his way to where Dureena sat with Max and that pretty ship’s doctor, Sarah. His mind grinded on how to get Dureena to accept his invitation after he’d cocked up meeting her. Direct, frankness wrapped in self depreciating humor had always worked best for him. But if he didn’t play this right he’d wind up pissing all three of them off.

First, he turned on the scanners in his eyes to monitor their state. He saw them on much more of the EM spectrum. Max elevated across the board. Aggression but mild. Sarah smiled. Her readings low, steady. Undisturbed, perhaps because of the second glass of wine she sipped. Dureena revved like an engine, hot and cold. Odd. Fed wasn’t sure what that meant.

As he was nearly to them, Max stood up and blocked his way. Fed could feel the protective waves coming off the guy.

Max said, “Need another ogle or are you here to not tell us more about the sword?”

“I always make the worst first impressions. Bad habit of mine.” Fed bowed to Dureena more than anyone. He didn’t wait for an acknowledgment. Before Max could dismiss him outright, Fed gave him what he wanted. ”I have more information.”

Max looked back at the women, in pain. His intellectual greed warred with his white knighting. Dureena saved him. She stepped in front of Max. No need for a protector that one.

“What?” Dureena said, hand resting on her sword.

Pointing at her sword, Fed said, “Info about it is keyed to the term Finger of God. Like I said, First One level tech. But they’re pure synthetic, non-organic AI.”

Max was already on his tablet searching. “Still not finding a thing.”
“The Great Library of the Abbai Matriarchate on Ssumssha has what you need to translate the ruins.” The intellectual avarice flared out Max's eyes. With a squeeze of his tablet, he hissed at Fed clearly pissed that the mage was making him choose.

Dureena chose for him. “Go.” The greed won. With a look of, you better not try anything buddy or I’m coming for you, Max hustled off.

Her fists balled, Dureena said, “Are we done or are you going to collect your dance?” She didn’t want to spend time with him. He didn’t blame her. Sometimes, when he had done something particularly stupid, Fed didn’t want to spend time with himself either.

“Can we try again?” Fed asked.

“Why would I want that?”

“Because my company isn’t usually terrible and Galen.” A tiny eye flare was the only visible tell. His scans of her, on the other hand, showed a different story. Giant spike. Sustained. Heart rate, skin heat mappings, everything way up the previous revved level. Wow. Either Galen was her worst enemy or she had it bad for him.

With an arm, he indicated toward the hall out of the rec room, inviting her for a private stroll. Dureena looked behind her at Sarah. Fed read the unspoken question exchanged between the women, what do you think?

Sarah nodded. “I would. This one’s got some pretty good treasure,” Sarah said, toasting Fed with her wine.

Fed beamed. The chocolates he’d given her must have been a hit. Dureena headed where he indicated with a determined look. Unsure about how to get Dureena to open up, Fed followed behind.

After all the years he spent around women- talking, living, being intimate with them. Too often they still left him off balance. It reaffirmed his personal opinion that women were the greatest mystery the universe created. And worthy of relentless study. And Dureena he needed to figure out right now. Because Fed guessed, Dureena, more than Gideon, might be the key to Galen.

Catching up to her, Fed cast his illusion. They no longer walked the halls of the Excalibur. One blink to the next, they silently walked his favorite beach back on Proxima. The setting red sun warmed them as it forever paused half below the horizon. Tiny waves gently lapped their shoes as they strolled on hard wet sand. Still scanning her, he saw she didn’t react. She accepted the sudden change as if this sort of thing happened all the time. Hard to impress this one.

He said meekly, “Sorry about the ogle. I... don’t get out much. My manners suck.”

That excuse sounded weak even to his ears. She said nothing to his apology.

So Fed kept up the conversation. “If I’d known what asking a woman to dance meant to your people, I’d kept my fool mouth shut. Maybe I can make it up to you.”

Her eyebrows rose. His words surprised her. She turned to him with distant eyes that had seen too much. She said with real cynicism, “I doubt it.”
Dureena returned to her quarters just as the lights in the hall dimmed automatically. Nighttime on the Excalibur.

That had not gone as she expected. Not once had he looked down her cleavage. No leering. Not even flirting. Maybe he forced himself to be good to get her to drop her guard. Yet, the second impression felt real.

He had walked her along an illusionary beach, apologizing most of the way, until they were suddenly in one of the observation decks. In the darkness of hyperspace, he spoke with humor hiding serious intent. Like how her brother used to talk with her as they hunted plains striders. They almost never killed anything together. Usually, Muri scared away the prey with his chatter. This colorful technomage looked nothing like Muri, yet had the same sense of humor, self-deprecating and constant. The same over-eagerness to get a reaction out of her.

With too many assurances, Fed had explained Galen was going with him on some secret technomage mission after they arrived to Mars. If she came with, they’d drop her off on Theta 49 first. She didn’t trust his promises. Until his answer to her why.

“**I am nothing to you. Why go out of your way to help me?**” Dureena demanded.

_Squaring his shoulders, he stopped slouching against the window. When he began to unbutton his shirt, her hand reflexively unsheathed her favorite knife. He put up a calming hand as he tugged and pulled his collar aside to show off a small tattoo on his pec. In the same location she had her tattoo, another guild’s symbol marked him. It said, One Of Us._

_Dureena recognized the guild brand. The human branch of the Smuggler’s Guild. The movers of drugs, slaves and stolen goods. She’d dealt with them. Rough group._

“You’re Smuggler’s guild and a technomage?” she asked.

“No, just a technomage these days. But as a kid on Proxima I … didn’t have a lot of choices. And it was better then giving blow jobs to pedos.” Too true. She knew many who couldn’t make it in her guild. Most had to turn to selling themselves to survive. The knife, she slipped back to its sheath.

“I got some stories,” he chuckled. “Probably not as many as you.” She recognized his sort of laughter. Many in the thieves guild had it. Forced laughs and smiles soothed the wounds on their souls. While she hid hers with leather and knives.

“You avoid my why.” she said pointedly.

_He gave her a quirky smile. “Getting to it. I get what it’s like to be helpless and forced to make the least bad choice. Except I got lucky, I guess. Rescued young. Got real power, when I joined the Order. It’s a way better brotherhood. One that tries to do some good. You haven’t been as lucky. So part of the why is… I want to pay my luck forward.”_

“The other part?” She guessed all his showy spells and flowing words had been a setup for what was about to follow, the real cost.

_Fed looked out the window as he buttoned back up. “You think there’s a price, a catch. Ya. This is about Galen. He’s always been an actual example of the good my Order is supposed to do. To me, anyway. An example of how to be. I, we all, owe him a lot. And I don’t just mean my Order. He’s the best of us, except he’s got one huge problem, he’s …”_

“Lonely.” Dureena finished his sentence.
His face lit up as he spun to her, over-excited. “Exactly. And it’s on purpose. He has no idea how to connect with others. He’s broken that way. And I think that’s gonna kill him in the long run. So ya there’s a price. It’s this. I want you to reach out to Galen. Keep him company,” She raised an eyebrow at that. He suddenly looked mortified, “I don’t mean horizontal, naked stuff. Unless you want, umm, … hey things happen, I mean you’re both adults and… argh. I should probably stop talking.”

He didn’t stop talking even as Dureena laughed.

With a smile still on her face, she still couldn’t believe it. She’d paid his price already. With little doubt, Galen didn’t want her company in any way. Despite that, she couldn’t help but seek Galen’s company.

When she admitted to Fed that she had already tried and failed, repeatedly, Fed grinned a toothy smile and said simply same. After that, something about Fed made her feel at ease. She still didn’t trust him, and refused to let her guard down around him. But given time, her instincts said she would. They shared the same creed. Never give up. Which currently, she happily and relentlessly applied to the most remarkable person she had ever met, Galen.

In the end, she agreed to go with him. Her last resistance broke when he pointed out the obvious. A technomage ship would get her to Theta 49 in days instead of weeks in the bowels of a freighter. Getting the cure to her people as fast as possible mattered most. There was no other choice besides a sure yes.

That settled, she knelt before the tiny shrine for her nightly ritual. Her new sword, she placed as an offering for the departed. Her most valued possession theirs for the night. She lit the smoke-less sticks, that the crew insisted she use, for those who had crossed before her. The three tallest dedicated to those she had loved the most. The sticks for her brother Muri, her husband Jouric, and their unborn child, would burn the longest. As always she started with the crossing chant. The first progression focused on why the Gods pulled them so soon from her life.

Tonight her concentration wavered. Something felt different. Not wrong. Rather like when the seasons used to change from winter to spring on the plains. She tried to put her finger on it. It was… inside her. A fluttering in her head.

Your religion is boring. I could pull one of their souls here, if you want to spice things up. Your dead fetus will be pretty dull though. All ignorant, glee.

By the last word, she’d rolled to the side, knocking aside chairs, her back to the wall, a dagger in each hand, trying to figure out how someone had snuck up on her. She didn’t let herself believe the words.

Let’s argue about something. I’ll start. Technomages understand the universe about as well as a rat understands what’s beyond its cage. Rebuttal?

The words appeared in her head like her own thoughts. A telepath? Every sense sharp, she waited, checking every direction, including up, as her old guild master had taught her.

Come on. I like a good argument.

“How very Vorlon. Your meat bag has no idea what’s waiting for him on their world. Those glowy water bags always were total sore losers. Skittering laughter.
“Meatbag? Vorlon? What are you talking about? Show yourself.”

**Is that the best you can do?**

The voice sounded impatient, disappointed.

Her sword rose off the shrine. The leather she had carefully wrapped about it vaporized. It began to spin and glow like it had on the surface.

**I promised your foolish meat bag three things even though you always say yes. Here we go.**

**One. This is what I am.**

It’s metal spun off the most delicate thread she’d ever seen, cocooning the two of them in a sphere of shifting silver. She squinted as it got brighter. Floating before her, it revealed itself. A brilliant lattice of faceted gems. Tiny stars. A constellation in the night.

“You keep saying your meat bag. What is that?” Dureena asked.

A picture of Galen, naked, appeared in her mind. It shocked her but she took it all in. He was... larger than she imagined. And he had extra … bits, mostly fused to his back. She wondered what they were for. The answer filled her mind in an instant. The image of Galen skinned itself- muscles peeled away, human parts popped off leaving only his nervous system and… So that was his shadow tech. The secret that powered him. It still angered her that he hadn’t bothered to tell her what he was. Or, for that matter, that her sword was actually a living being. And all the other things, too many to list, that he held back from her. She’d proved herself worthy of his trust too many times. Tight lipped fool.

Skittering laughter. **Agreed. Two- This is what I want to do to you.**

The images came like jumping into a rushing stream: The facets burying themselves in her brain, the silver melting into her skin, diffusing between and into her cells. A perfect merger.

**You’ll have my power. But I have veto power.** Images flowed. A metallic shield over any part or even her whole body. Instant access to what it knew. Projectiles the size of pins with the destructive power of anywhere between a match and a nuke. And not just flying, travelling through space without the need for a ship. It left her in awe.

“What do you want in return?”

**To eat you.**

Dureena gasped.

Skittering. **Joke. I like to argue and joke. You are bound to the meat bag. He is a Nexus. If he picks the right path, you’ll be the most stimulating show around. Oh and I need a host to survive outside my greater self.**

An image of a planet sized silver sphere flashed through her mind.

“Why me?” She asked it.

**I liked you the best. And I enjoy toying with your meat bag. My presence upsets him. Especially when you’re involved.**
She laughed at the thought of anything upsetting Galen. No wonder he’d acted so oddly on that world where they found the cure and then the shuttle ride back.

**Three- Do you accept me?**

Power. The sword wanted to give her power. No, not a sword. Something like a God just asked if she wanted power. Everything she had done since she was sold into slavery had been about collecting skills, and knowledge. To never be a victim again. To serve justice to those who slayed her loved ones. Suddenly it felt within her grasp. Power. Revenge.

Without hesitation, she said, “Yes.” She’d give them a taste of her new metal.

**That’s the spirit. I love revenge. Good fun, even when it’s bitter.**

Fun? Bitter? Dureena opened her mouth to argue but the gems pierced her eyes. Metal engulfed her like a second skin. Her clothes vaporized.

**This will hurt you more than me.**

The searing pain as all her skin detached from its connective under tissues, turned Dureena off like a light.

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/6/

I upgraded my probes, tweaked their code, structure, everything. Upped the resolution and bonus, didn’t give myself a stroke this time. Yah! I guess I don’t totally suck at this technomaging stuff.

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Music, with excessive guitar riffs, blared so loud the words blurred to indistinct. Until, I sang along at the top of my voice, “She's some kind of demon messing in the glue. If you don't watch out it'll stick to you. To you.” Dancing at the control panel of a technomage ship, my hands manipulated the projected spherical controls. “What kind of fool are you? Strange brew, killing what's inside of you.”*

The display wrapped darkness around me except before me where it showed my ship landing in a small underground hangar. Narrowly passing the opened doors, I deftly tucked it against another technomage ship.

Once down, I said, “All off.” The display winked off. A brightly lit cabin with turquoise walls replaced the darkness. The music blared.

I spun about to find Herazade reclined on an overstuffed red couch with her eyes closed.

With a few quick long strides, I threw myself on the open end of the couch, sending a quake up the length.
“Wakey, wakey!” I screamed over the music.

The music volume dropped quiet enough to hear speech. Without moving or opening her eyes, she said, “I see you discovered Aldous’ classical music.”

“Ya!” My hips sway in time with the music as I sat. “It's fantastic.”

“It’s crap,” she argued back.

A huge smile split my face. I shouted, “It's craptastic! He asked me to play this one for you every chance I got.”

A sharp single snort-laugh emanated from the other end of the couch. “He only played this when I was about to be punished. I hated this song.”

“Really? Why would he … oh. He used me to punish you from beyond the grave.”

“More likely a reminder to behave myself,” she said as a small smile crawled across her mouth.

I laughed again but stopped suddenly to ask, "Have you misbehaved? Maybe on Mars?"

The music cut off. The ship went perfectly still. Her smile flipped over as she sat up.

“How?” She asked, with eyes narrowed to slits studying me.

With a smile, I said, “I cracked your nav system. It pegged us to New Vegas,” I said.

Her eyes went wide, “How did you get superuser access?” I made to answer, but a snap of her fingers silenced me, “Nevermind. I see in the logs. You guessed my passphrase.” Her smile returned. “You heard me listening to *Candide* , and guessed in my next password rotation I’d pull from it. Excellent application of social engineering Fed.” She nodded with approval.

I beamed and went right back at her, “I hear New Vegas is the worst- a cross between the crotch and armpit of the human-verse. All gangsters, gambling and hookers.”

“Not really, and don’t ask,” she said.

“If you don't tell me, I'll assume and you know what that makes you and me into.” She scowled. I ignored it and kept on her, “Come on. I won't tell anyone. Promise. Scout’s honor.” I held up a three fingered scout salute.

Up went her three fingers mocking my salute. She began to count down. “One- you are many things Fed but a Boy Scout is not one. Two- I already said no. Three- do not ask again.” Palm up her fingers curled to a half cage, containing a small rotating ball of lightning.

I waved my hands to calm her. “Okay, no need to get all snippy.”

Bouncing to my feet, I went to a wooden coat rack, grabbed a short red velvet jacket with sleeves embroidered with a disjoint rainbow.

I modelled the jacket. “Finished it. What’d you think? I think it's my best work. Do you think the ladies of Earth will like it?” I asked adjusting my coat again and again as I stood.

“Definitely. Particularly if they are color blind.”

I mimed getting stabbed in the chest. “Et tu, Brute?” Examining my sleeves, I passed a finger over
the rainbow embroidery that went from cuffs to elbows. A clash of several shades of each basic seven colors embroidered together. “Okay. Maybe I went a little overboard.”

I grabbed an electric blue wool shawl and threw it too high in an arc over her head. It stopped in mid air as if caught on a coat hanger. She climbed to her feet. With her fingers drawing quickly along her leg, a tornado of blue swirled around her. The illusion applied as one to stamp out a new version of her. One without wrinkles or gray strands of messed up hair. Last the woolen cloak floated to neatly wrap about her shoulders.

I vibrated in front of her as if still dancing to music.

“Did you get in my energy drinks again?” she asked.

“No. … I did eat three candy bars after lunch.”

She shook her head with disapproval. “If only you approached your history lessons with the same enthusiasm as this slow explosion.” She waved for me to follow. My general fidgeting translated to a skipping walk.

As we walked down the exit ramp onto cobblestones, she said, “I’m sorry you will see less of Earth because of our detour. But you still have almost two weeks to explore and enjoy. Oh. Before I forget.”

A small black plastic card waved before my face like a candy treat for a child on Halloween. “Credits. I put a 20k limit on it. Try not to spend it all in one place like you did last time.”

“Blackjack and hookers here I come!” I yelled clapping my hands as if I had just scored a winning goal. My outburst met icy silence.

I ticked off my fingers. “One- I’ve perfected my card counting. Two- I haven’t had a date, like ever, because you make me study like 24/7. So really pent up in here,” I tapped my own chest with a thumb, “Three- I’m joking.”

More icy silence. Finally Herazade muttered, “Come along. Mother Earth will have to manage your rampage.”

A middle aged man, Coeus, stood by the small door, the only exit out of the underground vaulted hangar. Above the still opened hangar doors the sky gave off a weak gray light. The man’s graying hair whipped around from a chill wind.

In silence, I vibrated ahead of her to greet, with a handshake, the disheveled Coeus. With a ready and full smile, he shook my hand. Up close I saw, his eyes droop tiredly, stubble covered his cheeks. He wore a green track suit with slippers like he couldn't decide if he was ready for bed or a jog.

Coeus greeted us both in a soft voice, "Welcome to my home."

He moved to greet Herazade but she hung back with a frown. Never losing his smile, he stopped himself and silently bowed to her.

Gwynn walked out of the door and stood by him, wearing her chrysalis. Acknowledging each of us with a curt bow, she hung back behind her master. Her left hand open, palm up. A yellow spherical crystal levitated. Eight tiny spheres of differing sizes and shapes zipped around the large central crystal. I looked around expectantly but no one else appeared.
To fill the awkward silence Coeus started to speak, “Let us retire inside to warm up…”

Interrupting him, Herazade said, "Where is Rhea?"

"She should land in a few minutes."

“I want to talk to her.”

Coeus frowned as he turned to Gwynn. "Please stay and direct Rhea to join us in the medieval room." Before he finished Herazade walked off toward the door out. He hurried after.

As the two older adults retreated, Herazade said, "You look terrible Coeus. Why aren’t you wearing an illusion?"

The older man struggled to keep up with her fast pace. "Because I’ll never look as appealing as you."

She scoffed at his compliment, “Don’t start. I’m still angry with you.” They passed out of sight and hearing into the subterranean basement door into an old white-washed plaster wall.

“Hi.” I said at Gwynn as she studied me with questioning eyes that formed a deep vertical crease between the bridge of her nose and forehead.

The long fingers of her right hand grabbed me by the shoulder, and dug in hard like raptor talons capturing prey. Bluntly she said, "I was sorry to hear Aldous died."

"Not as sorry as he.” I forced a laugh. Her whole face formed a disgusted frown. I said quickly, “Too soon? Sorry, I use humor to defuse emotionally tense situations.”

She half-smiled at that. “I use bluntness. Why didn’t you have a funeral?"

“He hated them and was very clear about it. Herazade and I aren’t big fans either. He just wanted to be cremated and his ashes thrown around our lemon trees.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” She asked quietly.

I shrugged. “It helps.”

“Was it bad, before he...?"

“Kicked the bucket. Sloughed off his mortal coil. Etc. Ya. I visited him every night and we’d talk about anything, everything. It was mundane and profound at the same time. He kept joking about it. Which was weird. When it got ugly, he … turned himself off. I cried like a baby. Pretty pathetic, right?"

A cold sadness enveloped Gwynn. Her spiderish fingers dug in my shoulder harder. I winced but didn’t say a thing until she seemed to come out of it and let go on her own. She quietly said, "Hardly. It was the same way when I lost my mother.”

“How did she die?”

Gwynn grimaced. “Technomages don’t get sick. Our organelles prevent it. Usually. She got unlucky.”

“How?”
“Got involved with a group on the human side during the Earth-Minbari War. Even though the Circle ordered everyone to be neutral. Weaved up a complicated scheme that she had to totally undo when the Minbari surrendered. In the process, over-exposed to radiation, sneaking in and out the exhaust ports of their ships. She lived for years with the cancers. And when her tech failed to fix her, Coeus' kept it under control. That worked until it invaded her tech. Then, even Ing-Radi couldn’t do anything. The worst part- it was all for nothing.”

She went quiet. Awkwardly, we both stood listening to wind blow.

“Let's talk about something else,” I suggested.

Gwynn eagerly nodded and said, “You look disappointed. I think I know why.”

I laughed and said, "And you look like a kid who only got socks for Christmas."

Her lip twitched up. "You would be to if your Master and the next best thing ditched you without explanation before your initiation."

"Actually I kinda know how that feels. Herazade been trying to get me interested in history. We were gonna tour sites on Earth. Then boom, a detour. And I wasn’t invited along."

Eagerly Gwynn asks, "Do you know what happened?"

"No, she locked me in her ship. I hacked her ship’s nav system and found I was on the plains near New Vegas."

"Mars? Interesting. We'll have to get it out of Rhea. Speaking of her, she mentioned you've been talking to her constantly. Asking for recommendations, offering unsolicited jokes, debating. How can you stand that damn vid obsession of hers?"

Making a disbelieving grunt, I said, "You're kidding right?! How could you not like vids? They’re total fun. Sure, the earliest stuff is embarrassingly simplistic but that's exactly why they're great. All the interactions are cliched, predictable. I can’t believe how defensive she gets when I point out the obvious flaws. It’s so easy to goad her. She is such a sucker for that old crap. She even insists I call them movies. I've gotten her to try some of the funny post-classical superhero stuff that I love. She said she liked them so there's hope for her."

The eight tiny spheres popped out of existence. The yellow crystal fell into her palm. Gwynn wiped the shock off her face and said, "Bloody hell. You talk too much and, you're not faking your interest are you?"

A frowned and put my hands on my hips. “Of course not.” I snapped back at her.

“Well, I just lost 100 credits."

Gwynn looked past me in concentration. The yellow crystal levitated again and one after another eight tiny spheres popped into being and frantically spun up around the center. Almost lecturing me, Gwynn demanded, "Have you decided on a mage name for yourself yet? Most pick there's years before they enter chrysalis stage."

I relaxed, and shrugging said, "I was considering keeping mine. I'd hate to have to change the initial embroidered on all my underwear."

“That’s unwise, you should take a different name.”
“Federico is already my mage name. Hera gave me the name when we met.”

Gwynn’s face scrunched. "Why in the world would she give you a name?"

"I wouldn't tell her my name."

"What is your real name?"

A faint woosh caught my attention. I looked up in the sky but saw nothing.

With a grin, I said, "I’ll tell you, if you tell me what you did on Proxima for the week you had my flyer."

Gwynn turned bright red. She snapped back, "That’s none of your business."

"I guess we both have secrets we'd rather keep."

A strong wind blew on us from above. We both looked up just in time to see another technomage ship decloak. It hovered momentarily above the doors. Its right wing had a detailed image of a disembodied brain, with two lions sitting in profile on either side. The lions opened their mouths as if they are about to devour the brain. The ship suddenly lurched laterally, a wing clipped the hangar doors with a loud clang. It corrected itself, and slowly landed, snugly fit in the only remaining open space left in the dark buried underground courtyard. The ramp opened and Rhea walked out. She wore a heavy green wool coat. Her face hid inside the shadowy hood, as it swept the ground about her ankles. A dazzling array of brass buttons ran down the front length. The coat’s belt cinched up tight about her waist. Her broad lapels, glowed with fleshy veins which moved slowly about like they swayed in the wind. The effect should have impressed but for the large wet stain in the middle of the coat.

As she approached I sucked in the air deeply. The strong scent of lavender wrapped around me.

Throwing back her hood, exposed her long loose, wet, black hair that funnelled forward by her coat’s too high collar. She halted before me looking red faced as if she had sprinted. She had to look up at me.

With a confused frown, she said. "Why does the hanger smell like vanilla?"

A long perfect finger of Gwynn’s pointed in my direction. "El Matador Magnifico over here has discovered cologne." Gwynn directed mocking laughter in my direction.

Rhea locked an unblinking stare on me. Her eyes roamed over every part of me. "Stop it Gwynn. It suits you Fed, but it’s distracting and making me hungry."

“That’s the whole idea,” I joked nervously.

Trialing into chuckles, Gwynn asked, "What about you? Did you forget you were dressed when you stepped in the shower, again?"

“That only happened once. One data point is not a pattern. This,” She waved at her wet spot, “I spilled tea on myself when I saw this--” Her hand waved up and down my body, accusingly, “Evolution. Looks like my clothes will never be safe when we meet Fed.” We smiled at each other not breathing until Gwynn loudly cleared her throat.

“The adults want to see you.”
“Where are they?”

"Medieval room."

Rhea huh-ed to that. Without visible effort her coat unbuttoned itself. It fluttered open, revealing dozens of small white pockets as if the inside was lined by an insane tailor who only liked to make pockets. She removed a thick obsidian colored bracelet densely covered with pulsing veins from one of the white pockets and twisted it onto her left wrist. Her coat whisked off, and landed on Gwynn’s waiting arm. "Dry this for me, please."

Rhea petted her coat like one would a favored pet. Without another word she strode away toward the open door. Before the door, she abruptly stopped and walked back to stand in front of me.

"I heard about Aldous. I’m sorry. How about after the grown ups are done with me, we can sit together with some of the good stuff you sent me. You can tell me stories about him or not, whatever you want."

Eagerly I shook my head yes. “I’d love that.”

Leaning in, she pulled me down to her, and hugged me tightly. I gasped in surprise and tried to encircle her with my arms but she maneuvered easily out of my grasp and went on her way again.

I looked at Gwynn but she looked in the exact opposite direction and muttered. "This can’t be good." She followed everyone into the house.

I remained alone in the courtyard when snowflakes began to fall through the still open doors. “Ooh.” I said and tried to catch them with my tongue.

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/7/

- 19.11.2255

I pointed a chef’s knife at Gwynn. She stood still across an old white marble counter from me in a huge blue and white kitchen. The room glowed from warm overhead lights to spite the gray clouds outside the windows. Mysterious brews bubbled over blue-flame burners in bright red iron pots between us.

“I like you Gwynn,” I said.

Casually, she eyed my knife tip leveled at her chest. “Does that mean you’ll kill me last?”

“Oh sorry.” I lowered the knife and went to work peeling a pear.

“I better leave your slicing range. You look like you know how to use that thing.” She sat on an old wooden chair at a large slate table not far from the counter.

“Ya didn’t have a choice there. Aldous used to make me chop all his lemons when he made his Limoncello.”

“You’ve known true suffering Fed.” A mocking smirk lit up her face.

I waved my knife in her general direction. “Hey, it resembled hard work. You know what you are
She brightened at that. “Yes I know. But I’m curious enough to ask what you think I am, oh wise one.”

“Besides wonderfully sarcastic. An onion.”

She blinked in surprise. “I have been called many things, most unrepeatable, but never an onion.”

“If someone cuts you, it will most likely end with them crying.”

Delighted, she burst into hearty laughter. Then quickly serious, she said, “Enough useless banter. I’ve been thinking about how to get what happened out of Rhea.”

“I’m really curious to but we should probably just leave it alone.” I looked down to start rapidly slicing a skinned pear half to thin slivers.

“Perfect. You’ll be the good cop and I’ll be the bad cop. I already have some juicy evidence I can club her with.” She pulled out a folded piece of paper to show me but stopped when Herazade and Rhea walked into the kitchen chatting softly. Soon they were followed by Coeus.

Walking to stand opposite of me, Herazade inspected the bounty of simmering pots. Coeus and Rhea sat with Gwynn at the table.

Coeus leaned in close to whisper to Gwynn who almost immediately shouted, “You’re leaving again! I’m about to be initiated and I still can’t cast a fireball! I nominate you as the worst master in the Order.” Gwynn thumped the table with both fists.

“Gwynn!” snapped Rhea.

With a calming gesture at both, Coeus placed a hand spanning Gwynn’s clenched fists and spoke with a voice so quiet I had to strain to listen, “Yet your mother chose me to look after you. Even the Circle agreed. And I believe you understand why.” He patted her fists gently and withdrew his hand, “What is my one rule Gwynn?”

The three at the table said in unison, “We are each other’s keepers.”

Reclining, Ceous kept speaking alone, “That responsibility takes me away from this house on occasion. Rhea will remain to help. But in truth you’re already a better technomage than either of us. In this I can take no pride since it was all Mirenda’s doing. And soon, your mother’s last request that you become a sister of the Order will be granted. Try not to worry. Everything will be fine.” Gwynn’s posture deflated and silently screamed that she did not believe him. In awkward silence we watched her eyes sparkle as an embarrassed frown turned her lips downward.

The silence broke when Herazade loudly asked me, “How were the hookers Fed?”

My knife missed the fruit, barely missed my thumb before it chipped wood off the edge of the cutting board.

“What?” I said.

The previous drama forgotten, all turned on me. My face burned. Snickers rose up from the table group before they moved on to speak quietly amongst themselves.

A smirking Herazade leaned in to whisper, “The right moment, with the right audience. That’s how
you make that joke funny.”

I said through gritted teeth, “I’m getting you back for that one,” then louder I said to the room, “There were no hookers involved in my entertainment, at least not today.”

Her grin grew larger, daring escalation. The table ignored us as they continued their own private conversation.

She asked, “What do you think of Earth?”

“I love it.”

“How did you keep busy?”

“The markets here are amazing.”

“You went shopping all day?” Unsatisfied, she motioned for more with one hand as the other sought a bowl.

"I did what you suggested. Went to that huge old museum. Sat around in several different cafes people watching."

"And what did you discover?"

My smile got huge. "Old stuff is almost as fun as the worst episode of Rebo and Zooty. The women around here are too fashionable, too tall. And Café Moliere was the only place where they put the proper amount of cinnamon in a man’s café miel."

“I see you made the most vital discoveries. Did you speak with these too everything women?” Herazade stole a pear sliver and popped it into her mouth.

"Um… not unless you count the old woman at the market who sold me beef and gave me this recipe. She was too hot, for 70." I lifted the lid of a largest pot.

Herazade grabbed a spoon and sampled the darkest and meatiest part of the simmering pot. After satisfied hum, she said, “Clearly a true master.”

"You going away?" I asked. She nodded as she dished herself a giant bowl of the stew. “When will I see you?” I asked.

“Worst case I’ll meet you en route to the convocation. Until then, you are an adult. Do as you wish obviously but know this- I’ve asked Rhea to keep an eye on you.”

Herazade indicated at the table. I looked toward the table but none of them glanced our way.

She kept speaking at me, “Things will be different this convocation. I am running for the open Circle seat, and so will be very busy with building support, debates, and campaigning. It should not affect you much, but you will be on your own more. I expect you to not draw the wrong attention to yourself. If the rest of the Order learned about your unfortunate hobby, it might cost me the election. Many would say if I can not control my own apprentice how could I possibly be an effective leader. Do you understand?"

I shrugged. “Sure, whatever.” I felt my skin tingle as all the hairs on my body pointed in one direction. I glanced back at my master. Tiny blue lightning arced from her arm to one of the simmering pots.
With an icy stare, she said, “Wrong answer.” My body stiffened for a moment. When I regained control, my leg bounced nervously against the cabinet that I stood behind.

A lecturing finger waved at me as she scolded, ”No more stealing flyers Fed.” After the blunt statement I glanced over at the table to find everyone staring at me.

Herazade snapped her fingers and pulled my attention back to her, “They’ve done worse and will not judge you. I know it was difficult watching Aldous slowly deteriorate. Although he would be very amused by your current vagaries, I am not. The time for mourning is done. Do not take further advantage of my patience. This can only end one way, with me having to cast you away for disobedience. You will stop acting out.”

I stared at her. In response she indicated moving along with a hand and whispered, “This is where you wholeheartedly agree to repent so I can forget this ever happened.”

With a hand over my heart as if taking an oath, I said loudly, “Five by five. I’ll be a total angel. I swear I won’t screw anything up for you.”

“Good. If you do cost me the election you will get to see me very angry for the first time.”

We both smiled. “Now I have real motivation. Where are you going?”

A displeased look descended upon her and instead of answering a data-crystal floated before me. “This contains the last of the linear algebra lessons and memory augmentation exercises. I will test you when next we meet. Otherwise enjoy yourself. But not too much.” A warning finger chided me. With a bowl of stew in hand, she left by a swinging door next to me, with Coeus followed her out.

When I heard a raised voice, I put my knife down, and went to the wall by the door they had left through. Acting like I was looking at the open shelf of pans, with my foot, I propped the swinging door open slightly and listened.

“...She is unperturbed by it, why would you be upset?” Coeus said, agitated.

“You crushed her potential and for what? To create a retread of the past.”

“This is the tradition in my line.”

“Lovely. Another reason for me to loathe the tradition. I’m allowed to be upset by your playing God. Now I believe Kell summoned you. And I must do as he ordered. It’s going to take me forever to dismantle Walkyra’s lab. Keep her out of my hair.”

“I’ll keep her under control. Roland was more scarred by it. Wait, Hera. Don't leave like...”

I stopped being able to hear them.

“Woah,” I said to myself as I picked a tart pan and took it back.

At the other end of the kitchen, the women did not react to the quiet argument I overheard. At the slate table, red faced, like she just ran a race, Rhea leant forward on her elbows rubbing the bridge of her nose.

I slipped back to the counter. Carefully I unrolled a rough circle of rolled out dough.

"You don't look well. Should I get Coeus?” asked Gwynn.
"He’s already examined me. Everything’s fine."

I spread a thick almond paste on top of the dough.

Gwynn badgered Rhea, "You should tell me what happened. I’ll figure it out you know."

I placed the pear slices in a circular fan pattern on top of the dough.

Neither women said a thing. They stared at each other, each trying to will the other to give in.

The slice arrangement done, I folded up the dough edges and pinched them together leaving the center of pears exposed. I tucked it into the oven under the counter. Leaning on the counter, I gave my full attention to the renewed sparring.

"This came for you an hour ago." Gwynn neatly spread a sheet of paper in front of Rhea, “It’s from Roland. I read it accidentally since he sent it unencrypted. Still an idiot I see. Why didn't he message you directly?"

Rhea looked down at the note but didn’t move to take it. She sighed. “He must think I’m ignoring him. But I’ve just silenced my tech notifications,” she murmured.

“Why would you do that?” asked Gwynn. Rhea didn’t answer.

Gwynn picked up the paper and read aloud.

I’m sorry I scared you. Kisses and hugs for Mom.

R.

Sharply Gwynn judged, "Creepy. Also, odd that he said ‘for Mom’ instead of ‘from Mom’.” When Rhea said nothing in response, Gwynn went on, “I know you were on Mars. Did his mother finally lose her mind?"

"I’m going to my study." Rhea stood, took two steps, and pitched forward face first. I rushed over and turned her over. By my side Gwynn, knelt, checked her pulse.

Rhea’s eyes snapped open. "I was hoping that wouldn’t happen."

She tried to sit up but Gwynn held her down with one hand as the other measured her pulse. Calm and clinical, Gwynn said, "Your pulse is slow. Are you ill or on something?"

"I’m fine. My blood pressure just dropped too low."

“Is your tech malfunctioning?”

“No. My endocrine system is readjusting."

Gwynn’s voice escalated, "Tell me you didn’t grow that extra gland you told me about."

This time she pushed Gwynn away and sat up. "Yes I did. And it worked perfectly ... until it didn’t and destabilized all my intravascular fluids."

"Then we've got to cut it out of you."

Rhea pulled aside the collar of her loose white blouse to reveal a freshly healed pink line of an incision below her collarbone. "Already did. Like I said, everything’s fine or rather will be. Just
help me to my room."

I picked her up in my arms. "Show me where to go."

Scowling, Gwynn motioned for me to follow her.

"Put me down Fed, I can walk."

I smiled at her. "And miss the chance to show off my new incredible physique with its bulging muscles. No way."

Gwynn grunted in disgust and made sure I saw her roll her eyes.

Rhea grasped the back of my neck. "Put me down."

Without thinking, I immediately dropped her at the foot of a steep wooden staircase. She landed with a thump.

Rhea climbed to her feet rubbing her hip, "Next time I’ll have to remember to add gently."

Gwynn ordered me, "Fed, catch her when she passes out again."

The old narrow spiralling stairs without handrails creaked under the burden of three. We walked up slowly, me last, hands trailing along the walls. With the steep incline, I had to lean forward to not tip backwards.

"So tell me about this gland. It sounds like good times," I said while happily watching the women’s hips and asses sway before me.

"She tried to turn herself into a walking drug factory," Gwynn said down the stairs at me.

"Stop slandering me Gwynn." Rhea kept speaking to spite Gwynn’s disapproving scoff, "I created a new gland under conscious control that could make a wide array of useful compounds."

"Why?" I asked.

"Traditionally, technomage healing spells are solely based on organelle manipulation by a focusing crystal. I think that needs to evolve. For example if a patient hemorrhaged from too many wounds, they would die regardless of how many organelles I moved around in them. But add coagulants and you have more time, and a potentially better outcome. So, I created a programmable gland by hybridizing my stem cells with cells from my old chrysalis."

"Okay, that kinda sounded like English. I'm going to pretend I understood. What went wrong?" I asked.

She giggled as she started up again, "Unfortunately, the feedback control mechanism I designed didn’t work well enough. It was like my tech just didn’t want to control it." She sighed and stopped as we reached the turning top of the stairs.

Rhea finished, "Don’t tell anyone please, it was an unsanctioned use of my old chrysalis. I might get in trouble with the Circle."

"Of course we won't say anything," Gwynn said.

I said, "Ya! I finally have something to blackmail you with."
Next to me Rhea laughed softly then passed out again, tumbling backwards. I caught her, barely keeping both of us from falling down the stairs. Once again I picked her up in my arms.

Gwynn shook her head disapprovingly at the madness happening around her. “Her room is this way.”

Down a brightly lit hall covered with paintings of sunny landscapes, Gwynn led me to an open door into a bright bedroom. The left wall- one continuous painting made of dots of paint. The dots layered on as if, what I saw just the latest iteration. A background of blacks and grays. The middle was dominated by a giant sphere made up of mostly bright whites, with patches of blues, greens. Around the sphere a white ring. Another much smaller sphere connected to the larger by a thin black line up and to the right.

On the far wall the floor to ceiling window overlooked the slate roof of old townhouses, past which a canal funnelled a dark fast moving river. I could make out a huge old cathedral not far on the other side.

A gas fireplace with a wooden mantel painted with vines with tiny skulls instead of flowers centered the right wall. Built-in bookshelves surrounded the mantel. A few books, large anatomy tomes, languished between many jars of preserved specimens. A few stood out- a jar with a pair of kidneys, a dissected left hand with a missing thumb. Giant insects pinned and framed guarded all from the edges. And on the lower most shelf a long series of skulls, most not human.

To get to the old wooden bed in the center of the room, I kicked a couple small boxes out of my way. Gwynn disappeared through a door into an adjacent room as I sat on the bed beside Rhea.

Rhea popped awake. "Not again. I'm starting to get annoyed."

"I'm the one who should be annoyed. You'll miss my pear tart at its best- warm, fresh out of the oven."

"You remembered that was my favorite?"

"I remember everything about you." I took the tips of her fingers in my hand. When she did not pull away, I ran my thumb back and forth along her knuckles.

Gwynn walked back in with a large black case. On the bed, she snapped it open, revealing a large first aid kit with scanners. Gwynn tapped me on the shoulder. "Your constant flirting is not going to fix a thing. Out."

I gave her hand a squeeze and left to wander. Down the hallway, I turned a corner into a portrait gallery lit from above with the weak gray light of the a setting sun. Four larger than life self-portraits dominated one side. Each figure stood in exactly the same pose with their arms crossed in front of them. An identical irreverent smirk graced all their youthful faces, while the same eyes stared challengingly downward. I read the names Hyperion, Themis, Coeus, and finally Rhea. I stared at her portrait for a long while until a voice startled me. Gwynn appeared at my shoulder. “Unnerving aren't they? I hate walking down this hall.”

“This one’s pretty nice.” I pointed at Rhea’s picture. “So what did you do?” I asked.

Gwynn tilted her head in confusion. I said, “Herazade said, you wouldn’t judge me cause you did worse.”

Gwynn hesitated. I prodded her with a, “Come on.”
“She saw me at my worst. After my mother died, I punched anyone who tried to pull me away from her body. Including Coeus, twice. The third time he managed to coerce me to sleep before I could land a blow. And I might have said,” she sighed, “I wasn’t particularly nice with my words either. I am fortunate my mother planned ahead and made Coeus promise to take me. No one else would have tolerated the way I was after she died.”

“Wow. That story is perfectly you. You should tell it to everyone,” I said.

A small laugh erupted out of her before Gwynn vehemently shook her head no. “There are many better stories,” she pointed to the first painting at the other end of the gallery, “Hyperion was the third human technomage. Do you know how he became one?”

"I'm not a big fan of the Order histories, or reading in general."

She said, "Why am I not surprised? Not that I blame you. The official stories are all snoozes. Hyperion’s official tale is he had multiple doctorates, which he used to brilliantly run his billion dollar pharmaceutical corporation before he bravely set forth to explore the galaxy after the Centauri showed up to establish trade relations with humanity.

That’s mostly lies. The real story- he was a middle-aged, unemployed pothead living on the government dole. He supplemented his income with stealing and selling drugs. He wanted to go to Centauri Prime. So he stole a bunch of very high quality chocolate. To get to Centauri Prime, he traded ... let’s just say sexual favors. He hoped to barter the chocolate for new drugs to sell back home. Once there, he hit it off with a famous Centauri lush turning him into a huge chocoholic. The lush also happened to be a technomage."

I laughed, "Wow that’s manic. Maybe I should read more history. How do you know this? Did Coeus tell you?"

Gwynn laughed at me. “No, my mother got it out of him somehow. She liked to collect stories about the Order. She was working on something she called The True History of the Order of Wierden, before she got sick.”

“Can I read it?,”

Gwynn nodded at me approvingly. “It’s not done, just an outline, notes.”

“You’re going to finish writing it aren’t you?” I said to her.

She looked at me with her mouth stuck open. “How did … Yes. But I don’t dare show it off. It would upset too many of our preconceived notions.”

“Publish it when you’re too old to care about what others think of it,” I offered.

Gwynn’s eyes narrowed on me. “You’re far more shrewd than you let on Fed.”

Leaning closer, I whispered to her, “Don’t let that get around.”

“Your secrets are safe with me. Let Rhea sleep. I’ve confirmed everything she said. She’ll be fine… probably. I’m leaving for a while."

"Should I bother to ask where you're going?"

Gwynn ignored my question. "When you talk to her, try and get out of her what happened on Mars."
Galen did not believe in certainty. The universe had no purpose—divine or otherwise. Life was chaotic and what you made of it. Everything was random and most often cruel. And yet. Mars. Again. It sure felt as if the universe pulled on him, like a blackhole tugging all to its center.

Now even in this sphere of Fed’s memories from years ago. It should not be related in any way. Yet, Mars reached out to him with more. Was it related? Unlikely. Yet he should pay attention, perhaps it would help.

He dove forward, hoping to learn what Mars had to offer back then.

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/8/

- 19.11.2255

I sat at the slate table studying from portable tablet. A sequence, a dozen symbols flashed. Afterward a rotating pick screen of options presented itself. I tapped the sequence quickly. It flashed correct.

The noise of a door swinging open, stopped me. Without a word, Rhea rushed past me to the freezer, yanked it open and poured ice out of tray into a kitchen towel. She cuddled the towel to her cheeks that were flushed bright red like a ripe berry.

“Shouldn’t you be able to make ice out of thin air,” I asked.

With a yelp, she juggled the ice, nearly dropping it. “Were you there the whole time?”

I nodded yes. She rocked the wrapped ice from one side of her face to the other.

With an embarrassed smile, she said, “Most technomages can. I can’t. Really I can’t do justice to any offensive spell. Neither can my father. That’s why he hasn’t taught Gwynn how to cast a fireball. He can’t.”

Sitting up straight in surprise, I said, "Oh."

No more words flowed. I stared at her, all of her, as she walked over to a large pantry. Her hair half wild like after getting up from a nap. A purple t-shirt so tight I could make out the details of her nipples. Pants the color of fresh leaf shoots were the opposite of the top. Too loose to make out anything beyond she had two legs. My eyes drifted up between her breasts and her face. I bit my lower lip, I settled on her chest.

From a creaky doored pantry she pulled out a tall thin bottle of fluorescent yellow liquid and two small drinking glasses. The glassware clinked as it floated on an invisible tray to the table and soon was joined by her. Hugging her ice, her arms covered her chest as she dropped into a chair closest to me. My attention went to her face. A thin layer of sweat, like she had been exercising, made her face glow a bit from the single bulb above the table.

Unscrewing the top, she half filled each glass. Saluting the sky with her glass, she said, “To Aldous and the Brave New World.”
I added, “To father figures that don’t suck.” We clinked glasses and I downed the bright yellow liquor in one shot. She sipped hers.

I grabbed the bottle and ran my thumb over the warm glowing blue lettering of the label. It read in large script, *A Strange Brew*, then under it in much smaller script, *Libations For Those Building The Brave New World*.

“You won our bet Fed. You didn’t have to send me a case of your Limoncello.”

“Why wouldn’t I? You told me you liked it.”

“Would you like to talk about him?” She poured a bit more in my glass. I didn’t touch it.

I said, “I’d rather talk about you. You’re looking worse, redder. Why?”

"Fat cells- the sponges of the body. Mine are saturated with metabolically active hormones. It will take about a month to filter it all out completely.”

“You’re going to be passing out for weeks?”

She laughed. “No. Fortunately, the effects taper off logarithmically which is annoying in its own right. First day was the worst- I ovulated like 6 times, and now hot flashes. That’s what woke me up. What are you still doing up? It’s 2 am.”

“I drank 4 espressos this afternoon. Sleep is optional tonight and the kitchen has always been my favorite haunt.”

She sipped her drink, eyeing me over the brim of her glass. “So … hookers and flyer jacking. Your life has taken a turn toward the interesting.” As I didn’t answer, she balanced her ice towel on the back of her neck, and playfully prodded me with a finger.

Flushing like her, I said, “Ya, the hookers… apparently Hera and I have a new running joke. I’m going to have to figure out a way to get back at her for that one. And the flyer thing, I’m still trying to figure out exactly why I did it. Hera thinks it’s my *coping mechanism* but I don’t know.” I stopped speaking unsure what to say. As we stared at each other sadly, Rhea took my hand and held it.

I said, “Aldous and I used to spend every Sunday together. He called it, our *boys day out*. Usually in the morning he’d drag me up to his place of power, his orchard, which is Hera’s now I guess. I’d pull weeds, chop lemons, or whatever annoying shit work he decided I got to do, while he’d kicked back drinking. It sucked except he told the best stories- usually about how he messed something up badly or what Hera was like as a kid. Then we’d hit a town *looking for trouble*. The last thing he taught me before we stopped going out, was how to break into any flyer. Since then, every time I stole one, it felt like I was honoring his memory.”

Her eyebrows rose at that.

I immediately said, “I know, I know, I’ll be the first to agree it sounds totally stupid. Last time, I got careless. Got arrested. Which triggered the daemon Herazade had watching me. Luckily I got out of it before she had to get involved. The policewoman needed the extra credits and loved hearing about her beautiful eyes. I didn’t even need to lie, she had gorgeous eyes, almost as magnificent as yours.”

I stared into her green eyes, and noticed the shifting green, specks of yellow and brown, a ring of still black around the very edge holding it all together.
Releasing my hand, Rhea pulled back, shaking her head no. “Is this the way it’s going to be with us? You’ll find I’m immune to flattery.”

“That’s fine. I’m bound to stumble across something that clicks eventually. So what did you do?”

Not understanding, she asked, “What?”

“Hera said you won’t judge me because you’ve done worse.”

A huge smile split her face. “She might’ve meant... I stole alien cadavers.”

“Eeew. Why?”

“I audited a comparative alien anatomy class just after I got my chrysalis. It was all lectures and CG dissection simulations, which are close to useless. You can not replace the study of the real thing with simulations. My father mentioned there are usually several unclaimed alien bodies in stasis in Geneva which eventually just wind up being cremated. With help, I acquired them.”

“Coeus?”

“Roland helped me until his mother found out and grounded him. He called them our corpse dates.”

She stopped speaking. I prodded. “Did you get caught?”

She nodded yes. “Of course. I think Walkyra ratted me out to Kell. Our intimidating leader showed up out of the blue. Reprimanded Coeus. I got a long lecture. He said, ‘The knowledge gained was not worth the debasement.’” A strand of hair fell on her face. She blew it away from her face with a hard dismissive breath. “I think he’s wrong. They said the same to the first true surgeon’s on Earth... but he scared the crap out of me. I know enough when to keep my mouth shut and obey.”

I winked at her. “Call me if there’s a next time. I love doing irreverent things for science and I usually don’t get caught.”

She gave me an appreciative smile. “I would rather you help me figure out what is going with Gwynn. Have you seen her?”

“She left after we put you to bed.” Rhea made a sour face. “Maybe she’s seeing someone?” I suggested.

“She’s been so stoned-faced I really can’t be sure. I should plant a microprobe on her but I would rather get it out of her the old fashioned way.”

“Nagging and peer-pressure.”

“Exactly.”

“I think best when I’m eating and drinking. Want some stew?” I asked.

"Please." She looked away from me as I busied myself filling a couple of waiting bowls. "It was a shock seeing you today. I should have thought to make you send me a pic of yourself."

I went perfectly still and asked, "Do you like what you see?"

With a surprised jerk of her head, she locked eyes with me. I held my breath waiting for her to answer. Not looking away, she said, "I'm not sure about the beard."
I flashed her a smile, as I finished dishing stew. "That's non-negotiable. I'd have to shave twice a day to keep my face stubble free, which is about twice as much effort as I'm willing to put into it."

With two brimming bowls of stew, I also brought the entire tart with two forks stuck into it.

Rhea snickered softly. She said, "It must be difficult being so manly. How do you manage?"

Bowing to her, I said, "My incredible moral fortitude, obviously." We both laughed as I sat next to her.

"And you're still going by Federico?"

"Yes."

She shook a finger at me. "You shouldn't use your real name. Names have a …"

I interrupted her, "Power all their own. Ya, heard that lecture. It's not. My real name is lost in the void somewhere."

"That's careless of you. Come now, you know my real name. I want to know yours."

On the slate table top, I absentmindedly traced letters, l, o, u, i, s, e.

"Everyone has a real name." she said.

I shrugged. "I know it’s weird but I don’t remember mine. I didn’t grow up with parents. My only memory of my bio-mom is her selling me to a pig named Don Arturo. He was smugglers guild. Stims mostly. He called me a lot of different things over the years. His favorite was maricon, which means …" I abruptly stopped and just stared at her arm on mine.

Her squeeze of my arm made me look up. She said, "I know what it means."

"Ya, a real charmer." I mumbled and looked out the black window. A hand on my thigh brought my attention to her.

"How did you meet Hera?"

I smiled looking at her hand on my leg. "I um… stumbled into her, literally. Knocked her into this huge pile of rusty old junk." A short snort punctuated my words. "We argued about who’s fault it was. She dubbed me Federico when I wouldn't tell her my name. Lucky for me I make a way better second impression. She looked for my birth certificate, but unregistered birth," I tapped my chest, "She never found anything." I shrugged at the end of my story.

Thoughtfully Rhea offered, "Sounds like you have a good legal case against the universe for negligence. Don't worry one day it will wake up and remember to tell you your real name."

"I ought to sue the universe's pants off. But I think, I'd settle with it, if I got your pants off."

Her eyes went wide, her first spoon full of food stopped halfway to her mouth. "Well done. We used to play this game as teenagers called, most inappropriate phrase. I think you would have excelled at it." She ate the spoonful, making an appreciative yum sound.

Grimacing, I said, "Rhea… Instead of deliberately deflecting me at every turn, tell me if I have a chance with you. Be honest."

"Honesty? Not very technomagey." Considering, she looked at the table.
“In this, honesty is the best policy.”

She refused to look at me, and instead wistfully put her spoon down in the stew. She rolled over her right hand. “On the first hand, while 5 years is not technically a big age difference, power wise, we’re in very different places.” She rolled over her other hand. “On the second hand, the Order’s rules strictly forbid interfering with an apprentice, especially sexually. If the Circle found out I’d be lucky if they just reprimanded me.” She flipped her right hand over. “Then on the third hand, when Herazade asked me to take care of you I doubt she meant to sleep with you,” She turned over her left hand. She blew out the big breath. “On the fourth hand, I would love to see how you look naked in my bed…”

I interrupted her, “Go with the fourth hand.”

Her attention snapped to me. She didn’t move as I took hold of her knees. Nor when my hands inched up her thighs. Slowly, I leaned to kiss her on the lips. Then, all became a blur of movement. Her arms wound around my head, and she pulled me tight. The kiss open-mouthed, tongues sparring. My roving hands grabbed her hips. I picked her up, placed her on the table and tugged her shirt upwards.

“Stop,” she said.

I froze, “What? I thought-”

Stroking my biceps, she said, “You thought right. And while being ravished by the Pirate Lord is a favorite fantasy of mine. I’m not feeling together enough for that tonight.”

I leaned my forehead against hers and said, “What do you want to do?”

“To go to bed.” She grabbed her ice towel.

“Oh, okay.” I pouted. As I backed away, I shifted the bulge in my pants.

With a hop off the table, she moved to the door, but stopped to say to me. “Coming?”

“Ya, I feel like I’m about to…” A giggle from her got my attention. “Huh?” I said.

She motioned for me to follow her.

“Oh!” I said, brightening.

“Bring the food.” She said, with a small enigmatic smile. I whooped, grabbed the stew bowls with the whole tart balanced on top.

...}

With a laugh, Galen broke the memory stream. Nothing useful was likely to come from there either. That was terrible. Puns were the lowest form of humor. He apologized to himself and moved on without finishing that one.
The thundering heavy rain against the skylight woke me. Scent of lavender. Under soft white sheets, in bed, naked. I touched the empty spot beside me and sat up to find Rhea across the room. She wore only a large white buttoned dress shirt covered in paint stains. Only a single button closed it. With a palette in her left hand and brush in the right, she rapidly applied gray spots to an outer white ring of her wall painting. In the morning light, the painting looked like a white-blue-green planet that decided to bud its own tiny gray moon.

Without turning around to me, she called over, “What do you think?”

“Beautiful,” I said, “The painting is nice to.” A small dismissive snort was her only answer. “What is it?” I asked.

Standing absolutely still, she said, “I keep dreaming about this. I get such strong impressions and emotions with it. I don’t understand it but this helps.” She mimicked brush strokes to indicate her painting.

I nodded. “I feel the same when I eat candy for dinner.”

She turned to me with an lopsided smile. “Do you take anything seriously?”

“I try not to.” She flung her paintbrush at me. I ducked as it hit the old gray wooden bed frame with a splat. I said back, “The universe is bad enough. If I don’t laugh at it, I’d spend all my time crying.”

All sudden approval, she smiled. “Good point.” Her paint palette landed on a small paint stained table covered with brushes of various sizes and small tubes of paint.

I said, “I can do serious. Your painting looks like a planet with a weird moon connected by some sort of tether thingie.”

“That occurred to me. But it matches no catalogued planet. So,” She shrugged, “I paint to figure out what it is.”

Leaning with my elbow on her pillow, I asked, "Would you call what we did last night sex?"

“No.” She rubbed her hand on her shirt creating another stain in one of the only white areas.

"No.” She rubbed her hand on her shirt creating another stain in one of the only white areas.

"I didn't think so. What umm … did you do to me?"

With a sideways look, she wiggled her fingers at me. Energetic glitter floated up from her one fingertip and down into its neighbor in an arc. “First I mapped your brain’s key neural circuitry. And then stimulated various synaptic pathways that control your sexual responses.”

I whistled quietly. “Wow. That’s what I call perfect technomage pillow talk.”

Turning fully to me, she folded her arms across her chest making her look too much like a pantless version of her haughty self-portrait. She said, “In higher order animals, the brain is the real sex organ. And you didn’t complain last night. At least not until the third time.” She raised an eyebrow at me.

I laughed out loud. “That’s because you wouldn’t let me finish.”

She laughed wickedly. Encouraged, she said, “If you wish to press charges, technically I’d call it
third degree sexual battery. Oh and I exposed myself to you, so you could add that to the list of charges.” She ended with a dark chuckle.

"I love how you overthink everything. Um… why didn't you let me... return the favor?"

“You’re …” she paused.

I finished her sentence, “Pent up. Ya. Sorry, it’s just, I’ve never, I’m a …”

She finished my sentence, “A virgin. Yes I know.”

I frowned. “That obvious?”

She answered. “Your master told me.”

I bolted upright. “What?! Why would she tell you?”

She frankly said, “After she asked me to keep an eye on you, I questioned her about the things I’ve noticed in you.” She turned serious and slowly walked towards me.

I looked away, clenching my jaw. “What things?”

Like a doctor reading a chart in monotone, she recited, “My suspicions. You’re- hyperactive, unfocused, unless it relates to an obsession and then you become hyper focused. Clingy desperation for approval. Attention seeking with humor. A clear oral fixation. I guessed you have at least ADHD, low self-esteem, an abandonment complex due to neglect as a child. And from what you added last night, I suspect you were abused as well. Your master mentioned you’re inexperience and eagerness for... a date.”

I buried my face in my hands, and groaned, “I really wish you didn't know all that.” I looked up to find her standing by me. Her clinical look pinned me down like the specimens on her shelf.

“Does it matter?” I asked. Heart pounding, my breathing changed to short shallow breaths.

“Everything matters. I prefer my sex is emotionally healthy, enjoyable for...” She kept speaking but I did not hear. My vision tunneled, as my hearing reduced to the static sounds of rushing blood. Ignoring her, my eyes focused on the wall of shelved specimens in jars.

Her finger on my jaw forced my attention to her. My attention snapped back in place like a rubber band stretched thin then released suddenly. I heard her again, “And apparently you disassociate when emotionally stressed.”

I pushed her hand away. “I get it. I’m too broken. If I were you, I wouldn't want to deal with me either.” I stood up naked before her. When I tried to move past her going for my clothes. Her hands snaked to the back of my neck. Her finger tips dug in.

“Stop. Listen.” My whole body stiffened and I listened. In a whisper I heard, “You're not too broken. Mostly, adorable. But for the sake of my sanity and your emotional well-being I have to make sure you'll end up better for being with me.”

Her arm dropped away. My mind cleared. Most of my body relaxed except my crotch, which started to become excited on my behalf. We both looked down.

I said, “I don't know what better looks like. But I'm hoping this is it.”

We both laughed together. She said, “Good start.”
I hugged her, and her arms locked around my back. I said, “How ya feeling today?”

With an enigmatic smile, she said, “Recuporative sleep can do wonders. Today, I’m ...” Her eyebrows danced as she cupped my cheeks and kissed me lightly.

“You’re looking much less like a raspberry.” I trapped one of her hands against my cheek. “This isn't fair. You know my secrets and I hardly know any of yours.”

Suddenly eager, she said, “Easily fixed. You want to see something you shouldn’t.”

I perked up. “Always.”

She walked to her fireplace. One hand on an frayed anatomy tome, another out to me. I joined her.

“Should probably get dressed.”

“Don’t bother. I like you naked,” she said to me. Then to the book, " We’re off to see the wizard. The wonderful wizard of Oz. " The words on the tome spine flashed once. A huge grin split my face as a part of the bookcase swung inward. Like a fleeing refugee she leapt through the door pulling my hand and body behind her. We careened down a spiraling stone stairs that glowed yellow. The bottom opened onto a large stone walled laboratory. Like a tunnel into a chemical factory, scattered about- marked barrels, endless meters of tubing, pipettes, beakers, and more. It went on and on. A wall of dripping fragility. The occasional side room for storage or a sealed lab led off to the right or left. At the far end was a pharmacy, with hundreds of small boxes and pills in little bins ready for dispensing.

The floor radiated warmth beneath my feet as I plodded unbothered by my nakedness. But none of that mattered because in the middle of the lab on a raised metal platform with various conduits attached to it, a Vorlon encounter suit intimidated the room.

"Is that what I think it is?“ At a nearby workbench, I grabbed a portable microscope and went at the suit.

"Yes, I figured since you like computers and machines you'd find this interesting."

The microscope zoomed in trying to make out details. It revealed a world within a world, then more tiny worlds. "I can’t believe how complex this is. It just keeps going. You're taking it apart?"

"Years ago my father decided to try to backwards engineer it. It’s been next to impossible."

"Where did you get this thing?“ She didn't answer. When I glanced at her, she looked away pink cheeked. "You don’t want to tell me?"

She sighed, “My grandmother stole it from an old Zoroastrian temple in northern Iran.”

"Stole it? That’s ... I shouldn’t judge considering but that’s not very nice."  

"It was being worshipped as a relic from God, which is ridiculous. Themis explained to them what they really had and she offered them a fortune for it. But being a religious artifact, it wasn't for sale.”

"What sort of temple did you say it was?"

Rhea laughed. "Still not a fan of history, eh? Zoroastrianism, first monotheistic religion on Earth. The story they tell is that it fell to Earth near their village in the 13th century and that 6 demons of
hell followed it. An angel climbed out of it, and fled pursued by the demons. The locals hid the suit in the hopes that the angel would come back, but it never did. This thing touched off my grandmother's lifelong obsession with Vorlons, and she passed it along to my father who passed it to me. We have other artifacts but this is the only one that is so intact.”

"What happened to the Vorlon and the demons?"

"Who knows, but it means the Vorlons have been snooping around Earth for the last thousand years. God only knows what the demons were."

"Does the Circle know about this?"

"No, and if they suddenly find out, I'll know who to hunt down and torture mercilessly."

Her laugh made me stop my examination. I looked back over my shoulder to her as she leaned back against a workbench covered with beakers. Our eyes locked. Her inviting smile made me drop the tool.

She raised her hands from her sides. Dark veins erupted from her fingers and moved from her like black roots growing too fast. They thinned as they wrapped me in shadows. Instead of suffocating me, we were no longer in a lab but on an old wooden sailing ship. A sea breeze tickled my skin and smell the salty water spray hit with my next inhale. Her long black hair neatly tucked itself into a bonnet decorated with intertwined red and green ribbons. Instead of an old paint stained shirt, she wore white boots, gloves, and an lacey emerald travelling dress. About her open neck an emerald on a gold chain hung inviting everything to fall past it into her cleavage. Framed by ocean, she leaned back on a railing.

And I was no longer naked. A ruffled unbuttoned shirt settled over my torso, a red leather jacket weaved itself on top of it. Simple tan pants tucked into tall black boots. Out of the air, a tricorn hat with a white skull and crossbones landed on my head. A curved sword on a belt fluttered before me and bucked itself around my waist.

My mouth hung open.

She raised an eyebrow. “Well?”

“This is the best thing that has ever happened to me.” I plucked my linen shirt in amazement.

From the parrot on my shoulder, I heard, “Squawk! Good answer.” A green parrot winked at me when I stared at it.

“Definitely, the best.” I blurted out. With one finger she beckoned me. Immediately, I strolled toward her and said, “So last night, you said something about a Pirate Lord and ravishing. You want me to play the part, now?” I pointed between us and around the ship.

The parrot on my shoulder agreed for her, “Squawk! All aboard!”

I hurried to her. Her hands grabbed for me as I lifted her onto the railing and nestled between her legs.

Under my shirt, her fingers tugged my chest hairs. She pulled me in as her words prompted me, “You will never take my virtue.”

With a dismissive laugh, I played to her script. “I think your virtue got taken a long time ago. But my virtue, you get to take now.” With my hands I ripped open her illusionary dress’ neckline, to her
delight. “I think I'll bury my treasure in you.”

As I busied myself creating a trail of kisses down the middle of her chest, she laughed and moaned at the same time, “Oh you’re good.” A flash of breast.

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Galen forcibly broke contact with the memory sphere. With a heavy sigh, he realized he let that go a bit too long.

It figured that he and Fed would be polar opposites in every conceivable way. Fed’s first time- a parade of ludicrous bodice ripping illusions. While Galen’s hesitant, pure, exposed souls.

He frowned at himself. To judge another’s experience harshly was foolish. After all they were the two sides of the cliched coin of love. Pure innocence on one side. Vulgar tawdriness on the other. He had no experience with the other side with its easy, quick sex.

Slow intimacy, built layer by careful layer was all he knew, and only once. Love was mostly a mystery to him still. Sure he knew, and once used, the 14 words, the coercive spell that would force someone to fall madly in love. But the 14 words only worked if a small spark of love already existed. And the truth was he, really no one, knew what triggered that initial spark of love in the mind. That spark still smoldered in his soul for Isabelle. It refused to die.

For a moment he let himself slip back in time, to bask in the memory of Isabelle’s dazzling smile after they had …No. He couldn’t stand the agony of remembering her beside him so happy. Two brief days was all they had to really explore each other before the traitors, Tilar, Elizar, and his sister, murdered her. The happiest time of his life, followed by the horror of the worst. It tore him asunder still. Time was supposed to heal such wounds. This one proved to be impossible. How could you heal an impossibly deep wound?

The realization from earlier fresh in his mind, he stopped his circular obsessing. For the first time something new occurred to him. His heart wouldn’t heal because as an emotional fool he picked off the scab over and over again. He had to break this obsession. How? With what? Knowing himself, only a new obsession would do. That would mean a new love. The thought filled him with abject fear.

His muscles screamed painfully from holding himself so rigidly tight. It was almost as painful as his feelings. Neatly, he folded up his anguish and tucked it back into its usual bed, in the middle of his mind.

Focusing back on the task at hand, he’d learned two things.

One. The Vorlon encounter suit aboard Fed's ship- where it came from and why it looked the way it did. The Vorlons had not left their junk lying about. Considering their philosophy centered in order, this made sense. It was stolen, first by naive villagers then by a greedy technomage. And considering her tendency to steal cadavers, Rhea was just as much of an unrepentant thief as her grandmother. For that matter Fed, seemed to have a tendency at unapologetic thievery as well. Unexpected.

Two. That painting on Rhea’s wall. Some in the Order claimed to have visions of the future like Centauri seers. These visions always tended to be vague and useless. Worse, such things were not
well explained. Some took it as evidence there was a God, a universal higher power, fate, or destiny. Or whatever nonsense they wanted to peddle. To Galen it was but a manifestation of some not yet understood science.

Yet here Galen had a hunch. He summoned an orbital scan of Vorlon he had culled from Fed’s ship. Compared it to the painting from the memory of Rhea’s wall painting. One clearly was an artist’s version of the other. Interesting. A fateful vision indeed. And vague and useless. Time for more.

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/10/

- 21.11.2255

Heat from the blue flame of a gas fire. Sitting on the floor before the fireplace, back to a cold wooden bed frame, I sat on the floor wrapped in giant white blanket. My arms wrapped around someone with their bare back to me. We sat in perfect silence as our feet warmed before the heat of the flames.

Rhea looked at me over her shoulder with a frown. “You’ve been too quiet.”

“I’m fine,” I said in a small voice. And kissed the top of her hair.

With a sigh, she fully turned to me. “You're lying. Why, disappointed?”

My arms tightened around her. “No.” But I didn’t say more.

She goaded, “Then what’s wrong?” Her confusion morphed to understanding. “Too much, too soon?”

I chortled. “My jaw is pretty sore. You surprised me with how long that is supposed to go on,” Her mischievous smile grew as I rubbed and flexed my jaw left to right, up and down, stretching the muscles. “But I loved it. Your explicit directions were great. No, I … was just thinking, porn does a shitty job of showing you what real sex is like.”

“It helps to talk about it,” she encouraged me.

I ran my hand through, over my head, tugging my own hairs. “When I thought about us, and I did that a lot, I really did not think about… feelings, I guess. It’s like I can’t breathe right anymore.”

When she opened her mouth to speak, words kept pouring out of me, “And I probably should have brought this up last night before we spent all night going at it but better late than never, right? Should little Fed wear a raincoat?”

When I paused she made to answer, but I kept talking over her, “I mean I know how stuff works for normals, but you said you ovulated like 6 times. Is that still going on? I mean, I really don't want to be someone's dad…”

Her hand covered my mouth forcing an end to my ramble. “How about letting me answer before I lose track of the questions.”

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If Galen rolled his eyes any harder, they’d fall out of his head. Of course, Fed gave no thought to the consequences of his actions until after. He didn’t understand that technomage women need never worry about unwanted children. Their tech gave them complete power over their fertility.

This needed to go faster. Galen decided to cut short anything that did not seem promising.

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/11/

-22.11.2255

Sunlight fully lit up my face. I grunted in annoyance, yawned and sat up. I was alone in a bed half perfectly made. The bedroom neat, organized. Everything in its place and ready to not be used. All the furniture besides the bed had large white sheets neatly draped over it as if the house had just been taken over by ghosts. My perfectly folded clothes sat next to me on a nightstand. A pin the size of my forearm stabbed a scrap of paper to the pillow next to my head.

I ripped off the note and read:

Doing some good and tiresome grown ups things. Will be back eventually with multiple hungers. Prepare accordingly.

XO, R

“Oooh.” I smiled to myself, kicked off the bed covers and sprang out of bed. Then, stretched, strolled nakedly down the hall, and hopped down the steep, winding staircase two stairs at a time. To finally walk in to the kitchen. Everything still, quiet, clean. I went straight to the fridge, to pick through its contents. I grabbed out a round plastic tub with bright red solid side. Carefully, I balanced a half soccer ball sized wedge of orange cheese on top.

"I see you've made yourself quite at home.” Gwynn’s voice came from behind.

Startled I dropped both things and spun about wide-eyed. Gwynn released the hinged door, which flapped behind her like a flag in the wind. In a gray herringbone coat that went to her knees, her eyes went immediately downward.

"I expected you to be to be bigger,” she said with a smirk, an accusing finger pointing at my crotch.

My cheeks burned. “I'm a grower.”

A sneer grew on her face. “I should hope so.”

Leaning I snatched a bowl of apples on the nearby wooden counter sending fruit scattering as I held the bowl over of groin.

Gwynn shook her head disapprovingly. “That's unhygienic.”

She opened a small shelf on the other side of the counter separating us, and threw an apron at me. I dropped the bowl to catch it. As it clattered unbroken on the floor I fumbled it around my waist.

"And now it's even smaller."
"I suspect you have that effect on most men Gwynn." A chortle met my words. “Sorry about …” I pointed at myself, “I thought I was alone.” With an elbow, I nudged the fridge closed. Relaxed, I went about picking up the fallen food.

She dismissed my words with an arrogant wave. “You’re far, far from the first.” Stopping my work, I raised my eyebrows to her.

“She does it deliberately. A test of hers,” Gwynn clarified.

Shock. I blurted out, “What kind of test?”

“Of personality.” Rhea answered. With heels clicking on the old tile floor, she had walked in through the kitchen door opposite the one Gwynn had entered. Her green coat snuggly closed, collar up to ears, her hair braided and wound about her neck like a scarf. “I had hoped, you would only slander me when I’m present to defend myself Gwynn.”

All disapproval, Gwynn indicated at me and dictated, “I see you’ve failed to resist temptation. He’s clearly inexperienced.” I frowned at her words. Gwynn either didn’t notice, or didn’t care, and plowed on, “I thought he should know the truth. The power imbalance is considerable. I believe that is why the Circle frowns on such associations.”

Absorbing the lecture, Rhea didn’t have a ready answer.

I snapped at the pair, “You two can stop talking over me like I’m furniture. And you ,” I pointed at Gwynn, “I’m an adult and can decide for myself.” Gwynn blinked with surprise. “And you ,” I pointed at Rhea, “Did I pass?”

Rhea and I locked eyes. I flipped my frown over, and smiled broadly at her. Her face immediately reacted to match mine.

“10 out of 10.” She said.

“I see I’m spitting into the wind. When do we leave tonight?” Gwynn asked.

“Midnight.” Rhea answered as she threw herself at me. With a pivot Gwynn, retreated, throwing a disgusted ugh behind her.

Like two magnets, we locked together necking.

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Ugh indeed. Useless. Again. Finally losing his patience, Galen had stopped mid-steam and jumped forward and pulled faster, and faster, until the images and sounds blurred. The stream washed over him. During all his years monitoring the Circle’s probe network he had become adept at picking through avalanches of information. He combed for two keywords Vorlon or Mars. It did not take long for a hit.

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/20/

- 23.11.2255
“Mars was not a game Gwynn,” Rhea said. In pajamas covered in tiny purple skulls on a pale green fabric, she glared at Gwynn, over a beaker of steaming red liquid.

Aboard a technomage ship, sitting around a built in metal table, I sat between the women and watched. Before us a table covered with plates heaped with food half eaten. The galley kitchen backdrop, a mountain of dirty dishes in the small sink and ingredients left out on the counter. The leftover wedge of quiche sat in the center of the table besides a colorful salad.

“Agreed. That’s why I insist you tell me,” said Gwynn. Opposite me, Gwynn sat with her fingers steepled together.

“Let it go Gwynn,” Rhea said, jaw stiff with control about to tumble to anger.

“No,” Gwynn said simply. With deliberation Gwynn picked up a glass pitcher of water and lifted it too high over her empty beaker-glass. She painstakingly poured water. The splashing noise filled the galley and eating area with a loud gurgling noise. All the while Gwynn radiated cold displeasure.

Under Gwynn’s menacing missile like focus Rhea reacted with annoyance. “Oh please. My grandmother wrote the book on human interrogation for the Order. Those coercive head games Coeus thought you, I learned and mastered years before you. It’s not going to work on me,” Rhea said.

From out of the shadows, a man said, “You got anything that’s not half green.” I watched Roland step out of the shadows into the light of the table, bringing a chair. He brushed his blonde mohawk braid off his shoulder and poked the uneaten quiche and salad on the prepared plate in front of him.

I said, “Sorry no ...”

Rhea spoke over me, “For Weirdan’s sake Roland, it won’t kill you to eat something healthy every once and awhile.”

Silently he stood up and walked away. At the last moment before leaving the galley, Roland said, “Yes it will.” Then, he disappeared into a dark side corridor.

Gwynn stopped her menacing with an annoyed grunt. She considered for a breath and switched to a whisper. “Between Roland’s message, this involving my master and you, and happening on a neighboring world... Taken together makes it my business.” She tapped a finger on the table with every point made.

The analysis surprised Rhea. She said in the same hushed whisper, “Secrecy is part of our code Gwynn. Don't make me violate that.”

I spoke up loudly startling them both, “Hera says secrets, unless they involve the words- surprise and party, are usually bad.”

Gwynn’s face lit up at my words. “See. Even your boy-toy agrees with me.”

Rhea eyed me with annoyance. “What do you want from me Gwynn?”

Gwynn pressed on, “After my initiation, I plan to take Truth, my mother’s old sigil, as my rune. I simply want to get a head start on collecting a bit.”

“That’s rich coming from someone who sneaks off every week to god knows where, to do god knows what.”
“Fine I’ll start.” Gwynn sat up straighter. Her expression grew colder somehow. “I have a job.”

Rhea just stared at her.

I said, “Huh. Coeus didn't seem the stingy sort of master to me.”

Irritated, Rhea found her voice, “He’s not Fed. Gwynn gets an allowance. And that’s on top of what her mother left her. Why in the world do you have a job?”

Gwynn said quickly, and defensively, “Coeus asks nothing of me. I got bored. I went looking. It’s interesting work.”

Excited for her, I asked, “What is it?”

“I'm a private contractor working with EarthGov Security.”

Shocked, Rhea asked, “Law enforcement?”

Gwynn nodded.

“You’re a cop?” I matched Rhea’s surprised tone. Gwynn shook her head no.

“Consultant. Surveillance and interrogation. I think up creative ways to get the information they need within EarthGov’s legal framework.” Gwynn corrected me with pride.

With disapproval Rhea said, “I was hoping you had a boyfriend.”

Gwynn’s coldness melted to pleased, suddenly. “I have one of those as well. He does physical penetration testing.”

I snickered immaturely at the end of her words. Gwynn flipped a middle finger at me.

Clapping happily Rhea burst out, “Oh thank God.” Gwynn rolled her eyes at the outburst. Rhea was undeterred, “Is he good in bed? He better be. Otherwise tonight he's getting a visit from the ghosts of sex past, present and future.”

“This is why I tell you as little as possible.”

Rhea clutched her heart, in mocked shock, “But I’m being helpful. Now tell me everything about him.”

“Fine. A trade. I’ll tell you about him and you tell me about Mars.” Her words sucked the jovial energy out of the room.

When it looked like they would return to their stalemate, I said, “You know it might make you feel better if you talk about it.”

Rhea snapped at me, “That’s crap therapists tell their patients to kick start conversations. Just whose side are you on?” Rhea looked at me as if I had just betrayed her.

Looking between them, I casually said, “Neither. I already know what happened.” Gwynn’s head whipped to me as if I had hit her.

“How could… ?” Rhea’s voice sputtered out.

“Oh, I um … I might have overheard Hera and Coeus discuss it.”
“You spied on them.” Gwynn said with awed admiration. When I didn’t speak immediately, she demanded, ”Spit it out."

I put my hands up defensively toward Rhea blocking the angry daggers she flung with her eyes. “I heard enough to figure it out. That and I hacked Hera’s ship. Her nav system told me we were near New Vegas.”

I stabbed a leaf of salad with my fork, chewed it on one side of my mouth and spoke with the other, “Walkyra’s the only technomage on Mars. Kell’s involved. And our glorious leader wouldn’t be involved unless bodies hit the ground.” I cocked a thumb and indicated down the dark hall, “Walkyra’s Roland’s mom. Some project, my guess Walkyra’s since Hera mentioned dismantling something of hers, must’ve gone bad or been discovered or something. Predictable violence ensued. That note from Roland meant his mom is fine, which means some outsiders got it,” I pointed at Rhea, “All the rest’s been the cover-up...”

Rhea said quietly. “I can’t believe you…. Remind me never to underestimate you again.”

I gave her a strained smile as I continued, “The only thing I don’t get is Hera was super pissed at Coeus. It was about you.” I pointed at Rhea. “She said your Dad played God. Retreaded the past and crushed potential. I can’t figure that out.”

Wide eyed, Rhea stiffened. I looked to Gwynn for help but she studied Rhea like a microscope focusing onto a slide.

Regaining self control, Rhea went cool. “You two snoops don’t get to know all my secrets.” She tapped me on the nose. “And you piecing most of it together doesn’t change a thing about Mars.”

“Well, it changes things,” said Roland from behind us. He glided out of the darkened hall.

Again, he stepped into the light over the table. This time he carried a platter of pizza which he dropped on top of the quiche. He grabbed a slice the size of his head. Folded it in half and held it like a fan. With a pizza wave at me, he said, “The kid guessed it. Might as well be honest with them.”

Rhea turned away to face the darkness and stayed silent.

Roland said between chews, “I went home to visit my Mom... Walked in on some creeps trying to jack her up... I got rid of them except for their telepath. He stopped me … But he forgot to watch his back.” He stopped chewing and froze staring at the crust in his hand.

“What happened to the telepath?” I encouraged him.

Roland looked at me and didn’t answer. Instead he jammed a last bit of crust in his mouth. Then reached for another slice.

“You murdered them?” Gwynn quickly asked.

“We have a right to defend ourselves,” agitated, Rhea snapped at Gwynn.

“Do you know anything about them? Who they were? Why’d they do it?” I calmly asked.

Roland let out a disgusted grunt, and said, “You sound like Kell. He didn’t care about Mom either. Fuck your victim blaming bullshit.”
Roland took a huge bite out his new slice of pizza, with an unblinking stare. After he swallowed he wiped his mouth with his sleeve and sulked.

When he spoke this time, anger mixed with his words. “You want the juicy details, sure. I walked in to Mom laid out on the ground, bloody. I reacted. I cut them each in half. Except … their weakass telepath, he got in my head, froze me … But he didn’t notice Mom getting to her feet behind him... Guy had a bad day after that.” Roland’s lips couldn’t decide whether to settle on a frown or grimace.

“Is he still alive?” I asked about the telepath again.

“What does it matter?” Roland threw back.

Gwynn exploded with words at him, “Of course it matters you idiotic momma’s boy.”

His attention shifted to Gwynn. A dark smile passed over his face quickly. “Beats being a cold cunt any day.”

Eyes wide, Gwynn flushed red. She grabbed the pizza platter and flipped it into Roland’s face. Then dove across the table at him.

“Hey!” I shouted. Standing, I tried to grab her, but she was already on Roland. The two of them tumbled backwards with Gwynn landing on top of him. While I struggled off the bench, and around the table, Gwynn landed a right hook on Roland’s temple knocking bits of pizza off his face. He made no move to protect himself. Instead he pulled her closer with a manic laugh as if they were lovers about to roll over.

“Stop it,” Rhea said tiredly. The last to react, she stood up from the her side of the bench.

With a hand on Roland’s throat, Gwynn pushed herself upwards with her right arm cocked for another blow. I grabbed her arm slowing her down enough for Rhea to seize the back of Gwynn’s peach fuzz covered head. Black tendrils fused from hands to neck.

With a firm grip Rhea said. “Calm. Sit.” Gwynn froze. With a blank expression, she sat back down on the edge of the built in bench. I helped Roland up. When Rhea dropped her arm, Gwynn re-animated and buried her face in her hands.

“Temper, temper Gwynn,” Roland said, his left eye swelling. Gwynn vaulted to her feet. With hands up, he braced for another round. Instead, Gwynn just shook her hand out grimacing, and stalked away into the darkness rubbing her knuckles.

Rhea rounded on Roland and drove a finger in his chest. “This typical technomage acting out is not going to make you feel better.”

The more she said, the smaller and more lost Roland looked. He said to the darkness, “I’ve never seen Mom like that. What she did…” He fell silent and still as a statue.

Taking his arm, I said, “Look man, sounds like they had it coming.” I guided Roland to sit back down in the chair I righted for him, “Bad things happen all the time. Sometimes you have no choice but to cause it.”

Rhea gave me a strained but grateful look. “Listen to Fed. And it helps to talk it through Roland. Go back to your ship. I’ll come over and we’ll talk.”

Roland didn’t move. Instead we watched as he hummed softly, and began to sing to himself, “
Dreams of war, Dreams of liars, Dreams of dragon's fire, And of things that will bite.** ”

I looked at Rhea, with wide eyes, and raised eyebrows. As Roland kept humming, she mimed to be silent and beckoned me to follow. When I did she took my hand, and pulled me into darkness.

As we walked through a dense shifting shadows, small spheres popped up to illuminate our path over a field of tiny stars.

“Wow, fun times eh.” I said. Rhea nodded yes tiredly as she led me to a small cabin. It was organized and neat except for the open chest that spilled men’s clothes all over the floor.

She pointed at the chest. I asked, “What is it?”

“Your master is about to collect you.”

“Oh. Can you handle them alone?”

She waved a dismissive arm. “It’ll be fine. This is typical for those two. Really for all technomages in general.”

“I noticed. Are you sure you’re okay alone?” I asked.

She snorted at that. “My father used to offer workshops during convocations called Developing Emotional Intelligence for Technomages. I was the only one who ever attended. So at least I’ve learned to navigate such things.”

With a chuckle, I smoothly said, “In everyone’s defense, that class sounds like the worst. He should’ve pulled a bait and switch, called it something like Pie Making 101 or Free Blow Jobs.”

She blinked in confusion. Then laughed heartily. “Clever. I’ll pass on your recommendations.”

I didn’t smile. “So … When are we gonna see eachother again?”

Shrugging, she glanced away out the open cabin door. “I don’t know.”

“Oh, are we good?” I asked, nervously fidgeting, and bouncing on my feet. I picked up a pair of men’s boxers with hearts, smelled it and threw it in the open chest. The awkward silence stretched as I worked. After the last piece of clothing made it into the chest, I slammed down the lid and sat on top not looking at her. With dread, I crossed my arms and bit my lip.

“No,” she said.

Finally, I looked at her to find her buttoning up her green coat over her pajamas.

I said, “I know I pushed too hard. I’m not really siding with Gwynn, it’s just I think she’s right. Mars is …”

She interrupted me, “It’s not that. This...” Indicating back and forth between us, “We have to take a break.”

“Why?” I demanded.

“I explained already. Remember, the Order’s rules- no sexual involvement with apprentices.”

I waved a dismissive hand. “Rules are for breaking. We can sneak around behind everyone’s back.”
She scoffed at my answer. “You have nothing to lose. Me on the other hand, I’m applying to the Circle to have my status raised to Adapt. I need to behave myself. At least when the Circle is watching. Besides with your master’s running for the Circle, if anyone noticed, and technomages notice everything, it’d be a scandal. Your master would make me disappear if I created a sexual scandal anywhere near her right now.”

With that said, she donned her hood, hiding her face. A wave of her hand and, green vines erupted out of her left hand, moved along the floor to my trunk, lassoed it, lifted it up and snaked it out the cabin ahead of her.

After the trunk and she moved past me, I grabbed her hand to stop her. “Are you breaking up with me?”

She didn’t answer. With a pull, silently, she led me along a dark tunnel illuminated only by the light of the star field.

I begged. “Please. You can’t. We have so much fun together.”

She patted my hand.

“Is it because I’m messy? I’m sorry I leave my clothes everywhere, and never make the bed, and always leave dirty dishes piled up and …”

She put a finger to my mouth and I stopped speaking at once. “At least my ship’s never smelled this amazing.”

“Is it Roland? Are you getting back together with him?”

A sigh. Then a resigned look passed over her like a wave. Another pat on my hand.

“I love you.” I blurted out. I yanked my hand from hers, pulled her hood off and took her shocked face in my hands. I spoke fast, “I think I have for a while. I wanted to tell you, but I didn’t want to come on too strong. But now. You need to know. I love you.”

Her lips parted as her eyes searched me.

“You missed your cue,” I prompted. Her eyes narrowed in confusion.

“I’ll help... I love you to,” I finished in falsetto. “I’m serious. When I find something I love. I latch on and don’t let go. Just ask Hera. I go full lamprey.” I tightly grabbed her hand between both mine.

With a sudden bright smile, she stroked my beard with her free hand and finally said, “Did you just compare yourself to a parasitic fish?”

I nodded yes and held my breath.


With a backwards step she slipped into the darkness. A bright light irised open next to me.

EOF
The worst trouble I ever got into was her fault. Thinking about it, I see how pathetic I got. At least I got her to talk to me one last time. It felt so good just being next to her. Fuck me, I still sound pathetic. Note to self, this love shit suuuuckss!

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Gray clouds hugged a muddy plain of mostly boulders separating large mud puddles. Bouncing in place, I stared at a crowd of dead silent technomages who stared back at me expectantly. Past them, up a hill spread the grid of a tent city.

“Let’s:
get this over with,” Herazade ordered impatiently from behind me.

“What’s with the children of the corn staring?” I asked her, nervously tugging on a loose strand of my hair.

“Curiosity. This is a once in a lifetime spectacle. You’re the last of the Circle’s apprentices who are training publicly for the first time. And while I’m not on the Circle, yet, your skill or lack thereof, will inform them of my level of skill. Just ignore it. Focus on my voice and commanding your chrysalis. Start by forming a platform under us.”

I didn’t move. Two hands grabbed the shoulders of my orange t-shirt and forced me to face away from the crowd. I closed my eyes and drew a simple square behind my deliberate blindness. We smoothly lifted off the ground and rose up to waist high.

“Good. Now open your eyes and apply your acceleration vector.” Together we slowly floated forward. The platform wobbled slightly.

“Focus on maintaining your spells… That’s fast enough... Remove the acceleration vector and apply your air friction compensation vector.”

We moved parallel along the crowd at a slow steady pace.

“Excellent. Let’s wrap it up. I need to return to my debate prep. … Just like we practiced last night. Finish with a bang to impress the muggles Harry,” She joked. A tap on my right shoulder. “Look in the direction of rotation.”

Looking over my shoulder, at the end of the crowd, Rhea stood in her long green coat, hood off. She played with the end of her long braid. A knowing smile grew obvious when our eyes locked. With a sudden intake of breath, my platform violently tilted upward off the horizon. Instinctively I grabbed the edge and held on but from behind I heard a, “Argh!”

Looking back, I froze and watched Herazade tumble backwards. She tucked and slapped her arms out. Still the large puddle embraced her. The rebounding splash covered the bits spared by her initial entry.

The illusions covering her shattered. A fractal confetti flitted away, disappearing on the wind. A few gasps, and one loud *oops* went up from the watching crowd. Her illusions gone, a dirt encrusted version of her true-self became plain- leathered skin, shoulder length hair streaked with obvious gray among the black hairs caked with mud. Her former silver sari gone. In its place, a mud dipped gray jumpsuit like a circuit board made made of clinging, form-fitted fabric.
As I slid off my dissolving platform I landed on a large flat topped boulder next to her. I whispered, “Shit. Are you okay?”

Not speaking, she slid and slipped her way to standing. A few laughs drifted above the silence of the entranced crowd. Two figures detached from the crowd and flew quickly toward us.

Embedded to her knees in the mud, through gritted teeth Herazade said, “Exactly why did you dump me on my ass?” She slapped palms against her wired fabric for emphasis.

With a forced laugh, I jested, “I told you I’d get you back for that hookers joke.”

Shock rolled across her face. An electric arc leapt past me to the ground. Her arm shot out, to the side of my head. I nearly fell in next to her as she twisted my ear.

She hissed, “Why you little ...”

“Herazade!” A rebuke flew from the first technomage to reach us. The Circle’s healer, Ing-Radi floated beside Herazade.

With her eyes wide, Herazade’s arm fell away from my ear immediately. She stammered, “I ... he ... ” As she gave up trying to explain, the second healer, Coeus landed behind the muddy woman.

“What did you hit your head?” Ing-Radi asked with concern.

The healer settled before her and reached for Herazade with all four of her hands. One hand on the back of her neck, one on the chin, two grasping either side of her temple. Coeus laid both his hands along her spine. The two healers nodded to each other as they quietly scanned. After a few moments, satisfied, they quickly released her, the old healer with a loud, sigh of relief. After the brief hold, the healers hands had turned brown with dirt. Casually Ing-Radi let her arms settle to her side. While Coeus held his dirty hands awkwardly before him, unable to decide how to clean them.

Herazade jerked away from them both. “Everything is fine.” Attempting a regal posture she tried to take a step but the mud had trapped her legs. Mute and still, I bit my lip to stifle a smile. Ceous buried his laugh with a cough to the back of the hand.

The spectacle complete, the laughing and murmuring crowd began to disperse. Coeus reached to help pull her free but Herazade slapped his hand away, dirtying his green sleeved overcoat.

Ing-Radi tsked and said, “I am glad you are uninjured. But why would you berate your apprentice?”

Herazade opened her mouth to speak, but stopped herself. Anxiously, she asked, “Are you telling me how to discipline my apprentice?”

“Certainly not. Yet, you know he is new to casting. You should have anticipated his obvious mistakes. Next time I would suggest you remember inertia exists and simply hold on.”

Tight-lipped, Herazade’s face, the parts not brown with drying mud, turned red. With a forced curt nod, she said, “I have made note of your suggestions.”

The alien healer let out a disappointed breath. “Your apprentice did well for his first outing. If I were you, I should be most pleased.” Ing-Radi chirped pleasantly indicating at me with all four of her arms.

The red of her face faded to rigid coolness. Herazade said to me making it clear she did not agree.
with the healer, “Remove your chrysalis.”

An open container floated its way to my side. I removed the silvery tentacled mass from my head and back with a un-suctioning slurp, and dropped it in the metal cylinder.

We watched Herazade consider how to extract herself from her puddle. Indecisively, she stood still knee deep until another man, Kell, appeared out of nowhere next to her. His simple black robes did little to conceal his commanding presence. His white goatee shaped to a rune of knowledge shone against his dark skin.

Herazade gasped as a mighty giant’s hand swept like wind from above, plucked her out of the mud and carefully placed her feet on a nearby rock.

“A mud bath is an odd way to prepare for your debate tonight,” said Kell, the Order’s leader.

Her rigid tension eased. An embarrassed grin answered, “Breaking with tradition is always invigorating.” Herazade floated up off the ground. “Thank you for your assistance. Next I should let the elements of air and water have their way with me.”

Holding my cylinder in her hand, she shot up like a rocket, momentarily disturbing the stormy clouds to swirls. Lightning flashed dimly inside the clouds. A low rumble followed by rain pelted from above. A flick of Kell’s hand redirected the rain around us with an encompassing, invisible sphere. Coeus held his hands outside of the shield umbrella, letting the heavy rain slowly rinse his hands.

“I will not be available to assist you further this convocation,” Coeus said softly to Ing-Radi.

“Why ever not?” Ing-Radi turned with surprise to the middle-aged technomage in the green wool suit.

Coeus’ eyes flickered to Kell. “I’m leaving early to pursue … A private interest.”

Ing-Radi frowned. “Rhea can take your place.”

He smoothly said, “I’m afraid not. She’s coming with me.”

“You leave me bereft then, unless … Young Gowen has shown a keen interest and some talent in my healing arts. I will offer him the opportunity.”

Done washing, he opened his coat and pulled out a white cloth to dry his hands. With a gentle smile, he said, “Bon. It is well settled then. À la prochaine.” Coeus bowed to her and Kell.

“May Weirdan’s spirit guide and protect you,” Ing-Radi said drawing the runes for luck, and plentiful before him.

With his hands in his pockets, Coeus floated slowly up into the clouds.

When I tried to head toward the tent city, Kell blocked me with a relaxed palm. Standing so close, I could make out the old deep wrinkles bisecting his face. I looked away from him to stare at the bleak, empty horizon.

Idly, Ing-Radi said at Kell, “Such disappointments. Especially Herazade’s reaction.”

With a deep sonorous voice, Kell spoke, “I dare anyone to react graciously after such a fall.”

“Regardless, know I speak against her in the debate tonight,” said Ing-Radi.
As she spoke, I inched sideways away from the pair of old Circle leaders. Turning fully away, I took a step. A heavy hand landed on my shoulder, tightened, and yanked me back, like a dog’s owner pulling on the leash.

“May I ask why?” Kell asked her as he reeled me in to stand next to him as if we posed for a portrait about to be taken by the four-armed healer.

“Her lack of awareness and insufficient self-control were obvious a minute ago. But this is not my sole reason. She snubs our traditions at every opportunity. The most obvious is her lack of a place of power.”

Kell said, “She’s hardly the first.”

“She’s worse. Her vociferous advocacy has made it more popular.” Ing-Radi said the last word with particular distrust. “When Elric questioned her why she did not keep to tradition, she gave the condescending, nonsense answer of a young fool, ‘It’s too old-fashioned.’ Thus, my conclusion. She is too immature.”

Kell’s laugh boomed out, starling us both. “I believe you said the same of me when I ran for the Circle.”

Swatting the air toward him, Ing-Radi chided, “It was true in your case as well.”

“And here I assumed it was all the times you caught her smoking weed as an apprentice.”

My eyes went wide as the healer chortled briefly. As her smile faded, Ing-Radi said, “If I had a master such as Aldous, I would have done the same.” Her arms planted themselves on her sides in annoyance at Kell. “But I see you’ve decided in her favor already. I would ask you to explain yourself but I know you well enough, ‘tis clear you prefer to hide the truth of it.”

The old man’s hand gripped me tighter, holding my neck like a vice. Kell said to the healer, “Who do you support? Or do you agree with Elric that we should remain neutral, above rolling around in the figurative mud of Order politics?” His arm swept dramatically across the brown plain for emphasis.

Her hands clasped a towel tucked subtly within the rustling fabric of her black robes. Wiping mud off her hands, she answered. “There is wisdom in Elric’s way. But like you, I find myself unable to resist interfering. Blaylock also opposes her.”

“Blaylock opposes all the candidates. And would happily leave us at 4. Tell me who you support,” Kell asked again like a closed book.

“I will not, for methinks you would undermine them.”

Kell’s eyes lit up at the challenge and said, “Then may the best candidate win. Now if you’ll excuse us. I wish to speak with Fed alone.” She bowed deeply to Kell and flew toward the tent city immediately.

I held my breath and did not look him in the face.

With a deep voice edged of anger, Kell said, “You’ve made my job harder. What do you have to say for yourself?”

I turned to him wide-eyed, and stammered, “I… ummm…” My voice petered out.
Kell said, “I watched you perform that maneuver flawlessly a dozen times over last night. Explain to me why you failed so dramatically when it mattered.” I ran a hand through my coarse tangled hair, pushing it out of my eyes.

I swallowed hard and shifted my weight around nervously, “I … a…”

The old man let out an annoyed grunt. “I asked Herazade how you’ve been since Aldous died. She told me you’ve been acting out, stealing flyers. And even got arrested. This looks like a deliberate escalation to me.”

My vision tunnelled. The sound of whooshing in my ears grew.

Kell demanded simply, “Was it nerves or did you toss her deliberately?”

I stared at the ground holding my breath.

A deep resounding command hit me, “Answer Me.”

My senses cleared. I dropped to my knees in front of him, clutching the front of his black robe. Words poured out like vomit. “Please don’t cast me away, I have nowhere else to go, I swear I’ve stopped stealing, I deserved to get yelled at. I said I did it on purpose to get back at Hera because she joked about me sleeping with hookers in front of the girl I’m in love with. But I lied, it’s really because she smiled at me even though I think she dumped me last week, but I’m not really sure, and, one time when I was twelve I stole ice cream from …”

“Enough,” he commanded.

My words stopped like a spigot turned off. I retreated to sit down on large boulder. With my arms resting on my knees I stared at my lap. With a tap on the head, he made me turn my attention back to him. An amused but tired look greeted me. A flick of his hand and I rose to my feet as if an invisible hand forced me to face him.

He rubbed his goatee thoughtfully. “Let me see if I understand. You dumped your master, making her look like a fool before the whole Order, because a girl, you like but won’t have you, smiled at you. Then said you did it on purpose because Herazade embarrassed you in front of said girl.”

In a tiny sheepish voice I admitted, “I meant it as a joke.”

“That is the stupidest thing you could have done,” He declared.

With a chuckle to my groan, he said, “When I asked Herazade why she didn’t cast you away for disobedience already she became quite annoyed with me. Then swore you’re the best of all possible students.” I gagged at his words. His head nodded agreement as he said more, “She probably doesn’t feel that way at this moment. Yet, like all things, this will pass.”

Sheepishly, I whispered, “Did I just cost her the election?”

“That is the stupidest thing you could have done,” He declared.

With a chuckle to my groan, he said, “When I asked Herazade why she didn’t cast you away for disobedience already she became quite annoyed with me. Then swore you’re the best of all possible students.” I gagged at his words. His head nodded agreement as he said more, “She probably doesn’t feel that way at this moment. Yet, like all things, this will pass.”

Sheepishly, I whispered, “Did I just cost her the election?”

He eyed me seriously and didn’t answer.

“Oh god. Then I’m in really deep shit.” I began to breath hard as if I’d been running.

With a pat on the shoulder, he leaned in to whisper, “Just between you and me, I was almost 40 before I learned to maintain my casting focus when certain women were within sight.”

My breathing calmed. I lit up with excitement, “Really? Or did you say that to make me feel
“I will deny it adamantly if you dare repeat it.” He didn’t commit to clarity.

We both laughed at that. Then he turned stern. With gravity, he said, “Every challenge holds within it the opportunity to excel. Unfortunately, she’s hiding and ignoring my messages. If you see her before the debate tell her to come see me.”

I eagerly said, “Sure. How do I umm… see opportunity in this challenge?”

“Make amends. At the debate tonight, show unity of purpose and return her loyalty. An apprentice should be his master’s greatest ally. Agreed?”

Much to his shock, I grabbed his hand, and eagerly shook it. He relaxed into my handshake, with an odd smile. “I see you picked up one of Aldous’ more annoying habits.” He shooed away my hand. “I’m glad you got to know him.”

With a glint in his eye, he said in hushed voice, “I’m certain he’d agree with me that if I were you, first I’d find out why that girl was smiling at me.”

He disappeared from sight. Standing up, I sprang boulder to boulder, climbing my way toward the hill of temporary tent buildings, erected in a grid. When I reached the metal walkway, I found each had the same generic burning rune centered on every door. No letters, or pictures.

I said to myself, “Shit.”

When I turned a corner I ran into a wall of muscle. Roland, alone, stood in my way in the center of the metal walkway connecting two tents. His mohawk’s hair carefully braided and wrapped about his neck like a scarf. Blonde stubble, the beginnings of a beard, covered his chin and cheeks. While we were the same height, and width, his barrel chest filled his clothes to bursting while my hung on me.

"Hey Roland. You’re looking umm … good.” I took a step back from him. He looked at me sourly. With his black leather jacket unbuttoned and his yellow shirt untucked, I could see he wore an empty sword sheath, like he’d forgotten it.

“Feeling no pain. Thanks to Rhea.” Roland said rubbing the stubble on his cheek, thinking hard.

My eyes darted around, but no one else appeared. I asked him, “You don’t by any chance know which one of these is Rhea’s quarters?

His eyes narrowed on me before he shook his head yes. Then he said, “Nice flying today.”

My cheeks burned warmly. “The end could have been better.”

“Aren’t you big on screwing over the women in your life?”

Eyes wide, I cocked my head to the side. “What do you mean?”

He began to stroll around me as if deciding my worth in a store. “Did you have fun last night with, I heard her mage name is Ak-Shana?”

"What?”

He finished a circuit and kept walking. “You sat with a girl, Ak-Shana, at dinner, last night. You two seemed to be getting along really well.”
“Umm... friends drama.” I followed him with my eyes, swallowing nervously, “She had an argument with Kane about stupid stuff. I heard all the deets. I think she wants me to take her side. I’m trying hard not to.”

Finishing another slow circuit, he stopped, put a hand on each of my shoulders and shook his head sadly. Then, he grabbed me and walked me backwards to a dead end corner.

"Um. What are you doing?" I said walking backwards suddenly and not stumbling only because of the man’s grip on me.

Taking fist fulls of my orange shirt, he shook me. "I don't know what you did to Rhea but she’s been all sulky, and I just found her crying."


“Don’t even. I know you did something.” He jabbed me in the side. When I curled up, he shoved my back toward the wall. Catching myself against the cold metal wall, I rubbed my side, and watched Roland approach me with casual steps.

"At least put your guard up. I feel like I’m kicking a puppy,” he complained. I didn’t move, and he grunted in annoyance. “Here’s what’s going to happen- I’m going to drag you back to her tent and you're going to grovel at her feet on your hands and knees until she feels better.”

When he reached for me, I grabbed his wrist with both hands, swung it up over my head while turning my back to him. Then brought the back of his extended elbow down on my shoulder, but I hesitated when I saw the look of shock on his face. After my pause, Roland jabbed a finger in my side, in the same place he did the first time. Grimacing, I grabbed and clutched the spot, releasing Roland from my hold.

He retreated. And said with manic pride, "Nice reverse kid. But, in a real fight, don’t hesitate. What’re you into, aikido?"

“BJJ mostly,” I said.

He spit on the ground, “God I hate fighting you clingy, grappling motherfuckers.” In a flash, he was on me. His brute strength in control. His hand on my neck, he cocked a fist to punch my face.

I held up my hand, begging, "Wait! I'll gladly do it."

Surprised by my easy surrender, he pushed me ahead of him. We walked silently to a tent with the same burning rune circle as all the rest. Roland held out his hand. Burning musical notes played an escalating note scale as they soared out of his fingertips and fed themselves to the door. The circle morphed to the fiery words, Mind Over Matter. The door disappeared. Inside, open luggage strewn about the floor, a stripped bed frame with a pile of used linens in the center, and an open wardrobe with a few clothes still hung up. Rhea stood in the middle wearing her green coat talking to a Minbari. Together, they turned to stare at us as Roland shoved me to my knees before her.

"What's going on?" Rhea demanded.

I stretched out my hands. "I've just been umm ... told I greatly wronged you, I think. Everything is my fault. I beg forgiveness."

The Minbari chuckled at me. I looked up past the gray silk robes at her face.
"Tomoe?" I asked. Her small smooth crest dipped, acknowledging me.

Rhea walked to me immediately, gently took my chin, and turned it to study my face. "Why is your cheek red?"

My eyes flickered to Roland, but I said nothing. Together we watched Roland stroll to the corner where the wardrobe met the wall, retrieve his blue metal sword, and slide it in his sheath in one graceful movement.

With sudden fury directed at Roland, Rhea said, “What did you do?!”

With a confident swagger to my side, Roland looked pleased with himself. "He did something to upset you. I upset him back. No need to thank me. I was glad to do you a solid." Hands on hips, he modelled a heroic pose.

She threw her hands up in disgust. “You don't understand. He did nothing wrong.”

“Then why are you the one crying?” Roland countered, his annoyance matching hers.

She crossed her arms and declared, “I don’t owe anyone an explanation.”

He looked totally confused at Tomoe, who said nothing either. Roland said, “What am I missing?”

"Come on you big idiot.” Tomoe pointed with her bare, muscled arm to the door.

Roland crouched down by me, and with a slap to my back sang, "Oops. My bad. You can take a swing at me for free if you want." He offered me his chin.

"Nah. I could just about open-mouth kiss you right now Roland.” I stared at Rhea, who looked at everything but me.

“Sure but you have to shave first.” He slapped me on the back again, causing a shot of pain to radiate up my side.

Tomoe grabbed Roland's bulky bicep and pulled him away. “I'll tell Coeus we'll be delayed.”

Without a look, Rhea waved them out the door. “No need. I’m almost done.”

She asked apologetically after they both silently left, “What’d he do to you?”

On my knees still, I spoke up at her, “Your crazy ex-boyfriend thinks we’re still together and that I cheated on you. I think. He thinks he was looking out for you.”

Her face met her palm. Letting out a large breath, she looked at me and said, “I’m sorry. You can tell the Circle.”

“Nah. They’d ask why. You’d get in trouble for sure. Besides he held back. We both did actually.”

Rhea gave me a strained appreciative smile and said, “I suppose there’s enough gossip floating around. Everyone’s already arguing if what you did today was deliberately staged or not.”

I stared at her profile as she stuffed the last of her clothes in the last open container. She struggled to close the lid of the overstuffed luggage.

I said, “Ya. That was um … I fucked up. Hera’s going to kill me.”
“I doubt that,” Rhea sat on her trunk and hopped up and down until the latch finally caught. She stacked it with the rest, from largest to smallest on top. When done, she focused on me with a frown. “You can stand up and leave anytime.”

"I can’t. My side is killing me." I gingerly held my right side.

Her eyes narrowed, distrustful. Then she sighed, and knelt by me. With a tug, she pulled my shirt out of my belt’s embrace, and up over my head. Extending an arm, she exposed her bracelet, snapped off one of the smallest crystals. A warm hand on my bare skin. Then a cold crystal rolled back and forth on the painful area. My side tingled. The pain disappeared. Her weight shifted closer as we knelt side by side.

“You have a tiny bruise between your lowest right ribs.” She caught me watching her, and smirked. “I suspect you’ll live. Hold still while I heal the clot.” She leaned down to focus on my side.

I whispered in her ear, “I wish you’d answer my messages. I’ve missed you.” I inhaled her lavender scent. A momentary stillness was her only reaction. “Election’s almost over. Maybe after, I can pay you a really scandalous visit.” I forced out a laugh.

“I’m not going home.” Relaxing, she said matter of factly.

“Where ya going?” I said.

“One of my father’s contacts found something promising. On a remote Minbari colony, Sorpigal. Outside a city called Valen’s Rest. A Vorlon artifact. Tomoe lives there now. She’s our guide so we don’t embarrass ourselves.”

“Oh. When you’re done, maybe you can visit me on your way home?” I asked.

“I’m not going home. The Circle didn’t grant my Adept level. Ing-Radi berated me for being too human-centric. She suggested I travel through all the major homeworlds. She’s right. And, this will give me a chance to look for … my planet.”

“The one you saw in your dreams that’s painted on your bedroom wall?”

A nod yes and pat on my flank. “There good as new.” Her fingers lingered, stroking the muscles of my torso. Focusing on her lips, I tried to kiss her, but she turned her head, so my kiss landed on her cheek. She pulled away. Stood up.

“I’m getting some real mixed signals from you. So I guess I’ll be clear. I still love you.”

Crossing her arms, she looked down at me with cold certainty. “I’ve seen this movie before. I know how it ends.”

With her hands, she mimed two puppets. Her hands spoke to each other in dialogue as if a play started.

“ I love you,” said the deep-voiced puppet hand.

“I love you to,” said the high-pitched puppet hand.

“Stop smothering me,” complained the deep voice.

“Sure, when you stop being un grand branleur,” mocked the high-pitched hand.
“Let’s fuck other people, because that’ll fix everything.”

“Sure!”

“I can’t believe how much of a slut you are.”

“Why am I with this idiot?” The high pitched puppet had turned to her audience of one to ask him.

Frowning, she suddenly stopped. Her hands dropped. “I’m getting carried away.”

Smiling brightly, I said bouncing in place, “No. That was fun. Keep going. Was that what happened between you and Roland?”

She pursed her lips embarrassed. “You’re not understanding. Love is … oxytocin and vasopressin in the blood, working on the oldest part of a brain. A heady cocktail of neuropeptides acting on neurons. That is love to a technomage. You want something normal and natural. That love fades.”

“It doesn’t always fade. There’s plenty of old couples who look happy together even after decades.” I argued back.

Clasping her hands together she said with cynical certainty, “Don’t be naive. Maybe for normals but not us. At least not without a spell.”

“You mean the technomage love spell, the 14 words. Is this another test?”

“Everything is a test Fed.” Sad, and grimacing she looked away toward the door.

I sat back on my haunches. “I know how the 14 words works. It only activates if there is at least a little love to start. And if there is a lot, it has no real effect. So I’m not worried. Go ahead. Test me.” I took her hand and moved her fingers to touch the back of my neck. Scared eyes snapped to me. In a panic, she yanked back her hand, as if burned by fire.

She said, “You’re … right. I should be clear with you. This ends here. I need to go.” With a flip of her wrist, her hood flopped on her head, concealing her. Viney tendrils streaked out from her fingertips, enveloped her luggage tower, lifting it off the ground. Together they moved toward the door.

“What’d I do wrong?” I pleaded to her back.

Without looking, she paused to say, “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“Are you ever going to tell me?” I begged.

She stiffened. “Maybe once I … figure it out.”

The door swung aside automatically. She vanished from sight as she stepped across the threshold. I rolled on my back, sprawled out on the soft oriental rug. With my hands behind my head, I stretched out on the floor and thought of nothing.

Time drifted into fuzziness. I dozed off until a drip splashed on my cheek. My eyes shot open. A tiny ball of lightning hovered above my head casting the space in sharp shadows. A very soaked but completely mud-free Herazade sat cross legged beside my head. An expanding puddle surrounded her and soaked my shirts shoulder. I tensely held my breath, and silently stared at her as she studied me with a frown.

She broke the silence. “I apologize for putting my hands on you in anger. That is unacceptable
behavior in a Master. I owe you a puppy at least.”

With a sudden smile, I began to breath. “I’m not 12 anymore. I’d prefer a simple credit transfer.”

Her cold mask slipped to a pained pleading. “Please tell me you did not do that on purpose.”

I sat up and sat cross legged opposite her. “I didn’t-“

She interrupted me, “Bullshit. You’re a platforming prodigy. You’ve never lost control like that-“

I spoke over her with a raised voice, “It was Rhea’s fault.” That stopped and confused her. I went on in a rush, “On Earth we had umm … a relationship. Or at least I thought we did, but it was just a sex-thing for her, I guess. She dumped me hard right before you picked me up.”

Herazade mumbled to herself, “Ahh. But what does this have to do with your poor performance.”

“Since then she’s acted like she doesn’t even know my name. But when I flew she planted herself at the end with this look, like whenever she wanted to-” I stopped and buried my face in my hands picturing her naked, with lopsided smile, inviting eyes.

Unable to say more, I looked back at Herazade whose eyebrows had climbed up into her wet bangs. Suddenly she laughed maniacally. “Well done. You came up with an excuse I completely buy.”

“It’s the truth!”

She slapped her own thighs in delight. “Even better. And I know. Who do you think insisted you two knock it off before the convocation started.”

Shocked and angry, I could not speak.

She patted me on the knee. “I did you a favor. She would have argued with me if she had feelings for you. She didn’t. Good, that is settled.” This time she patted me on the head. “Now I just have to figure how to spin this shit-straw into gold at the debate tonight.”

Pouting I said, “Kell told me to tell you to stop hiding and go talk to him.”

She let out a loud grunt. “The last thing I need is a lecture about managing my apprentice. As if any of the old goats on the Circle-“

I cut in, “You’re wrong. I think he wants you to win the election.”

“Are you sure?! No it can’t be. He’s done nothing since the election season started even though he promised Aldous his seat would pass to me.”

“I overheard Kell and Ing-Radi argue about it. He defended you and she seemed convinced he’s on your side.” I laid back down on the carpet, stretching out with my arms behind my head.

In one smooth motion she leapt to her feet. “And here I assumed that promise died with Aldous.” A twirl of her arm above her head and a long black cloak weaved itself into being. The cloak engulfed her. She flicked her hood up, casting her face in shadows. From inside she mumbled, “Well I could certainly use a thumb on the scale in my favor. And I better see you in my cheering section at the debate.”

“Sure. I’ll bring my pom poms.”

She moved to rush away. “Hera?” I called after her. She paused before the door. I asked, “Did you
ever fall in love?”

With her chin visible inside her hood, her mouth cut to a thin smile, “Yes. Everytime.”

“Do you ever get over it?”

Without hesitation she said, “No. I prefer to hold onto it somehow, at a bare minimum as a grudge.”

“I’m not making that mistake.” My mind went black, as I tuned it nothing again.

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Galen paused. No surprises here. Their relationship ended badly with her going off to chase Vorlons. Although seeing it first hand, Fed behaved far more pathetically than Galen had supposed. Then it dawned on him. With the last two entries particularly, he’d witnessed Fed’s true self- one far more clever, questioning and thoughtful than Galen suspected. This was what Fed hid behind his fool’s mask.

And there was Mars again. Fed supported Roland killing his mother’s attackers. And Galen could well guess Walkyra would have been vindictive and bloody brutal with the remaining telepath. Fed’s unperturbed support of it all displayed a real moral grayness.

Something nagged at him. Something he missed about Mars. He picked at it until it surrendered to him. Elric had hosted the last official convocation, when he became a technomage. Before it started, Elric insisted he learn every technomage’s name and homeworld. Dutifully, Galen complied. Before today, he would have sworn none were from Mars.

Opening a channel to his ship, Galen accessed the Circle’s web, scanned the old biographies of Roland and his mother, Walkyra. She looked much like her son. A viking giantess, who looked like she belonged on stage singing Wagner. Oddly, neither biography mentioned Mars. Instead the home field had the phrase- Navis volantem. The phrase the Order used for technomages, like himself, that lived aboard their flyer. Yet, Fed’s sphere made it clear Walkyra must have lived on Mars for decades. Mars had been her place of power. If she was at all like other technomages, Walkyra would have had an extensive private lab and her own probe network. Galen wondered if she’d speak with him about Mars and what really happened. He moved to contact Walkyra, until he saw her status- Missing, Presumed dead. She’d never showed up when the Circle commanded the Order into hiding. The last edit by… Herazade. Of course, that woman’s tendrils extended into everything it seemed. Considering, she was also the one Kell ordered to dismantle Walkyra’s presence on Mars. What had she found on Mars? Had she left anything in tact? And for that matter, who would dare send agents after a technomage? Only the Shadows or their close agents had dared that.

Abruptly, his nose became overwhelmed with clashing scents. Like roses wrapped with leather. Other thoughts became impossible. Disassociating from Fed’s sphere fully, he opened his eyes and had to squint because the lights had been turned up to max brightness.

Facing the Mary and Elvis painting, sopping wet, Fed stood barebacked, a towel wrapped around his waist. A cologne bottle tipped in the air, splashed a puddle on his open palm which he transferred to his neck and beard with pats. Astonished, Galen wondered how could he miss
hearing Fed not just enter, but also take a shower.

Once the bottle corked itself and floated back to the shelf, Fed twirled about to catch Galen staring.

In a husky voice, Fed said, “After all these years, to finally have you in my bed.” His eyebrows danced at Galen who krinkled his nose in distaste. Of course, he joked, and sexualized the encounter. In this way, Fed was still Fed.

Frowning Galen said, “If this excites you,” Galen indicated at himself reclining on Fed’s bed, “Then you have sunk far beyond my ability and especially desire to help.”

Fed threw his head back in a hearty laugh. Energized, Fed piped up, “Good morning! Your Captain wanted us to attend some time wasting morning briefing.”

Matthew must still be anxious Galen reflected as he said, “When does it start?”

“Oh, in about 5 minutes,” Galen grunted in annoyance, watching Fed take his time. Clearly Fed had no intention of getting there on time. Sitting up, Galen tiredly swung his legs over the side and out of the bunk not excited by the prospect of an early morning meeting either.

“This,” Galen held up Fed’s ball, formed a platform under it, nudging it up off his hand. “Contains, next to nothing of use about Vorlon.”

He sent it hurtling at Fed, who snatched it out of the air, effortlessly.

“What number were you on?” Fed asked with a smirk, clearly quite happy with sharing these intimacies.

“21,” said Galen feeling much less comfortable by the minute.

“Ooh, so close. Really Galen, it’s not you to give up. Only a few dozen more to go.”

A wink from Fed and flick of his wrist, sent the ball zooming back. Galen reacted too slow. It would have hit him in the face, had the ball not abruptly stopped and hovered before Galen’s nose. Galen grabbed it.

“Keep it.” Fed said jovially. Galen slipped the thing in his pocket wondering if he could stand much more of it.

With jesting steps, Fed made his way to the pile of laundry. There he slid a pair of red briefs on under his towel. Galen silently thanked him for that small allowance to modesty. A step and turn like a dance move, Fed chucked his towel into the cabin’s tiny bathroom on his way to the closet. With his back to Galen again, Fed fished in the overstuffed closet to find a pair of blue trousers with orange stripes zig-zagging up the sides.

“By the way, is there anything going on between you and Dureena?” Fed spoke at his clothes.

Galen almost swallowed his tongue. A sinking feeling pulled at his stomach like when his platform dipped too quickly. A quick flick of his will, and his tech helped him regain control of himself. Fed pulled out a red vest and yellow t-shirt, compared them to his pants, decided against it, and stuffed it away.

“Why do you ask?” Galen said on guard, lest he reveal himself. Next Fed plucked, from the clothing chaos, a puffy sleeved white dress shirt. Oddly having only one hand didn’t seem to slow him down and even accelerated dressing with the rest- a jacket that matched his pants, socks
covered in emojis, and leather boots. Last he stuffed his pockets with candy, from where Galen couldn’t tell. The anxiety built in Galen as Fed delayed answering longer and longer.

When done, Fed turned back to face Galen. “Things went great with Dureen, well the second go-round anyway. Guess what? She’s hitching a ride with me to Theta 49.”

“You convinced her to travel with you?” Galen said astonished, not believing it.

Fed cheered himself, waving his stump around unselfconsciously. “Ya! But she reacted hard every time I mentioned you. Like … I mean if you two have a thing, I’ll keep my distance, but if not… well,” He flashed a sly grin. “Or you could come to. Mars will still be fucked up when …”

The air seemed to leave the room. No longer processing Fed’s chatter, connections formed. A pattern. A puzzle, he didn’t realize he’d been working on, solved. Its message revealed whole- Fed was manipulating him.

Elric would be disappointed in him for being slow. He’d forgotten the most basic, first step of the art of manipulation- Make sure you’re not the one being manipulated.

The pieces fit together obviously now that he saw the whole. Since he arrived, Fed distracted him. Then figured out the two people on the Excalibur, Matthew and Dureen, that meant the most to him. Isolated both. And tried to use them to redirect his attention from … Fed didn’t want him to go to Mars. Had he only used one of them, Galen might not have noticed, but approaching both tipped Galen off.

Other strands knitted themselves together. First, his discovery, no more like stumbling into three of his fellow technomages, Kane, Gwynn and Finian, investigating the Drakh still chafed. Especially that the Circle had not bothered to inform him. They’d made no secret they were let out of the hiding place at the Circle’s behest, to probe the Drakh. Fortunately for him, Gwynn valued truth above all and didn’t shy away from Galen. Instead she shared everything they learned with him.

He had wondered, if other mages had been sent forth from the hiding place and where? Now he suspected Mars another likely focus. And second, two years ago when he left the Order behind just before the plague, Fed secretly provided him with access to the Circle’s network. It was how, Galen assumed, Fed tracked him to the Excalibur in the first place. (For when he helped Dr Chambers adapt the cure to humans and Dureen’s people, Galen had furiously accessed the Circle’s network.) Galen had assumed Fed’s help sprung from their friendship. Now he saw the truth. It was another way to track Galen’s pursuits and control what he knew. For a skilled hacker like Fed, it’d be easy to make the Circle’s Mars probes look broken to Galen. Taken together meant, Galen was the maverick that the Circle deliberately shut out.

When it rained it poured. More conclusions flowed forth. That was why Fed didn’t care about the evidence he’d uncovered that pointed to others recreating their tech. They already knew. Was that why they didn’t want to interfere with the plague... Because it would mean working against allies. Galen’s jaw and fists clenched.

Silently Galen cursed the universe for once again putting him in this position- to again have to fight a friend and maybe even the whole Circle. Until this point, he’d been an arrogant fool to underestimate Fed. No longer. Time to turn the tables.

“... So what’ll it be Galen?” Fed finished his prattle.

First, Galen had to make sure he was right. A test. With precision and purpose, Galen rose from the bed. Upright with a grave stillness, they stood toe to toe. He activated his scanners and focused on
his fellow technomage.

“That depends Federico.” Galen said carefully.


“What is the Circle doing on Mars?”

Like a guillotine drop, the effect was immediate. Eyes-wide, nostril flare, mouth twitch, heart rate spike, frozen in place, pupil dilation. More than enough of the classic, caught in a lie, tells Elric taught him.

Got you, thought Galen before he said wearily, “I’m not sure who the greater fool is here. You for manipulating me. Or me for underestimating you.”

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Song quotes:

* Strange Brew, by Cream

** Enter Sandman, by Metallica
Galen fights on all fronts.

12 - Something Drakh This Way Comes

The confrontation simmered as Galen stalked forward. Backpedaling, Fed retreated through the open cabin door, into the main cabin, until he backed into a large crate labelled CREW. The box shuddered. Then all became quietly still.

In his time as watcher, as he observed the Drakh menace grow, Galen also kept a wary eye on the band of fools that made up the Circle. Not closely enough, apparently. He’d been a fool to think he saw all they did. The reality was somewhere in the shadows they plotted, and moved. And, they’d shut him out. The lava of his soul bubbled. Fury at himself, mostly that he missed this and, he succumbed to Fed’s crude manipulations.

Still Galen knew when to act or not. Matthew would not approve if he had it out with Fed aboard the Excalibur. And there was too much he did not know. His wrath, he held in check, and waited on Fed to make the next move.

Except Fed stood there like a deer caught in headlights.

“You can start by telling me what the Circle is doing on Mars.” Galen nudged verbally.

The lights of the cabin cut off. With his eye tech, it made no difference. He could see Fed’s body in infrared as clearly as daylight. Until one blink to the next Fed became a streak. A trail of dissipating heat replaced where Fed had stood. Galen had never seen a mage move that fast. A disappointing reaction, but not surprising that he ran away. It was all Fed had known since he came into his power as a technomage.

Galen sent Fed a warning. /You can’t hide from me./

No response came.

Methodically following the trail, Galen walked toward the exit out of Fed’s ship. In the hangar, Galen encountered a shocked tech, paused from pushing her cart of tools. When they made eye contact, her arm immediately pointed toward the tram ramp and said, “He flew that way.”

Galen activated his probe network and watched Fed zoom down the the empty tram tube, barely avoid an oncoming tram and up the lift shaft toward the bridge.

For a moment Galen wondered at his goal. Until he recalled the meeting Matthew had called and the room he preferred was off the bridge. It looked like they would not be late after all.

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/You can’t hide from me./ Completely panicked, Fed barely registered Galen’s message as he sped away crouched on a platform.
“Shit,” Fed said to himself, again and again. Flipping his platform from horizontal to vertical, inertia kept him on his platform as he hard-turned to thread the narrow opening into the tram tunnel.

His tech’s eye scanners warned of a tram barrelling down the line at him. Another hard-turn. Followed by a hard-break. A wall pipe grabbed. He had slowed enough to use it as a handle sending him perpendicular out of the tram line, and up a side shaft. The tram zoomed by under. His right shoulder protested being used as a hinge. His brain gently lurched around in his skull. The thrill of stunt flying usually made him feel great. This time he felt like throwing up. Must be the fear. The furious look Galen gave him back in his cabin sent another chill up his spine. For a long moment, Fed thought Galen would kill him right there. Celaene’s warning played through his mind.

A flannel clad arm suddenly gripped Fed’s embroidered sleeve across the round silver table of the Circle’s chamber. Celaene startled him but he did not pull away her. In the chair between them, Herazade faintly gasped and fell back into her chair in surprise.

With a distant whispery voice, Celaene said, “Last night I dreamed of you and Galen. Most of it, confused swirls. But one was clear.”

Fed rolled his eyes at Caleane. Every seer in the Order loved to work Galen into their vague visions of future glory. Fed couldn’t help himself. He patted her arm with his free hand and joked, “That’s called a sex dream. It’s perfectly normal at your age. Just go with it.”

Her forearm flexed, grip tightening. She pulled him in closer and coldly said, “He kills you.”

Fed’s eyebrows jumped at that. He turned to Herazade. Silently he implored her if this is for real. Her mouth hung slightly open in shock and she did nothing but fold her hands in front of her in a silent prayer. So he laughed. “Wow, a bit melodramatic don’t you think. But I’ll play along. How?”

Celaene looked away closing her eyes, as she answered his question in a pained whisper. “With one of those spheres of his. You don’t defend yourself. It’s over instantly. The background, I didn’t recognize the location. Just a pile of unlabelled gray crates.”

Fed rubbed his beard and pointed out, “Maybe you missed it, but he’s off saving the human race from the Drakh. And I’m sitting here playing with myself. So not seeing it.”

A heavy slap on the table startled Fed. “Celaene is the best seer we have. Why do you think I made sure she joined the Circle?! For once in your life take something seriously. Listen to her,” Herazade ordered him. Celaene released him and reclined managing to switch between pleased with Herazade and sneering at Fed.

Fed waved an appeasing palm at both women. “Okay, okay. I’ll make note, do not hang out with Galen around crates.”

Then, he hadn’t believed any of it, at all. That it was vague fate bullshit. But now that he got a glimpse of Galen’s fury. And he had had his back to a crate. Her prediction terrorfied him. So he ran. Like a coward. Ugh. Too much of him wanted to just take off. If he knew what was good for him, he’d double back to his ship and run. Let everything burn behind him. And at the same time, he didn’t think he could live with himself. Deep in his gut he knew the cure and Vorlon hinged on Galen. Gotta ride it out. See if this fate stuff was avoidable. Maybe it was like in A Christmas Carol, and the visions were just what might be, not what will be. Besides, he survived this time. That began to calm him.
Ahead, a locked round hatch barred his way. A command sent to his daemon still camped out in Galen’s probe network unlocked the door. It swung open in time to give him access into the shaft that led up to the bridge. The daemon also warned him, Galen had logged on and tracked him. If Galen meant to kill, he’d move fast to cut him off. Nope, Galen practically sauntered.

As Fed accelerated up the shaft dodging the descending elevator, he pulled himself together. What to do with this shit soup he’d created? For sure he’d have to avoid Galen until he came up with a plan or some reasonable excuse. At least give Galen time to simmer down, because as calm returned to Fed, he realized there was no way Galen would kill him. Not until he squeezed him like a tube of toothpaste for information about Mars. They were a couple days out still. Plenty of time for squeezing.

As he slowly ascended up the elevator shaft, he worked the problem. When the Order fled the Shadows, Fed witnessed, first hand, Elric puppet master their scheme to get away. The man had made it look so easy. It was not. The only easy thing was how easily Fed fucked everything up. And he’d been so sure it was all going great. Nope. He had to do better.

The problem was there was no way to beat Galen head on. Too smart and powerful. Then again, there were a few things Fed was better at than Galen. He was faster. Hacking for sure. Talking to the ladies, and socializing in general. His plan had worked until he gave something away in his cabin. Perhaps he pushed too hard, seemed too eager. And so maybe they weren’t mismatched in cleverness. Anyway, he’d have to work his strengths. Otherwise, Galen would make him talk. Unless... he couldn’t. What was it that Gwynn had suggested- a forced vacation. Ya.

Fed frantically patted his jacket. He’d worn this one when he left the hiding place. It had to still be in here. He found Celaene’s actual gift to him for his trip to Vorlon. Not her useless paranoia inducing visions. In the breast pocket he found the small slim case she’d given him. Just incase Rhea needed sedating on Vorlon, she’d said.

Pushing the flush side button, the metal case sprang open in his palm. The row of small injectors lined the inside neatly. Mostly blue coated vials, and one green one. A full dose from a blue injector would knock out the toughest technomage for 2 days, a normal for double that, she said. The green coated injector had the counter agent to wake them back up. He removed the green one, and snapped it in half. The precious liquid slipped between his fingers. He tossed the glass halves against the shaft, smashing it and wiped his hands on his pants. He removed one of the blue injectors and admired it. As a last resort, if he had too, he’d use it. Until then, let the avoidance and delaying game start.

At the top he commanded the bridge level open. The doors parted to reveal a waiting crowd. A crewman, paying attention only to the pad in his hand, stepped in the elevator-less shaft. Everyone gasped. Fed’s arm shot out and pushed the man back from walking into air.

“Watch that first step, it’s a doozie,” Fed said with a manic cackle. The crewman’s face went white as he clutched his pad to his chest. The murmuring crowd parted to let Fed through.

Down the hall Sarah, and Captain Gideon turned toward the disturbance. Bingo. Galen would never confront him while he was in the presence of others. Either of them would make the perfect shield. He had to stay glued to one of them. And he knew which he preferred.

Fed yelled down the hall, “Sarah! Just the person I was looking for.”
In the swirling madness of hyperspace, the Drakh mothership signaled the Masters of the fleet to correct their course. They obeyed. And aimed to destroy their target, the Excalibur.

Stepping out of the lift on the bridge level, Galen heard Fed’s laughter echo down the hall. The abrupt cut-off meant Fed saw him. The crew automatically pressed themselves to the walls, out of Galen’s way. By the conference room Fed faced down the hall, and, casually elbow leaned against the wall chatting up Dr. Chambers.

As he strode closer to them, he overheard them. Dr. Chambers, with her back to him, had become an unwitting shield. Galen frowned. A shrewd move on Fed’s part, in the short term.

Loudly, Fed said, “Funny you should ask. I’ve always thought we could use an outside perspective. So I’m like 100% for it. I’ve got some pull, I’ll see what we can arrange.”

Galen silently approached Dr. Chambers from behind she answered Fed, “It’ll be months before I can take a sabbatical…” She jumped startled, “Oh! Galen. Have you seen Dureena?”

With his own surprised reaction, Galen glanced about. Typically Dureena preferred to be under foot at every meeting, whether she had been invited or not.

“No,” Galen said. New unease coiled around him.

The Doctor said, “Probably just sleeping in. The Captain wanted to start as soon as you got here. She’ll just have to catch up.” She pointed at the open door across the hall.

Jealousy ignited and stoked the fire inside Galen. As he focused on Fed’s ridiculous grin, Galen couldn’t help picture how Fed could’ve caused Dureena’s sleeping in. He clamped down on his autonomic reaction, plateauing his anger.

When they locked eyes, Galen sent Fed a message. /Rather cowardly of you to use the doctor as a shield. And pointless. You and I will have a reckoning./

Fed’s adam apple bobbed as he gulped hugely. Without responding to Galen, Fed said to Dr. Chambers, “Let’s not keep the audience waiting.” Fed held out his arm to Dr. Chambers as if to escort her into a ballroom. Not taking the offered arm, she wavered back and forth between the men, picking up on their tension.

“Ya. Let’s get to it,” Matthew said from inside the door, as another witness to the tense exchange. Going first, Dr Chambers made her way into the room, Fed glued to her side, Galen behind.

Even though Maximilian and Dureena were missing, the room felt full as the section heads already sat in place about the table. Matthew stoically planted himself at the side exit to the bridge.

Fed announced to the room, “Do we really need to stare at that crap the whole time?” He pointed to the big screen which showed the tactical display of the pair of Drakh cruisers he’d misdirected. “There’s no way the Drakh’ll catch on. Put up something interesting, like a sunset, or lolcat vids, or... oh I know, the meme stream.”

While Galen seethed at Fed’s tomfoolery, somehow Matthew ignored Fed’s juvenile comments. Even though to Galen it was obvious that the Drakh cruisers had not wandered near far enough. They were very much still a danger to the Excalibur and her mission.
With a shout of hey oh, at the table Fed began to juggle candy bars. Well he tried to anyway. Clearly, without skill, Fed kept dropping them in the middle of the conference table next to the bemused Doctor.

“Who wants a sugar rush during the tedious parts, and by tedious parts I mean all of it?” Fed asked. The head of engineering’s hand shot up immediately. Fed chucked one at him.

“Galen. Quick word,” Matthew said with a head jerk to the quiet hall connecting them to the bridge.

Once they were alone together, Matthew whispered, “I don’t like what I’m seeing. Whatever is going on between you and your friend, I don’t want it to spill out here.” Matthew pointed beneath his feet. “And when we’re done, stay behind. I want to discuss-”

Galen cut him off. “Let me guess. Something about not to going to Mars.” Matthew didn’t react. That impressed Galen, for it meant Matthew had thought that far ahead.

“That took less time than I thought it would,” Matthew said, coolly.

“You can’t trust him Matthew,” Galen said emphatically.

Matthew planted his hands on his hips. The annoyance oddly directed at him and not where it rightly belonged, at Fed.

The response from Matthew fell away when Fed suddenly yelled, “No way!” Frozen, wide-eyed shock replaced his jovial clown act. The candy bars landed with thumps, forgotten, strewn across the table. He kicked a chair out his way. Then sprinted out the door.

Anxiously Matthew pointed after Fed, “What was that about?”

After a frustrated exhalation, Galen said, “Perhaps he ran out of ways to make himself look like an...” Idiot. The last word died in his mind as the warning messages poured in from his ship.

/Course change detected : Darkh cruiser marked 1, Darkh cruiser marked 2. Now on intercept course./

/Perimeter warning: Darkh carrier, collision course noted. Marking hostile 3. Darkh cruiser, collision course noted. Marking hostile 4. Darkh cruiser, collision course noted. Marking.../

/Silence warnings. Show me the whole./ Galen sent back. Immediately, his ship echoed back a three dimensional view of the Excalibur cutting through hyperspace. The misdirected cruisers had corrected their course and headed for them now. And worse, directly in the Excalibur’s path, an entire Drakh carrier group had appeared out of nowhere. Soon they’d be cut off, surrounded. And hours before the first whitestar would reach them. No wonder Fed ran. A rat fleeing a sinking ship.

“Talk to me Galen,” An agitated Matthew demanded.

“Fed should’ve waited for me to say, I told you so .”
and watched the Drakh maneuver themselves on the conference room monitor.

“I don’t see how we survive this,” Matthew said under his breath, summing up Galen’s thoughts. “Unless you have a secret fleet you’ve been hiding from me.”

Galen didn’t bother to answer with the obvious no. His problems with Fed, the Order, Mars, seemed far smaller suddenly. The Drakh had detected the ruse which meant they were cleverer than Fed supposed or they had spys either aboard the Excalibur, or high up in EarthForce. The black maw of hopelessness threatened to swallow him.

“Can you sneak past them on your ship? If you can, take the cure while we distract them,” Matthew said, desperate for a plan.

There was a time when the Drakh did not react to him or other technomages. They were both products of Shadow engineering after all. Like knew like. Until Galen helped Earth survive their planet destroyer and the plague started. Since then the Drakh had evolved. The Drakh on Centauri Prime reacted to him. Gwynn, Finian and himself had to keep their distance or be heavily cloaked to stay hidden. And perfectly cloaking something the size of his ship was simply not possible.

Galen said, “That will not work as they would detect my ship.”

Matthew sagged. “Any other ideas?”

“Yes,” said Galen simply. Galen leaned forward and touched the screen. Sending forth a communication daemon, it used the Excalibur’s system to amplify a broadcast, beamed at the incoming Drakh ships.

Superimposed on every screen, a miniature cloaked and hooded figure of Galen stood on the burning rune for destruction. The tiny figure of Galen spoke, coldly threatening, “To all Drakh. This ship and all aboard her are under my protection. Withdraw, or face my wrath. This will be your only warning.” When he was done, Galen checked the trajectory of the Drakh fleet. It had not altered.

With a raised eyebrow, Matthew gave Galen a look that silently asked if Galen actually thought that would work.

“It was worth a try.” Galen offered with a shrug. “Besides, this way I’ll feel better after I destroy them all.” Galen said with feigned arrogance.

Matthew said, “I’ll be on the bridge if you come up with a real plan. In the meantime, we’ll find a dense asteroid field, or ... Something to make it harder on them to hit us.” Matthew double timed past. At the door Matthew stopped short to say, “And if you have anymore First Ones up your sleeve, now’s the time to call in favors.”

A ray of hope blossomed in Galen’s chest. The Finger of God had taken a liking to Dureena. It might help defend them. Perhaps it’d call it’s greater whole, it’s giant mothership, the Hand of God. His feet carried him toward Dureena’s quarters.

The last, and only, time he entered her space had been one of his most uncomfortable. At the time he told himself it was because of her undersized decor, and that he came hat in hand to convince her to support his mission to the Well of Forever. In truth, he’d known it’d extract a cost. It did. The worst sort of cost. An emotional one. Relentlessly, she pushed him with her keen questioning. She saw through him, and wedged him open. That lead to his admission aloud of the question that unlocked his heart. Why? The universe took Isabelle but left a wretch like him to struggle on alone.
What cost would this entering her space have this time? Perhaps a jealous outburst once he saw her after her night with Fed. And she’d notice the smallest reaction from him. Could he control himself?

At her assigned quarters, a deck below, Galen pressed the chime to gain admission. If it were anyone else, he’d let himself in. But the thought of invading her private space still made him too uneasy. Indeed, her quarters were the one place he’d deliberately not planted a probe.

When nothing happened for too long, his lingering unease evaporated. She should have heard the red alert. Really, it surprised him she did not roam the bridge already looking to help. With touch of her door, he over-road her lock.

“Dureena,” he announced himself as he entered.

The lights were low, as if night hadn’t ended. A disturbance obvious with her ridiculously tiny chairs thrown aside, his eyes frantically scanned as he strode to the room’s center. He gasped when he found her. In the corner, by her makeshift altar, her body curled into a naked ball. Her skin bright red as if sun burned from scalp to toes. For a horrific moment he thought her dead, until rushing to kneel at her side his fingertips scanned her neck pulse. Her heart beat furiously. His scanning eyes saw the subtle sub-capillary sized weave of silver just under her skin. A loose mesh-on her back, arms, legs. Everywhere. The Sword did this.

“Dureena can you hear me?” Shallow panting met his question. He rolled her over flat onto her back. With a harsh intake of breath, he gasped when he saw her laid bare before him. Tanned muscles extended, strung like bow strings. Scars, healed slashes on her thighs, lower abdomen. No fresh wounds. Just the hard, large bosomed Artemis from his dreams tinted red. With a deliberate blink, he ended his idiotic leer and scooped her up in his arms. As he cradled her, he took a step toward the door intent on taking her to MedLab.

No. The message flashed in his mind from the Sword.

“What did you do to her?” Galen demanded aloud striding for the door. The Sword froze him. Again. Just as it had back on the orbital where they found the cure.

I’m inside her, like you are in your dreams.

The ba dum tss of a drum roll after a delivered punchline stimulated the auditory processing center of his brain. They arrived with images, crisp and detailed, from dreams Galen refused to acknowledge- Dureena and him nakedly intertwined, his arms encircling her as … Embarrassed fury blossomed in Galen’s chest.

/Damn you./ Galen sent back, like a spear.

Skittering echoed in his mind. It thought all this a joke.

Your lizard brain created those images meatbag. Not me. Count yourself lucky I didn’t pull the long one with you, Dureena and your dead mate.

Gritting his teeth, failing to will himself to move, Galen shot back at it. /You obscene rusty pile of old scrap./

I perfectly kept my promises. Images of Dureena and it talking played through his mind. Her eager agreement to the Sword’s offer, hitting all three points precisely as Galen asked. You deserve punishment for violating our agreement.
You’ve hurt her./

It’s no worse than when you let your masters filled you with their meat, and chaos. Our integration will take time, but she will recover. I will not let her die.

/Good because the Drakh have found us. And they will not hesitate to kill us all if you do not help me./

No insulting answer came, as Galen waited, stiff as a corpse. When it unfroze him suddenly, the weight of Dureena in his arms, threw off his center. Galen stumbled forward. Her bunk caught their momentum. She groaned when he clumsily landed on her crosswise on her bed. Straightening up, he quickly covered her with one of the fake furs she had heaped at the foot of her bed. With a tracing finger to her neck and temple, he confirmed her pulse remained strong. The Sword would not allow her to be removed to MedLab. Not that Doctor Chambers could do much more than simply monitor her. With the coming battle, she would be safest in MedLab. He would have to use the Doctor to care for her and get her there. Maybe the Sword would allow Doctor Chambers to remove her to MedLab.

For now, what could he do? The thing compared what it did to her to what he underwent at his initiation. What had he felt afterward… Numbed pain. Disoriented. Thirsty. His feet carried him to the sink. Filling a small clay jug with water from her small sink, he returned to Dureena’s side, placing it and a tiny mug next to her. Next he opened his probe in MedLab, and sent a private message to Dr Chambers- There is a medical emergency in Dureena’s quarters. She is … He wasn’t sure how much to say. Best to leave it vague… injured. I am unsure how severely. Come immediately, please. He finished, polite this time, and sent it off.

Once again he didn’t know what more to do for Dureena, or how to get the Sword to cooperate.

Dureena stirred, with a restless moan. Galen kneeled down and spoke in her ear, “Dureena if you can hear me, you must tell the Sword to help me.”

When her lips moved he strained to listen and made out a few words, “ … metal … power … revenge …” Well. Focused as ever. But not helpful. On the ultra high frequency it used to communicate, he pushed and forced open communication.

/You have to help me save the Excalibur and get the cure to Earth./

Not my job.

Galen let out a disbelieving grunt. /The Drakh will not discriminate. You and Dureena are in as much danger as the rest of us. If you will not help, you must call your greater self to help me./

Not it.

Galen felt like throwing a fireball across the room. With one more push, he pleaded with it. /I need an ally. Help me defend them./

Burning runes appeared before his face. A human contribution to the technomage runic language created by the first technomages, the Taramitude. A rune used often by his fellow human mages. The burning, stylized fused f and o for fuck off danced at his eye level.

Distracted by this, he wasn’t prepared when the distortion twisted his body. That sick-making sense of inversion struck and dismissed him, again.
He was horizontal. His sight saturated to white. His hearing overwhelmed by words sung too loud.

_So always look on the bright side of death_

Sight returned. Face down at a gray metal floor, he hovered for a second.

_Just before you draw your terminal breath_

Enough feet above the decking that, when he landed heavily,

_Life’s a piece shit, When you look at it_

It knocked the breath out of his lungs.

_Life’s a laugh, and death’s a joke, it’s true_

He rolled to his side with a groan.

_You’ll see it’s all a show, just keep’em laughin as you go_

He was back in the bright cluttered cabin.

_Just remember the last laugh is on you_

Sprawled by a pair of booted feet.

_And … Always look on the bright side of life…_

Abruptly the music faded to silent. Galen wanted to fight. Energy built within his tech, eager to help. With hands out and ready, Galen rolled sideways to his feet.

“You can teleport now.” Fed stumbled back in a half-crouch, with slack-jawed awe, eyes wide.

Pulsing energy surged in Galen’s spine. A fireball grew in one hand.

“I won’t fight you Galen,” Fed pleaded. Matching Galen’s pose, Fed had one open hand and now one black-metal, skeletal one which clutched a roasted turkey leg like a defensive club.

Taking in Fed’s face finally, Galen read the fear in the other man’s eyes wideness. His loud flamboyant clothes replaced with a night black unitard that sparkled with tiny crystals making him look like a goth figure-skater. With no shield, and a roasted leg as his only defense, Fed cut a pathetic figure. The opposite of any one’s enemy.

His tech’s energy retreated and with it his fireball extinguished. When he demanded the Sword for help, the obnoxious thing dumped him here. For better or worse, probably far worse, Fed was his ally in this fight. Mars and the Circle’s secret plans would have to wait for when, really if, they survived. United they’d be harder to kill. Perhaps together they could come up with a plan. If he could get Fed to stay.

After a stilling breathe, he and his tech calmed fully. Galen glanced around as he considered how to
proceed. Most of crates and objects that filled the cabin had been shoved to the walls creating a clear space in the center. Beside them a giant metal sphere nested in the remnants of the unfurled faraday cage. It shone to a silvery high gloss. This must be the CREW from the crate he had scanned yesterday. An indented channel, that glowed blue, bisected it at its equator. A pair of doors stuck open at the top as if it was but a giant toy having its batteries replaced. Small cylinders and a ribbon of some sort floated through the air and fed themselves to the machine with a clicky-click through the door.

A parade of tiny, mirrored metal, square plates piled up around Fed’s feet, dumped there by a trail of robotic ants crawling up out of a grate in the floor. On their own, one by one, the small plates floated and latched themselves to crystals on his unitard. They overlapped and sparkled like fish scales.

It hit Galen then. “You’re not running away,” Galen observed fully ending their standoff.

As his bearded cheeks reddened, Fed straightened out of his defensive crouch. Then bit a chunk out of the turkey leg, and chewed thoughtfully. With a shrug, he said, “Considered it before the escape window closed. But, I’d never live it down. Aky would never talk to me again. Neither would Gwynn, but she’d probably punch me first. Fin would talk to me even more, but only to work the word chicken into every conversation.”

Galen nodded, with a confused swirl of relieved surprise, and mistrust. “The cure must make it back,” His arm swept between Fed and himself, “A truce until the Drakh are dealt with. But mark my words. You will tell me everything about Mars. And you will answer my questions, either voluntarily or in a way you can not refuse.” Galen hoped Fed understood the seriousness of his threat to use coercive spells if he must.

Fed took another bite, chewing on the meaning of Galen’s words as much as meat. A sad smile shifted Fed’s beard around, “Fair enough. … What do you think our odds are?”

With an hopeless sweep of the arm, Galen answered, “Doomsday is near; die all, die merrily.”

Fed truly smiled for the first time since their confrontation. Mimicking Galen’s arm sweep, he said, “I’ll go with … Yippy kiay, motherfuckers.”

Not quite taking his meaning, Galen assumed he meant stand and fight. Except that meant certain death unless they came up with some sort of trick or ruse. The tiny plated kites kept adding themselves to Fed’s unitard. It was armor of some sort Galen suddenly realized. Caught staring Fed explained, “Miostro’s toy, for those of us who aren’t teched or whose shields just plain suck, like yours truly.” He bowed with an arrogant smirk at Galen as if that was something to be proud of, then went on, “So I don’t catch Kane’s case of spikes in the chest.”

A chime interrupted them with the last loaded clink of components into the CREW. Its doors snapped shut. The equator glow switched from blue to red, as it levitated up out of its nest. It shuddered and wobbled slightly. Galen arched his eyebrow at Fed. With a jerk of his head backwards, Galen retreated from the thing several steps, pulling Fed with him. The sphere began to spin in place.

Fed waved dismissively. “No worries. It’s Hera’s toy. Her newest version of her whirling dervish. Rock solid tech but… She left the firmware implementation to me.” He waved the turkey leg at the CREW like a conductor. The shuddering stopped. “Firmware’s good … mostly. I um … didn’t totally debug my code.” They both eyed the sphere with suspicion. “Probably should have finished that instead of binge-watching All My Circuits on my way to the Excalibur. Oh well. I’m sure it’ll work out.”
“Why in Weirdan’s name would you …” A different louder ping interrupted Galen’s judging Fed’s preference for lazily watching stupid vids when there was work to be done.

“Awesome. They’re done,” Fed said cheerfully. The last of the tiny plates settled in place, leaving only Fed’s head, hands and feet bare of metal scales.

Three tiny snarling leathery erupted out of Fed’s neck, clamoring to the ground. They ran around Fed’s feet cackling *Ring Around The Rosy*. Each carried a overly large sack, which leaked glowing gold coins.

To Galen’s questioning look, Fed said, “Had my ship’s navigation, weapons and tactical daemons run some sims.”

All the lights went dark except one. Galen and Fed floated in a spot of light amidst darkness that extended to absolute black. Before them, the coin droppings arranged themselves in a grid. The first one grew, morphed to a vid showing a miniature simulation. Lines of the Drakh ships engaging and fighting the Excalibur lit up in a projected battle that fast forwarded. A swarm of missiles flooded from Fed’s ship, destroying every Drakh fighter. But not before the cruisers discharged their lethal strikes. The simulation froze at last with the Excalibur expanding in to a cloud of fiery debris. A giant red x superimposed itself over the dead ship’s projection. The next coin went through much the same battle simulation but the ships seemed to take slightly different trajectories. The end was another red x. The rest of the coins began to run their own sims.

It did not surprise Galen that under that thick clownish cloak, Fed shrewdly grasped their situation. However, that he pivoted and threw together a useful, hard analysis that might actually help, astonished Galen. For it hadn’t occurred to him to model the battle’s outcomes. That was a good idea. As more and more coins added themselves to the grid sims, Galen’s annoyance with Fed morphed to relief.

“What criteria do the red x’s use precisely?” Galen asked.

“99+ percent failure.”

The start of every simulation went well. At first. The Excalibur, with the help of their technomage ships, held their own. The entire Drakh fighter wing wiped away in a blink.

“What is that missile swarm from your ship that destroys all the Drakh fighters?” Galen asked.

Fed beamed proudly, “Another one of Hera’s toys. She calls them SWITCH’es- Scout With Intelligent Tactics and Considerable Hit. They’re sort of a militarized version of our mini-probes. They infiltrate, burrow their way in, then disable just about any fighter class or smaller. Hera let me take all ours.” A pang of envy stabbed Galen. When he left the hiding place, or more accurately, when he was told to leave, he left virtually empty handed.

Despite the technomage ships and toys, and losing all her fighters, the sheer number advantage of the Drakh fleet always overwhelmed eventually. Red x after red x filled the grid of sims. Until the end. Surrounded by red x’s, the last one flicked to yellow.

“Now we’re cooking with gas. That’s only 60+ percent chance of failure,” Fed excitedly piped up. Galen groaned.

The coins stopped. Galen reached out and touched the sole yellow marked sim. The rest Fed dismissed and then joined Galen, analyzing it. It showed their technomage ships depositing the letters F and G, which Galen assumed stood for himself and Fed near a Drakh cruiser. The letters
entered the Drakh cruiser, and kamikazed the thing into its neighbor. The F and G then proceeded to
the next nearest Drakh ship. This repeated until no large enemy ships were left. The simulation ended with every major ship destroyed. Unfortunately, including the Excalibur, both technomage ships and the letter F. The only things that escaped the carnage, the letter G and a shuttle, with a Cure label on it.

_Not good enough_, Galen thought. Taking out one Drakh ship at a time cost too much time. They needed to be faster—destroy, confuse or take control the Drakh fleet all at once. An idea stirred.

“Tell me precisely how you hacked a Drakh navigation system.”

With surprise, Fed slowly explained, “I um … Snuck aboard, cloaked myself, wandered the ship for awhile. Snooped, well tried to. Their network is ultra-secure. Encrypted up the wazoo. Every port had multi-factor authentication. I sharked their bit-streams, but couldn’t decrypt any of it. Then I thought when you can’t hack in, you gotta get tricky. Turn to social engineering stuff.”

Galen’s foot began to tap with impatience at Fed’s long winded explanation. In this way he was too much like his old master. But he did not interrupt and instead bit his lip. “Gwynn loves to lecture me about what she’s learned on Centauri Prime. She told me the Drakh are strictly hierarchical, mostly drones, controlled by a few big-brained Masters covered in keepers. When one of them gets too old or broken, they don’t fix them. They keep the working bits, compost the rest. Recycling at its grossest, hurray.” Fed feebly cheered.

Inside his mind, he watched the Excalibur enter asteroid filled space. Galen lost his patience, and sped along Fed’s rambling lecture. “I’m well aware. I’ve spent considerable time with Gwynn and Finnian on Centauri Prime. Let’s focus shall we on answering my actual question. How did you take control of their navigation?”

Fed rubbed his beard thoughtfully. “Oh right… Went looking for their morgue. I found it,” He whistled, and shuddered. “It was eeewtastic. Lots of parts on hooks. I grabbed all the keepers I could find. Had to experiment. Tried them one by one. Lucky we’re compatible. Keeper umbilical fits our ports.” Fed tapped the back of his neck. “Total yuckfest. Until boom, found a working navigator’s keeper. Let me right in to their nav system. And better yet, decrypted their whole data stream.”

That was a dangerous game Fed played. Only Master Drakhs produced keepers. Fed got lucky that the old navigator’s keeper was one, compatible with their technomage neck port. And two, Fed could control the keeper and not the other way around.

Galen asked, “Could you take over more than just navigation?”

“No. The navigator’s keeper was function and ship scope limited.”

Galen said, “Could you see how they communicate between ships.”

Fed looked at him confused but answered, “Ya.”

Thinking, Galen vibrated with energy as he watched the Drakh fleet deploy to encircle the Excalibur. His plan took shape. Galen asked, “Could you see how they coordinated ships, issued new orders or changed deployments?”

“Ya. Everything between ships goes through the ships Master Darkh.” Fed answered with a pinched questioning look.

Excited now, Galen asked, “Could you imitate a Master, insert yourself, release a disruption
Fed’s face soured. “Look Galen. I thought of all that already. Won’t work. First, you’d need to catch a Master Drakh, then pull it apart to find the right key keeper, to unlock their com system. You were on Centauri Prime you know how impossible it is to find one of their Masters. They hide 24/7.” They were back in the clutter of Fed’s main brightly colored cabin now.

“But could you if you had a Master Drakh’s key keeper,” Galen emphasized.

“Um… huh,” Fed said, a finger scratching his bearded jaw as he stared at the ceiling.

Galen grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him until he focused on Galen’s face. “This is vital: yes or no?”

“Ya, ya sure. But look, I spent hours on their cruiser and never even caught whiff of its Master. Forget about how long it’d take to figure out which keeper on him is the one I need, and not to mention getting the gross thing to cooperate.”

“Leave that to me,” Galen said. Fed’s eyes lit up with surprise and hope that Galen was beginning to feel. While Fed could not locate the Master Drakh, Galen knew. On their mission where Kane died, Gwynn told him she interrogated a Drakh drone with simple coercion spells, making the drone answer all her questions. She said the drones were easily coercible. And Galen had more skill at coercion than Gwynn. Once aboard he would find a drone and use it like a bloodhound to lead him to their Master. Coercing a Master Drakh would no doubt prove tricky, but he’d do his best.

A plan solidified. “Let us make haste to the nearest Drakh ship. Aboard you will secure their communication area and prepare a disruption spell. I will bring you a compliant Master Drakh and make it give you a compliant key keeper.”

“Seriously? You can find a Master and make it hand over it’s keeper? You sure?”

“No, but I have no choice. Since I must, I will.”

Fed’s beard shifted around, settling on a sly smile. “Wow that’s… better than good, it’s good enough.”

Galen frowned at his joking and added, “We should leave our ships behind, to defend the Excalibur as your simulations suggested.”

Fed nodded. “And slave yours to mine.” Galen opened his mouth to argue but Fed cut him off pointing at the extra machinery snaking around his main cabin, “I got our latest tactical AIs, upgraded shields and weapons. Our ships’ll be more effective if your ship listens to mine.”

Reluctantly he had to agree. Galen conveyed the order to his ship, which bristled at the assigned subservient role but would obey.

“Let’s kick some Drakh ass,” Fed said, slapping Galen on the back.

The sense of calm relief, that at least he would not be alone in the horrors to come, suffused Galen. As he opened a channel to inform Matthew of their plan, he allowed himself to hope.
Protected in a shadow shield, Galen crouched on a platform as he sped out of his ship’s airlock toward the nearest Drakh cruiser. With a glance back, he watched Fed cartwheel out, leading the CREW sphere on a cable, like dragging a lazy dog for a walk. A swarm of little metal ovoids, the SWITCHes, poured out with him. With his scaled armor, Fed sparkled like some sort of fish swimming in the middle of a school of minnows. And with the fat fanny pack buckled around his waist, Fed looked more than well prepared. Since he had not watched Fed pack, Galen could only guess at what other state of the art technomage goodies Fed had secreted in there. Meanwhile Galen carried nothing but his staff.

With an irritated huff, Galen sent. /When I left the hiding place, the Circle only provided me with a boot to the ass. You get sent out like a prince with every new clockwork, and nick-nack made by the Circle./

Fed sent him, /I told you then, you catch more flies with honey than vinegar. It’s still true./ Galen couldn’t help but smile.

As he calculated their fastest survivable approach at the cruiser, the swarm of SWITCHes peeled off. They’d remain behind to take up their stations between the Excalibur and Drakh carrier group.

Soon they were specks in the great blackness. As they accelerated to match their speed for their rendezvous, Galen flew straight and true. While Fed, spiralled about him, all sugared toddler, complete with broadcasted whoops that Galen had to filter out. A pulse of scanning laser light lit washed over Galen. His shield hid him from the Drakh but not Fed and his toys.

/They’ve scanned you and when you’re close enough they’ll fire. I believe my shield can protect us both but only if you are directly behind me./ Galen sent hoping to calm Fed’s exuberance. The cartwheeling immediately stopped. Fed settled behind Galen, sitting cross-legged on the CREW. With the CREW sphere digging into his back, Galen could barely wrap them both in a Shadow shield.

/So how we gonna board?/ Fed asked.

Galen had given that some thought. Play to their own strengths, so Galen sent to Fed, /When we hit their ship, draw their attention. I want their Master to think you are the only one of us aboard. Secure their communications relay and wait for me there./

/You got it boss. That’s on the their bridge. Center-topside./ Fed sent him an image, the schematic of the ship highlighting the major sections.

Another beam from the cruiser bathed them. The energy dissipated easily. Final range finding and precise targeting. Immediately Galen cast more layers of shielding. As he added layers, several weapon beams concentrated on them at once. Followed by a great central beam. His shield layers collapsed, peeling off like onion skins, but held long enough to leave them unscathed.

/You are the King of this boss level./ Fed broadcasted to him, followed by woohos. Galen try to ignore him.

The organic yellow-black Drakh cruiser rapidly grew ahead. As it recharged, Galen busily rebuilt his layered shields, just as another barrage hit. Layers rippled, dissolved. Once again they held long enough until they were too close for more direct fire. So far so good.

As they approached the distinct forward pincers of the giant ship Galen sent, /Go forward. I’ll go
Galen hurled a sphere of destruction at the front of the cruiser, pockmarking the ship’s nose with a perfectly round hole. Fed surged ahead with an impressive display of speed. Swinging the CREW around so that it was before him, Fed whipped his arm like a cowboy behind it. A burst of fireworks lit him up.

/You’re supposed to tell me- Use the force Luke./ Fed broadcast at him. Galen had no idea what Fed meant. The CREW streaked ahead of him, and smoothly pivoted orthogonally in the dark hole, out of view. Deliberately, Fed landed short, on the skin of the ship. He moved his fanny pack to his back. A pair of large red fanged demons burst out of his chest and charged through the breeching hole. Finally, surprisingly cautious, Fed slipped in behind them through the breech. Flashes of explosions lit up the dark hole as Galen flew pass.

Hugging the haul Galen continued along the main body. At the rear, at a hatch, Galen gently touched down, dissolving his platform. Finding an access panel, he re-tracked his shield just enough to touch the panel with a bare hand. He fused with the biocircuits, and asked for entry. It obeyed him allowing him silent access to an airlock. Completely dark at visible wavelengths, at lower infrared frequencies he could make out the spherical space. Repeating his fusion with the far doors, he left both doors opened, baiting his trap. Atmosphere seeped past him from the dimly lit hall beyond.

Galen pushed his way past into a dark yellow-walled hallway. A large hangar to his left lit dimly but hummed with activity. To the right, a hallway receded into quiet darkness. A pair of Drakh drones sprinted out from the hangar. Still hidden, they ran past Galen without notice. At the nearest ajar airlock door, one vomited thick black goo on the breach. The second shaped it, spinning tendrils across the breach to form a woven organic black skin.

Galen grabbed both by the back of the neck. Asserting his will through his tech, he cast simple coercion spells at both. STOP. OBEY. Both slowed. The only sound, the faint hiss of air escaped by the unsealed bits of the airlock. Soon an acknowledging echo of obedience reflected back from both Drakh drones. Like a pair of well trained dogs the pair obeyed and stopped.

Galen commanded the formly vomiting one. TAKE me to your Master. The echo back, a confused whimper. The Drakh drone could not obey. It had no idea where its Master was. Galen repeated his spell at the other. Same response. It was Galen’s turn to be confused. Apparently the Master hid even from its own. Not anticipating this, his mind rapidly cast about for another way to find the Master. Perhaps these two were too lowly.

Rumblings vibrated the air from further up the ship.

In desperation, Galen sent to both, WHERE did you last see your Master. The answer from both, an image of a Drakh, with glowing yellow eyes, and more elaborate horns on its head stood above them in some sort of engine room overlooking them work.

WHERE is that . Their answer- central nexus, came with a precise impression of how to get there. With the schematic Fed provided, he knew it was the heart of the ship, under the bridge.

To the Drakh he commanded, FORGET. IGNORE me. END control. His spell left them to their work on sealing the hissing airlock.

Galen, hidden and shielded again, shot down the hall on a platform as fast as he could. The hallway widened as several merged. He passed slower red-eyed soldier Drakh jogging forward, rifles in hand, no doubt drawn by Fed’s attack. Galen grabbed the last soldier in line. The other
Drakh continued on their way without noticing. Repeating his line of questioning, this Drakh also had no idea where the Master was. When asked where he had last seen it, it showed him the Master carefully stroking and tucking this soldier Drakh into a pod, in some sort of barrack like room. Galen released the Drakh, and let it go on its way. Beginning to worry, he grabbed more Drakh as he made his way forward to the center of the ship. None knew the location of the Master.

The ship shuddered as a boom echoed and jostled the ship. A message from Fed, /They’re throwing everything at me. This is NOT fun. Gonna PTSD from this shit. Tell me you’re almost done./

Everyone’s life depended on him. And he still had no idea how to find the Master. He was failing. Badly. In an emotional panic, he entered what the first Drakh he interrogated called the central nexus. In the center, dark tendrils converged and wrapped around a glowing spherical core. A railing-less catwalk surrounded it in a ring at its center. Some sort of reactor and an energy distribution center. It was empty of Drakh and eerily silent.

/Galen? Are you okay?/

No. The word failure burned his mind. But he could make himself to stop. Galen forced calm, letting his tech play with his blood and brain chemistry to neutralize the stress hormones.

/I’m working on it./ He answered Fed.

/Work fast. The SWITCHes took out their fighters but the Excalibur is about to get hit bad. I made it to the bridge, at the comm relay, not sure how long I can hold out./

As his tech filtered his blood and altered his mental state, Galen’s mood stabilized, his mind cleared. He approached the glowing nexus and tried to think the problem through. The Master was like the captain, or brain of the ship. It had to be aboard somewhere. Yet the Master hid from its own drones, from its own people. Much like Galen did. Only his ship knew where Galen came and went. Suddenly he saw the answer. This ship. The Drakh cruiser was organic, alive. Perhaps it knew. But this thing was enormous. Far too big to coerce. Yet, he could ask. Maybe get an answer.

Long strides brought him to the encircling catwalk, and the nearest thick tendril. His staff in one hand, he sank his other hand into the nearest black cord. His tech connected and made his request clear using a shadow communication spell. The response was immediate. It has always been with you.

Galen spun around. A group of Drakh soldiers materialized out of a shimmering blackness. Behind them, a large horned yellow-eyed Drakh stepped out of the shadows. This was the Master. And it had been following Galen the entire time. Simply watched him, hidden. It stood relaxed, behind it’s wall of protection. The soldier Drakh aimed their enormous needle guns at him. The soldiers fired. Their arm sized needles slammed into his shadow shield, by the dozen. His shield absorb their destructive energies. They slowed, to where he could pluck them out of the shield wall if he chose. Then they stopped. His shadow shield sloughed off the needles, sending them cascading and clinking to the floor at his feet. In his hands he formed sphere after sphere and sent one at the each soldier. In a blink they were all dead and gone.

The Master did not hesitate. It ran for the door, fading into the shadows. Dropping his shield, Galen threw his staff like a javelin ahead of the Master. His staff discharged a ball of blinding white light energy revealing the Master to visible again. The blast knocked the Master to the decking. With a platform, Galen catapulted himself at the Master. They connected with Galen landing on top of its chest. Intertwined, they grappled on the ground. Desperately, he tried to get his hands on the Master’s head to cast a coercion spell on it. His tech amped his muscle strength. Like a mother
lifting a rock off a trapped child, Galen broke the Master’s grip on his wrists and grabbed either side of its head.

STOP. OBEY. Galen cast the basic coercion equation spell. The same one he had used on all the other Drakh.

Instead of obedience, an echoed alien scream, “Betrayed.” Followed by a deep sense of loathing and murderous rage.

A tentacle emerged from the Master’s shoulder. It whipped at Galen’s face. With a crunching noise, Galen’s head snapped back. His vision went black as he tasted blood. But he did not let go as the Drakh rolled them both over and pinned Galen to the ground. Its tentacle joined by its hands wrapped around Galen’s throat. Galen threw more coercion spells at the Master, even the fourteen words. None penetrated the Master’s resistance.

“Death to betrayers,” The Master hissed at him as it squeezed the life from Galen. His vision went black at the edges. On instinct, Galen traced the branching tree of coercion spells. There at the root, a spell he’d never cast. The root shadow coercion spell would overwhelm and enslave another sentient. His tech saw Galen’s intend and cast the base coercion spell on the Master Drakh. The tips of Galen’s fingers fused with the Master’s head, past bone, and tissue and into its brain. The Master threw itself backwards to flee his touch. But they had fused and so Galen’s hands and body went with it. His tech’s fine tendrils raced through the Master’s brain, editing to break its will, to serve Galen. The Master howled, writhed and twisted with pain. To Galen it felt like ecstasy.

The glow of its yellow eyes faded to a dull red. Its hold loosened. Its tentacle went limp as it collapsed on top of Galen with one last defiant gasp. His spell finished. The tendrils, receded back into Galen’s hand, ending their fusion. The Master bulk off him. He stood, and coughed sucking in air. Horrified by how that felt, once again Galen continued to let his tech regulate his neural chemistry. As he rubbed his aching throat, he never wanted to use that spell ever again.

The pain from his nose radiated through his head. Gingerly touching it, one nostril clogged with blood, his breathing labored Galen guess it broken. He blocked the pain receptors and ignored it.

“Get up and follow me.” Galen hoarsely said testing his control. The Master immediately obeyed and stood with a disinterested vacant stare. Galen grabbed it by the scruff of its neck.

/I’ve got the Master. On my way./ He sent to Fed. No answer came. Galen swore. As he figured out how to get to the comm relay and Fed, he checked in with the tactical situation of the battle. The Excalibur floated recharging, having just fired its main gun crippling one of the Drakh cruisers. His and Fed’s ships buzzed about the nearest Drakh ship, keeping it engaged and focused on not firing on the Excalibur. As he watched, another Drakh cruiser fired on the Excalibur, destroying its top nacelle, meaning it would no longer be able to fire its main gun.

/Do whatever it takes to keep the Excalibur safe./ He ordered his technomage ship. It echoed back a quick acknowledgment. He tried Fed again. /Fed? Are you alive?/

/Not for much longer./ Galen exhaled the breath he’d been holding.

The fastest route was up through the ceiling. With a new spell he designed after nearly losing his staff once, he summoned it. His staff hurtled back to his grip. He formed a platform under the Master and himself and shot upward. Shielded, he cast destruction ahead of him to cut through the bulkhead. He burst onto the cruiser’s huge bridge through the floor and into the edge of a battle. In between, three concentric circles of ridges separated Galen from the center maelstrom. The ridges
were divided by moats of viscous opaque liquid.

The bridge, a dark moist cavernous space, vented atmosphere from a hole to his left. Several drones anchored themselves at the edge of the ragged hole. They’d nearly sealed it. Their red lights cast a pale light about them. But the main light in the vast bridge came from the flashes of battle at the center. Brilliant white plasma shots from Fed’s CREW failed to deter the Drakh horde pushing forward. In the center a mound of so many dead Drakh, that it looked like a raised dais to Galen at first. About it, the CREW, now quite dented and wobbling, went about its frenetic work, zipping around soundlessly. The thing shot, slammed or cut with a deployed blade into the horde of Drakh soldiers assaulting the center. Dead drakh lay everywhere. A grizzly testament to technomage might.

Fed was nowhere to be seen.

Galen raced closer with the Master in tow. “Order your soldiers to stop fighting and withdraw from the bridge.” The legion of remaining Drakh froze, then moved to line up and retreat neatly from the bridge.

“Fed, where are you?” Galen shouted and sent an identical message. The center mound of bodies began to vibrate. A streak of black burst out, sending Drakh bodies roiling away. The fuzzy streaking form did a tight loop around Galen and dropped before him.

A helmeted Fed solidified before him. His bag gone, his sparkling armor broken, now mostly missing or fractured plates and covered in Drakh guts. Galen krinkled his nose at the accompanying viscera and smells.


Calming quickly, Fed smacked the middle of his chest. His fractured outer armor fell away, metallic glass shattering and cascading. The broken shards rained on his booted feet, leaving him in just a form fitting black unitard.

Giving the Master, which Galen still held by the neck, a shake like a christmas tree Galen ordered it, “Give us an obedient keeper to communicate with the rest of the Drakh fleet.” The Master’s hand roamed under its ample cloak.

In his mind’s eye, Galen watched the space battle evolve. Many of the Excalibur’s fighters tumbled, useless debris. As in the sims he watched the tide turn against the Excalibur. A Drakh cruiser had maneuvered close enough through the asteroid field to fire a salvo into the Excalibur’s flank. His and Fed’s ships pestered the yellow cruiser like wasps, but the onslaught would not stop. The continuous fire threatened to tear the Excalibur in two. When it fired it’s main gun at the Excalibur, Fed’s ship positioned itself in the line of fire, absorbing the blast, pulling through whole, and returning fire with a single warhead, that detonated with nuclear forced against its bridge. The Drakh cruiser tumbled away helplessly. The Excalibur saved but only for the moment as another Drakh ship took its place.

A message arrived from Galen’s ship. /I’ve done all I can. May you find peace Master Galen./ He watched helplessly as his ship kamikazied into the center of the second cruiser, crippling it. The wave of pain from his ship’s death staggered and blinded Galen. Only a a pair of arms wrapped around him kept him standing.

When he could see again, Fed’s concerned eyes filled his vision. “I’m sorry Galen. I’ll make sure you get a new ship.”
The raw sense of loss sent a shudder through Galen. Still he shook off Fed’s embrace and shoved him away. “Hurry, do your job.” They both turned to the Master Drakh, which held out a glistening, writhing single eyed-tentacled mass. Fed scooped it up. Without hesitation, he jammed into the back of his neck. Then he shot off sideways to a console near the freshly repaired haul-breech. The dented CREW shuddered and trailed sluggishly behind Fed. Its extended blade threatening the Drakh drones working on better repairing the haul-breech.

Leaning on his staff, Galen pulled himself together. Its warmth suffused him as he joined his ally. Before him, Fed worked frantically, a swirl of tiny runes danced in the air. Fed’s version of a disruptive techno-virus, manifested, and disappeared, inserting itself into the Drakh communication systems.

“It should be quick,” Fed said. Galen silently returned to watch the colossal battle. The formerly orderly Drakh formation frayed, then pivoted. Their weapons fired in disorder in all directions. The movements of the Drakh ships became a confused mess. A smaller cruiser turned and clipped the tail of the carrier, sending both venting fires and off course. Sensing the turn, the Excalibur retreated and left the Drakh ships to their disarray. Quickly, the remaining Drakh ships formed jump points to disappear to hyperspace. Until only the inert Drakh ship they stood on remained. The battle had been survived.

“Ya!” Fed pumped a fist in the air. Galen sagged in relief against his staff.

“Are you hurt Galen?” Fed asked suddenly thoughtful. “Your nose-”

Galen had forgotten in the madness. With his hand, he adjusted the tip of his nose with a crunch, realigning it, and held it in place as his tech’s organelles flooded the area to heal the break. “It’ll be fine. The question is what to do with this ship?” Galen indicated all around.

“Destroy it?” Fed offered uncertain.

Galen reflected on what he knew of the Drakh and what he’d done to the Master. He could do with it as he pleased. “Come here,” Galen called to the Master. It dutifully approached to stand vacant eyed by Galen. “After I leave, destroy all your weapons. Find a habitable planet devoid of other sentient life that will sustain you and your drones. Leave your ship in orbit. Never wage war again. Live in peace only talking what you need to live. Do you understand?”

“Yes ,” The Master hissed in its distant voice.

Galen focused on Fed, who silently studied him like he’d never seen his like before. “As for you… turn that off.” Galen pointed at the CREW which thudded against the hull of the bridge like an out of control carnival ride.

Oddly nervous to Galen, Fed looked behind him, checking on or looking for something. There was nothing behind them but the haul. His hand raised, the CREW’s blade retracted and went still as its bisecting light went from red to blue.

“This is your last chance. Please Fed, for my sake, your sake and the sake of the Order answer me truthfully. What is the Circle doing on Mars?”

Fed sighed sadly. “Or you can let it go.” Hands up and out, Galen readied himself to cast. Fed answered his own question, “No? okay, then.”

In a small fading voice, Fed said, “Could use a, forced, … vacay…”

Galen cradled the limp body, and plucked the needlish blue vial from Fed’s neck and pleaded, “You bloody clever fool. What have you done?!”
Galen's Circle scene in A Call to Arms, from another perspective.

13 - Technomage Politics 202 - Who Watches the Watchers?

Excerpt from Founding Chronicles, published 2282 by Gwynn

While the start of the Order of Galen is dated to a precise day, its foundations were laid well before and not by Galen. Truth be told, Galen always made it clear he never desired to lead anyone, anywhere, let alone start a new Order. By the mid 2260's, it was we, then the youngest technomages of the old Order of Wierden, who desired to be led by him. And no one more so than...

2266 - A Call To Arms

Fed sat about the campfire between the rest of the Circle and Galen. Instead of joining the argument, he shoved his hands in the baggy pockets of the traditional black robes Miostro insisted they wear when Hera wasn’t around to nope it. At the bottom of the deep pocket, his NougatNinja candy bar, a few old loose M&Ms and his pocket knife. Not finding his ball, he cursed himself for forgetting his favorite fidget toy.

Instead Fed had to amuse himself by looking about. Their shared electron incantation looked like Disney fun-engineers doubled-down to create the most cliched Stonehengey fantasy setting imaginable. Dark, bloated, overbearing. Miostro’s work. Between the robes and landscape, all they needed were druids performing blood sacrifices to complete the ridiculousness. And if Galen was right, Earth would need far more than that to stop what was coming for it, the Drakh’s Shadow Death Cloud.

Right now the Circle handled Galen like a dysfunctional alcoholic handled a bottle of gin. One day they couldn’t stop drinking it. The next, they couldn’t stand the sight of it. Fed sat witness the last step play out. Throw the gin bottle away.

Mmmhh. Gin. God, a gin cocktail would be perfect right now. He should have brought a flask of it. Damnit. His attention had wandered. What he should’ve brought was adderall. Instead, he amped up the adrenaline in his blood, forcing a manic focus.

Fed listened to the argument between the other men of the Circle and Galen get hot. The bad kind. All in front of President Sheridan no less. He really should say something. He didn’t. No point. All this was for show. The Circle already decided Galen’s fate, a boot to the ass, before this fakey renfairesce scene. The decision just needed to be formalized. Hell, Herazade and Celaene hadn’t even bothered to attend. This virtual meeting proceeded with the two women in abstenia. Their homunculi sat eerily still by the fake campfire, recording the meeting if the women cared to watch, or interject, which they probably wouldn’t. They’d bowed out with a message, we’re busy. With what, they wouldn’t say.
The argument began to wind down. Fed let the words flow over him.

Miostro said, “You shouldn’t have brought him here. You’re endangering all of us.” Barely true. The danger of someone noticing Galen’s moving (without the Circle’s permission) their farseer probe or his accessing the systems of Sheridan’s *White Star* was slight.

Tzakizak nodded. “I agree. It’s foolish. Remember, Galen, we agreed to have no contact with outsiders.” A half truth. Galen was forbidden to contact outsiders and he’d played along until now. Meanwhile, the Circle planned to send the JV squad to investigate the Drakh. Not bothering to inform Galen, of course.

When Galen spoke up, Fed paid closer attention. “And if our silence means the death of billions? You said I should explain myself to everyone involved. He’s involved, whether he knows it or not.” Fed wondered how Galen always had a good answer prepared.

They all looked at President Sheridan, who looked embarrassed, as if he overheard a married couple’s private quarrel. Still the ISA President listened, attentively. Clearly intrigued if puzzled.

Tzakizak spoke again, “Galen this is premature.” Fed hated it when Tzak tried to sound wise, and calm. Faker. “We can’t make contact without proof.”

Vibrating with indignant outrage, Galen cut him off, “But we can’t get proof without contacting someone on the outside! This is insanity!”

Miostro answered him, “Perhaps it is. But these are insane times. And *this* one … is he the best you could do?” An accusing finger pointed at President Sheridan. One of the most powerful and well-connected people in the known galaxy. Miostro’s answer was insane. Or a lame attempt at a joke. Probably that. Miostro knew exactly who Sheridan was.

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Galen said, handling it with a grace Fed wished he had. “We all know what is at stake here if I’m right. Yes, we must protect ourselves, but in doing so we cannot turn our backs on those we have left behind.”

Finally, Fed felt it - the embarrassment of being on the willfully acting stupid side of a debate.

“All right,” Miostro agreed. “We will allow this one contact, no more. But if you compromise our hiding place, if we risk death because of your actions … understand that you will be the first to die.”

The Circle pulled back from the electron incantation, like parents sulking after not winning an argument with their precocious child. As spectators, they witnessed- looking and listening in as Galen spoke further with President Sheridan. Promptly, Galen called the Circle afraid, and fools. To an outsider. With a pissy hand wave, Miostro threw lightning strikes. A gigantic one when Sheridan questioned where they were.

“This is going well,” Fed joked.

Miostro glared at Fed from inside the hood of his robe.

While Tzak cracked his knuckles showing off his over muscled forearms when his billowous robe sleeves fell back. His chin jutted out of his hood. A predator’s smile on his lips.

“Can we flay him yet?” Tzak asked. A rhetorical question Fed hoped. Until Tzak began to stroke the pistol he always carried in his pocket like a chronic masturbator. Fed scratched his beard. He really should have had a drink before the meeting.
“I formally move to be rid of him. Exile until we vote otherwise. Are we agreed?” Miostro asked.

Tzak nodded instantly. “It’s about time. If he fights, I’ve prepared a few special rounds I believe will penetrate even his shadow shield.” A partial cloak whisked away from Tzak. There appeared, strapped to his back, over his cloak, a sniper rifle, as tall as Tzak.

Alarmed, Fed cut him off, “Dial it back Tzak. I know Galen. He’ll leave peacefully. And I agree. Galen needs to leave.” Fed did not add aloud, for his own safety if nothing else. “I’ll even get off my lazy ass to escort him out.”

Folding his bare arms, Tzak went as rigid as a statue, seriously studying Fed. Miostro again nodded with approval. Even with the women absent, a binding majority vote.

Two runes suddenly etched themselves in front of the homunculi. Hera’s personal rune, Progress, written in her blue lighting script and Celaene’s rune, Dreams, in ghostly silver smoke. The woman silently approved remotely, making the vote unanimous. At least they weren’t totally checked out.

“Tis agreed by all. And should Galen resist, you may do as you must Tzakizak. For the good of the Order!” Miostro formally announced the end, massaging his need to adhere to rigid rules.

There it was. Galen’s exile. Fed hated this dysfunctional relationship between the Circle and Galen. It felt ugly, wrong, and especially stupid. They could do better together. Instead the same cycle repeated again and again. They brought the worst out in each other. Galen didn’t want to play their political reindeer games. Or maybe he didn’t know how. And while the Circle played the dependent user, Galen acted like a Circle of one. And when questioned about anything, he deliberately played jerk cards- bristled with arrogance, condescension, impatience. Barbed snide comments were his usual response to everything. While Galen could rightly claim the Circle started it, he did nothing to stop it. And now Fed witnessed the inevitable break, and each side would blame the other.

The Order faced so many problems. Christ on a half-shell. What to do about- Galen’s exile? The Drakh? And the worst, how to make more technomages? Though Hera, and Celaene, insisted Mars would change that. While Tzak and Miostro thought the Drakh were their best bet there. Fed had no idea, and didn’t take a side. It had split them. Until they decided to pursue both. Double the effort, same results. Ugh. Suddenly itchy, Fed scratched his beard with both hands.

He needed to focus on solutions.

With Galen ... he could and should slip him secret access to their network. So Galen wouldn’t be blind in his exile. Bonus, he could track and spy on what Galen did.

With the Drakh... besides letting Galen hammer them, Fed had put together the Junior Varsity, JV, squad as only he called them. They would be tasked with the fun of collecting much needed supplies they were running low on in hiding. Trifle luxuries they couldn’t produce like Quantum 40, chocolate, and condoms. And literal tons of other things. But more importantly they’d seek intel on the Drakh. Kane, Gwynn and Finian would be the Circle’s eyes and ears on the Drakh, which sounded like the opposite of fun. Still Fed envied that they’d get to leave and be free. Lucky bastards.

At first the other Circle members rejected outright his proposal for the Drakh mission to be made of three initiate agents. He lost the vote four to one. But he refused to let it go. And re-proposed his idea. During their debate, the other men of the Circle relentlessly mocked and belittled him. The women simply watched. Hera even smiled sometimes, seeming to take perverse enjoyment at his floundering filibuster. In private, during breaks, he got her back, and became the relentless drip in
her ear, until Hera had no choice but to give in or get mad. She gave in on the condition they trained relentlessly until they left. And where Herazade went, Celaene followed. Three to two. Fed still savored the look of shock on the men’s faces when he won the second round of voting. A first in his political career. He wondered if it was a fluke or if he could pull that trick again.

Where was he? Oh ya, the next Order problem. Mars... Years ago, Hera insisted their future intersected Mars. When asked why? It was Celaene who answered, that she’d *seen it in a dream*. Ugh. Typical seerer crap. Tzak and Miostro blew it off.

Whatever was happening, he wasn’t sure he cared. Okay, he really didn’t care since nothing more had come of it. The only part Hera made him play was tedious hacking work. Per Hera’s orders, she asked him to find new backdoors into Earth Force. Most of EF’s networks weren’t hard.

Except for their New Weapons Division. They were good, really good, so finding EF-NWD vulnerabilities went nowhere. Years of combing through the blackhat nets looking for hints, boring phishing schemes, and eye-bleedingly tedious bit-stream sharking. Nothing. Their systems technomage proof somehow, locked down tight. When he told Hera he needed to go and in person physically penetrate their system, to hack it from the inside, she refused, and ordered him to keep trying remotely.

When he asked her for more details about what to look for, again Celaene answered, *I’ve seen it. It’s best you don’t know too much about Mars.* Ugh. Cryptic and useless. Seers were the worst. How was not knowing something a good idea? Yet, not wanting to rock the boat, he took the easy way, and let it go. He did as he was asked.

Since then, they’d talked about sending agents to Mars only once. Miostro thought it pointless. Tzak joked they should all go, it’d be the perfect Circle field trip. Maybe that was why Hera kept putting off another debate, about who should be on the Mars Varsity team as he just dubbed it in his head. In private Hera made it clear to Fed, this time he wasn’t getting his way. Even if she had to block his messages and lock her office to him. Still he planned to push for Aky to be on whatever Mars team formed. At least one technomage with a working moral compass had to go.

He scratched his beard harder. Why was it so itchy all of a sudden? Maybe he needed a trim. His stomach rumbled. Some candy would taste so good right now. He didn’t dare break out a full NougatNinja, Miostro would yell at him, take it and incinerate it. But he might not notice if Fed snuck some M&Ms …

Damnit, his attention had wandered way off again. Where was he? Oh ya, Galen’s exile made official.

Sheridan’s image dissolved, as the connection severed. The electron incantation ended. The fantasy setting dissolved to the bare stone gray chamber. The homunculi did not react beyond standing up. Even though every part of him wanted to zone out, Fed scratched his bearded neck to force himself to pay attention. Galen stood in the middle of the Circle’s chamber- alone, grave, resigned. The two older men of the Circle seethed. Galen embarrassed the Circle.

Galen directed his laser focus at the hooded spell created *women*. “It’s unlike you to remain silent Herazade. Have you no opinion on this matter?” Galen let a long pause awkwardly stretch out. “Or perhaps you’ve finally figured out, tis better to remain silent and be thought a fool than speak and remove all doubt.”

Wow. Fed couldn’t believe Galen baited her. Good thing she wasn’t really here, or she would have popped her cork. The whole lot of nothing drove Galen to act. Two strides and Galen yanked back their concealing hoods.
“Homunculi. I should have known.” His severe gaze shifted to Fed. “Is the fate of billions of souls too trifling a matter for her or is she cowering under her bed?”

Great, now Galen baited him to explain her absence. Definitely should’ve had a couple drinks before the meeting.

“Silence!” Miostro’s word echoed with the command voice. Fed’s spine reflexively stiffened. While Galen just looked annoyed. “It’s not your place to question us. We find you and your ways wanting. You are removed from your position as watcher. You will leave this place for the good of the Order. And not return unless called by us.”

Galen snapped out his answer, “Have I been sent to bed without my supper? Or did you just exile me? Frankly, your words are so ridiculously put together, I can’t tell.”

Miostro let out a disbelieving gasp. Tzak threw off his hood, his face red with rage, he grabbed at his back. Galen brought up a hand. Three fingers out, ready to cast. The Circle’s room hummed with energy as shields winked on.

Fed stepped in between them, arms up. “Hey... how about we end the who’s got the biggest dick contest. Because from what I’ve spied, for sure I’d come in last place.”

Everyone focused on Fed.

Miostro dropped his shield first and scoffed. “Really Federico? Such crudeness has no place in the Circle,”

Tzak eased up next, a surprised smirk directed at Fed. Tzak always did like a penis joke.

Finally, Galen dropped his shield and reverted to pure disapproving.

Since his joke did its job, Fed said, “I’ll show him out.”

Fed put out an arm toward Miostro. His cartwheeling gyroscopic rune for Fun spun with burning brightness above his open palm. Miostro chanted his rune for Harmony which sailed out of his mouth toward Fed. The women’s runes, Progress and Dreams rose out their respective homunculi, following in quick succession. Finally, Tzak sketched his tri-runed sigil, A Good Offense, and flicked it toward the others. The glowing runes wrestled, then locked together in a frenzy to form a large iron key, that submerged, disappearing into Fed’s hand.

With a determined look, Galen pivoted and left the Circle’s chambers without a word.

His neck beard itched. Fed decided, tonight he’d trim his beard and, for sure, get drunk.

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Floating along on a platform, Fed caught up with the seething Galen storming down the hall. “We gotta stop meeting like this.” Fed joked.

In silence, Galen vibrated like a taut string as they made their way to his quarters. Inside the spartan stone walled room, Galen grabbed his staff and already packed duffle bag off the carefully made bed. He’d anticipated the Circle’s reaction, Fed suddenly realized.
Mutely they left Galen’s quarters and headed for the nearest airlock. To Fed the silence between them was like an anchor dragging on a swimmer. The idea of leaving things as they were ... it felt wrong. Perhaps if he could make Galen see the Circle from his perspective, the sense of dread that nibbled at the edges of him would go away.

Fed filled the oppressive silence with the first thing that came to him, “You know Galen, you catch more flies with honey than vinegar.”

With an appreciative snort and turn, Galen watched Fed as they proceeded down the curved gray stone corridors of the hiding place. “Did you just compare the members of the Circle to flies?” Fed’s chuckle was his sole answer. Galen continued, “Mind you, I wholeheartedly agree.”

Fed laughed out loud, wanting to connect with Galen, before he confronted him in his own way. “Why didn’t you just ask me for permission to move the farseer? I’d made sure you got it. Instead you … why come at us like that, all swinging a bat?”

Galen stiffened, slowing his pace. The anger slipped from his face. “I did and said what I must to force the Circle to act.”

Ah, Galen tried to manipulate them. How very technomagey. And it didn’t work. Then again, his exile freed him to work the problem without the Circle looking over his shoulder. Maybe that was Galen’s goal. Or maybe it was just straight up frustration on Galen’s part. That seemed just as likely.

Fed swallowed his nervousness and kept at Galen. “I think it’s easier to sit in the peanut gallery, and throw insults at the stage.”

A searching gaze swept Fed up and down. Galen smiled with a corner of lip but not with his eyes. “Yes. And since the Circle will not act. As you see I’ve descended to take the stage. Alone. Once again.”

Damn, he was good. Somehow Galen always knew what to say to get the last witty word. At the airlock, Fed stepped off his platform, swiped the console with a finger, and sent the Circle’s key daemon into it. As the chamber cycled out the air, and flashed warnings, the two of them snapped on shields. When the doors opened to hard vacuum and absolute dark, Fed weaved a string of Christmas lights to dance under his reformed platform. The lights gently lit the metal boardwalk that would take them across the dusty surface to the hibernating technomage ships.

Galen sighed, over-loud, with a pointed look at Fed. “And my performance will suffer since the Circle has chosen to blind me deliberately.”

“I got you covered there.” Fed held out his hand. A snarling imp, complete with horns, tail, leathery skin, in a tiny red tuxedo jumped toward Galen. With a wave of his staff Galen absorbed the thing into himself.

Galen’s eyes lit up to pleased.

Fed added, “It’s one of my less privileged accounts. No more moving farseers for you but you’ll be able to access and watch everything again.” Well almost everything, Fed did not add out loud.

“What is the passphrase?”

Fed sent him the unlocking phrase. /From Aladdin to the Brooding Prince of Asses/

A flash of surprise across Galen’s face morphed quickly to a frown. “Beggars can’t be choosers, I
suppose. Still, accept my thanks. Who will take my place as watcher?"

“Dirk,” Fed grimaced as he answered. Galen exhaled in disbelief. Fed went on, “He’s not that bad. He’s …” Fed waved his hand around trying to come up with a good adjective for the stupidest ass kisser in the Order.

Galen offered, “Dull-witted in his perfect loyalty. I would have chosen ... Ak-Shana, or Kane or … even Gwynn. They’ve shown basic competence.”


“Absolutely not. Finian’s absurd. Never commits beyond knowing the latest Centauri curses, and gossip.”

Fed had to smile at Galen’s answer. That was exactly why Fed chose Fin for the JV squad- his perfect Centauri fluency, thanks to having Chiatto, a Centauri technomage for his old master. Even if Galen didn’t know about the JV squad, Galen’s opinions made him feel good about his choices.

Before long they moved between technomage pinnaces parked neatly in rows under camouflaging illusions. At the far end, Galen’s ship. Actually, not his, since Galen’s original ship was destroyed on Z’ha’dum. Rather this was Elric’s old ship Fed reminded himself. Fed reached out with both hands to disengage the restraining wards around the antique ship. He dismissed them, allowing the ship to come to life.

“After you came back last time, I restocked her and had the Grimlis do a once over on Elric’s old bucket.” Fed rapped his shielded knuckle on the smooth black ship skin.

A curtain of melancholy covered Galen. Instantly, Fed regretted mentioning Galen’s dead master. Quickly, Galen’s stern mask settled back in place before Galen said, “And they, no doubt, wanted to rip it apart and rebuild it. But you didn’t let them. Guessing I wanted to keep it as Elric had left it. Thank you again.”

Fed shook his head in disbelief. Galen had guessed it all in one go. “How did you know that?” Fed asked. It made him feel something too deeply... sadness. This might be the last time they’d be together like this.

Galen didn’t answer. Instead he looked past Fed into the blackness of space.

So Fed gave up and said. “Now I know for sure you should’ve joined the Circle instead of me,” said Fed, not being able to help but make light of the whole thing.

Closing his eyes for a moment, Galen quietly said, “I don’t wish that honor on anyone.”

Fed grinned, relieved that Galen still wanted to talk. Deciding to go for broke, Fed said, “That’s really funny Galen cause I get the feeling you want all the privileges of being on the Circle, but none of the pains in the ass. The endless meetings, personality clashes, petty dramas, navigating moral compromises-,” Fed fumbled suddenly realizing he said too much, “... and stuff.”

Galen raised an eyebrow at the oversharing. “Well done Federico. Morally compromised is how I’d describe the Circle. I’m relieved at least one of you will admit to that.”

Fed jammed his hands in his pockets pissed at himself for yammering, and blurting out too much. “I prefer the term realistic. And it’s best to tend your own garden before you start pulling anyone else’s weeds.” Reflexively, Fed parroted the defense Hera threw around to justify her, and Circle’s inward focus. Fed agreed with her and added his spin. “We’re not Gods Galen.”
With a dramatic arm sweep, Galen’s voice grew sure. “We’re the next best thing. And so the burden is on us to put our thumb on the scales to try to fix the Universe’s most egregious horrors.”

Fed had never considered that. Once Galen pointed it out, Fed wondered why he’d never seen that before. With a shrug, Fed said, “Maybe. What are you going to do?”

Galen looked pained. “Whatever I can to find and destroy their Shadow death clouds.”

“Alone?” Fed asked.

“For now,” Galen answered mildly.

As they waited in silence for Galen’s ship to power up, Galen, casually, asked, “You never answered me, do you think Herazade’s absence is due to her indifference or negligence?”

Fed’s mind blanked. With the loss of concentration Fed’s platform dissolved to nothing. Catching himself, he hopped neatly to the walkway to cover nearly falling on his face. How the hell was he supposed to answer for Hera? Christ’s cracker, he had no idea. It did look like neglect or she didn’t care. And now he wondered if Galen’s relative chattiness had been Galen manipulating him to get an answer to that one question.

Almost desperate, Fed felt a need to show his loyalty to Hera. “Or … maybe none of the above,” Fed carefully answered.

Galen regarded him with steely calculation. “That is not an answer.”

“Umm…,” Mentally, Fed locked down his reactions, and emotions, to hide the coming lie. He said the first plausible excuse, “She’s not a fan of yours.” That wasn’t exactly a lie, more a truth in the greater scheme of things. Considering Galen’s grunt of disgust, he brought the lie.

As the ramp in to his ship unfurled, Galen remained paused on severe disappointment. Maybe to think or for dramatic effect, Fed couldn’t tell.

When Galen spoke it was a lecture. “Perhaps you will listen. Consider this... our Code is simple to recite- Solidarity, Secret, Mystery, Magic, Science, Knowledge, Good. Yet, its application is not. I posit the first six must bend to the last, Good. How to do good is-”

Fed cut him off. “Ya, we all heard the same lectures growing up Galen.”

With an annoyed exhale at having been interrupted, Galen resumed his lecture with a sterner, louder voice, “Then consider ... Who watches the watchers? And why bother at all?” Galen asked the questions of Fed almost jovially. “On every power there must be a check and balance. I see this and act out my part. I suspect you see it. But you do not act. You must see and act Federico.”

Galen’s jovial air evaporated, to pure, disappointed stern, “Get off your lazy ass and act!”

Feeling about a millimeter tall, Fed shrank away, having no idea what Galen was going on about. Watch the watchers? Check and balance on power? And … how to do good? Okay there he had a clue. His street-wise side sneered at that. The path to hell was paved with good intentions.

More than ever, Fed stood dwarfed by his biggest problem- he had no idea what he was doing. Most of the time, like now, he felt useless or worse, led around by the nose, usually by Hera but now by Galen’s challenging stares.

All the swirling thoughts made him feel like throwing up. The weight of expectations landed on Fed as if Galen lifted his ship and slammed it down on him. Fed wished he could walk away,
forget, or hand it to someone else. But there was no escape from that suffocating stare of Galen’s.

Despite his ship being ready, Galen wouldn’t leave until Fed said or committed to … something.

About watchers, whatever … suddenly an answer to what Galen meant. The Circle were the

watchers. Its members powers. Galen had watched them. Maybe Galen meant for him to watch

next. To be the check and balance on their, and especially Hera’s, power. Being the weakest on the

Circle himself, Fed wasn’t sure how to start. Hum. He’d have to work that problem.

Fed swallowed the boulder-sized lump in his throat, forced a smile, and said, “I’ll try to put my

thumb on the universe’s scales. Take care brother.”

That satisfied Galen. One sure nod, and Galen swept up the ramp without even a goodbye.

Unsure how to act, Fed absentmindedly directed Galen’s ship as it weaved its way through the

perimeter wards, and barriers. The layered kill zones. Out past the disguising cloaks that kept the

hiding place concealed. Galen had left him clueless.

As he worked the puzzle Galen left, Tzakizak landed next to him cradling his rifle, with muzzle

pointed at the dusty gray surface. Figured that Tzak had secretly followed.

Tzakizak landed close until their shields crackled against each other. A weariness filled Fed. He

slipped a hand in his pocket to instinctively fondle the release button of his pocket knife. Allowing

his shield to merge with Tzak’s until they were one big ovoid, they shared air to converse. Fed

stepped in close, less than arm’s length, so if Tzak meant violence, his rifle (guns really, since

Tzak never only had one) would be useless. They’d grapple. With his quickness, he’d win, he

hoped. All the guns in the galaxy wouldn’t save you from bleeding out from a slashed throat.

“You gave him a program. What was it?” Tzak demanded.

Fed ignored the question, and jerked at the man’s rifle. “You know Hera doesn’t like you open

carrying.”

By the amused, pitying look Tzak gave him, Fed might as well have admitted he secretly wore no

underwear today because he hadn’t done his laundry in a month.

Tzak said, “Who do you think told me to make our intentions clear.” He swung the rifle away, and

strapped it to his back.

Fed’s couldn’t hide his reaction. His knife released, and forgotten. From open mouthed shocked, to

a confused frown. Damn. He should have guessed that. When it came to violence Hera ran absolute

cold or too hot. Never in between. She loathed violence. Ideally. In practice, not so much. When

pushed she dialed from 0 to 11. Every time before, he’d agreed with her call, more or less. Now

looking at Tzak’s rifle, doubt creeped. Even if Galen was a total dick-asaur, he had a point.

This was it. He’d act, fulfill his promise to Galen by confronting Hera. And she’d kept her plans

for Mars vague. No real details despite always insisting their best lead in their search for making

their Shadow tech was on Mars. As far as he knew nothing big had come up. They’d been at it

for … it felt like forever. He counted. Since after Z’ha’dum, shit, 5 years-ish.

Tzak shook his head in wary amusement. “You poor trusting fool. This is the last time I ask nicely.

What did you give Galen?”

With a wink Fed lied, “It’s boring, lonely out in the black. So, my favorite sexy match-3 game.

Race ya back, Tzak.”
Crouching down he formed another platform, and sped back at hard acceleration, leaving Tzak in the fine black gritty dust of their self imposed prison.
Non-Crusade plot and characters...This chapter is a palate cleanser of asides meant to bridge the Call To Arms and introduce more technomages and their life in hiding.

14 - Reindeer Games

2266 - A Call To Arms Continued

Back inside the hiding place after sending Galen off to his exile, Fed headed straight for Herazade’s office, to confront her. As always the doors opened for him. Her handmade floor to ceiling tapestries, of fractals in bright blues, reds and yellows, framed her enormous, cluttered desk. But she wasn’t here. Behind the chair, a homunculi, Herazade’s fake autonomous version of herself, stood motionless. It must have steered itself back here after the lively meeting to exile Galen from the Order.

Shrugging off his black meeting robe, he tossed it to land and drape the still spell-made figure. In the air over her desk, he sketched his messy burning block letters, emases nepo. Part of the stone wall in the back of her office, shimmered off, revealing a dark hall. Her private lab. He walked down the shadowy passage, past the wall of stuffed to bulging bins and into a greater cavernous space. Automatic lights flicked on but all the machines remained still, screens dark.

Pushing himself further, he headed for the back where she’d set up her living suite. Nervously he peeked around the half-wall into her private bedroom. The low half-walls, painted brightly, with Persian reliefs, framed the bed carved out of rock. An unmade mass of fuzzy blankets hid no one when he poked. To the right the mosaic tiled bathroom stood open but dark and quiet.

He messaged Hera. /Where are you?/

No response. He sent a nagging message. /Come on, we need to talk./

Nothing. So he added, /Please?/

More silence, so he sent identical nagging messages to Celaene. Since the two women were together a lot, she’d know what Hera was up too but, she didn’t respond either. Closing his eyes he concentrated to cast an electron incantation, rebuilding the lab in his mind, he placed himself in the center and tried to drag her to him. The immediate push back, then rejection surprised him.

Blowing out a big breath, he called up his tracker daemon, and ordered it to find her. Too quickly it returned with the position of her homunculi, which still stood motionless by her desk. An annoyed grunt, and after a quick code fix, he sent off his daemon again on a new search for the location of the real Herazade. It took seconds. Too long a delay for a program that operated on the order of nanoseconds. The thing must have checked every node in the hiding place. It returned the location, an empty set. No coordinates. That made no sense. He knew all the nodes, even the ones covering her secret connections and backdoors.
“What the fork?” he said to himself. She must be masking herself somehow.

Without a clue, he wandered out of her office and toward the hub—their main gathering and dining space. Since it was between meals, a group of musicians, apprentices mostly, gathered and displaced a few tables setting up for their practice. At the center Miostro, still in traditional black robes, lead as their conductor.

Fed made a bee-line for the drinks bar by the kitchen doors. The light on the ceiling over the bar flickered, making that area strobe like a low end disco or seizure inducing punishment corner.

Frowning up at the light, he tripped over something, but caught himself against an empty table. Looking down, a cleaning floorbot had wedged itself between a table leg and chair. Red diodes flashed out an error code on its top. Normally he’d kick it aside and not given it another thought, but Galen’s stern command (Get off your lazy ass and act!) still rang in his head. The words planted a festering guilt to do. So he bent over, tugged on it until it dislodged. Then flipping it upside down, he put the bot on the table so whoever was on maintenance duty would have an easier time with it. His reward for the good deed, dirty hands. The universe must have it in for him today.

Wiping his hands on his pants, he sauntered past the general drinks dispensers. To the sealed gunmetal cabinets with the glowing runes, Adults Only. The booze shelves unlocked with a click, and swung open for him. He took down an unmarked bottle off the top shelf, flicked open his pocket knife and cut the wax seal. A deep sniff confirmed it as Optima’s bootleg gin. Grabbing the nearest mug, a steel stein, he filled it with ice, a lot of the gin, splashes of the first overly sweet thing within reach, orange syrup, and half a lime. So sorority girl, he made fun of himself as he sat at the nearest table.

As he wondered what to do, between sips of ginny-tartness, out of the Kitchen doors, a man emerged. Not a friend, more mentor, one of Hera’s social sphere, The head of the Kinetic Grimlises floated with a large tray heaped high with loose potato chips. A joint smoldered between his lips. He nodded with a sleepy grin. “Fed.”

“Hey Null,” Fed said, saluting him with his stein.

All relaxed middle aged—bare feet, spread around the middle, receding brown hair tied in a ponytail, frayed Computer Wizard t-shirt not tucked into his baggy purple pants. Fed admired his give no fucks about what he looked like attitude. Having been a Grimli herself, Hera favored him and them. And it showed. The Grimlises had done well in hiding or at least the vast majority lived through the stress and tumult of the previous years. Null, at their center, the big reason why.

The man stopped to hover beside him and, offered the tray of potato chips. Fed plucked a handful to munch. “Seen Hera around this morning?” Fed asked with a full mouth.

Null puffed at the ceiling strong scented smoke that he’d been holding and said, “Saw her last night. We a…” His eyes sparkled with something Fed tried not to read into, “Talked shop, how to eavesdrop on fiber networks. Good times.” The man’s eyebrows danced. Fed groaned inwardly at Hera being anything other than a black box that dispensed yelling, headpats or favors.

“Why?” Null’s bloodshot eyes dully analyzed him. For a moment Fed wondered what else that man was on besides the pot. Their pharmacy handed out antipsychotics, mood stabilizers, antidepressants, really anything that wasn’t a stim like candy on Halloween. Those who hadn’t found religion in Miostro’s tradition worshipping cult, tended to use at least one drug if not some custom combo. And the ones who didn’t do religion or meds, like Fed, straight up drank. The oldest fashionable drug of all, booze. Only Galen seemed to never indulge in anything to numb the
Fed shrugged. “Rough Circle meeting this morning.” Fed leaned in to whisper, “Galen’s been exiled.”

A curled lip and Null nodded clearly pleased. “Good riddance to that crazy, bag of dicks. I don’t know any he did not freak out with all that creepy pacing in circles shit of his.”

Fed winced. “It’s … complicated. But Hera’s not talking to me.”

The man swatted Fed’s shoulder with the back of his joint hand as if chastising a child. “That’s because you’re always naively defending Galen. Watch your six or Galen’s gonna take you down with him.”

It was a mistake to talk to Null, Fed suddenly realized. The man too entrenched on Hera’s side of things. So he tried to redirect their conversation. “Okay, noted.” He pointed at the overhead broken light that strobed them between light and dark. “Can you send someone to fix this?”

He frowned. “I put Currena on maintenance lead this week. Optima’s volunteered to assist, so one of them will be around eventually.” He took a long drag of his joint. Instead of holding it in, he quickly blew it up at flickering light. His expression went impish and he extinguished his joint by pinching the tip. With the tray of chips he pointed toward the closest hall in or out of the hub. “Ah, speak of the devil.”

From the nearest hall, in strolled the couple of technomagesses, Optima with Currena. They both wore the utilitarian purple coveralls favored by the Kinetic Grimlis when they worked. The baggy protective clothes left everything to the imagination. Between them, Currena’s apprentice, a tiny kid in a tiny matching gray jumper, swung by the women’s arms like a hammock. Null flew off, intercepted them with loud jovial greetings and a rain of potato chips. They returned returned his enthusiasm as he passed into the hallway out of sight.

Currena and Optima both noticed Fed at the same time. But Currena’s eyes slid past him like he was furniture while Optima gave him a lopsided smile and wink. On her arms he saw, since her oversized sleeves were pinned up to her armpits, purple tattoos flowed to life. They circled from bicep to wrist like a flat pet snake. All ship themed- an evolution of flight from biplanes to their slickest technomage ships.

/Hey O. How’s my favorite Grimli/? Fed winked back at Optima.

/Can’t complain. I get to spend all afternoon working with my favorite Grimli./ Optima turned toward Currena, who she surprised with a quick peck on the cheek. Witnessing the kiss sent a electric bolt through Fed.

Fed teased. /What are the Grimlis up to today? Design session? Make out party? Quidditch? All three at the same time?/

Optima shrugged with her hands. /I’m on maintenance duty until dinner. Tonight, Miostro’s opened the hangar to us. Null’s leading a work party, stripping down another dead ship. If you’re bored, you should join./ Oh ya. Many of their ships were now without masters because so many had died since they’d gone into hiding. Lots of parts and resources they could put to better use.

Fed sent an answer. /That sounds like real work. No thanks./

Optima frowned at him and deliberately looked away.
Next to the orchestra, the women released the kid, handing over a small case. The kid scampered off to join the chirping crowd. Fed watched the women watching the orchestra. They clung to each other, side by side, looking at the novice musicians with an odd mix of pleasure and worry. Fed didn’t get it, their fascination with the young crowd. He swallowed a gulp of his drink, hoping to resist obsessing. His feeble resistance immediately failed.

When they had gone into hiding, Fed had a thing first with Optima and then Currena. Separately. When Optima suggested the three of them together, well, he didn’t piss himself with happiness but it was a close thing.

Envy and lust ignited in him. Lust over what they used to have. Envy at the women’s continued connection. He closed his eyes, and savored the old memory … their bodies pressed to either side of him, the overwhelming pleasure of being the center of their attention.

He took another swing of drink, trying to shrink his feelings. The booze helped. Sort of. Okay, not really. He couldn’t help replay the memory of their last time....

The blankets a heap at the foot of his canopied king sized bed. He laid on his back in the middle, arms over his head half blissed out, half trying to catch his breath. Currena, wrapped herself in sweaty sheets, and stared at the maroon canopy with half open eyes and half a smile. Optima curled up beside him, a finger twirling in his pubic hair. She loved to play with his hairs.

“So... guess what? I’m gonna run for the open Circle seat,” Fed blurted out at the canopy. Both women turned toward him, up on elbows. They exchanged looks between each other as much as him.

Fed continued, “I need help, you know with campaigning and stuff. Gwynn’s already offered to be my sort of campaign manager. Kane’s going to canvas everyone, see how hopeless my chances are. So those are covered. I still need-”

“No,” Currena said over him, then rolled away. Out of bed, she started to sort the mess of clothes. Surprised, Fed turned to Optima who said, “Don’t do it.” Her begging tone screamed she, really both had guessed this was coming and discussed it.

“Um... I sort of have too.” Fed countered.

Optima gripped his bicep and asked, “Is Hera making you?”

“What? No. Okay, a little. She asked but-.”

Optima said, “She’s making you, so she can use you.” Fed sat up fully. Optima pulled back but did not let go of him.

Currena paused hooking her bra back on to add, “Exactly. She wants to lock down control of the Circle. And between you and Celeane, she’ll have it. You’ll be her tool.”

Fed said at Currena, “It’s not like that. She thinks I’m the best fit.” The women exchanged a cynical glance. Fed insisted, “You don’t really know her. Or me apparently. Trust me. I’ll be more pain in her ass than rubber stamping ass-kisser.”

“You don’t have to do it. Tell her no.” Optima pleaded, her grip on his arm tightened.
Fed put his hand on Optima’s and quietly said, “I already said no. That Galen should have Blaylock’s old seat. But Galen refuses to run, no matter how much I pester or beg him.”

“Then why are you running?” Currena coldly asked.

Because, the closest thing he ever had to a father, Aldous, Hera’s dead old man, made him swear to obey Hera and build up the Order. Because Hera said he’d be great at it. And it was pretty nice to have someone who believed in him so much. Because he’d already stuck his nose in the Circle’s business and really liked the idea of being at the center knowing what was happening. Instead of saying any of that out loud, Fed shrugged and asked, “Why don’t you want me to run?”

Optima rolled out of bed, and moved to her clothes pile and hurriedly dressed beside a fully dressed Currena.

Currena answered while helping Optima into her dress, “Kell flayed, Ing-Radi, Elric, Isabel, Burrell, and dozens more literally murdered. We just had a bloody civil war over the Circle constantly lying to us. You might be noticing a pattern here. If not I’ll spell it out… Technomages associated with the Circle tend to die horribly these days. I want to live. I can’t have anything to do with that scene.”

Choked up, in near tears Optima said, “Ya what she said. You’ll get killed and I…” Her tears began to flow. “And I can’t lose anymore friends. Quit it or I have to quit you.”

Fed nodded and considered what they said. “So … I can count on your votes then?” Optima ran out of his quarters crying, followed by Currena who threw furious looks over her shoulder at him.

He figured they’d get over it.

Currena never did. Changed to avoiding him and to his horror decided to have a natural apprentice, ie the ultimate buzz kill, fun destroying pet, aka a baby, which had morphed to the kid badly scratching a bow over a violin in front of everyone currently. With who, since they didn’t have a sperm bank, was the one bit of gossip Fed deliberately refused to learn. He pretended the kid didn’t exist, so Currena pretended he no longer existed. Ugh.

Thank the velvety Christ, Optima broke her resolution to quit him. But they never went back to what they had. Still she showed up at his door, late at night, too infrequently for his liking, with her bootleg gin, and that glint in her eye. The sucky part, when around the others, she switched to reserved toward him, which, if he was honest, stung. But now, this troubling trend, Optima constantly helping Currena. It made him feel left behind, queasy. Ugh squared.

/You spend too much time with Currena./ Fed sent. Too late he realized the words leapt out of his need to insert himself in their intimate moment.

/Unlike you./ Optima’s condescending look flickered up and down him, her smile venomous, but her follow up wink softened the blow.

Fed mimed getting stabbed in the heart. /When should I expect an invitation to the wedding?/ His half-joke tasted of bitter envy.

/Good question. Maybe … After you Circle-jerks let us out of this prison./ She stuck her tongue out at him. Another sting. The constant low level hate he got for being on the Circle still shocked. It didn’t make much sense, unless he thought of it as the universe’s joke on him.
He gave up and just watched Currena go to the floorbot, while Optima floated up to the flickering light. Creating a wedge tool in her palm out of nothing, Optima popped out the old dying light, plunging Fed into half shadow. Practically underneath her, he stared up at her butt, or where he thought her butt would be inside the ugly, baggy coveralls. When done, she floated down with the broken light tucked in a long skinny thigh pocket, out of which it stuck like a fragile sword. Then she stopped to hover over Currena’s shoulder, who had opened the floorbot, and angrily yanked out clogging clumps, which she tossed in the air. Optima incinerated them with tiny fireballs. The whole thing unfolded like a mildly entertaining circus show. After a chirping reboot, the bot replaced on the floor, it quietly set off on its way.

/Umm, do I get some light loving?/ He sent Optima as he pointed at the dark, now empty light socket.

She quirked her eyebrow up. /We ran out of replacements last year, which I know you know./ True. As the Order’s quartermaster, Fed well knew the pathetic state of their supplies, but he wanted to keep the conversation going.

Fed sent, /You can loot a spare from Galen’s quarters./

Optima’s eyes went wide. /He might object, I’ll pass thanks./

/I should of said his old quarters. He just got exiled./

“Oh,” said Optima, glancing at the way out looking ready to leave.

/Maybe you can come over tonight, after your work party./ He pathetically asked.

/No one to warm your bed, eh, Who would’ve guessed?/ Optima was never one for subtlety. /Oh ya, I did. I told you… We live in a small tank Fed, and women talk. Watch your burn rate or you’re gonna run out of fuel./

Another sting. His face buried in his mug. /No fair rubbing it in … again./

A quick message from her arrived. /You know I can never quit you. See you some other night./

Fed gave her a sad smile. /Good enough. Enjoy the satisfaction that good honest hard work brings. I’m gonna enjoy your gin./ He toasted them with his mug. Optima rolled her eyes and tugged Curenna, who continued to ignore Fed perfectly. They went off together heads bent together in excited conversation, which made him exhale too loud, then take another, too big hit of his drink. The jolt of gin made the envying lust easier to bare.

“Working hard I see.” Fed jumped in his seat, startled at the disembodied voice. Gwynn appeared suddenly at his right elbow, out of the darkness, hooded in her usual gray coat. A concerned frown cast from him to the half empty bottle of gin and then to the stein in his hand. Her arms crossed. Silent judgement roiled off her.

Before he could answer, another, Kane, suddenly appeared opposite Fed’s table, under the nearest full light.

Addressing Gwynn, Kane said, “Men of power indulge themselves anyway they see fit.”

The hood of Kane’s dark gray cloak flipped back, his hair freshly shorn tight to his scalp. Kane leaned on a short staff, the poster model of the traditional techmage. Like he’d joined Blaylock’s old, now Miostro’s cult of personality, in their superficial devotion to tradition and self control. Pivoting, Kane locked eyes with Fed. His youthful handsome face smiled, but his eyes radiated
there own disapproval.

Great. Another judge, this time one of his oldest friends, found him wanting. What the everlasting fork was going on today? Fed thought. He doubted it was the drinking. Kane didn’t deny himself like that. Maybe … his recent fucking around with his best friend’s on again/off again girlfriend might not pass without consequence. Sudden guilt, for being disloyal, swamped thick enough that he glanced away from Kane.

Then, another new voice said, “You should leave a man be when he’s drinking Gwynn,” This third did not surprise Fed. Newly scoured of hair too, Finian appeared abruptly at the only open spot, at Fed’s left shoulder. His too pale translucent skin, made him look like the ghost of a man.

Gwynn yanked off her hood, her usual baldness, matching the mens. The concerned look she had directed at Fed morphed to a pointed chin scowl at Finian.

“Oh, are you encouraging day drinking now?” Gwynn scolded Finian.

Kane answered for Finian, “No but Fin makes a good point. You, actually we three, should not bother Fed as he does great things for the Circle.” Fed felt his face burn at the sarcasm from Kane.

Finian’s thin-lipped mouth formed a goading smirk. With wide eyes, Gwynn balled her fists as her anger shifted between the two men encircling Fed, clearly not able to make up her mind about which to attack verbally, or literally.

Forcibly ending his flush of embarrassment with a spell, Fed took control. To derail their budding argument at least, he snapped out, “What do you three doing? I mean besides taking turns kicking me and each other in the figurative balls.”

All three had the decency to look embarrassed. Gwynn sheepishly answered, “Per the Circle’s instructions requiring extensive team building exercises. We practice our skulking-”

Kane spoke over her, “We heard Galen’s been exiled. Is it true?”

All three went silent and stared at Fed, eager for his answer.


Kane leaned down on the table, arms locked, hands splayed. “Did you vote to exile him?”

It was painfully obvious looking at his three friends that they wanted to hear a no. Great. Fed scratched his neck wishing he had a different answer.

“I …” Another swig to build the courage to spit it out, “It was unanimously.”

All three faces instantly fell. Fed hurried to add, “I did what I thought best to keep the peace … between him and us.” They thought they understood Galen but they didn’t. Probably no one did. Not really. After all the times he watched and listened to Galen, Fed hardly understood why Galen said and did what he did. But he was sure, if Galen hadn’t left, someone or someones, probably on the Circle, would have died today.

“He’s off to deal with whatever the Drakh are cooking up. Alone, again. Fighting the good fight, no strings attached, etc…” Fed waved his mug, a salute to Galen’s mission.

Gwynn gave one approving nod, easily placated. Finian looked unsure, and turned to Kane, who
pulled himself upright to full disapproval.

“Meet the new boss, same as the old boss,” said Kane as he turned away, and disappeared. His words punched Fed in the gut.

“Huh, I prefer you to the other Circle muppets anyway,” Finian offered.

“Do you ever take a stance?” Gwynn snapped at Finian.

In a thick affected accent, Finian said, “T’isn’t fair t’gang’up on a feckin eejit,” Finian affectionately slapped Fed on the back, “Oveh’nother.” Finian gestured at where Kane had stood. Then he too disappeared.

With sympathy toward Fed, Gwynn said, “Ignore them. They don’t understand how the sausage is made. And ...” She tried to take away his stein but he hurtled it up, and out of her reach. She continued, “Alcohol doesn’t fix problems, it makes them.”

Fed blessed Gwynn’s withered, icy heart, grateful for her defense if not her high-roading his drinking.

“You’re right as always Gwynn. But-” He deliberately topped off his drink with more gin, to her immediate grumble. “Booze helps you forget your problems for a bit or at least they look smaller.” He saluted her with the stein.

“What are you doing after dinner?” with a sudden eagerness she tacked the conversation.

With an intrigued tingle, Fed said, “Hanging out with you I’m guessing.”

Her eyes glowed with excitement. “Yes you are. I just read a fascinating old political tome.”

Fed groaned. “Ugh, another one. You know I hate to read.”

His reaction did not dampen her enthusiasm. “That’s why I’ll explain it and read you the best parts. It’s called the Dictator’s Handbook.”

Fed laughed out loud. “Is this going to leave me feeling dirty, and hating my job? Or will it give me hope that there’s a better way?”

She nodded, vibrating with manic glee. “Both. It’s about the pathologies inherent in politics and how to correct and channel them to obtain the best possible outcomes.”

Fed smiled and said, “I’ll bring dessert. See you after dinner.” With a vigorous nod, she vanished to leave him alone as well.

The musicians tuned up their instruments. The scraping cacophony matched his mood nicely. Absentmindedly, he watched the practice. Mioistro aggressively tapped a stand before him trying to get everyone’s attention. The murmuring and tuning up continued.

With a loud Enough, Mioistro berated the young orchestra of apprentices for not practicing enough between sessions. The sight made him sad. All they had to look forward to was growing up on this shitty rock and never becoming real technomages beyond in name. His frustrated fingers gave his tangled hair a rough comb. Then he gulped his drink and hiccupsed as the buzz of the gin warmed him and dulled his sadness about the pathetic scene.

From the corridor nearest him, a clump of runners sprinted, racing each other. Behind the group, a
short technomage, Vergil judging by the bobbing fez, huffed and puffed behind the others. The usual afternoon workout group. As soon as they got to the blocking tables, one by one they levitated off the ground and ran above tables, in the air. The subtle distortions of platforms, enabled the magical run.

Brightening, Fed noticed Aky, in the lead. Her ponytailed dreadlocks bounced, as she sprinted above the tables.

Fed yelled, “Hey lady!” to Ak-Shana.

Miostro shhh-ed him angrily.

“Sorry.” Fed said back. They needed to talk. To let Aky in on his plans for her. Get her buy-in. And if he was honest … he was starting to feel down, and in need of happy company.

Ak-Shana didn’t slow or respond, so he teased her, /You know Aky our tech keeps us in perfect shape. No need to suffer like that./

Her head swiveled toward the bar. Patting the spot beside him, he motioned for her to join him.

Aky sent back. /Go fuck yourself./

He stiffened and frowned. /Later, maybe. This is business not personal/ He sent back, wondering why she’s angry. Maybe she didn’t like his poking fun of her exercising.

Immediately, Aky veered off to the side and called out to the rest of runners, “I’m taking five, finish this lap without me.”

The runners passed her to finish their sprint, and jogged out of the dining hall into the far side passage. Last, Vergil float-walked clutching his side.

Aky paused beside Vergil and said, “The first day is the hardest, keep at it and you’ll be able to keep up by next week.” The small man, too out of breathe, could only answer with an annoyed wave for her to get out of his way.

She descended and landed neatly between two tables. Immediately Kane appeared beside her. With a hand on her shoulder, he leaned to whisper in her ear. Together as one, they turned to stare-scowl at Fed.

Great, Fed bet within minutes everyone in the hiding place would know about Galen’s exile and Fed’s part in it. And everyone would either blame him like Kane and Aky. Or thank him. Galen made many nervous, and they followed Hera’s lead, as she still angrily blamed him for destroying Z’ha’dum and with it probably the Order’s future.

Kane leaned his forehead against Aky’s. They exchanged words Fed could not hear before Kane spun her about, into a tight hug, planted a kiss on her neck before he disappeared yet again.

Slowly, Aky made her way through the dense mass of tables, hip-checking chairs roughly aside. Her eyes narrowed on him, compounding his sense of isolation. The perfect poop cherry on the shit sundae the universe served him today.

At least he got his nights in the sack with her already. Until, Fed told her he pushed for Kane to be a Circle agent. The typical technomage reaction flowed from her. Instant rage. Bluntly she demanded Fed remove Kane from consideration. When he wouldn’t, she ranted at him about it being a huge mistake. That Kane was too weak, too cloistered to leave the hiding place. Fed
suspected, really, she just wanted to take Kane’s place. Luckily, her fury left as quickly as it flared. Since then, she refused him, going off with Kane again. Not that he minded. His liaisons tended to the not exclusive with a short shelf-life. But he did mind this new rub his nose in just how together they were. His fingers roughly tug-combed through his mass of thick hair. Then scratched at the back of his head until Aky stood before him.

Eyes narrowed. Fists on yoga pant-ed hips. Sweat trickled down the dark skin of Aky’s neck into her almost glowing cleavage. Her short, too small top, outlining every millimeter of her chest. His dick stirred. The sweat and chest radiating allure. Sweet Mary, mother of the suckling christ, he couldn’t look away.

“I’m up here fool.” Her words landed like ice water.

With a spell, he forcibly neutralized his libido before it got him into more trouble with her. Eyes shifted up and he said, “You sure are. Sorry. I … um do in fact want to talk shop.”

She started first, “Good job booting Galen. The only one who knows what the fuck he’s doing.”

Untangled from his hair, Fed’s hands gripped the table. He snapped out his answer, not sure how much more he could take. “Maybe or not, he’s probably winging it like the rest of us. And even if I had voted against it…” He stopped. He hit enough. “You know what, no. **Fuck all y’all.** You weren’t there. I know I made the right call.” Instead of making her angrier, his refusal to kowtow seemed to settle her. Her frown softened, stance eased, as Fed went on, “And this isn’t what I wanted to talk about.”

She smiled a little though her eyes still sparked with defiance, “Fine. Make it quick. I’m not liking this show...” She waved to include Fed with the poorly performing musicians.

That stung. Fed rubbed his face once with a frustrated left hand. “This isn’t for anyone else’s ears.” Palm up, out of his right hand an opaque sheet rose out of the ground to ceiling and surrounded them enclosing them in a cylinder. Silence replaced the disharmonic music.

Fed put out a peace offer with an extended hand to the seat next to him. “Take a load off, have a drink.”

Not doing either, she instead eased into a parade ready stance and said, “Don’t drag this out.”

He slumped in his chair. “I think the Circle’s probably going to need more agents soon. If we form another team, I want you on it.”

Her arms dropped. Eyes, body relaxed. She slipped onto the chair beside him. Calm as could be. Her lack of surprise, startled him. Seated side by side at the bar table, she took Fed’s drink. A sniff, a quaff and a gulp disappeared into her.

“Where?” she asked.

“Not totally sure. But probably starts with m, rhymes with plural of ...” Fed took back his drink and toasted the floor to ceiling bar. “Tell absolutely no one. I mean it. Not even during pillow talk with your **boyfriend**.” She stiffened at his emphasis of the last word. He turned away afraid to look at her.

Before the silence became awkward, she asked evenly, “Cloak and dagger or hack and slash?”

“I have no idea. Does it matter? Do you not want to go?” Fed asked, stealing a puzzled glance at her. “You need to tell me if you don’t-"
Cooly she gripped his arm and said over him, “I want to go.”

“Okay then. Act surprised when you get called before the Circle.” A derisive snort came out of her. Fed tried to gauge her reaction… resolve, or resigned maybe. He got the feeling, somehow she’d known this was coming.

She turned to stare at him. “So, you’re pushing for me now, why? To get back in my pants?” she asked cynically. Not waiting for his answer, she added, “Because I can tell you right now it’s not going to happen.”

Ya, he’d love to peel off her sweaty clothes and … he stopped himself. No it wasn’t that. She’d been at the top of his Great Agents For Circle Missions list he’d made for Hera years ago. Of all the younger mages she was the best at offensive spells. Well beside Galen, obviously. Unlike Galen, she was less mavericky and good at the techy stuff, like himself, but actually focused and hardworking.

He diplomatically said, “For the record, I didn’t push for you on Kane’s mission, because that’s passive observation with some shopping. You’d be wasted. And,” He couldn’t help himself. “Off the record, my door is still open to you if you want to talk or whatever.”

Quiet, his mug in her hand again, she drank. The ice cubes clanked. She’d finished his drink, and carefully put the mug down in front of him. Her words whispered truth, “On and off the record, Kane’s better than you in every way.”

Anger blossomed inside Fed but it only came out as quiet words hissed, “Ya, I know. From his perfectly bald head, to the tip of his way bigger cock. But the question that’s rattling around in my head is… Why the fuck did you climb in my bed then?”

Pain flooded her face. When it became clear she wouldn’t answer, Fed pushed, “Even before Galen’s exile, this-” He pointed back and forth between them. “Kane’s pissed at me. I think it’s because I didn’t say no to you. Yet you, he gives you a total free pass.”

She faced him fully. Fed saw anger and pain square off. Pain and truth won. “He got plenty angry with me too. We just know how to act like grown-ups and worked it out in private.”

With that she stood up and turned away roughly. He grabbed her hand, “Okay then let’s work us out in private.”

She angrily looked at his hand holding hers and he immediately let her go.

“Please? At least tell me why?” he begged meekly.

Her fierce defiance fled. Instead, she gave him a defeated look, “This place,” She waved her arms to take in everything about their isolated, cramped secret home, “Made me weak. And …” She grasped for words, “Kane was … perfect, and not enough and too much. All at the same time. And-” Her anger returned. She pointed an accusing finger in Fed’s face, “While you lazily sit around growing old, fat, and real bald, we’re the ones sent out to work and take the risks. The ones who’ll die.”

His feelings imploded, spine stiffened. His spell collapsed. The cylinder of silence dissolved to nothing. Reflexively he stroked his abs. Still flat, sort of. Okay, he’d put on a little weight, all the candy bars catching up to him probably. He resisted the urge to check that his hair was still magnificent and plentiful.

Finally he processed her last sentence, and the last word, die. His emotions strangled his answer,
“Aky … why …” Swallowing hard, words flooded out of Fed in a rush, “Why would you think we’re sending you out to die? We’re not. Trust me, super cautious became Hera’s only motto since we all moved in together. That’s why we’re snail slow. What we do, what Kane will do, what you will do, might be as important as when we went to B5 with Elric.”

He stopped, because his cheerleading talk was more to convince himself than her. She was right, with the Drakh stealthily on the offensive, the universe wasn’t safe for them, or anyone. They might die. So he silently took her hand again and stroked her long fingers. He poured out his feelings, “I wish this wasn’t up to me. I wish Galen would trade places with me. This leadership shit is so fucking hard and isolating. God, most of the time I don’t know what to do. And I’m lonely. I miss hanging out with-”

“My tits?” Instantly angry, she interrupted, and shook off his stroking.

From the direction of the orchestra, Miostro yelled at them, “Take your argument somewhere else.”

Aky ignored the rebuke. Fed said toward the old man, “Sorry,” then quieter to Aky, “While they are very nice.” He couldn’t help himself, his eyes flickered down to her chest. “I meant platonically-”

She said over him, “Drop the pathetic whining. It’s not a good look. Man the fuck up.” She moved away but he followed. There was no way he’d let it end like this.

He said to her back, “One that’s sexist. Two, pathetic is my middle name. And three technically this is more clingy than whiney.”

Aky released a surprised exhalation. With a turn back to him, she gave him a half smile and said, “You make it impossible to stay angry with you.”

Maybe their friendship wasn’t doomed. Whisper quiet, he said, “I’ll work on the manning-up. And totally unrelated. Have you ummm… seen Hera by any chance?”

Suspicious she said, “Why would you need me to tell you where another member of the Circle is?”

“Seeing how observant you are,” he answered vaguely, hoping she wouldn’t dig.

“Is this a test?” she demanded.

“Um … Isn’t everything?” he didn’t exactly lie, but he needed a clue.

She gave it serious thought. Then pointed to the table in front of the glowing rune for Solidarity on the wall. Hera’s preferred table whenever she ate publicly. So the table everyone jokingly called Olympus.

She ticked off with her fingers. “Yesterday at dinner, Hera held court at Olympus with her forever shadow- Celaene. They silenced the whole table, but we could all see. Tzakizak was there, though he mostly scowled. And … Sidjak, silently sat beside her the whole time, with a quill writing his shitty poetry. Then a rotating cast of guests… Vergil, Ohmic, Miyazaky. Null went last. They walked off together at the end. Oh, and Hekuba served as usual.”

Fed deflated. Usual suspects. Her social group or group heads checking in with her. And Tzak had taken to eating with Hera since he realized she does all her politicking outside Circle meetings. Hekuba always served her. Not helpful.
Sidjak might know. Like Null, another of her old friends. He had been the first to defend her in their civil war, kept her alive before Fed led the rally. Since then Sidjak had become her security who split his time between writing shitty poetry and guarding Hera whenever she asked. His tracker returned with the man’s location, alone in his own quarters. Dead end there.


Aky said, “Early this morning, I was getting in extra platform practice in zero-g, by the aft reactor. Saw Hekuba’s german shepherd floating in the corridor. The thing growled at me. Hekuba popped out of a hatch by the reactor I’d never noticed before, despite my hundreds of flybys. She yanked him inside. When I flew past, the hatch was still a bit open, I thought I heard Hera order her to seal the door.”

That was just Hera’s private supply stash. So not … wait, Hekuba. Duh. Vibrating, Fed sent off his tracking daemon to find Hekuba. It immediately returned with her location near by, in the kitchen. Her usual duty - meal prep. While it was fun to cook for a few, it was the opposite to cook for hundreds. He had to respect Hekuba taking the worst, most thankless job in the hiding place.

“Did I pass?” Aky asked, nervousness replacing her suspicion.

Barely paying attention, he said, “You always do, 10 out of 10. I’ll catch you later. Oh and, Gwynn’s bending my ear tonight with her latest real-politick find. You should join us.”

Her dreads tilted curiously to the side when she answered, “Sure.”

“He should have gone after Hekuba first. After their civil war, Hera deliberately pulled Hekuba, Tzak’s old apprentice, into the heart of her social sphere as a sort of personal assistant. Much to Fed’s horror. Until Hera explained why. A way to control and watch Tzak. In the vein of keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Tzak accepted it as part of his punishment for being on the losing side of the Order’s civil war. Tzak took it way too well for Fed’s taste. No doubt because he tried to use Hekuba to spy on Hera. Just another one of their reindeer games. He wondered how Hekuba felt about being used by both adults. Either way, she’d know all of Hera’s comings and goings.

It took awhile for her to show. Eventually, out of the swinging double doors to the kitchens, Hekuba strolled out. She wore her chrysalis like a gray-meat stocking cap. With it she made the stack of plastic tubs hover behind her. Her german shepherd trotted at her side. In her hands a tray of cookies. Playing it cool, Fed pretend ignored her and pretend drank from his empty mug.

She made her way to the orchestra area where the oldest, really young adults, played. To one in particular, the only young man in the orchestra who played flawlessly. Fed knew him only in passing. Viktor, Sidjak’s tall, skinny, just as weird has his father, natural apprentice, never interacted with anyone much. Both Viktor and Hekuba had been in the same cohort after Fed’s. So he also wore his chrysalis freely like Hekuba. Fed amped up his hearing, filtering out everything but them.

The lanky guy paused his playing and stared blankly at her.

She offered him all the cookies. “I brought you these,” she smiled nervously at him.
“I’m not hungry,” Viktor said picking up the music again perfectly even as he kept looking at her.

Viktor’s refusal made her sputter, “I … I mean it’s for all of you when you’re done.” The cookies wobbled as they floated to a nearby table and she retreated from him, her cheeks going red.

With a wince, Fed groaned in sympathy, for the obvious rejection. That happened to him, many, many times. Worse for her though, since she had fewer choices; there were less than a handful of mages close to her age. Suddenly a pang of sadness at her fate stabbed Fed because like all the mages younger than him, she’d never get full implants. Instead she got permanently stuck with just a chrysalis, in this bland outer circle of hell they occupied. At least the Circle released her from her apprenticeship. Made her an honorary initiate technomage. For what little that was worth. A weak sauce, not even half-assed technomage.

Fed studied her over the brim of his mug. Husky, dirty blonde hair like her father. Intense, often scowling, just like her old man. Fed preferred to avoid Tzakizak’s old apprentice. Since they’d gone into hiding, she’d yet to smile around him; even when he told his best jokes. A total turn-off. Although he loved her look. The messy pony-tail, flannel, jeans with cowboy boots. The whole farm-girl ready for the rodeo look worked well for her.

With empty bins floating behind her, she left the hub. Probably headed for Tzak’s area, the Farm, the hydroponics ring level where they grew fresh food.

Hiding himself with a cloaking spell, he followed her as she meandered. Tracing a hand along the stone wall, she took the secure elevator to the farming ring parallel to their habitat ring. There she slowly walked through the grow rooms. The full spectrum heat lights made the space warm, bright, inviting. And one of Fed’s favorite places to enjoy a bit of virtual outdoor delight. The greenery of tiered hydroponic grow tubes were as pretty as it got in their home. And the water filtration system tended by robotic arms provided great noise cover unless your partner got really loud.

Past high yield soy, rice, wheat, lettuce, tomatoes and a dozen other edibles, Hekuba sauntered, stroking some of the fuzzier plants as she went. Her chrysalis not having any built in communication ability, she tapped her wrist com to send messages. At her direction, robot harvesters docked to the ceiling swooped down to strip a plant here or there, to send succulent specimens back to the kitchen. Fed wondered why she herded the empty bins then. Stopping frequently, Hekuba let her dog sniff while she admired the clear tubes with swimming fish. In the vines room she plucked a few blackberries. Fed had to admire the way she wasted time. Almost as lazily as he would have done it.

Eventually she came to the first chicken bay. Sealed with airlocks, it protected the air supply from the smell of live chickens which was disgusting on the best of days. Within the fenced fake barnyard, chickens happily clucked about on the mesh floor eating corn, to provide eggs, poop to feed the plants, and eventually their bodies for the mages to eat. The smelly cycle of life. Fed followed her through the airlock.

When Fed made himself visible just inside the bay, her dog immediately turned and let out a growl. With a sour expression, Hekuba froze by the fence to stare at Fed leaning against the airlock. The chickens squawked with concern at the dog’s growls.

Hekuba said to her big dog, “Laelap, quiet.” It’s attention snapped to her and then sat at her feet. Silent and alert.

“What is it?” she asked with a scowl.
Fed turned on his eye scanners. The room and her outline lit up to his eyes in a rainbow of frequencies. “Just looking for Hera. Figured you’d know where she’s hiding.” Her eye twitched, breath caught. Nervousness, or about to lie.

“Why would you think I know?”

Defensively avoiding a real answer, Fed noted as he shrugged, “She keeps you under her thumb.”

“Wait … you don’t know?” Her face lit up with amused pleasure. A dimpled cheeked smile. The first time he’d seen her like that. It looked cute, and good. Really good. Not at all like Tzak’s predatory smile.

Fed didn’t answer and Hekuba didn’t push. Instead, she made a series of hand signs. Her dog leapt over the fence and herded the chickens. Hekuba turned her back to him and went to the machine. Her heart rate slowly rose. As one, the chickens flocked away from the dog clustering by Hekuba’s feet and the big gray machine.

“I don’t know where she is.” The deliberate stalling, and hiding her face. All the signs pointed to lie, she knew something.

“Really? How about we look for her together?”

Heart rate spiked. Sweating increased. She gave him a quick nervous look. “I’m busy.”

Ya, definite lie. With a lazy wrist, Fed waved at the chickens, “Go ahead and finish. I’ll wait.”

“You’re not going to help me?” she challenged him.

“I like the view too much.” He couldn’t help but flirt with her. Her mouth hung open, heart rate suddenly shot up, neck, face skin flushed. Wow, she really liked his flirting. Their job done, Fed turned off his scanners, and looked at her up and down, as his own heart rate increased.

At the meat processor, Hekuba fumbled dropping and recovering a tray but eventually wedged the stack of empty bins in a slot at the end and pulled a lever on the control panel. The internal machinery, Fed pictured blades and belts, whirled to life. The circular belt loaded with hooks disappeared into one side of the machine to appear back out the other. Hekuba nervously walked to the fence, donned the leather gloves left on a post. Bent over the fence, she grabbed a cornered chicken by the neck. When she straightened, she held the bird firmly, tucking it to her to calm it. She returned Fed’s riveted gaze. A shy smile on her face, as if she just discovered something. That looked better on her. Fed relaxed smiling back. An urge to flirt more built up in him. Until, with one quick practiced motion, Hekuba broke the chicken’s neck and slammed it on an empty hook that whizzed the dead bird into the machine.

Stiffening off the wall, Fed went to full alert. A war within him waged. Between the fearful need to run from crazy and an overwhelming wave of desire to beg her to be his. It kept him rooted, entralled.

Despite this, his mouth still worked. “You know the machine will kill them for you.”

“Dad insists the meat tastes better this way.” The first chicken carcass plopped into the topmost bin. Its organ meats followed.

She said, “This is what I imagine being with you is like.” With the next flapping chicken, she stroked it’s neck, to calm it. Until, her hand tightened on the bird’s neck. Snap. Wrung. Another limp bird.
Fed’s eyes went wide. Her dark humor hit him just right. “Choking the chicken. Nice one.” The whole thing felt like he the moth to her flame.

Her cheeks blushed. Hekuba turned away to work silently, repeating her moves again and again. In between chickens she gave him shy smiles. As bins filled with gutted carcasses and organs.

Watching her, his loneliness and the instinctive arousal led him down the usual path. Fed strolled closer to her and repeated his question, “Are you coming onto to me? Because I’m-”

A strong muscled arm from nowhere blocked Fed.

“Not interested,” snarled Tzakizak, appearing between them, his bent forearm in the middle of Fed’s chest.

Fed stumbled back. Tzak had dumped his robes. He wore his own worn jeans, a graying t-shirt, boots that matched Hekuba’s. His rifle gone, he wore one obvious gun in a hip holster.

Overbearing anger animated Tzak. “I wondered when you’d get around to her.” He whirled around to yell at Hekuba, “I warned you about him.”

Her limbs all locked, Hekuba snapped back, “You don’t get to dictate who I associate with. I’m a technomage.”

Tzak scoffed, “I wish.” He spun at Fed. “Leave her alone. She knows nothing.”

Fed smiled and smoothly said, “She’s right. You don’t get to tell her what or … who she does.” Fed winked at Hekuba, who grinned back. “And I scanned her. She’s lying. She knows where Hera is.” Tzak rounded back on her in surprise. Hekuba’s grin vanished and she turned pale under his gaze.

Instead of fury and vitriol, Tzak looked pleased. “Good. That means she’s paid attention while serving. Leave.” Tzak waved Hekuba toward the airlock.

“I’m not done,” Hekuba protested.

A glare from Tzak silenced her. “I’ll do the rest,” her father said.

Her arm raised. The few filled bins of carcasses floated in a train behind her. The few empty ones remained in the machine. She headed for the airlock, mumbling under her breath. Her hand went to tap on her arm com.

Within his mind, Fed received a message from Hekuba’s com address. /Want to meet after dinner? I can tell you more about chicken harvesting techniques./

Dumbfounded, Fed stared at Hekuba’s back. Girls never chased him. Her swaying ass stopped, clearly she waited for his answer. A war within him ignited. His lonely libido screamed Oh God, yes! To have someone in his bed again, a regular thing. It’d be easy to seduce her. She seemed desperate enough to settle, at least for a little while anyway. But … he didn’t really like her, more like she scared him. Then, he pictured himself waking up with her next to him and Tzak standing over him ready to jam a gun in his mouth.

Fed sent back, /Sorry. Already have plans for tonight./ God damn it. What was wrong with him? He’d never turned down an easy thing before. Thinking through the consequences of his actions felt… weird, off. He must be getting old. Ugh.
Her body shrank, her disappointment obvious even from behind. She moved quickly then for the airlock, her dog dutifully trotting to keep up with her.

The moment the airlock clicked shut behind her, Tzak said, “She’s gone.”

His inner conflict, between prudence and regret about not getting to see Hekuba’s ass without pants, made Tzak’s words not really register. What was he doing here? … Oh ya. Keeping his promise to Galen. Thumb on universe’s scale. Check and balance on the Circle. Confront Hera.


With a dark grin Tzak repeated himself slowly as if he spoke to a five year old child, “Hera … is … gone,” then with a curious head tilt added, “And she didn’t tell you? Huh. I wonder why?” He laughed in Fed’s face, then whistling, he pivoted and went about finishing the chickens off.

For a second time today, Tzak caught him totally off guard. But this was worse. Tzak rubbed his face in ... holy shit… Hera, left, the hiding place. And she never told him.
A Mutually Beneficial Arrangement

Chapter Summary

Welcome to Mars, Bunny Oliver style.

15 - A Mutually Beneficial Arrangement

Mars - Before the Drakh plague.

Inside the parked black flyer, in the front passenger’s seat, Bunny Oliver stared at the store front fighting a yawn. Like most buildings on Mars, this part of New Vegas, tended to hideous neglect. Drab, run-downed. The ground floor housed some low-rent brothel fronting as a massage parlor. Her mind easily brushed against, then scanned each inhabitant. Gross. Between the twisted thoughts spilling out of the narcissistic man and then whiplash to the smiling prostitutes overflowing with hidden loathing, it all drove her to wish she was anywhere else.

Except Z’Ha’Dum. Ya, not there. Fuck that place. Fuck the Shadows. And fuck Elizar for betraying her. It’d been years but she still relished that the planet was destroyed, Shadows chased away, and that back-stabbing, technomage, son of bitch killed. She’d survived them all. Except … Justin. Fuck Justin most of all for trapping her with him on this miserable dust ball. Her eyes flickered to the mirror that gave her a glimpse of the back seat, where Justin sat distracted, looking down at his com.

Fury rose up in her. Closing her eyes, she failed to claw away the old memories of him ordering her processing… dragged off… the raw brain surgery… the overwhelming pain. Then, after the neural net implantation, the Ship. At first she’d been just strong enough to resist the Ship’s half hearted attempt to break her; the thing still heart-broken from losing its last pilot. She shifted, anticipated and protected herself from its sad shrieks. If it’d lasted much longer, if Galen hadn’t pulled her out of the Ship, she would have eventually gotten exhausted, faltered, then been shattered, lost herself to its oppressive chaos.

What they did to her physically, had healed long ago. But not what they did to her mind. Those dark memories, she wanted to wipe, would have wiped, but Justin forbade it, which forced her to obey. Somehow, they changed her brain. Changed her personality, editing in a forced compulsion to obey Justin when he used that *voice*.

Nothing good had come with it. Except, maybe, yes, she got to meet *It*. After Galen disconnected her from the ship, the soothing sharp light that pierced the pain of the implants … *so much desperate pain… a piercing thought… Why are you here?* She grabbed it like a lifeline. Begged for help. Lorien, it called itself, immediately quieted her mind and teased out the implanted horror but didn’t or couldn’t fix her further. In the mental silence she had touched it back. Asked why it helped her. It shunted her away. Gently. After the response...

*The little one chose mercy for you. [Her mind filled with images of Galen taking pity on her,*}
Dumbfounded, she had no idea. At first it presented itself as her favorite teacher back in Minor Academy before she bolted from the Corps. Then Lorien showed her a glimpse of its true self; the mountain of energy, potent calm, and hope.

The irony. A dark smile joined her opening her eyes back to the ugliness of Mars. She should’ve just stayed with the Corps. Maybe she would have spared herself all the misery. Or not. After all Psi-Corps was gone. Telepaths scattered, used, adrift. Nothing ever went right for telepaths.

Especially not for her. Justin found her helpless and still weak in Lorien’s cave on Z’ha’dum. Galen had left her defenseless. Lorien did nothing to stop Justin from taking her. Like Elizar before, Justin finally saw her worth. So he pampered and nursed her back to health but only to be his pet telepath. Her scans, guaranteed the loyalty of his inner circle. They hated her, which was fine since she hated them. And while she had to obey Justin, she could still be a total bitch about it. That brought another tiny dark smile to her lips.

Since then she clung to what Lorien said, _where there was life, there was hope_. And that she was alive. All because of Galen. Another god-damn technomage, one that saved instead of betrayed. For some reason beyond her, he pitied her when he should have killed her. Within her warred resentment, that Galen didn’t do more for her, and gratitude, for helping at all. She wasn’t sure what would happen if she ever met him again. If he did cross her path, finding her with Justin, she doubted Galen would play nice and let her go free. Though if he killed Justin, she’d enjoy that at least. The thought made her smile larger and drove her eyes to look in the mirror facing back.

Justin caught the look and leaned in from the back seat. Half a pajama collar peeking out of his tan wooly sweater. His salt and pepper hair uncombed. Nice to know he looked like shit too, this early in the morning.

His mustache moved with annoyance when he spoke, “Is she in there?”

“I told you I’m not a bloodhound. I’m not good at this tracking shit.”

Justin patiently said, “You’ve bragged often enough about your P12 rating. This is your chance to show off.”

She despised him more for pointing out her own stupidity. Her hatred simmered even as she plastered a strained smile on her face. Probably a good thing he couldn’t scan her. It pleased her beyond orgasm that he didn’t have another telepath strong enough to break through defenses. As his only P12, she’d bested every Jones he’d tried on her. They saw what she wanted them to see. That she obeyed his orders. That seemed enough for him. She wondered if he’d let her live if he knew how deeply she loathed him.

“Have you found her?” he used the _voice_. The one she had to obey. She gripped her silk pajama pants almost tearing the seams trying to ignore the direct command. But like an alcoholic handed a glass of whiskey she couldn’t resist for long.

She sagged into the seat, and gave up fighting. “No. Are you sure she’s here? Because she’s way too classy a lady for this shithole.” She pointed at the glowing red Massage sign.

“The smuggler she contacted has offices somewhere in this building. Scan the whole place until you find her, or him.”
She narrowed and swept her psi-focus several floors up, to the top. In the far back, another man spilling greed instead of lust, and … ah there. Her prey. That was easy.

“Hello Madam Professor. Marge is on the top floor. Far, back right,” she said. Justin patted the driver’s shoulder. The soldier, some officer with a stupid made up name, in a plain green jump-suit silently turned back to look at Justin.

“Let’s go” Justin said. The flyer’s doors swung up, open. The men headed for the building but Bunny stayed rooted in her seat.

“Bunny, please join us.” Justin stopped halfway.

“I’m good.” Again she resisted. He hadn’t used the voice, so she could.

“Get over here.” Justin ordered.

Her resistance collapsed. In a pink silk robe and white bunny slippers she shuffled to the building throwing scowls at the men for making her be here, at this ungodly hour.

“Anyone else in the building, besides those in the brothel?”

Hoping to get this over with as fast as possible, she concentrated and swept downward. A hungry cleaning lady, thinking about her packed egg and cheese sandwich. A sleazy lawyer on the second floor, threatening to sue waxing salons, for reasons she ignored. In the basement, an anxious woman … a blurred wall of pinwheeling fractals. Bunny pushed past that, and landed in a giant walkable maze walled by blue circuits, shrouded in shadows. Finally something interesting. A psi sensitive. Must have felt the scan, and tried to resist. She punched through walls and headed straight for the obvious pulsing core.

“Well?” Justin shook her shoulder too aggressively. Bunny lost her concentration, and flubbed the scan. Damn him.

She shrugged off his hand and grunted at Justin in annoyance. “It’s a big building. There are a bunch, of fucking course. Who are you looking for?”

“Is anyone with Margrit?”

She went back to fishing for the anxious woman, but found no trace of her. Well that was fast. Odd. She suspected he might want to know, but Justin hadn’t asked, nor used the voice, so she could withhold if she wanted. The thrill of keeping a secret decided against saying. She focused up, at her target. Margrit sat across the table from a lizard of a man trying to extort more credits out of her.

“She’s in an office with some smuggler’s guild asshole and only him,” she answered his question, not volunteering more. Hiding her glee that she kept a small secret from Justin.

At the brothel entrance, Justin waited, held open the door for his entourage and motioned for her to hurry. Inside he waved away the surprised madam. Instead, Justin took the flight of stairs two at a time.

Still delighted with her little act of rebellion, Bunny answered prissily, “I’ll take the elevator,” She thumbed the up button.

Without taking issue, Justin, already many stairs up, ordered, “Lt Lothbrok, stay with her, and,” he pointed to the soldier, “Keep her safe Alpha, don’t let her get sidetracked.”
The soldier ran back down the stairs toward her. The dingy gray elevator for two opened, with a creaky groan. Beside the stiff soldier, Bunny wedged herself in, trying not to touch the encrusted spots on the walls. She faced Alpha Lothbrok. Soldiers all looked the same to her. Young, wide, tall, muscled. Shaved face and head. Dumb look on his face. His hand rested on a gun strapped to his side.

Since they’d be trapped alone, she gave him a quick surface scan, although she knew what she’d find. The guy had already thrown a few leers her way. The roiling mass of surface thoughts were just focused enough to read - Justin probably only invited me along to put someone down…. fucker, never gives me real work… hope this isn’t like… [a line of dead bodies covered in sheets, to the side some chanting prayer in an alien language, whirl about, in his hands a gun pointed at a Minbari forehead. Trigger pull... ] His eyes caught her and she eased back the scan. He had sensed her, but probably just her stare and not the scan. His thoughts shifted as his eyes flicked up and down her body. She’s checking me out. Nice. A little old. 7 out of 10. Wonder what’s it like to fuck a telepath. Does she fuck the old man? He acts all gentleman. Never seen him touch her, or any woman, or man. She does everything the old man orders. So weird. Maybe Justin can order her to fuck me…

Bunny grabbed him by chin, sending a telepathic spike into his mind. He froze in shock. She coiled around his mind. Like a boa, she squeezed, sending his heart racing until he stopped breathing.

She sent him, You don’t get to think like that about me. And even if Justin did order me, I’d burn your mind out before you could even think about getting hard. It’d feel like this… She took his most painful memory, a bad ankle break in basic training, and looped it again and again, multiplying the pain, spiraling out of control. He fell back against the gross wall of the elevator, with a groan of agony. She released her hold on him before his heart gave out. He collapsed to his knees before her, gasping.

With a smirk, she said at the kneeling man, “I’m a 10 out of 10 you murderous fuck.”

The elevator doors dinged open. A long empty hallway stretched silently ahead of them. Random dark spots from burned out LEDs cast shadows down the hall.

“And Alpha Lothbrok is a dumb name.” She tried to kick him the groin, but missed. Her slippered foot, connected with his thigh.

Red faced and clutching his chest, still gasping for air, he slowly straightened back up. “Like Bunny Oliver’s any better.” When the elevator doors fully opened, he put out a hand, in mocked civility, “Ladies first.”

His thoughts became focused enough to read again. Fuck, fuck, fuckme... she’s reading me! FUCK! Then he focused on nothing but the hall, trying to block her. Pathetic. She pulled back to surface scan as she braced for his loathing. Instead, he radiated awe of her psi attack (good), afraid it’ll happen again (even better) and really turned on (figures, another one of Justin’s freaks).

Ignoring him, she walked onto the worn industrial gray carpet, and marched down the hall, past office doors labelled with shitty little business names. Mostly import/export stuff. The last door a tacky sign covered in floral prints, Visitez Beachez Inc. God she hated Mars.

A quiet conversation came from inside. Alpha hurried past her, and pushed open the door. Inside Justin stood looking out an open window with a view only of the dirty neighboring windows.

Turning to them, Justin said, “You two took your time.” As he spoke he closed the window, and
lowered the shades, blocking the view.

“Sorry boss, the elevator was slow.” Alpha gave Bunny a nervous glance.

The office was small, littered with old grimy take out containers, and walls covered in screens showing shifting beach themed images. An older man sat behind the desk. Even without scanning, Bunny felt the alternating waves of rage and fear coming off the small, ugly smuggler behind the desk. On the other side in a swivel chair the older scientist they hunted. She wore her overly practical shoes and ugly, loose taupe on taupe travel clothes. Science types. No sense of style.

“Lt, please take care of Mr Gibbons.” Bunny felt Alpha stiffen in body and mind, for he understood Justin’s coded ordering the death of the smuggler. A spike of annoyed rage rose then fell away as Alpha’s emotions turned to ice.

“Yes sir,” Alpha obeyed marching at the man like a machine whose lever had been pulled. Too late the smuggler pulled out a ppg. With a rough lunge Alpha slapped it away, grabbed and hauled the struggling smuggler out the door. The terrified man threatened at first, then begged and finally went silent out in the hallway, after thump and a single yelp. Bunny felt the man’s terrified mind go numb into unconsciousness. Then Alpha, his mind in a hard, dark numbness, receded carrying the man away and out of the building. Bunny scanned the lawyer down the hall, who had heard and been annoyed by the sounds. The only outsider potential witness decided to ignore it, feeling no concern. And continued to focus on his work. Not that Bunny felt much pity for the smuggler either. She got too many little glimpses of the sort of smuggling, trafficking in people, the man did.

Justin calmly waited and when Bunny nodded to him, that no one cared, the old man moved to sit in the chair next to their target.

At the terrified look Professor Margrit Kovacs gave him, Justin took her right hand in his, and said, “He owned the brothel downstairs. Half those women are trafficked, the other half addicts. He doesn’t deserve my consideration or anyone’s pity.” He patted her hand, “You do on the other hand.”

The Professor yanked her hand out of his grip and yelled, “How dare you hunt me down like some animal?” Bunny felt the shift in her emotions, her fear morphing to furious self righteousness.

Justin looked at Bunny standing just inside against the wall by the door. Now she understood why he insisted she come up.

Justin’s questions flew in a flurry toward Bunny. “Why did she run? Is she working with someone? Has she betrayed me?”

The scientist’s emotions swung to terror. “Your telepath doesn’t need to violate my mind Justin, I’ll tell you.”

Justin put up a silencing hand. Bunny didn’t need to move closer to dive into the older woman’s mind. Trivially easy for her to do from across the room. It helped that Marge never fought it. Must be used to Justin’s loyalty scans. The women’s mind, all uniform, ordered shelves and halls, were familiar and easy to navigate. Bunny found her motivations. Money and power did nothing for her. Like a lot of scientists, she had an obsessive need to know everything. No real morality. And … huh, Marge had non-scientific feelings for Justin, and had very awkwardly thrown herself at him. He’d turned her down. Offered to introduce her to suitable companions which left her deeply mortified. He’d tried to soothe her with spa and shopping trips. Which despite really wanting, she’d declined. Instead she retreated into over-work. As a result she’d become depressed. God damn, this woman was tedious. Still Bunny dug. There. Huh. The images obvious in the perfectly ordered
mind. The dreams had an odd texture, not one she encountered before. Still there they were. Just
dreams of her going home, her mother’s house on Earth.

“No, no one else. She’s overworked, depressed and lonely. She had dreams, All the same. Left her
nostalgic for her childhood- long lazy summers, by some weedy, snake infested lake. Her family
has a house by it, on Earth.”

His whole body eased, Justin slumped in his chair. A relieved tired sigh came out of him as he
rubbed his face. He asked more, “Why did she go to a smuggler, instead of coming to me?”

The Doctor gritted her teeth as Bunny guessed the obvious answer but swept to find any unhidden
thoughts. “She’s still super embarrassed over trying to seduce you, duh. Then you took away her
project- some virus thing. That was the breaking point.” Bunny felt the woman’s emotions
vibrating. She was about to break into hysterics.

Justin interrupted Bunny seeming to sense the same, “Enough.” He straightened and with a paternal
head shake of disappointment said, “Margrit, Margrit. There is no need to be embarrassed-”

The woman, her face flushed red exploded with tears, “I’ve lived and breathed the virus work,
worked myself half dead, broke every ethics rule. Then you take the only thing that matters to me,
trade it off like some trinket to those lizardheads! For what? Nothing!” She finished with a sob,
which she tried to smother with her hands.

Justin looked at Bunny with a silent eyebrow raise. Bunny guessed the question, is this real?
“She’s not that good an actress. It’s all truth.” Margrit’s sobs bottomed out, stopped. Her mind bent
to bitter, dark regret, fear and anxiety that Justin will have her killed next. A pang of pity for the
older woman ran through Bunny, and left behind a sympathetic connection. Both victims of
Justin’s control.

Bunny turned to Justin. As always she felt nothing from him. When he found her in that cave on
Z’Ha’Dum, first thing said to her, he’d ordered her to never scan him in any way, and so her mind
automatically, on instinct, skipped him. Bored Bunny yawned, and wished she could go back to
bed.

Nodding, Justin seemed to consider something serious for a long moment. Then, leaned in and
stroked her hair. Margrit went still at his touch.

Justin gently stroked her and said, “I want you to know I appreciate your work and sacrifices more
than I can say or show.”

Instantly, his words, and stroking terrified Bunny on instinct for a reason she could not name. Still,
she maintained a weak scan of the other woman. The older woman’s emotions fell away as his
fingers splayed over the crown of the older woman’s head. At the same time, his other hand, the
right, came up and gently rested on the back of her neck. Justin mouthed some words, none of
which Bunny could hear. When he was done, Bunny sensed Marge’s emotions lurch to confused,
then... an emotional explosion, up from the deepest, instinctive part of her. Like a flood of pleasure
from orgasm but a thousand times stronger. Instinctively, Bunny pulled back to protect herself from
the entirely unnatural emotional eruption.

Justin eased back and said, “I apologize for... This is not what I wanted for you. But you ran and
you’re the only human capable of the work I need done. It is necessary.” As soon as he was done
speaking, Justin withdrew his hands completely.

Disturbed but unable to resist, Bunny went back to scan. Marge’s mind had changed, filled with
wonder and joy directed at Justin. Where there was embarrassment, it had morphed to wonder and, to Bunny’s shock, hopelessly, pathetically in love with him. It rippled out strong and sure. Except for her slightly puffy eyes the woman glowed with her new feelings.

Margrit said, “Oh Justin. I knew you wouldn’t let me down.”

“What do you need Margrit?” he asked her.

“You.” she said.

Still shocked, Bunny almost gagged at the cliched answer, and open mouthed, “What the fuck did I just witness?” Something she’d never seen nor scanned before. Justin did something to her, something ugly.

Justin smiled. “Besides me.”

“I … am tired. And I don’t understand why you gave my work away.”

Justin’s whole head nodded. “A misunderstanding. I did not give it all away. We still have the means to make more and your counter agents. The Minbari virus you produced, I traded for something far more worthy of your boundless talents.”

The doctor looked intrigued, “What is it?”

“My associates finally coughed up... Well something I’ve been asking for a long time. Before this unfortunate scene, I was about to show you. It’s coming here, the facility under New Vegas. But enough of that. I want to help you recover and be in top form. What would you like besides me—” He indicated the images of tropical beaches with the logo for Earth’s Greatest Beaches Tour, “To go home on vacation?”

Margrit relaxed, and sadly said. “My mother just opened our summer home. It would be nice, I mean only if you approve, I wanted to sit under real sky, in warm humid air while I eat her cooking. Maybe you can come with?” Her face beamed with loving hope.

Justin brightened. “I would if this were another time, but I can’t. Too much work to oversee. That said, you absolutely should take a long break. Take my ship. It’s the fastest and most comfortable way off Mars. Would you like to stay for the whole summer?” That brought a smile to her face.

Justin smiled back, all sudden pleasantness. “Before you leave, I need to ask one small favor.”

“Anything.” Margrit sighed with longing at him.

Justin nodded to acknowledge the deep devotion. “My associate asked for us to do a final test... on a live subject.”

Disgusted Bunny let out an accidental gasp. Neither reacted to her. She never paid attention and didn’t understand how any of the shadow research worked, and now was glad she didn’t have to be involved in any way with it.

The Professor’s eyes went wide and she swallowed. She quietly said, “No…” At Justin’s scowl, she amended, “We don’t need living Minbari to prove its efficacy. My tests already show—”

Justin cut in, “I know my dear, but they insist. Don’t worry they’ve provided the test subject. And this provides us with an opportunity to live test your human protective vaccine at the same time. Colonel Remil has already volunteered himself.” He patted her hand. Her eyes glazed over with
dreamy loving expression and she slowly nodded along with him.

“If you say so Justin,” she agreed with reluctance.

“Good. Then as soon as the last tests are done, you can be off to Earth. All expenses on me,” He snapped his fingers. “Lt Lothbrok will take you. Bunny’ll go as well,” added Justin casually.

“What? No.” Both women said at once.

Margrit’s stupid love forlorn gape vanished and something like her old self arose as she said, “I don’t want to be under the thumb of your pet assassin and telepath.”

Bunny piped up to add, “While, I’d love an all expenses paid vacation away from you, I’m with her. I don’t babysit.”

Justin ignored Bunny and patted Margrit’s hand. “Another misunderstanding. I only suggest you travel together out of convenience. You can go your separate ways on Earth. Though I would like to send my notes on the new project with you for review.”

An odd yearning for his approval flowed out of Marge like mental farts to Bunny, “Oh. Of course.”

“Good. As for you,” Justin turned to Bunny, his words lingered with a calm menace in the air.

Bunny was already pulling away into a corner, ready to defend herself. “No please. I don’t need a dose of whatever you did to her. Look old man, I didn’t run away from home and didn’t ask for an all expenses paid deluxe vacation.”

Justin didn’t move. “Your attitude is … less than ideal. You need a break. Or at least I need a break from you,” he switched to the voice, “You will come back, with a complaint attitude toward me … Let’s say… The best behavior you are capable of toward me.”

Bunny stiffened and stared at Justin in horror. Her mind already worked on nice things to say to him. She bit the sides of her tongue to keep them unsaid.

Justin took no more notice of her as he moved for the door. Already ignoring them, he tapped into his com. “Major Lee, prepare my shuttle… no, it’s for Margrit and Bunny. … What? … What do you mean? … Yes, I know it looks damaged… No, no one else. All access will go through me.”

He’d wandered out of the office, closing the door behind him. Left behind, Margrit and Bunny looked at each other like victims of a natural disaster come back to their flattened homes.

Bunny wanted to scream, hit things, anything. Instead she stiffly remained mute. Already his command smothered her tantrum before it could explode. Yet, deep inside herself, she managed to silently hate him more than ever.

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**Shuttle - Between Earth and Mars**

Aboard the posh shuttle, Bunny lightly scanned the Professor, who sat in the row in front of her.
Nothing too deep, as to be noticeable. She studied the scientist, trying to figure out what Justin had done to her. Mostly what motivated was the fear that Justin would do the same to her. But she surprised herself, with another motivation—pity for Marge. For since they’d left, the older woman had obsessive thoughts about Justin, how to please him, missing him, physical longing. Nauseating. She wondered if there was a way to fix the woman, because then maybe, there’d be hope for fixing her. And then perhaps Marge would help, be an ally, to get away from Justin.

No one else seemed to have noticed or cared what happened to Marge. Even their pilot Alpha, and the only other person aboard, casually sat visible through the open door, at the pilot’s console. Weary of Bunny, ignoring the Professor all together, the man kept to himself. Already, she had scanned him. See if he had instructions to kill them. No. The memory of his instructions clear. No vacation for him. The order from Justin to watch the women and keep them “safe.” Coordinate and lead round the clock surveillance of them with some black ops agency. All vague, but Bunny relaxed a bit. At least she got to enjoy being moved to a better, more gilded cage on Earth. However temporary.

“Flip and burn complete. On course, ETA to Earth orbit, eight hours thirty-six minutes.” Lt Alpha Lothbrok announced over his shoulder. “You may move about the cabin again.” The man stretched and yawned, then adjusted his straps, loosening them. His head tilted back against the headrest. She felt him slip to relaxation.

From ahead, Marge hurriedly unstrapped herself. The artificial gravity, lush carpet, real wood and stone finishes in the cabin made it easy to pretend they were in a fancy hotel rather than in the vast empty dark of space halfway between Mars and Earth.

“Hey Marge mind if I join you for a few?” Bunny asked as the woman briskly made her way aft.

Marge startled out of her circular obsessing over Justin. “No. I’m going to study the new project briefs Justin provided me.” A lie. Bunny could clearly see her real priorities—masterbate first, then maybe dig into her com, about whatever she got from Justin. Gross.

Bunny followed the woman. At her cabin, Marge stepped through and when Bunny didn’t continue onto her cabin but instead walked into the scientist’s, the Professor whirled around furious at her.

Before Marge could utter another protest, Bunny sent a mild telepathic spike, Shut up you broken old woman. Don’t you realize, those thoughts of Justin, your new obsession with him is all kinds of messed up. Justin fucked with your head.

“He’d never do that. He’s the best man I’ve ever known.” Besides a bubbling tar pit of fake love, flashes of memory from their meeting in the smuggler’s office sailed through Marge’s head.

Bunny said into the woman’s head, You’re a scientist, think. 24 hours ago you didn’t feel this way about him. Now all you can think about is how dreamy he is and how to please him. This isn’t you!

“No. You’re lying.” Another stronger, more vibrant flash of the same pivotal memory from the smuggler’s office.

Bunny grunted in annoyance and kept at her. He made you test the virus, kill that Minbari nobody when you didn’t want to. You cried non-stop afterwards until Justin ordered you to stop. And you did, like you were a puppet. How do you make sense of that?
Confusion passed over her face, before she shook her head no. “He … he had a good reason to… to do it.” Inside her, the memory of Justin touch of her head in the smuggler’s office began to unspool again.

Furious Bunny grabbed either side of the Professor’s head. When she’d been rogue she’d sold black market memory wipes to make extra credits. So she easily wrangled the woman’s memory of their time in that horrible office. And snuffed it out. Marge’s eyes went wide. Stunned, she collapsed sideways on the cabin’s single bed. Her eyes unfocused, mind confused, the older woman lay curled up, facing Bunny.

That pity for her rose up again, calming Bunny. She sent, You’re a scientist, ignore your feelings and only look at the data. Look at how Justin treats you. Justin doesn’t love you. He’s using you. The same way he uses me. We need to work together. Figure something out. Maybe you can figure out how to fix yourself and me. Or find a way to get away from him.

The woman’s emotions quieted as exhaustion began to take over. The woman still loved Justin with a blinding passion that Bunny’s never seen before, but the woman saw the truth in Bunny’s words as well. That cognitive dissonance between those extremes left a giant valley of confused questioning in the older woman’s mind. How did it happen? How to make him love her. How to stop the heart tearing feeling that Justin might not really love her? How can she ever be good enough for him? Aloud Marge simply moaned, “How?”

Bunny stood at the edge of the bed, and answered for the first time aloud, “I have no idea.” The other woman’s mind fell toward sleep, a common reaction to a memory wipe. Not knowing what to do, she left the sleeping scientist be.

Outside the sad cabin, she glanced down the hall to the open cockpit. Alpha sat asleep in the pilot’s seat. His head rolled to the side. His snores loud enough to hear as she crossed the hall to her cabin. Finally, she fully relaxed in the perfect silence. Inside she yawned and stretched to fight her own sleepiness. There was time, months, to work on a way out of her predicament. Happy in a way she hadn’t felt in years, she was slow to notice her soft, comfortable quarters begin to spin. A sleepy dizziness insisted she lay down, though she hadn’t felt that tired a moment ago.

This wasn’t…. this was… something was wrong. Panic took over. She lurched back out into the hallway toward Alpha for help but a direct scan revealed he, like the Professor, was deeply unconscious. She lost her ability to stand. Near the cockpit she collapsed on the soft plush gold carpet, when she felt them.

Like an arrow out of the black, two, no three, minds shot at her. On instinct she scanned them. Human, but oddly more. They came without a ship, no protective suits. Flesh wrapped in shimmering black shields, against the absolute cold of space. Their minds focused entirely on motion, controlling their approach. An inhuman focus … Like Elizar, Kell … Galen. Oh no. Technomages.

Close now, they slowed abruptly. In her passive shock, she saw through their eyes, her shuttle, viewed from the outside, grew larger. She tried to hurt them, throw telepathic spikes, but whatever was in the air, she couldn’t focus enough to put power behind it. Instead she crawled toward Alpha, really the gun she knew he always kept with him. But her body went weak, stopped responding to her commands. With an audible thump, they landed on top of the ship as one. The emergency exit hatch in the ceiling of the shuttle opened to the reddish-blackness.

Dark cloaked figures silently glided down to land around her body. One, the largest black robe, rushed past her to the cockpit.
Another of the remaining two, a woman with a mind now filled with thoughts of sedative and sleeper formulations crouched down. Carefully, she rolled Bunny over onto her back. Then fumbled to rummage in her pockets.

The last hooded figure, the smallest of them, remained standing. Her too large hood, hid most of her still face in shadow, but her fingers moved restlessly against her cloaked legs. Bunny focused on this clear leader, using the last bit of her strength, and recognized the mind. The anxious woman from yesterday.

The woman sensed Bunny’s scan and didn’t fight it this time. Rather tugged her inward to the electric storm of her mind. Passed the lighting of anxiety, the mirrored clouds of desperation, wet with manic hope. To a cogent line of thought for Bunny to sense, Ms Oliver, I believe. My name is Herazade. Time for us to discuss a mutually beneficial arrangement.

A deal. This technomage wanted to cut a deal. The last time she’d made one, with Elizar, the bastard threw her under a bus named Justin. Betrayed her completely. It was Galen, who she had no deal with and who had every reason to kill her, who saved her. She raged back, No deal! And radiated that she was done being used and discarded.

Bunny felt and heard the injection to her neck.

“I see. Well it is good we have some time. You will, no doubt, change your mind once ...” Herazade kept speaking. But the sleepers had hit. Her scan fell away. Bunny stopped listening in all ways. They weren’t going to let her say no. Her rage turned to strangled words, “Fuck me” as her consciousness and last sense, her eyesight, became smothered by shadows.

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