

Miracle: the Pax Humana (novel excerpt)

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General Acknowledgements

For Dad, who taught me about fighting for the future; for Mom, who taught me that every soul deserves flowers; for Grace (and so many others!) who helped me along the way.

The future is bright. *Ad astra!*

Abstract

This thesis is an approximately 40,000 word-long excerpt of *Miracle: The Pax Humana*, a science fiction novel set in a "fallen-utopia" setting influenced by Golden Age science fiction, utopian literature of the Renaissance, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, ancient Greek mythology, war poetry from WWI, and especially by the aesthetics of the emerging "Solarpunk" and "Hopepunk" subgenres of science fiction.

Miracle itself focuses on the travels of interspecies diplomat Cleito Lyth- a human rescued and raised by the Chorus of Masks, a species of enigmatic yet peaceful aliens- as she undertakes a perilous journey to flee war-torn human space with a precious cargo in tow.

Cleito's adventures across the shattered-yet-healing garden worlds of the Orion Arm allow Cleito and her companions to explore various ideas of what it truly means to be human—complicating Cleito's increasingly dualistic (and often neurodivergent-coded) conceptions of identity, culture, and philosophy. Across Cleito's growth as both a person and a human being, she must face the burning question of humanity's trajectory within their universe: are they architects of utopian wonder, or engines of apocalyptic horror?

The work is an experiment in writing science fiction that shifts perspectives on tropes commonly used by space opera and/or military SF, using the premise of a "post-war" space opera setting to loosely explore topics of irenology, anthropology, human development, and long-term consequences of warfare. Meanwhile, cultural and technological remnants of the setting's "Golden Age"/"Pre-war" era also allow for indirect exploration of optimistic futures relevant to contemporary "Solarpunk"/"Hopepunk" SF writers, without sacrificing the conflict and intrigue that often makes far-future SF settings so engaging to their audiences.

This excerpt contains the Prologue and several chapters from the first "Act" of the novel, which introduces Cleito as a protagonist, establishes the themes and aesthetics of *Miracle*'s post-war "Bloom", outlines exposition on the War, the post-war Turmoils, and some of the factions involved, and briefly introduces key characters within the broader story.

“AT LENGTH FROM US MAY FIND, WHO OVERCOMES
BY FORCE, HATH OVERCOME BUT HALF HIS FOE.”

- *JOHN MILTON, PARADISE LOST*

Prologue

Uncharted Space

Somewhere in the Perseus Arm – 35,000ly from the Old Earth

613 Solar days since furthest outpost

Fields of stars and nebular oceans spilt like ink upon a lightless canvas, adrift across two onyx eyes alight with all their wonders.

So dark was the spatial shell of highspace transit, that E’vii Lyth had nearly forgotten what it *felt* like to see the starry night beyond. Two years of travel since they’d last seen civilization, and so many weeks of darkness spent on every jump... but *oh*, how those little lights beckoned her! All the many things they held beyond her reach. How could one ever deny their call?

E’vii pondered, as she often did, of what such things would look like to humans and their trichromatic eyes; how cold and lonely it would be to see such little color so far out among the darkness, let alone the dull skies of their busy little worlds.

Pearlescent sunlight glistened against the stillness of the temple waters, crept slowly across the soft garden sands, played across the shadows of the tallgrass and the leaves of the willows overhead. Fireflies came and went from beneath the folds of her ornate cloak as violet bioluminescence lapped at shallow shores, the glowing lavender eyes and carved grooves of her *Kaloki* mask only a murky image upon its margins. The space beyond the garden was no louder than its own serenity, and all the life within gave pause for her to dream.

There is balance in all things...

The mantra echoed in E’vii’s mind as she meditated on its meaning. She knelt upon the sands, just as her mother had taught her, and she dwelt upon its unseen wisdoms, just as so many Masks had done before her. The People of the Masks were not ones to embrace blind dogma

without first contemplating it, yet so much of their faith hinged upon that simple axiom that to challenge it was like challenging the ground beneath their feet.

Everything changes, and we change with it...

The nigh-imperceptible force of deceleration drifted to a stop, and a whisper came to her through the willows, a faded mimicry of her mate's voice:

"Captain," sighed the willows, *"We have arrived at the object."*

Inhale; a pause; then a breath of life filled the voids of her lungs.

"I will be along shortly," she whispered back. The willow sighed her echo, then retreated into silence.

Slender arms held her cloak and its silver tapestries tight around her body, and as she inched up from her dais amidst the garden, a cloud of tiny fireflies danced around her fingers, assembling themselves into a terminal display. E'vii read its update carefully, sparing no detail. The vessel's deceleration hadn't affected the object's rotation, much to her relief, and its receptors had sensed nothing else against the cosmological radiance found in all places. E'vii had almost expected there to be human vessels waiting nearby, but this far from the light of civilization, she worried how long that anyone inside the object might have been waiting for...

Nary well to dwell on a wanton thought, whispered the memory of her mother, *lest its dalliance lead you astray. Everything comes to the wise and waiting.*

E'vii slipped her hand beneath the folds of her cloak, clutching it tighter still as the fireflies settled within. Narrow feet were met by dampness as she walked across the pond's stones, every footstep leaving behind a fading bioluminescence, every ripple echoing across the temple stones and ancient bulkheads of the vessel. Beyond the garden, beyond the glass, the quiet halcyon of infinite stars lay scattered across the dark, watching with all their patience and wonder.

All life is sacred, whispered the memory of the acolyte she used to be. *Souls stand apart from oblivion, passing from life to life, held in trust by the Self until the loving embrace of death opens them to the Many. All life is sacred, and we too walk among them...*

It was the first thing E’vii Lyth’s mother had taught her, the first thing she could ever remember of being a starfarer-captain. The soul of a vessel was a mighty thing; strong like an oak, swift like a hummingbird, as humble and unassuming as a blade of glass. Like Life Itself, one’s vessel was a myriad of interconnected phenomena, possessing no singular feelings to speak of... but E’vii had learned to see the unspoken, unconscious patterns among them. She could see it in the Ways of things; the way the vines near the doorway retreated from her touch, the way the avian songs had stopped at the same time the vessel had, the way the air tasted staler as the lifeflowers retreated into their whorls. Dread had burrowed itself like a parasite into her vessel, and deeper down, she felt it writhing somewhere within herself as well.

E’vii passed into the dragonfly-spine of the vessel’s aft, treading the mossy path of the corridors as walls occupied by a thousand tiny eyes followed her every step. Alone in the coldness of deep space, she found the vessel’s warmth to be a welcome sensation. A greatflower bloomed from the edge of the door, and its two long asters reached out to her; she grazed a hand across them, and the hatch came unfurled as the greatflower shrank back into itself.

Beyond it, the universe; fields of stars, and traced in shadows amongst them, the familiar outline of Milin’s cloak. E’vii felt her mate’s spindly hand reach out to hold hers, now grateful for the comfort of another.

“The object is being pulled into the welldeck now,” he murmured softly. “I still can’t believe that you saw it. It was barely a glimmer on the telescopes...”

E’vii was quiet for a time. “Vayds have their tongues, and Hauei their hands, but we of Clan Lyth are blessed with sharper eyes than most.”

“Even still...” he murmured, going silent as they walked the temple’s wide staircase down towards the well deck.

E’vii turned her head to see where Milin stood beside her. Among the carved white grooves of his *Kaloki* mask, two glowing orange eyes stood out amongst the dark, and a thin stripe of her own lavender color stretched low across its jawline. He wore an ornate ochre cloak made of spider’s silk, something she’d initially taken as the hallmark of a comfort passenger, but had eventually realized was lighter and tougher than the woven spin of her own tapestries. Milin was born of Clan Hauei, a child of carvers and sculptors; he had married into her kin and kind,

into the explorer dynasties of Clan Lyth, only to find that they were made of far sterner stuff than he.

And yet...

“Do you think the object is human...?” he asked. “It’s certainly not one of our own.”

E’vii laid two outstretched fingers across her opposite cheek, a mask-emote for reassurance. “It’s human,” she answered sternly. “I’m sure of it.”

“How do you know this?”

E’vii ran her hand over a hive growing in the temple wall. In an instant, a swarm of gnats rearranged themselves into the object’s grey, cylindrical shape, with two candleflies blinking red where the object’s collision lights were.

“See? Human symbols.” She gestured to the shape’s starboard side. “It’s an escape pod. They build them cylindrically.”

“I wonder why...” Milin murmured to himself. “But there’s no beacon active upon it. No way for it to find help, or help to find *it*...”

“It’s warmer than the space surrounding it,” she retorted. “Still recently cast away. Perhaps they’re hiding...?”

“Barely warm enough to sustain life. If there are any survivors, they’d be nearly frozen by now...”

“Nearly.”

They slowly turned to each other and tilted their heads in unison.

“I think we’d ought to hurry,” E’vii murmured, and Milin nodded agreement.

They hastened their steady stride as a quiet cooing came from within the Temple, followed by a great bellowing from deep within the bowels of the vessel. The object was aboard, E’vii knew, and the vessel was breathing air back into the welldeck once again. Once this was done, if the object truly was an escape pod as she thought, then its occupants would likely exit, and either explore, or await contact with any sentients onboard.

“This detour will mean time away from the expedition,” she mused, descending the final steps of the temple’s grand staircase. “We’ll need longer burns to make it to the survey sites before apoapsis...”

“The Old Masks can wait,” Milin insisted. “They would wish us to help the survivors.”

“*All life is sacred...*” E’vii began to recite, but Milin squeezed her palm tight enough that she focused on the task at hand.

E’vii held her palm to the anther of the flower beside the welldeck’s door, and watched as its hard-shutters unfolded to the side. Gold-grass glistened on the floor around the object and the steps leading towards it, like dim candlelight reflecting off the cylinder and up upon the asymmetrical grooves of the deck’s cavernous ceiling. All the rest was shadows.

E’vii inched towards it as Milin trailed behind her, still clasping her by the hand as she crept out onto the deck. Even as the sensory silence of weightlessness overtook her, uncertainty gnawed at her instincts, and the gold-grass rippled and dimmed to auburn as the Ways of things were reflected all around her; E’vii steadied herself, watched as the grass returned to gold, and raised an arm from within her cloak to point towards the Object. In an instant, the candleflies nested within her cloak darted out, drifting amongst the empty space before finding orientation and darting towards the point of her guidance. They arranged themselves in glowing streams of light, tracing across the chipped blue writing and grey metal sheens of the object, illuminating it for her own observation.

“Why haven’t they emerged?” E’vii wondered aloud, directing the candleflies across the object as she searched for an entrance. “What could they be waiting for...?”

“E’vii...” Milin began. “I know that we-”

“No.” E’vii was resolute. “Don’t start. They *must* be alive in there.”

Milin bowed in acquiescence.

Finally, the fireflies came upon a metal stem, which E’vii quickly realized was the valve for a pressure hatch: an almost-certainty of human design. Little lights danced across the bulkhead as they came up towards the protrusion, a broad metal shield against the far face of the drum, and began to latch themselves upon it.

E’vii opened her mouth to speak... but found that words wouldn’t come. Finally, she lowered her hand to the blinking rescue-release button, and the hatch began to hiss open as the Object’s atmosphere vented outwards to equalize with their own.

She took a few steps back as the hatch slowly pivoted outwards, leaving nothing left between them and the pod’s interior. E’vii gestured, and a small handful of fireflies followed, their countless wingbeats soft against the unbroken silence of the welldeck. They diffused across the dark interior of the pod, lighting up and fading out in every space and corner; she saw them outlined against the glare of the pod’s virtual window, a shattered wall of pixels with a pulsing red outline, and wondered how long the pod had been adrift this way. Two rows of eight empty crash seats sat unoccupied, while scattered objects and debris drifted throughout; E’vii could see the outline of loose crash padding floating across the cabin, and various tools which had spilled out of their compartments and into the broad gaps between.

E’vii took a step forward, treading carefully as the scarabs in her boots clung to the grated deck of the pod. Milin followed beside her, holding her hand in his as they clambered slowly forward. The pod itself was spacious; enough empty crash seats to seat at least a family’s worth of occupants, ample headroom and torn netting that held emergency supplies and cargo... and yet, not a single soul in sight. Loose packets of processed rations floated about the cabin, and E’vii brushed aside a box that had been partially impaled by a loose screwdriver- most likely during a jolt-deceleration or collision of some kind. She had a sudden feeling of fear and uncertainty as the items drifted ever-further, colliding with themselves and the bulkheads, metal kissing upon metal in the silence and the dark.

They paused for a moment at the center of the cabin, trying to peer beyond the debris floating into their view. They could see the breadth of the cabin from where they stood, so...

Where were all the occupants?

“My love,” Milin murmured, reaching a hand to touch her shoulder as-

A shrill wailing erupted from the back of the pod, and two froze in terror. The gold-grass shrieked and bloomed to red, and the angry wingbeats of hummingbirds could be heard as they filled the welldeck, arranging themselves for E’vii’s first directions. They waited in horror, listening as something *living* gurgled and screamed somewhere in the shadows behind the crash

seats and debris. There was another wail, and the two shrunk back behind the door of the pod, trying to fumble their way out of its confines. It was a sound unlike anything the two had ever heard; Milinn grasped after something in the pouch of his cloak, while E’vii kept a finger waiting at the sleeve of her own garb, ready to order the vessel hard to starboard. A wild burn to throw the Object asunder was the only defense she could think of, and yet what of themselves and all the other life within the vessel...?

Milin shined a hand-torch into the back of the pod, and she saw a tiny thing floating amongst the debris, wrapped in a soft cocoon. As it slowly drifted across the cabin, a little face came into view, with pudgy cheeks and eyes wet with tears. Its little arms hung limp at its sides, while its swaddled legs kicked against the walls of its tiny chrysalis. Fireflies began to swirl all around it as it grasped at them, their little lights gently illuminating it as it cried into the empty space, faint fields of golden stars dancing across two little dark eyes...

“*Human...!*” they murmured in unison, lost in thought as they marveled at the sight of it.

Act I: The Human

1 | The Bloom

Uplift County – Bastion V

Pleides Sector - 384ly from the Old Earth

March 4th, 2481 (International Solar Calendar)

Twenty years later...

Cleito Lyth was never good at being human.

It wasn't for lack of trying, of course. She'd discovered all too well that to master such an art was a confusing and tedious project; one which demanded more patience, practice, and frustration than anything she'd faced in all her years of study. True enough that the virtue of becoming an ambassador's apprentice— a hallowed prestige among both humans and the Chorus of Masks alike— afforded her certain insights seldom shared by other beings... and yet, despite all her endeavors, that simple satisfaction of adequacy seemed forever out of reach. After a lifetime spent among the solemn philosophies and serene ponderance of the Chorus, the very idea of 'humanity' and the nebulous concepts it encompassed felt so deeply *alien* to her, and yet so tantalizingly familiar, that it was all she could do not to limit her vexation and forsake the art entirely.

Have patience, her mentor would say, taking time from his diplomatic duties to help ease her doubts. *In the end, there is peace.*

Cleito reopened her eyes to the world, allowing her restless thoughts to be washed away by the universe flooding her vision through the confines of her *Kaloki* mask. Two irises glowing with radiant blue veiled her dark eyes from the universe, set upon a layer of bio-cultured *a'kiai* tissue and hidden beneath an alabaster face carved in the image of an owl. The mantra repeated

itself in her mind as she ended her meditations: *In the end, there is peace. In the end, there is peace. In the end...*

Spring winds swept across the meadows of Bastion V, flowing through golden grass and dawn-lit lavender, traveling through wayward tatters and banners of a bygone past. Tides of air brushed through wildflowers swaying in restless fields, scattering pollen over hyacinths and asphodels blooming in reforested lowlands, and rustled though windward tatters held fast by sun-kissed cairns. Overgrowth stirred from the tops of fallen warships as helical turbines twirled amidst the zephyr, breathing life into the grass-roofed homesteads resting just beyond their shadow. Bright clouds dashed across a wide blue sky, as if to give chase to the moons and stars spread across the dark beyond.

Cleito held her ash-white cloak tight as it blew, feeling the breeze play at the ends of its living fabrics. She took in the smell of dewdrops and hay grass through the filters of her mask, imagining oneness with the life around her, and letting sensation settle her restless psyche. Meditating here was easy, almost effortless for her; after so many years spent wandering the tomb-wilds in the distant worlds of the Carina Arm, alone with the remnants and the ruins of whisperers lost for eons, the blooming garden worlds of the Orion Arm and its Human Diaspora felt as new and as wondrous as firstborn breath. The ivory sunlight of Bastion's central star felt warm upon the pseudo-senses of her mask, and with the wind blowing life into the harmony all around her, it was all she could do not to drown in the stillness of this place.

The valley before her was dotted with shallow ponds, and blankets of lotuses grew beneath cairns in places where the old floodwaters had never drained. Cleito had knelt to meditate at the edge of the closest pond, seeing her reflection muddied by the mirror-mosaic beneath her. The brightest colors she wore were the easiest to pick out—the ash-white of her

cloak, the glowing teal eyes and hand-polished alabaster of her mask— but she had to squint to see many of the finer details behind the talismans of her cloak. The other, more distant features of her silhouette— her skin, her face, her frame— seemed lost in the pool's murky depths.

In the closeness of her own reflection, Cleito saw only a stranger.

After so many years spent wandering the Carina Arm trying to understand herself, to honor the Chorus and the Old Ways by finding her humble niche in the Great Ecology of all things, she'd hoped that the beauty of the Orion Arm might bring her some small sense of peace; but in three solar months of living here, all she'd found was riddles upon riddles, questions upon questions, which drowned every certainty she'd foraged from the silence of the cosmos.

What does that make me? she wondered, as she often did in the company of her own thoughts. *Human that I am... human that I'll never be. If all I am is questions, then will I ever know the answers?*

Cleito reached for a lotus flower floating in a green corner of the pond, seeing the water ripple as her fingers danced across its petals. She cupped a palm around its bulb to try and pluck it, hoping to study the curious lifeworks within...

“Mind the remains, ma'am,” came a voice from the gravel path behind her, crackling with static and heavy with amusement. “Can'tcha read the sign? Folk 'round these parts don't take well to visitors vexin' the dead, y'know.”

Cleito turned to see a robot standing behind her, a humanoid machine with a bulky abdomen and a sash of rosy vines draped across reclaimed titanium shoulders. It stood with one elbow leaning atop a long-rusted sign to the path behind her, written in an ISO-standard alphabet that Cleito had neither noticed nor read. Warm sunlight fell from a wave of clouds pouring

northwest over the mountainside, casting shadows of the robot's figure across the cobbled alloy walls and verdure rooftops of the homestead just east of the pond. The machine's haphazard appearance seemed to mirror that of the environment it was forged in; Cleito had been told that the region's inhabitants had fashioned their homes from the salvage of warships struck from orbit decades earlier, and she presumed that the robot she was speaking to had been tinkered together through similar means.

"You've finally arrived," Cleito observed, rising slowly to her feet and bowing gracefully to the stranger. "I apologize... my wish was to reflect, not to desecrate. I wasn't aware these blossoms were sacred."

The robot folded its arms, standing idle as a head laden with cameras looked her up and down... then appeared to *chuckle* in a way she'd only seen humans chuckle before. Cleito hadn't come to expect such an expression from the foreign locals of the town, let alone a clockwork body of breadboards and silicon; although she'd encountered many models like this one, the apparent familiarity of the gesture caught her off-guard.

"Aunt Airy didn't tell you much about this place, did she?"

Cleito shook her head back and forth—a clumsy human gesture she'd picked up in her first weeks living in the Orion Arm—and rested her palms atop her knees as a Choral show of reverence. "She did not. I was only told to meet here."

"Hm. Reckoned as much." The automaton took a few steps forward, standing alongside her as it looked out across the water, gesturing to the lotuses and the sunken cairns that tangled their roots to the deep. "I don't blame her for not mentionin' it. It's hard enough for the Warmfolk to heal without havin' to relive the worst days of the War."

Cleito went quiet for a while, looking out upon the water and the landscape beyond. Her Mentor had warned her of moments like these; these vignettes of solemn silence, where there was so little that she could say or do to make things easier.

There was only a moment of peaceful silence as the wind blew gently through the grass, rippling across the water and the cairns below, lost almost as soon as it had arrived.

“I figure y’all’re ready to go, then?” asked the robot, pointing a thumb towards the path behind him. “Aunt Airy’s been expecting you, and I’ve wasted ‘nuff of your time.”

Cleito was still for a moment, trying to remember the correct human gesture... then nodded in the affirmative to the robot, and bowed to him just for good measure.

“I am,” she said plainly.

The robot gave her a queer sort of look—the kind of look that Mentor would have given her for misremembering some obscure facet of diplomatic protocol—then shrugged and arced its arm upwards towards the path, as if to beckon her to follow. After a moment of hesitation, she did just that.

They walked back up the gravel path for a while, passing beyond the grassy rails of the mag-tram line that Cleito had arrived on. The robot’s motors clicked and whirred with every step, its joints saturated by age and oil, while two pairs of silent fans in place of its stomach pulled air into heat-fin radiators fed by busy coolant pipes. Human homesteaders waited by the platform’s edge, clothed in vibrant ponchos or hemp-woven cargo trousers, peering at the two as they crossed the rails and kept on to the landing field beyond. Cleito was accustomed to such stares during her time with the Chorus—after all, the things one chose to observe spoke as much about

their mind as words did— but she wasn't sure what to make of it when those stares came from beings as strange to her as humans.

They came to a grassy clearing amidst the hayfields, and at its center sat a Sunrunner— a sleek airbike clad with matte grey plates over weather-worn chrome, parked on three sturdy legs and painted with telltale letters spelling “AIRY COOPERATIVE”. The robot made a whistling sound as it approached, and a plume of solar fins began to unfurl from its tail, sizzling with raw energy from Bastion's ivory sunlight as six powerful turbine mounts began to articulate and spool up for flight. There was a soft whirring as the engines cycled and up kicked dirt into the air around it, followed by a low electrical purr as it rose to a hover above the dewy grass.

The robot slung its leg over the chassis and climbed aboard, settling into a rider's seat upholstered in scratched-up cactusleather. Cleito saw a fresher-looking passenger seat sandwiched between the rider and a cargo box at the rear of the fairing, and presumed it was where she was meant to sit. The courier turned to meet her gaze, optics zooming to meet the dark eyes hidden behind her mask, as if to surmise her misgivings about the vehicle.

“Ever rode on one o' these before?” asked the robot as it flicked three switches to prepare for flight. “Honest answer.”

Cleito hefted a leg over her seat and clumsily fumbled aboard. “I have not.”

“You're gonna-wanna hold tight.” The robot flicked a switch near the bike's central console, and a grippy-bar popped up from the gap between the seats. “Wind's blowin' southwards. It's an odd omen, I know, but I *ain't* inclined to flyin' leisurely.”

Cleito looked back to the lotus flowers on the ponds further down the plains, to the meadows swaying in the wind, and the fallen dreadnoughts gored against the snow-capped

peaks. Finally, she took a deep breath in through the filter of her *Kaloki* mask and held onto the bar as tight as she could.

“If I might quickly ask-”

HRRRRRRRRRM!

The Sunrunner shot forwards before she could finish, sol-fins crackling wildly as they drank the sun and funneled their energy through the furious roar of turbines.

Stars beyond...! Cleito thought, clinging tight to the handlebars as the gale thrashed against them.

They dashed away at the speed of wind, screeching over alpine plains and verdant meadows as the sun cast columns across the landscapes spread before them. Rusted wrecks and solemn graves dotted the blooming dales beyond as aerodynes drifted through the skies above, their biofuel engines leaving shallow tails in their wake. Minestridders wandered the overgrown fields beyond shattered highways and ramshackle villages, picking at overturned earth as their long stilts pivoted through the air.

“*The name’s July, by-the-by!*” shouted the robot, briefly turning its head to glance at her and give a two-fingered salutation. “I work logistics for Airy Cooperative.”

“*Cleito Lyth!*” she shouted back uneasily, trying to be heard over the wind roaring through her ears. “*Journeyer of Clan Lyth, Emissary of the Chorus, apprentice to Ambassador-*”

“Oh, I know who you are already, ma’am!” chuckled July, shaking its head as a wooden necklace began to toss about in the wind. “Airy wouldn’t *shut up* about you and your mentor, God-bless’er...”

Cleito's interest was piqued. "Does that mean she's been—"

"Hold on a sec!"

For time, or for...? Cleito only had a minute to process the translation before July swerved the handlebars hard to left, veering the Sunrunner into a gully and arcing down so steeply and suddenly that Cleito screamed and nearly lost her grip.

"Sorry back there!" called back July, "Keep forgettin' you ain't used to how we ride here in Uplift... hah!"

"It's... acceptable!" *Was that the right word?* Cleito tried to keep her tone neutral as she reassured the bot through frenzied breaths, clearing her throat as was apparently the human custom. "Very... *somewhat...!* ...Acceptable."

"I'll slow down anyhow," July chuckled. "Saeville's just up ahead, and it ain't good optics for the Coop to be throwin' guests around like that."

Cleito felt relief wash over her as the Sunrunner slowed to a glide, enough for her to loosen her grip a bit and lean back onto the seat rest. Her blood froze when she saw it only a few moments later: burnt-out husks of Alliance tanks sown across the vale, rusted just like the ones she'd seen in her Mentor's archives, dotting the walls of old fortifications battered and broken in the darkest days of the War. Gun turrets popped from their sockets lay mangled on the wildgrass beside them, and a herd of deer taking refuge under scrapwork palisades scampered away at the sound of their approach. Threadbare flags waved over ruined bunkers left behind from the War, casting shadows over dugout trenches now flooded with rainwater, lotus blossoms, and soul-soaked cairns.

“Remnants...” Cleito whispered. “Just like Mentor’s stories...”

“Huh?” The robot swiveled its head to look at her, catching her gaze in the process. “Oh. Yeah. What about ‘em?”

Cleito tried to think of what to ask. “I’ve never... *seen* them this close before.”

“War’s long over.” July’s shoulders sagged a bit. “Not much left to *see* nowadays.”

Cleito realized the obtuseness of her words and fumbled on what to ask next. “Should we keep going...?” she wondered aloud.

July chuckled. “Not much else we *can* do, now is there?”

Laurels of flowers hung from flagstaves above torn tentposts, swaying gently in the breeze as they passed. Something raw, something *human* inside of Cleito yearned to explore the ruins, to somehow discern and understand it all... but before she could think of a question to ask her host, the Sunrunner had already veered into the next gully.

Cleito was silent as she hung back in her seat. The War had been so cruel to Bastion V, though many claimed it was nowhere near as cruel as the oppression humanity had endured in its prelude. Her Mentor had borne witness across two decades of carnage and sorrow, speaking in solemn tones of the horrors he saw at Hyacinth, at Cygnus, at Bastion V and a dozen worlds beyond. A year of omens at the twilight of the Golden Age could never have prepared humanity for the fall of the Pantheon they had built centuries ago, nor for the onslaught of the so-called “Exalted” that struck them down. Legions flooded the Orion Arm from a Spill beyond the galaxy, eclipsing the very stars above the garden worlds, igniting a so-called “war in heaven” as the United Forces of Humanity fought to halt the Edocii onslaught...

Her mentor recalled such stories to her in almost mythological terms, a tone he claimed was true to the propaganda that came alongside twenty years of total war in the ashes of the Golden Age. Armed combat, unrestricted war, *thwarted genocides*... such things took years to make any sense to Cleito, adherent as she was to the Old Ways. ‘Warfare’ was an utterly alien concept to most of the clan-born Chorus, a practice so abhorrent and all-consuming that the Old Ways treated them as anathema to nature itself. In childhood, his stories had always fascinated her; but to finally be present on Bastion V itself, to see such evidence of that terrible cataclysm strewn amidst the Bloom that followed the war, was enough to send chills up her spine.

Despite the toll those years had taken, as if to defy the scorns of war and ruin, it seemed that something new and peculiar had begun to bloom from the sorrow in the soil. Like so much else about her fellow humans, Cleito wished to understand what exactly that thing might be.

She hoped that she’d find peace.

Highland clouds sailed across the horizon as they soared, silhouetting distant mountain peaks and the shipwrecks gouged upon them. Cleito couldn’t help but wonder, in her own curious way, about how *different* these Garden Worlds must have been in the years before the Pantheon’s fall.

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2 | The Visitor

The Sunrunner's roar began to wane as they set down upon a grassy plateau just up the ridge from Saeville, eventually falling silent as they landed in a blue tent hangar filled with toolboxes and engine hoists. July slung a leg over its seat and slid off the Sunrunner's cushion, hitting the hempcrete floor and striding forward into the grass beyond. Cleito did the same, albeit at a slower, more nauseous pace.

"This-a-way," said July, beckoning towards the crest of the ridge. "Unless you need a sec to catch your breath...?"

"I'm fine," she lied politely.

July shrugged, then continued onwards. Cleito followed it over the crest of the hill, hearing the bellowing *whoosh* of windblades as they passed beneath the turbines powering the grids below. She stood at the precipice of the bluff, taking in the sight of Saeville before continuing down the walkway towards the streets.

Before her sprawled a mosaic of vibrant canopies, vine-wrapped pergolas, and terracotta roofs made of kiln-fired clay or perovskite solar cells, all casting shade over sandstone streets filled with folk from across the region. Saeville was like most other homesteads Cleito had visited on Bastion V: a smattering of various dwellings fashioned from reclaimed scrapmetals, artisanal glass, and wood cut from pine farms at the base of the mountains. Vast weather balloons floated from their tie-downs west of the outskirts, and Cleito could read the words "AIRY COOPERATIVE" painted above their gleaming emblem: shining hands of every color reaching up towards the sun, the sky, the stars. Humans and robots went about their daily doings as they

passed through the plaza, chattering amongst themselves or carrying goods and supplies to other homes in the community, sometimes staring curiously or smiling shyly and waving in her direction. Wheeled carts filled with rain-strained produce hobbled along the streets, pulled along by bull-like machines with articulating solar shields angled to drink the oncoming sunshine. Two human children and a golden canine kicked a hexagonal ball onto a dirt path just off the main road, only to be shooed aside by a young mother clearing the way for Cleito and July's approach.

"Thanks, miss," said July, nodding to the woman. It gestured Cleito down another path, a long alleyway shaded by solar pergolas and a canopy of white-flowered hawthorn trees, littered with fallen white petals. Cleito interlinked her hands and bowed respectfully to the homesteader before continuing onwards.

The Bloom had been kind to Uplift County; unlike their neighbors to the south and east, much of Uplift had been spared from the Turmoils that followed in the wake of the War, leaving Airy Cooperative as an unlikely mainstay of the Ceomeala Vales and the folk that called them home. On a world that once pitted brother against brother and sister against sister in the name of labels that outsiders like Cleito still struggled to understand, it seemed remarkable that they had rebuilt so much, so quickly.

"I see the recovery efforts have been going well," Cleito murmured, turning to face her host as they walked. If July truly *was* Airy's closest confidante, then Cleito hoped that conversing with it would help her to build some kind of rapport.

"Well enough, I hope..." July sighed, the sound of static even heavier on its voice. "We've made progress, but there's still contaminants from the War that we're tryin' to flush out from the soil. We've had to rely on the vertical farms more than we wanted to last season, but

hey— at least we’re still exportin’ to the rest of the Vale, and especially to the folks upstairs. What with all this talk of famine ‘cross the Sector, steady crops count for *a lot* nowadays...”

Cleito cupped her hands in what she hoped was a neutral posture. “Are things improving since the Chorus last visited? My mentor told me much of Saeville’s struggles during the Blight, even after the initial cure was found...”

“*Struggles* is a mighty big understatement,” July chuckled. “Life was hard down here. Had a *lot* of hungry days, but we made it through. Stars above, though... we had it *way* easier than those poor farmfolk on the space habs.”

“How’s that?” Cleito wondered.

“Biosecurity,” July sighed. “Hab ecosystems just ain’t as resilient as planetside ones, even *with* bio-modding. Once biosec failed and the Blight got through, the whole damn ecosystem just... withered away. Most of ‘em ended up either down here, or on refugee ships bound for the Cradle.”

Cleito stared blankly at the path ahead of her as she walked. *Stars around, how do I even begin to reply to that?*

“Answering your original question, though...” July turned to her, optics briefly glinting in the sun, such that Cleito could’ve sworn she saw a *smile* for a moment. “Things are as things always are. We’re gettin’ more help than we used to, folk ‘round Airy Cooperative are finally gettin’ comfy with the neighbors out in Advent County, and we’ve got new trade gigs poppin’ up across the whole damn Sector.”

“Any problems as of late?” Cleito wondered, remembering her Mentor’s insistence that she ask. “The Chorus is prepared to offer more aid, if ever it’s needed.”

“We’ll see,” July shrugged. “All we’ve got left to worry about nowadays is the minefields that still need clearin’ out east, the Partisans tryin’ to break the ceasefire with the Militias... and, *of course*, the Alliance tryin’ to court us into makin’ deals to lock out the Colonials.” July sighed. “Airy’s been busy as hell lookin’ after that, but as for the rest of the Cooperative? Business is boomin’.”

There was a moment of quiet as they continued onwards, with Cleito looking up at the sunbeams peeking through the gaps in the panels, and July treading over cobblestones shrouded in soft white petals. Even with her Mentor’s patient explanation, Cleito understood almost nothing about the human-on-human “Turmoils” that erupted after the War’s end. The Old Alliance and their United Forces, the Colonial “Revolutionaries” with their Militias... where were the differences? What depths of madness could drive humans, once brothers and sisters during the War and the Golden Age it ruined, to become bitter enemies? All of it was an enigma to her. Her Mentor clung to the belief that civil war was one of many inevitable aftershocks of the Pantheon’s fall... but Cleito found that hypothesis to be dubious at best.

Finally, July stopped in his tracks, then pointed to a storehouse at the end of the alleyway. A human with a straw hat and shemagh scarf stood by the door, and July waved to signal him. The human nodded back, shoulders easing at her approach.

“Airy’s just up ahead,” July murmured, setting its hands on its hips. “I’ll walk you in. No need for any searches- you’re with the Ambassador, so as much as I’d like to *object*, Airy trusts you completely.”

“Thank you,” Cleito murmured, hoping she’d made a decent impression upon the machine. “I appreciate our talk. I am grateful for our... friendship.”

“Uhh... likewise?” July answered in a higher-sounding tone that Cleito thought was mutual appreciation. It bowed slightly to her. “It’s, uh... a pleasure.”

Cleito bowed to her newfound friend, then left it waiting in the shade of an oak tree. *That went well*, she decided, hoping she’d read the interaction correctly.

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Cleito slipped through the hemptex curtain at the door to the storehouse, finding herself in a sterile labyrinth of hydroponic pipes, radiant diode lights, and racks upon racks of smallcrops sprouting from water trays. Skylights bathed the room in the afternoon glow, and at the crossroads between two walkways, a pair of chairs and a wicker table stood with a tea set and platters of fresh fruit laid upon a floral spread.

“Hungry?” called a voice from within the labyrinth. “Fresh-picked, just for you. Go on, help yourself.”

Cleito looked between the gaps in the v-farm trays and saw a figure on her tiptoes soldering the wires of a diode lamp above a plot. When she was done, she took a few steps back to inspect her work, then slipped the cordless iron into a reinforced cylinder on her belt.

“Thank you for seeing me,” called Cleito, waiting for her host to draw closer before she bowed in respect. “Ambassador Ordell Vayd sends his best regards with-”

“Aw. Straight to business?” Airy’s voice was heavy with disappointment. “And here I thought you’d be wisin’ up to how folks do things here in the Vale.”

Aunt Airy was a lively figure, far more animated than most of the humans she had met so far; many years older than Cleito, but way too young to be elderly by human standards. She wore a patchwork labcoat over bright denim overalls, with a rugged laptop and cabled router shoulder-slung at her side. Her wheat-colored hair was tied in a messy bun beneath a pair of blasted safety goggles, and as she moved to sit down across from Cleito, she blew a short streak of sky-blue hair out of the corner of her eyes. In some strange sense, Cleito couldn't quite tell whether she felt Airy was too old or too young for what she had expected.

“Once again: you hungry?” asked Airy, gesturing to the spread. “I know we’re on the clock here, but I had this ready for someone else, and uh...”

“Yes. I am... *somewhat* hungry.” Cleito tried to hide the unease in her half-lie; Airy was a prominent figure, and whereas she spoke the *Lingua Humana* natively, Cleito’s grasp of the foreign tongue and its associated customs was flimsy at best.

“Great!” Airy smirked, fiddling with the charge-port of her rugged laptop. “Figured you might be peckish, what with all that waitin’. It’s... *good* to finally meet you in person, Journeyer.”

Cleito put a finger to the cheek of her Mask to emote serenity. “This feeling is very shared. I am forward-looking...” Cleito caught her slip-up. “I am... *looking forward*... to our talks.” *Curse these shallow clauses!* “My Mentor is grateful for your continued friendship with the Chorus over all these years.”

“Course.” Airy nodded as she shimmied into her seat, plucked a chunk of watermelon from the bowl, then tossed it straight upwards; it arced up and down towards her open mouth,

then missed it entirely and landed on the floor. She muttered briefly, then cleared her throat and looked directly at Cleito. “So, since you’re keen on getting right to it... what can we do for ya?”

Cleito paced the room a bit and looked down to the glossy white bioplastic of the floor, a curious motion her mentor had taught her to make her appear deep in thought. She whispered her words to herself, a careful final rehearsal in the privacy of her mask, before uttering them to Airy.

“Over the last decade,” she began, “The exchange of favors between the local Chorus and Airy Cooperative has been hugely beneficial for the people of Uplift County and the Caomeala Vale more broadly. There are *some* in Uplift County spreading rumors of your personal ties to members of both the Rebels *and* the Partisans... and that, whatever the case may be, you’re a well-respected peacemaker between their leaders.”

Airy went quiet for a while... then shrugged and chuckled dismissively. “You’re oversellin’ me, kid. I just try to look out for the ‘folk here.”

“Nonsense,” Cleito said, hoping to build on the platform that flattery had given her. “In your work as a Godparent, you’ve organized many... *interventions*... which have averted crises and sustained the peace throughout the region. Your aims, and the aims of the Chorus, have always aligned in that respect.”

“Mind if I ask,” Airy interrupted, her mouth still filled with chewed-up apple, “If y’all cut it out with the butterin’ me up?”

Cleito blinked in stunned shock. Her Mentor had warned her humans could be abrupt, something he’d been especially keen to iterate about the inhabitants of Bastion... but after a lifetime among the Chorus, she’d *never* expected her thoughts to be read and called out so easily. “Pardon...?”

“No offense ‘n all.” Airy chuckled apologetically and winced a bit. “I know y’all in the embassies upstairs are used to the *big-wig* operas, and the fancy sentences with the ‘*posh!*’ rabble from Aurum and Cygnus and wherever else... but we’re simple folk down here. Be direct with us, leave out the hippy-dippy *bullshit*, and we’ll spare you the same.

Cleito straightened her posture, trying to recover from the surprise of embarrassment and the feeling of drums now beating in her chest.

“We need a favor,” she admitted, speaking as directly as she could.

“There we are!” Airy grinned wide. “The *Ambassador* needs a favor, you mean.”

“Y-Yes,” Cleito corrected, blinking at the sudden embarrassment. “The *Ambassador* needs a favor, and an urgent one at that.”

“Mmm.” Airy chewed a large bite of her apple. “Nfow dfhat... dftat I cahn *do*.” *Gulp*. “I’ve been offerin’ for *years*... ‘bout time he called it in. What kinda favor we talkin’?”

Cleito tried pacing again, hoping to regain some semblance of her composed appearance.

“As you already know, the interstellar Partnership for Peace in the Pleiades- P3, as you know it- is holding a diplomatic conference in three days’ time. Arcadia has been selected to host it, and the Chorus will act as neutral mediators.”

“Mhmm,” Airy nodded, cleaving into an apple with a long and heavy *crunch*. “Word on the local grapevine is that *Bastion’s* invitation got lost in the mail, even though it’s *our* planet on the docket. That right?”

Cleito ignored Airy’s chewing and recalled the response she’d so thoroughly rehearsed. “The negotiations among the superpowers— the Alliance and the Colonial Union— will be long

and contentious. It will take the Chorus much effort to keep their attention, let alone convince them to humor Arcadia's proposals for peace. With this in mind... there are two things we ask of you."

"Go on..."

Cleito tried to read Airy's expression— lips pursed, eyes narrowed, brow furrowed— and found herself paralyzed by the possibilities. *Was it interest? Contempt? Patience?* Cleito scolded herself mentally, realizing it was too soon to tell.

"The first is that you do as you've always done—and *keep the peace* among the factions here. The Militia... the Partisans... any action by any faction would distract from the importance of the P3 conference, disrupting our efforts for peace here."

"So just... business as usual?" Airy said, smirking. "I'll jinx it by sayin' this, but that'll be easy enough."

"As for the second..." Cleito turned to face her, making direct eye contact through the glowing shroud of her mask. She retrieved an object from within her cloak— a flash storage stub of human manufacture, encrypted with data she knew little of—and set it on the table before them. Airy looked at the drive with cautious hesitation, then leaned back in her chair and narrowed her eyes on Cleito.

"There is an item we need retrieved," Cleito said, sliding the drive over the table to Airy. "A certain trinket of great value..."

Airy shook her head and scooched back from the table. "Listen, I ain't *that* kind of Godparent..."

“Nothing illicit!” Cleito stammered, trying to reassure her. “Its value is *purely sentimental*. The trinket was lost in the mountains, and the Ambassador wishes to return it to its rightful owner. We need you to retrieve it, then deliver it directly to us on Arcadia.”

“Okay...” Airy said cautiously, leaning closer towards the table. “That sounds a bit more like Vayd. When you say *lost in the mountains*, do you mean...?”

“It was aboard a vessel shot down during the War,” Cleito explained. “It crashed somewhere in the mountains north of Uplift County.”

“What *is* it?” Airy asked, suddenly curious. “Nothin’ dangerous, I hope?”

“Mentor didn’t give me specifics.” Cleito gestured to the drive. “All the necessary details are on here.”

“Got it.” Airy reached over and slid the drive to her end of the table. She held it up to the light to inspect it, turning it in her fingers, watching its chrome edges glimmer in the shine of v-farm LEDs. “I’ll take a shot in the dark and assume you need this *before* the P3 conference, right?”

Cleito nodded. “Time is of the essence. We would have given more notice if we’d located it sooner, but...”

Airy slipped the drive into her shirt pocket and winked knowingly. “I know what you Mask-folk are like. I trust Vayd more than anyone else in this Pan-damned sector.”

“We appreciate that trust,” said Cleito as a wave of reassurance washed over her, “And we will work hard to keep it. You have our oath that we will do right by the people of Bastion V.”

Airy started twirling the blue streak in her hair between her fingers as she stared at Cleito for a long hard while, as if trying to ascertain some emotion that couldn't be seen through the privacy of her mask. Cleito found herself suddenly uneasy, feeling like some exotic specimen under the scrutiny of Airy's stare, trying hard not to be overwhelmed by the importance of Airy and her followers to her mentor's plans to avert another war in the Pleaides Sector.

Finally, she spoke.

"...That's *really* it?" she murmured uneasily, setting her feet back on the floor below. "Just... fetch the trinket, and keep on keepin' the peace?"

Cleito nodded.

"Ten years of helpin' us rebuild... ten years of favor after favor, breakin' his *back* to get us whatever relief we needed... and all he asks for... is *three days*, bullshit-free?"

Cleito nodded once more.

"Pan help us *all*." Airy whistled in amazement. "All these years... thought he'd ask for somethin' *tough*. This'll be a walk in the Commons."

Cleito sighed in relief. *This went well.*

"Just for good measure..." Airy fished for the charm of her necklace, and yanked it off its chain. She held out a small cylinder, seemingly made of oak wood and silicon, and laid it on Cleito's side of the table. "This datadrive has a cryptokit, and instructions on how to contact us securely over the AllNet. Give it straight to the Ambassador, and tell him I'll reach out soon."

Cleito took the drive, stood from her seat, and bowed to her host. "I'll do my best to ensure it gets to him."

Airy nodded and kicked her boots back up on the table. “July’s headed out soon with a shipment of fresh produce. He’ll be passing by Gellard Terminal, and the maglev there goes all the way to the Shuttleport. Should get you back by sundown.”

“Thank you.” Cleito bowed slightly—her back was hurting from all the bowing she’d been doing lately (why had *this* been chosen as the standard custom?)— but she was keen to ensure Airy knew how grateful she was. “I’ll be in touch to collect the trinket.”

“Guess we’ll see you then,” Airy smirked, sipping from her cup of tea. “Safe travels. Please give Vayd my fondest, and tell him he’s welcome back any time.”

Cleito bowed one final time, and- taking a handful of fruit for the journey back- started making her way back through the hemptex shroud.

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Nesting Chambers – *Essence of Alyssum* (Clan Lyth vessel)

Deep Space – Carina Arm – 8,500ly from the Old Earth

In her childhood, Cleito had no name to speak of.

Of her earliest years, she could remember little else beyond the warmth of her blankets, the silly expressions her father made to make her laugh, the constant longing to visit the temple where her mother captained their clan’s vessel... and the very first moments she saw the golden eyes of the Ambassador’s mask, glittering against the shadows of her nesting chamber.

“Be still, little one,” whispered *vuu*— later known as ‘mother’, and later still as ‘captain’— as she cradled her tiny kin in her fragile arms. *“I am here, hai’vehn’a, hai Tai’oka, sweet One with Little Dark Eyes...”*

Dark Eyes... something familiar about those words that *vuu* called her, something knowing and endearing in the tone that she said them with. She huddled close against *vuu*’s warmth, clinging tight to the safety and love that her carer so readily provided. *Vuu* held her tighter, whispered soft things in her tiny ear, rocked her gently into the calmness and serenity that only *vuu* and the nest could provide.

Dark Eyes looked out from the sling that *vuu* now cradled her in, wrapped in spider-silk blankets, and saw the shiny white of her mask and the hazy glow of her lavender eyes looking back at her.

“She has taken so long to nurse to health,” whispered another figure, nursing their kin from the safety of a sling within her cloak. *“The lengths your Kinship has gone to grow food for her...”*

“I am so proud of her,” whispered *vu*, grazing a loving hand to wipe a tear from Dark Eyes’ cheek. *“She has recovered so quickly, grown so gracefully. I cannot believe she’s almost old enough to don a Mask...”*

There was comfort in *vu*’s voice, safety in *vu*’s voice... Dark Eyes’s attention began to lull away to nothingness, until a *clop-clop* of footsteps pulled her back from the brink of slumber.

“Captain...” came a deeper voice, a voice that wasn’t *vu*’s. *“Ordell Vayd has arrived.”*

A quiet, sleepy pause. Dark Eyes yawned, a tiny noise muffled by her mother’s embrace.

“Bid him enter,” she murmured in return.

Dark Eyes saw *vu*’s mask glance between her stare, and something that wasn’t her stare. A few moments later, *vu* adjusted Dark Eyes’ fixture within the sling, facing her towards the chamber while still holding her close enough to feel her warmth. She saw little, and understood less; there were other figures, many holding tiny ones with tiny cloaks and wide grey eyes, but she knew not what their purpose was, only that they were not *vu*.

Amidst the darkness, a blurry silhouette could be seen amongst the phosphorescent teal that flanked the chamber entrance. Gold gilt glimmered against a blanket of white, and two auric eyes were just shiny enough to catch and hold her fleeting attention.

“Captain,” came a low voice, and a bow of the blanketed one. *“Thank you for seeing me...”*

“Ambassador.” murmured *vu*, and the funny sound of her voice was enough to make Dark Eyes babble and coo with affection. *“The thanks are all mine. Milin speaks warmly of your correspondence, and we are grateful for the nesting gifts you sent to us. It is good to see you again, after all the seasons since our youth...”*

“This is her?” murmured the gold one, eyes seeming to grow wider as they approached her. *“After all that’s happened... I never could have dreamt of such a rarity...”*

“Slowly,” murmured *vu*, harsh at first, then softer. *“Human as she is, she is prone to agitation.”*

“I understand,” answered the voice. *“I will be careful...”*

“Thank you, Ambassador.”

There was an instinct of caution as the stranger approached her, the white-gold blanket of his cloak growing wider and wider within her field of view... until he stopped just a few inches away, kneeling to look upon her face and try to augur emotion from her expressions. Dark Eyes babbled and reached her hands out to touch the shiny mask with its shiny eyes, and the visitor was motionless as her fingers played with its seals and *pat-pat-patted* at its grooves.

“She’s wondrous...” the voice whispered, laughing softly in the dark. *“Stars beyond, my friend. I would have journeyed a thousand galaxies to see a sight such as this...”*

“Would you like to hold her, Vayd?”

A moment of stunned silence. *“I... I am not worthy of that trust. Not after everything I’ve been through, everything I’ve seen...”*

“After all that you’ve done for them, you mean?” murmured *vu*. *“I can think of no worthier soul to trust her to than you, my friend.”*

Dark Eyes felt a rustle as *vu* wrapped her arms in blankets, then a draft coldness as she was held out and offered for the visitor to take. Dark Eyes looked out about the darkness, bewildered at the change of scenery and of orientation, until two warm hands cradled her and held her close to a robe filled with fuzzy, dangly talismans. The stranger’s touch reminded her of *vaa*, the fatherly voice who fed and clothed her alongside *vu*, and Dark Eyes immediately felt at peace within his arms.

“So light!” the visitor laughed. *“I thought she would be heavier...”*

“We’ve done our best to feed her well,” came *vu*’s voice, more distant than it had ever been. *“She was so skinny when we rescued her...”*

“It brings me joy to see her so well,” sighed the gold-eyes. *“Milin must be brighter than suns having her around...!”*

“I had hoped to send her back with you to the Orion Arm,” *vu* whispered, and Dark Eyes felt the same panging sadness that now weighed upon her carer’s voice. *“She deserves to blossom among her own kind. Milin and I have long debated this, but... I fear that nursing her within the Chorus would rob her of a better future.”*

A dire pause.

“You would give her up? Deny her the clarity of the Old Ways? Just because of what the galaxy says about the humans doesn’t mean she couldn’t-”

“I love her like a daughter;” vuu murmured, and Dark Eyes saw her mask fill her view as she looked down upon her precious charge. “But she is human, born of another human. Natural or not, I fear that our care is not what is best for her.”

“If you want what is best for her...” sighed the voice, “then I fear the time to return her has already passed. The bonds formed between ‘mother’ and ‘child’ are primal and sacred to their cognition, more so than ours. She has already lost one mother... to lose another, at this fragile age in her life, will be deeply traumatic to her. Even then, with so many others orphaned by the War, I cannot guarantee that I’d be able to find a caretaker...”

“Truly?” said vuu, whispering in a worried tone Dark Eyes had heard before. “In all the Orion Arm, is there not one willing soul who might care for this child?”

“The Orion Arm lays shattered,” sighed the Ambassador, gently rocking Dark Eyes in his arms. “The Pantheon has fallen, and the Golden Age is over. Few of their garden worlds still bear life, and of the ones that do, nearly all are engulfed in devastation and turmoil. It will take decades to regain some semblance of order, and even then, there will be a constant threat of civil collapse, violence, drought, famine.... no human could truly blossom under such conditions.”

“You said the War had ended, Vayd. In your letters, you said that the child would be safe from the genocide...”

“I only said that one conflict had ended. War is a ceaseless hunger, Captain, and humanity—now caught in its cycle— has already started down the path towards relapse.”

A silence fell upon the chamber, but unlike before, Dark Eyes felt no lulling of sleep.

“Humanity has won their ‘Everything War’, this much is true... but now, the champions of the United Forces seek retribution through genocide against the Edocii. Admiral Rune, the one I once spoke of as my friend, now hunts the very survivors I sought to protect. Every night, I pray that the ceasefire now brokered between the Alliance and the Colonial rebels will endure... but prayers alone will not stop Rune, nor the ambitions of the post-war superpowers. If the child is adopted, only to see her new home ravaged in a crossfire, will she truly be the better for it?”

“What would you have me do, then?” vuu whispered, and Dark Eyes began to feel the familiar rising of candlefly-sensations within her stomach, and the welling up of tears in her eyes. “What if she remains with the Chorus and grows sicker, hm? Our ways, our ecosystems are utterly alien to her... her bones are already tainted by the lightness of space. What if we have already poisoned her, and there is no way to reverse the damage we’ve done?”

Dark Eyes began to cry softly into her carer’s cloak, and felt the familiar sensation of rocking and the gentle sound of *“shush-shush, there-there”* as she was swayed back and forth.

“You do injustice to the care you’ve already given her,” murmured the gold one, and Dark Eyes felt a faint ruffle of blankets as she was returned to her carer’s arms. *“She would be dust and bones if you hadn’t found her.”*

“She may be dust and bones yet.”

“But she loves you,” murmured the visitor, whispering reassurance. *“And you love her. I can see that between you, as clear as one sees starlight on the ecliptic.”*

Dark Eyes saw the white of her mother’s mask fill her view, and her tears were replaced with a quiet babbling of joy and relief. She reached up to grasp vuu’s mask, and vuu leaned close enough for her to touch it. Dark Eyes babbled with delight.

“I love her enough to know what’s best for her,” vuu whispered sadly. “As for Dark Eyes... at this age, what else could Dark Eyes possibly know?”

Vuu sighed, a long and heavy sigh, and slowed her rocking as Dark Eyes quieted down and began to lull herself to sleep.

“You are all she knows now, E’vii. You, and Milin, of course.”

“What do I do?” she asked plainly. “All I want is for her to live and be well.”

The visitor was quiet. *“I brought a doctor with me: an automaton that accompanied me from the Orion Arm. It will help to advise on treating her conditions.”*

“And after that?” vuu murmured. “What do you propose I do, then?”

“You raise her,” Vayd answered softly, stepping slowly back into the center of the room, his figure faint and grey amidst the luminescent beetles scuttling through the branches above.

“You raise her as your own, just as you wanted to. Anoint her into Clan Lyth, guide her through the Trials, and when she is older and wiser... she will choose for herself whether to stay or remain. Come what may, the decision must be hers.”

There was silence, for a time; and then a softness as vuu cradled her, nurtured her, held her close enough to feel the gentle warmth of her heartbeat. Dark Eyes closed her eyes and, safe in her mother’s arms, began to drift away into sleep.

“I suppose you will know what is best in the end... won’t you, Cleito?”

There was an eerie stillness as a feeling within Cleito stirred, a certain familiarity now *punctured* by something foreign to her perception. She looked suddenly to her mother and found only an empty cloak now blanketing her; she fumbled her limbs about the nest— *her* limbs, and

not the limbs of an infant memory— and quickly set herself upright upon the dais of her captain-mother.

She spun to look at the center of the chamber and saw the glowing eyes of Clan Lyth's carers and nurses watching her amidst an ever-fading darkness, slowly shifting and shrinking and staring her down until the glow of their eyes began to morph into the pitch blackness between each other, a starry slurry swirling into a brilliant stream of lights that Cleito could barely follow. She watched in lucid delirium as the figure of a woman began to arrange itself amidst the stars, twisting space and curving light itself as the luminant background of the chamber seemed to coil around its silhouette. The shadow stared her down with two blinding white eyes, constellations swaying like long hair in a wind of oblivion, reaching an amorphous hand out to touch her while the voices of her caretakers called in perfect unison, distant echoes screaming *Cleito, Cleito, CLEITO...*

The Starry One was only inches away when Cleito dropped from her blankets, falling from the lurid husk of her dream.

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Uplift County—Bastion V

~0348hrs (local reference)

The whispers in the backwoods roused her long before the sunrise came.

Cleito realized that she was awake now, eyes alert but still heavy with sleep, trying to listen for the voices amidst the forest sounds surrounding her. She lay motionless on the tattered couch of her shelter for the night, an abandoned pre-war homestead carpeted with overgrowth and filled with walls of faded photographs, filled with portraits of bygone families. Cricketsong filled the air as fireflies danced in the midnight rain, with rays of moonlight shining through bullet-holes pierced through hempcrete bricks and wallpaper rotted in the years since the War brought ruin to Bastion V.

It had rained in the night, Cleito realized, and she found herself grateful for the restfulness that came with white noise and the soft scent of petrichor. The next tram wouldn't come until morning, and faced with the prospect of asking strange homesteaders for free shelter, she decided to rest alone with the wilds, the stars, and her thoughts.

Cleito was well-used to such nights; after all, it was an old Lyth saying that to rest beneath a blanket of stars was to invite dreams of discovery. After the long years of her Seeking amidst the wilds of the Carina Arm, in search of ruins worn away by countless millennia of rain and erosion, the forests of Bastion felt as warm and familiar as her mother's old nest. The living subsystems of the suit kept her snug and well-insulated from the coldness of midnight, and if ever there would come a sign of danger, the candleflies resting in her cloak would have roused her.

Breathing softly, and feeling no urgency of vigilance, she rose silently to her feet and crept towards the open, shattered window on the north wall. Nights like these reminded her of her mother, of their long nights resting in the ruins left behind by the galaxy's ancients, or sleepless hours looking up at the colossal, esoteric shapes that marked a world seeded by the Gardener precursors. Here, amidst the ruins and the beauties of Bastion V, she wondered if humanity's Pantheon had thought to distinguish its own Garden Worlds in a similar vein.

The night outside was calm, the courtyards quiet, with silver droplets glittering in the moonlight as rain trickled down from above. Wildgrass and forest leaves swayed softly in the gloam, and if any creatures roamed the darkness, they seemed to have no penchant for disturbing the peace.

She listened closer... until eventually, the drizzle slowed and crackling whispers could be heard, perhaps from some electronic speakerphone lost and forgotten in the forests. At the furthest edges of the treeline, Cleito could see a dance of faint silhouettes; motes of hidden color glowing softly in the mist, shifting and contorting between the trees and roots as they wandered the wilds and watched her in the window.

The Wisps are out tonight, Cleito mused to herself, lost in thought at memories of her childhood. Even in their faintness, the outlines here were far brighter than any she had seen in the Carina Arm; without her mother's eyes, she could only see the colors in pitch black after hours of letting her eyes adjust to the darkness. In the Carina Arm, seeing a Wisp in the wilderness was a good omen for any deep-space explorer... but for the human folk of the Orion Arm, she couldn't help but wonder what feelings such sights might bring.

A little light beckoned to her from the fringes between the true wilds and the wilds reclaimed by the War's end, the telltale totem of a Wisp that seemed to want to lead her towards some other, forgotten place even deeper in the woods. It flickered in and out of the darkness, as if to blindly fumble for her attention, before slowly drifting between the trees and the creeks far beyond them.

Cleito yawned, withdrew from the window, and fell backwards onto the faded couch.

The Wisps knew many things; as if to defy every other facet of nature itself, the secrets of the Wisps seemed to echo throughout the galaxy, taunting explorers with the inklings of sagacity they offered. Whispers alone were seldom cause for alarm, however, and she had neither the alertness nor the energy to chance seeking them out.

Cleito pondered the ghosts in the forests for a while longer, laying face-up to stare at the overgrowth covering the walls, until a lullaby of rain and petrichor sent her drifting into dreams unknown.

3 | The Diplomat

Awen Bay – Uplift County – Bastion V

Pleades Sector - 384ly from the Old Earth

March 5th, 2481 – 0845hrs (local reference)

Daybreak swelled across a boundless horizon as Cleito looked out across the water, watching as clouds of pink and gold danced across the glass skyline of Awen City and the mirrorlike bay beyond. The sun hung low over the edge of the water, glittering against the sailboats as they ventured out beyond the moors, shining as they traced the outlines of apartment stacks draped with ivy vines, articulating photovoltaics, drying racks, and other distant oddities. Colossal blimp-turbines bobbed and weaved over the snow-capped mountains to the east, siphoning kinetic energy to power maglevs darting between stations, heat pumps churning ceaselessly, and desalination plants pouring freshwater into metropolitan viaducts. Beyond it all, just south of Capitol Bay, the long cable of the Arcadian Uplift stretched up into infinity, its cargo-laden climbers slowly crawling down to the world, then back up to the vibrant cosmos above.

It was all so hypnotic to her, at least from afar; she likened the traffic of the spaceports to watching the comings and goings of bees, sometimes humming in stillness, and other times buzzing by her with the deafening roar of hydrogen thrusters. All her life spent aboard ships, Cleito could never understand how humans lived in places so starkly akin to hives; seeing their machine-cities on the horizon, bathed in glass and dusk and raw intrigue, made her all the keener to venture closer and find out.

Another day, Cleito thought to herself as she settled into her seat, mounted near the center of the cabin of an orbital shuttle. *There'll be many other days for that. For now... the Chorus calls.*

Cleito looked out the viewport, sighing as exhaustion's weighted blanket sank upon her. Cherry blossoms flanked the walkways of the shuttleport around them, their soft petals littered everywhere underfoot. Cleito could hear the fading roar of rocket thrusters as the shuttles hovered across the water, their propwash rustling the ivy vines dangling from verandas over the concourse. She looked down the shuttle aisle and saw the backs of many heads, human and robot alike, as the automated attendant strolled past her. The cabin was bathed in a calm, cream-colored hue, and at the forward bulkhead, Cleito could see a glass wall with the BTA chevron and Arcadian crest etched upon it, separating her from a lush wall of plants. She wondered whether they were living or not, and whether they could withstand the forces of acceleration burns day in and day out. It would be a taxing thing for any creature, let alone one bred solely for ornamentation.

Three chimes rang out in ascending order, and Cleito looked to the shuttle's bow to listen to the announcement.

"Good morning, and welcome aboard this Bastion Transit Administration shuttle to:" the voice clicked as it switched to a man's voice. "Terminal Six. Arcadia Port." click, and the woman returned. "Escape burn will be: ten minutes at 2 Gs. Please read the safety instructions imprinted on the back of your seat. Thank you for your patronage."

From outside the shuttle, a roar of thruster engines; from within, the ding, ding, *dong* of another chime.

"We are preparing for departure. Please ensure your seat restraints are fastened and all loose items have been secured in the seat back compartment in front of you. On behalf of the Bastion Transit Authority, we hope you have a pleasant flight."

Cleito felt the phantom force of inertia as the shuttle lifted off from the pad and slowly ambled to starboard, such that she could see the red-hot scorch marks on the shuttleport landing pad, the long spine of the Uplift in the distance, and the Capitol Bay glittering everywhere in-between. The shuttle gradually inclined, such that Cleito could feel her head pressed against the plush blue headrest, and she let gravity guide her hands back into her lap.

A high chime, and then nothing.

It came slowly at first; the texture of blue synthleather against her fingers, the padding of a neckrest she hadn't noticed before, the stiff foam of the seat restraint letting go of her torso, only to pass it to the plush cushions cradling her spine. Then a heaviness in her arms, a breathlessness in her lungs, and the growing force of acceleration weighing down upon her. The shuttle lurched higher and higher into the atmosphere, its lights bathing the cabin in a cool blue hue as sky outside grew thinner, darker... and then eventually disappeared altogether. Bastion Prime's sunlight crept across the cabin ceiling, and Cleito saw the tops of holocrux screens from the seats ahead of her as passengers swiped through apps, virtually unaware of the forces they were undergoing.

Then, after the silent passage of a time she couldn't recall, Cleito saw the cabin lights gradually brighten. Second by second, she could feel the weight of acceleration slowly easing off her, until she'd entirely forgotten what it'd felt like.

“Please prepare for Highspace shift,” came the chime once again. “In *ten... nine... eight...*”

Cleito noticed a child in the lap of the woman next to her. Cleito looked at the child, who looked at her; then looked back to the window, to the oceans and skies over Bastion V, and to all the stars that lie beyond.

“*...three... two... one. Shifting.*”

Cleito watched as the stars off the front of the shuttle slowly stretched, then began to drain inwards towards a single, blinding white pinpoint in the ship's direction of travel. The stars and oceans behind them began to grow to impossible size, expanding more and more across the field of view until the illusion seemed as if they lied just beyond the shuttle's window, close enough for her to reach out and touch.

“Shift successful,” the attendant murmured calmly. “Thank you for your patience. You are now free to move about the cabin.”

Cleito could hear the low hum of the ship's Icarus Drive as it distorted the very fabric of spacetime around them, pulled against wavelengths of light travelling past them, compressing the void in front of them and expanding the void behind them, such that the shuttle could ascend Bastion V's gravity well as easily as a stone rolling down a hill. The change of velocity required to maneuver between gravity wells was reduced this way, and on a trajectory the pilots knew to be free of debris or collision hazards, there was nothing keeping them from travelling at above-cruise speeds.

“*Think of it first as a bridge,*” her mother had murmured on the day she learned to fly.
“*The drive compresses the gulf of space around it, thus bridging the distance between two*

celestials. With less distance to travel, and with the tides of gravity interwoven, the time and acceleration needed to reach a destination is reduced from generations to mere hours. Beyond the speed of light, little is visible save a blinding pinpoint of blueshift used as reference to stay on-course. Less elegant than wormhole travel, but... such things were lost to the Ancients, and they are lost to us today. You will understand such things with time."

The woman in the seat next to Cleito's unbuckled her seatbelt and carried her baby to the lavatory at the rear of the shuttle, and in the aisles just in front of her, several passengers got up to stretch their legs and yawn.

With that, her stare drifted back towards the window, and Cleito closed her eyes to rest for a while.

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The cosmos exploded back across the dark as the shuttle dropped back down into Stillspace, and Cleito watched as Bastion V itself telescoped further and further away from her view in the window, until it was just another world suspended amidst its moons. Fasten-seatbelt chimes sounded as the shuttle began to rotate to starboard, and the immense space habitat of Arcadia Port came into view; a brilliant white cylinder stretching three dozen kilometers long and nearly a quarter of that in diameter, a vast mosaic of windows, docks, and emblems sprawling like metal moss across the colossal breadth of its hull.

"Welcome to Arcadia," chimed a newer, gruffer voice over the intercom, "The shining jewel of the Pleiades. On behalf of the Praesidium, we'd like to welcome you to our open city among the stars."

The shuttle lurched to port as it maneuvered towards a colossal Starport suspended off the sunward end of the cylinder, a bustling hive of spacedocks, warehouses and berthings anchoring tens of dozens of Starliners that seemed to bask in the sunlight. Many of the Port's rings spun against the station's rotation, such that their solar arrays were perpendicular to the galactic plane; sandwiched between the Port and the central cylinder of the city, Cleito could see the narrow disk of the system-wide Transit Hub as it gently plucked shuttlecraft out of freefall and lifted them into the centrifugal spin of the larger habitat.

They drifted closer and closer to the hub, so close that Cleito thought they'd crash against one of the sunward moors, until the jolt of the hub's manipulator arm came and guided the craft into rest on an outstretched pad. Cleito felt the weight of gravity come rushing back on top of her, pressing her senses back into the synthleather seats, the neckrest, the cushions of her seat. The orbital flight had taken twenty minutes at most, even if her nap made it feel like an hour.

Cleito sighed; she wished that she could be weightless forever, could sleep adrift and unbound from the world for the rest of her years, and yet the toll that such rest had already exacted upon her bones...

"Please prepare to disembark," came the familiar voice of the original attendant. "Alliance citizens, visa-holders, and spacecraft crew, please take the right-hand walkway; for provisional Colonial independents and all others, please proceed left to customs and inspection. Seatbelt signs have been-"

Every human in the cabin was now standing in the aisles, hastily fishing for their bags from the cedar-lined overhead, waiting eagerly for the shuttle to dock within the airtight terminal so they could finally disembark. Cleito saw the baby sitting next to her, now held in the arms of

an impatient mother standing in the aisle, staring at her with tiny green eyes and a perfectly blank expression. Cleito put one hand to her cheek to sign bemusement, and signed a reply of silent agreement with the other.

“Everything comes to the wise and waiting...” Cleito mused to herself, remembering her mother’s words as she settled down into her seat.

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Cleito had barely stepped foot into the left-hand airlock when she was jumped by a figure wearing a black shirt and a black security vest; she felt the air squeezed from her lungs as two arms wrapped themselves around her cloak in a crushing, warm embrace.

“CLEITO!” the woman laughed excitedly, *“Dude! It’s been a minute! How’ve you been?!”*

Whatever Lola Roberts lacked in tact, Cleito thought to herself, she certainly made up for in enthusiasm. For all the training and discipline that Arcadia’s Embassy Guard Corps might’ve instilled in her, it had certainly hadn’t broken the intensity of her spirit.

“I’ve been great!” Cleito wheezed, reciting the normal human reply as she tried to wrangle her one free arm around her only human friend. “I’ve been so, *so* great!”

Lola let her go, then patted her on the shoulder. She had a great wide smile spread across her freckly face, and her green eyes were wide with something Cleito assumed to be friendly curiosity.

“How’d the trip downstairs go?” Lola asked, holding her ID badge to the contraband scanner to let Cleito through untouched. “Everything went well, I assume?”

Cleito touched a finger to her cheekbone to sign reluctance. “I can’t discuss Embassy business. You know that.”

“No, yeah, of course.” Lola shrugged, gently carving through a crowd of commuters to escort Cleito through. “*’scuse me, pardon me, ’scuze me...* but I mean, was it a *nice trip* at least? *’scuse me, sir, thank you...* like, did you enjoy seeing Bastion up close?”

“I *did* enjoy it,” she admitted, chuckling to herself. “Seeing the Bloom and all the folk at work to rebuild... it’s nice to admire what the Ambassador’s worked so hard to sustain.”

“Good shit!” Lola smirked, playfully bumping Cleito’s shoulder with her elbow. “Cuz not to be that *girl* or anything? But the Ambassador’s been pacing all night, calling me and my C.O. at *ungodly* hours of the right, worried *sick* about where you were.”

Cleito looked at her in concern. “I sent him a message to let him know I’d be back late.”

Lola raised an eyebrow and pursed her lips. “I know you’re new to the language here, Cleito? But *’late*’ and *’gone all night*’ mean two *very* different things to us.”

“I tried to call after I missed the last tram,” Cleito murmured. “And I whispered to the Chorus through the willows and wisps in the forests...”

“Willows and wisps, huh?” Lola smacked her forehead with the palm of her hand and stuck a tongue out in sarcasm. “Well, *doh!* Why didn’t I think of that sooner? Knowing you, I guess I should’ve expected an answer as batshit *crazy* as that. Either way, your AllNet reception must’ve been shit, ‘cuz the message didn’t go through until just this morning.”

Something fell down a pit in Cleito’s stomach. “*Oh, stars above...*”

“C’mon, dumbass.” Lola rolled her eyes. Get that jaw off the deck and hustle, we’re gonna be late for work.”

They exited the last checkpoint and found themselves within the starport’s Grand Terminal, a sweeping masterwork of space-sourced quartz, stained glass, and floret walls flourishing atop open benches carved from maple wood, stretching as wide as a starliner across its diameter and soaring almost as tall at its zenith. Passengers hurried to and from their gates at the security scanners, often stopping to mingle amongst themselves or to admire works that, for many across the Orion Arm, had been the stuff of pop-culture and holocinema. Chandeliers forged in Arcadian style dotted the sweeping glass ceiling above them, each seeming to dangle towards a different statue on the floor as centrifugal force lulled them unevenly groundward. What seemed like gold dust seemed to glisten in flowing patterns across the warm quartz floors, seeping like solar wind from a glowing white Arcadian and into the vastness of the concourse atrium.

Lola leaned her elbows on the handrail of the far-side escalator as they boarded, stifling a yawn as ascended from the starport to the inner surface of the habitat.

“Had to wake up early to meet you, y’know,” she chuckled, wiping something from the corner of her mouth. “Didn’t even have time for coffee...”

Cleito tilted her head in disapproval. “That *bitter* brown liquid? Eurgh...”

“Hey, c’mon!” Lola protested. “I’m running on *fumes* here. We’ve *maybe* got time for a run to Mimi’s... *pleeeeeease?* I’ve got desk duty at the Guard barracks and *nobody* in the platoon ever does their paperwork right...”

Cleito tried to meet Lola's eyes as she considered her answer, only to find herself blinded by the glare from the surface just beyond them.

"*Welcome to Arcadia...*" came a warm voice from the speakers above. "...the crossroads of the galaxy. *Nil volentibus arduum.*"

Cleito opened her eyes to see Arcadian landscapes painted like murals across the horizon, sprawled wide across the space habitat's colossal interior drum, curving up and up and into themselves in an uninterrupted plane of skylless ground. A vast mosaic of parks and forests stretched far into the distance, interconnected by a latticework of trams and walkway concourses, separated only by compact townships and the Central District towering in the distance. Buildings were bathed in morning sunlight radiating from the fusion reactor at the nexus of the station drum, with rays of light scattering across the skyline and glittering against the glasslike stillness of the station's lakes.

Arcadia's habitation drum was nothing short of wondrous, even three months after Cleito had first laid eyes on it: a feat of space architecture stretching hundreds of kilometers long, housing an entire artificial world within the inner reaches of a centrifugal habitat. The entire megastructure slowly rotated along its lengthwise axis, generating a centrifugal imitation of the Old Earth's standard gravity suited to the health and comfort of the station's inhabitants. Entire cities had been erected around the inner circumference of the central drum, and skyscrapers soared like glassy stalagmites the cavernous expanse of Arcadia, lined in a jagged ring around a gleaming hologram of the Arcadian crest-of-arms. Arcadia's vast and vibrant ecosystems, though crude in comparison to the living technologies of the Masks, teemed with life and amazed her with their vastness and vivacity.

When they reached the top of the escalator, seeing the crowds swarming the concourse in the shadow of its statues and fountains, Lola sighed in defeat.

“Welp! Scrap that plan.” Her shoulders seemed to sag in defeat. “So much for a coffee run...”

“Come on!” Cleito grabbed Lola’s wrist and pulled her forwards into the crowd. “We’ll still make it if we hurry.”

“Cleito, *wait!* I didn’t mean-”

They scrambled forwards into the crowd, slowly sidling further and further towards the tramways, until they found themselves boxes in and funneled along with the riverine flow of foot traffic.

Arcadia Port’s morning clamor was far busier than Cleito had seen in the three months she’d lived there; humans in soft colored clothing chattered amongst themselves as leaves rustled in the trees overhead, and the savory smell of cleanbeef hung on the breeze as a robotic vendor flipped patties from a cart. Two rogue dogs chased each other from one end of the station lobby to the other, and a young child threw a cornrubber ball and cackled with delight as the animals scrambled over each other to fetch it. Hologram barriers separated an array of ticket gates, each shaded by softwood pergolas and the chevron logo of the Arcadian Transit Office.

“You know I can call a *shuttle* for you, right?” Lola shouted over the noise. “Like, you *rank* high enough for me to do that...”

The thought of seeing Arcadia from the comfort of a thrustercab in freefall didn’t appeal to her as much as the intricate up-closeness of a world’s ecosystem in motion.

“This route’s more interesting!” Cleito answered, holding tight to Lola’s wrist to keep them from getting separated in a mass of busy bodies. “And if we’re fast enough, we might be able to make it to Mimi’s...”

“Your call, dude...!” Lola called back uneasily, trying to carve her way through the crowd to follow her. “Just don’t get us trampled or- *ow! Ma’am, that’s my foot...!*”

“Sorry! Sorry, so sorry...!”

“Attention all passengers,” came an announcer’s voice over the loudspeakers, speaking in a calming and noncommittal tone. “The...” *click*. “*o-eight-forty...*” *click*. “...spinward line to Embassy Row, calling at: Chambers Station, Garrison District, Windward Street, Donovan Park, and Embassy Row- has been delayed, and will now be departing at:” *click*. “*o-nine-hundred*. Mind the gaps... and thank you for your patronage.

A few groans from the passengers at the news of the delay.

“*Pan-dammit...!*” Lola murmured, kicking the sore toes of her boot against the sheen of the concourse floor. “Never thought I’d be pissed about the tramline consolidation...”

“Huh?” Cleito wondered aloud.

Lola waved her hand dismissively. “Transit politics. It’s been like a whole *saga* between the ATO and the locals... anyways, we’re cutting it close. You better ready to hop on...!”

After minutes of impatient cramming and toe-tapping, the next tram arrived at the time specified by the announcer. Travelers waited patiently as the first crowds disembarked, scurrying to or from their everyday lives, and the onboarding passengers rushed to fill the voids they left behind. They waddled forward and into the cabin, eventually finding a place to sit amidst the

bags and bodies crammed together. The crowd dispersed into the various seats among the cars, leaving only a few folk still waiting for the next service to arrive.

“Made it...!” Cleito sighed in relief, taking a seat on the bench opposite the door.

“Aw, man...” Lola mumbled, showing “Mimi’s isn’t taking AllNet orders.”

“Oh.” Cleito went quiet for a while, trying to ascertain whether Lola’s face was one of sadness or of frustration. “That’s unfortunate...”

“Meh,” Lola shrugged. “I’ll just grab some powder-kaf from the chow hall. Thanks for the hustle anyways, dude.”

Cleito traced a human smile across her mask. “Always.”

The maglev rumbled beneath her feet, and as the other commuters chatted to themselves or minded their own business or simply tried to sleep amidst the bustle of morning transit. Flowering vines dangled from conifer rafters overhead, and beyond the panoramic windows on either side of the cab, Cleito could see the verdant fields and forests of Arcadia zooming by all around her. Lola had her holocrux open, and was swiping left or right on various photos of humans without making any kind of conversation with the ones surrounding her. Cleito took it as a cue that their passage was not a moment for conversation, and flicked her hands in an oft-rehearsed movement to open her own holocrux.

A Homescreen appeared in the palms of her hands, projected from the “pre-loved” holocrux band which was fastened to her left wrist. An array of apps, widgets, and modules arranged themselves over the backdrop of Cleito’s wallpaper (Lola wrangling Cleito in for a bear hug atop Mount Schmidt— a day trip to Bastion they’d taken weeks ago), and she felt a pang of

emotion at how incredibly accurate their machine-images were when contrasted with the Chorus's organic displays.

Cleito tapped a floating icon to open the Hedera app, and began mindlessly scrolling through the feeds of all her friends-but-not-actually-yet (as Lola had termed it) to see what they had been up to since she'd last checked ten minutes ago. Jackson-37 Nowak, a robotic barista she'd met at Lola's favorite café, was celebrating its body's fifteenth year since activation; Ravi Divakar, one of Lola's drinking buddies, had launched a fundraiser for the benefit of his aging mother; Nikau Haara, a gym trainer whom Lola apparently was fond of had advertised a promotional try-out event on Thursday evening; and Oyana of Gba, a retired starship captain that Lola had met at the Multifaith near Donovan Park, was asking for volunteers to help set up for her granddaughter's birthday on Friday afternoon. Cleito considered volunteering for the latter, until she remembered she'd already set the day aside to regroup with Aunt Airy.

Cleito signed motions with her hands to type into the search bar, entering the letters J-I-I-N to pull up Jiin't Laeces: the Ambassador's acolyte daughter, an aspiring zoologist, and the only friend Cleito had made independent of Lola's presence. The only content on her feed was a photo of a slumbering mountain lion, which she had apparently taken on a xeno-zoological assignment half a year ago. Cleito's friend request was still pending, which didn't bode well for their continued bonding, but she hoped it was due more to a distaste of human tech than any distaste for her company. *'Hoped'* being the key word there...

"Now approaching: Embassy District. Please gather your belongings and prepare to disembark..."

Lola opened her eyes, groaned, and interlocked her fingers before stretching her arms out in front of her.

“So tired...” she yawned, her breath still smelling of mint and burnt toast. “Wish the C.O. would stop giving me late shifts...”

“Have you *asked* him yet?” Cleito wondered.

“Not yet,” Lola grumbled. “Haven’t had the chance to... but I’m sure things’ll die down after the conference.”

Lola grabbed the overhead rail and pulled herself up out of the seat as the tram slowed to a halt. Cleito sat up from her seat, pulled her cloak close to her chest, and followed Lola towards the exit.

“*Caution. Doors opening...*”

The tram doors opened to reveal a sleek metal platform blanketed with Sakura petals, a fountain trickling water at the base of a humanoid statue. They stepped across the gap to Embassy Row, with its sleek apartments and consulate buildings glittering in the morning light, smelling of cut grass, dew, and exotic strains of flora that reminded Cleito of her years in the Carina Arm. The sidewalks were all but empty, save for a few uniformed figures of various Embassy Guards and the odd aide or two strolling between their meetings.

“Row, sweet Row!” Lola chuckled sarcastically. “Quiet as it’ll ever be. Not as boujee as the *usual* commute, but...”

Cleito placed a finger on her cheek to Mask-smile. “The tram is certainly more scenic.”

“If you say so...” Lola said, rolling her eyes. “If you’re hell-bent on robbing your friend of a *guilt-free* luxury comfort on her commute, then *faaaaar* be it from me to tell you how to travel.”

Cleito shook her head at her friend. “You have a *lot* to learn about our ways, Lola.”

“Whatever,” Lola shrugged. “Hey, by the way... got much going on today? If you don’t mind me asking.”

Cleito shrugged. “Consular affairs are *confidential*...”

“No, no! I meant *after* work.” Lola smirked. “C’mon, Cleito, I’d never grill you like that about embassy affairs. I’m going with a few friends down to the Boardwalk in the Entertainment District. Figured I’d see if you want to come and grab drinks with us?”

Cleito cocked her head at the idea. “Drinks?”

“Yeah, like... drinks. You know? Alcoholic ones?”

Cleito looked at her blankly.

“Do you not remember that party at Bailey’s place? That absolute *rager* he had?”

Cleito shook her head to indicate the negative. “I was busy, remember? Consular emergency.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never been *drinking* before!” Lola laughed. “Oh man, that’s like, a *big* thing in the Orion Arm. Humans *love* drinking, it’s like, this whole *ritual* we’ve had since antiquity or something.”

Cleito cocked her head in curiosity. “Is it culturally significant?” she asked. “What’s the history behind it?”

Lola narrowed her eyes and snickered. “Okay, listen- just meet me at the station at eighteen-hundred hours, and we’ll swing down by Boardwalk to show you what it’s all about before we meet up with the other. You don’t have to drink if you don’t want to, but... hey, it’ll be a culture lesson, y’know?”

“Okay,” Cleito murmured. “I’m intrigued. You always talk like it’s a lot of fun...”

“Hell *yeah* it’s a lot of fun!” Lola laughed. “I promise you’ll have a great time. Already have an idea what we’ll get...”

Cleito tried to imagine what the experience might be like, and how something as mundane as *drinking liquid* could *possibly* be as fun as Lola treated it. She imagined them gathered around some strange human altar, staring silently into their cups as they drank in perfect unison. Perhaps the import was in the symbolism of the drink?

“Okay...” muttered Lola, skipping two steps to a drum-ward turn of the sidewalk. “I gotta go report to the Guard barracks, convince the duty officer to move my admin duty to Monday so I can make Nikau’s thing on Thursday. See you at eighteen hundred?”

“Of course,” Cleito answered. “We’ll meet then.”

Lola winked, pointed a pair of finger guns at her, then hefted her duffel bag over her shoulder as she split off to walk in the direction of the Guard center. Cleito tilted her head in curiosity, then proceeded on along the main street of Embassy Row.

The recent lull of activity among the Row was most evident in the silence of the neighborhoods surrounding her, tall arrays of beautifully built luxury homes and once meant to house diplomats and their families, now lying vacant as a staff of drones and robots tended the hedges and floral gardens surrounding them. As Cleito walked along the hexagonal plates of the sidewalks, she noted the vacant stares in the Guards' eyes as she passed them. She wondered what they might be thinking of her; of the Masks, of the Chorus, and what these aliens might be thinking of the aliens that had so deeply involved themselves in the affairs of the Pleaides. Cleito was not one to shy away from adversity, but the thought of being judged and mistrusted so far away from the safety of the other Clans made her feel far more things than simple uneasiness.

Finally, a human man wearing a cloth of some kind atop his head waved to her, an apparent gesture of friendliness. Cleito swallowed her surprise and waved awkwardly back.

Among the architecture of Embassy Row, the Masks' Consulate was a curiosity: hybrid of human and Kaya building techniques, the Consulate entrance recessed itself into an alcove of the district wall, and above street level, the only indication of its presence were a pair of *Kalo'kano* peace banners and the panoramic windows of the Solarium above. The Grand Hall was built in human fashion and adorned with calligraphies and living artworks of the Chorus, but aside from the Solarium and the staircases leading to it, the deeper corridors of the Consulate had been grown and cultured into layouts more familiar to a Person of the Masks such as her.

When Cleito crossed the threshold into the Consulate, she was greeted by one of the Ambassador's acolytes, a short figure adorned in a plain white robe and wearing a featureless child's mask. They bowed to each other as a show of respect, then walked together down the Great Hall.

“*Vn’dana*,” greeted the Acolyte, and Cleito recognized the voice as belonging to The One With Humble Manners- an older boy hailing from a family within Clan Vayd. “The Initiates sorely missed your presence in the nest. They inquired as to why you were absent for their reading session.”

Cleito held her hands together as a show of respect for the child. “I was on business for the Chorus. I was delayed longer than anticipated.”

Humble Manners cocked his head. “Did you only wish to avoid our company...?”

“Of course not,” Cleito said, holding a palm to the cheek of her Mask. “As I said... I was preoccupied.”

He bowed. “I understand, Journeyer. I hope the assignment went as planned. Are you to ready to begin the day’s duties?”

“Of course.” Cleito nodded, following the boy as they descended into the caverns of the Enclave’s abbatial offices. “What has the Seneschal assigned me today?”

“Consular duties, primarily. A crew of philosophers seeks to attend a conference on Nyumbani, and they require passport-visas for travel to the Cradle Sector. Jiin is busy today and requested your help.”

“A crew, you say?” Cleito bowed as they passed by the ancestral heirlooms of Enclave’s reliquary. “Is that not a single document, needed for a single ship?”

Manners bowed hastily, having forgotten to bow to the reliquary. “I’m afraid not. The Alliance has required individual documents for *each* of the one-hundred philosophers aboard, in addition to papers for the ship itself.”

Cleito sighed. “Humans and their *infernal* paperwork...”

Manners put a hand to his cheek to sign laughter. “I empathize with your pain, Journeyer. I’m able to assist you before my lessons if need be.”

Cleito bowed. “I’d be very grateful for your help, Acolyte. I will teach you how these forms are done, and we’ll take on this task together.”

“My reading skills with the Lingua Humana has improved since we last met,” he said hopefully. “I am confident we’ll get it done quickly. Oh, but firstly...”

“Mmm?”

Humble Manners extended a hand from his cloak and gestured at the chitinous quartz stairs to the Astrarium near the top of the building. “The Ambassador has requested your presence before you begin the day’s work. Something about a human word... ‘debrief’?”

“He made time to meet?” Cleito wondered aloud. *I had expected to wait until the day’s end to speak with him*, she thought to herself. “I’ll see him immediately, then. Go and wait in the upper study until I send for you. We’ll begin the work once I’m done.”

The boy bowed. “Of course, Journeyer. Peace be with you.”

Cleito bowed in turn. “To you as well.”

The sound of her footsteps echoed across the chamber as she climbed the steps to the Astrarium, each one ringing out with the soft plodding of collagen soles against the xenofomed carapace beneath. She could see the sensory stalks around her trailing her presence, could *feel* the way the life around her seemed ready to carry her forwards, and took solace in having returned to the company of the Way after many days amidst humanity’s lifeless machines. Soft

shadows enveloped her as she came to the end of the hallway, and another Acolyte bowed to Cleito before stepping out of her path.

Chitinous doors parted ways as Cleito crossed the threshold into the room, eyes adjusting to the dark as she looked out into the cavernous chamber beyond. Amidst the darkness, Cleito could see a starfield of dull blue lights scattered across the walls; the air was alive with the chittering of candleflies, animated by the rustling of their life-tenders and nectarines in the hives below, and rumbling with the low hum of bioprocessors as they sifted through their cartographic memories of the known universe. Little lights filled the room the way that the stars filled the galaxy, arranged into a living astrograph of the Pleaides Nebula and Bastion's star system within it. Ornate patterns danced on a platform painted to resemble a planetary ring, and at the center of it all stood the towering silhouette of the Ambassador, clad in a pearlescent cloak and a thin blanket of candleflies, a dim patch of silver against the luminous universe laid out before him.

Cleito stopped halfway to the apex of the starmap, then bowed in respect to her elder.

"Mentor..." Cleito whispered, feeling the soft wind of candleflies on her arm as they rushed to their places in the astrographs.

Ordell Vayd turned from the starmap to face her, the aureate eyes of his scarred grey *Kaloki* mask glowing like foxfire in the dark. His shoulders softened upon seeing her, and he bowed in respectful greeting to his protégé.

"Cleito," he said softly. "You've returned."

"I have."

“I was worried. Are you hurt?” He tilted his head to his left as he spoke, beginning to descend the shallow steps from his perch they extended out beneath him. “You didn’t call. When Airy kept you past sunset, I feared you had been intercepted by the Partisans.”

“All of me is here— unharmed and unperturbed.” Cleito looked down at herself, cupping her hands into a spiral as a sign of reverent apology. “I did not call because I thought my messages had already gone through.”

Vayd sighed relief, then chuckled slightly to himself. “I’d expect nothing less... all that was wrong was the worries of an old soul. The journey down-planet was long, and you deserved to enjoy your rest.”

Cleito bowed. “Thank you, mentor.”

Vayd hesitated. “What of Airy, then? What did she say to our request?”

“Airy accepts. She had concerns about the duty we gave her, but she promised she’ll do what she can to aid us. I was told to give you this.”

Cleito reached into her cloak, then opened her fist to show Airy’s cryptokey resting in the palm of her glove. Vayd leaned forward to peer more closely at it, then extended a long arm dangling with knots and talismans from within the depths of his cloak. Cleito set the key in his outstretched hand, watching as his fingers closed slowly around it.

“Ah, yes...” He inspected the chip for a while, holding it in two fingers before the apricot glow of his Mask-eyes, before slipping it quietly into the folds of his cloak. “It will be good to speak to Airy again, without fear of interception. Oh, if only all such errands to Bastion could be as fruitful...”

Vayd placed three fingers beneath the eyes of his Mask, an indication of great trust, and offered his other hand as a gesture to approach. “I have some time before my duties begin. Come ponder with me, will you?”

“Of course, mentor.”

Cleito took a few steps forward, standing in the shadow of his towering presence. For as long as she’d known him, Vayd had always fascinated her with his questions and his lessons; few Masks had lived among humans for as long as he had, and fewer still could match his experience and reputation for negotiating among them. Across the years, the stories of Vayd’s time as a Journeyer seeking wisdom and compromise amidst the fires of the War had never ceased to amaze her. Cleito was older now, old enough to begin to understand how much the duties of his post weighed upon him; the fatherly presence she’d known in her childhood had given way to the outlook of an ageing being whose responsibility was now an ever-growing burden upon his shoulders. The time he had available was growing scarcer, and in moments like these, she was grateful for a return to the way things used to be.

One spindly arm reached upwards towards the stars, swept left-to-right through them, sending the little lights parading by with each movement through the astrograph. Whispers and living holograms told him things of the universe they represented, a dance of light amidst the yawning gloam, alight with all the many movements of human civilization. To Cleito, the icons were varying shades of red, blue, and green; but the Ambassador’s pentachromatic eyes could individually distinguish them in a thousand-thousand shades between, and she had no doubt that he could watch over such things with far more precision than she ever could.

“Tidings from the Verge?” Cleito asked, hoping he would note her attention to detail despite her relative colorblindness. “Those ships are colored with Colonial transponders.”

“Mmm,” he murmured faintly. “The Cygnans entertain my emissaries... yet when the topic of conference is broached, their leaders are nowhere to be found.” He sighed and took a step back from the starmap. “Oh, peace... what a *fickle* thing you are.”

“Are you not able to summon them directly?” Cleito asked. “With your sway, and with a topic of enough import...”

“No.”

“No?”

“No,” Vayd repeated. “The Cygnans are proud, and they are righteous in their sense of exceptionalism. This makes this *notoriously* prone to being slighted by diplomatic missteps—particularly when topics of peace with the Alliance are broached. To *force* their leaders to make time for our proposals would only bruise their ego, and sour our relations with them.”

“I see...” Cleito wondered, trying hard to think of what to do. “What do you plan to do?”

“Diplomacy is like the flow of water,” Vayd mused, watching the candleflies dance across his fingertips. “At times, it is a confluence of streams and rivers... at others, a great crash of waves against waves.”

Cleito cocked her head. “I fail to see how that applies here.”

“Our interests are not yet aligned,” Vayd murmured, playing with the folds of his cloak. “Cygnus and the Chorus are not yet flowing towards a confluence. To dam them up would mean that, somewhere else on our common ground, there might be spillover or drought.”

“*There is balance in all things...*” Cleito recited.

“Very good. It is my *hope* that with the United Forces deploying a contingent to Bastion V, the Cygnans will soon be more willing to work with us to reach a compromise that will avert war. Surely they must see they are outmatched... the challenge here will be *timing*.”

Cleito pondered the plan for a while. “That seems wise,” she ventured.

Vayd took a step back from the starmap. “Which great power will move first, do you think?” He watched her with a curious gaze, as if to gauge her reaction. “The Old Alliance, with their gleaming hopes and fallen flowers? Or the Colonial Congress, with their wild hearts and mud-caked boots?”

“Me?” asked Cleito. “You’ve studied them your whole life. You’ve *seen* them fighting in the Turmoils after the war.”

“Only a fool ignores the wisdom of the young,” Vayd murmured, setting a trusting hand upon her shoulder. “I seek your insight, Cleito, as both my student and my niece-by-kin. Your eyes and your heart are far fresher than mine. Answer this, then: left unchecked, do you think it will be the Alliance, or the Colonials who makes the first move upon the other?”

Cleito looked to where Bastion’s star hung within the starmap; a tiny ivory light amidst the edges of the Pleiades, lying on the brink of an imaginary boundary which humans called a ‘border’. Bastion and Arcadia above it lay on the Alliance’s division of the boundary, while Cygnus- the fortress-capitol of the Colonial Congress- lay on the opposite end, near the outer edge of the nebula. Cleito thought for a while, then at last, decided on an answer.

“It’s well-known that the Alliance covets the garden worlds beyond the Pleiades, so naturally, it makes sense that the Colonials would commit to defending them.”

“Indeed...”

“And yet,” she mused, “Would it not befit Cygnus to attack pre-emptively? To launch a first strike, take the Alliance by surprise, and gain the upper hand against a more powerful adversary?”

He nodded. “Such a strategy could be sensible.”

“Colonial doctrine is defensive in nature...” Cleito recalled. “And from everything we understand about them, they *lack* the capability to do so. Their fleets are hugely outmatched by that of the Alliance, which found itself vastly outmatched in fleet combat during the War...”

“Continue...”

“Despite it all, in the Bloom of the post-war era, the Alliance’s economy roils in crisis while the Federation’s expands like some cancerous growth.”

“Good,” Vayd commended. “Very good. You are wise to consider the logistical dimensions as well. What is your answer, then?”

“Clearly, it will be the Alliance.” Cleito pointed to Aurum, the Alliance’s capitol world, then rested her hands by her sides. “They have far more to gain from invading the Colonies, than the Colonies stand to gain from invading the Cradle.”

“Hmmm...”

Vayd made a gesture towards the map and watched as the candleflies zoomed out, arranging themselves into broader borders and charts of the Orion Arm. Thinking he would query

her on some astrographic dimension of the conflict, she tried to remember its regions: at the center of the Arm lay the Cradle of humankind, with Sol at its heart; the vast reaches of the Verge to spinward, the narrow straights of the Coalsack to anti-spinward; towards the core, the haunted northstars of Asteria, and towards the rim of galactic south, the vast arc of nebular red which humans knew as ‘the Crescent’. He pointed to the zoomed-out Pleiades- now just a blue bubble sandwiched at the Cradle and the Verge- and directed her vision across the outlines of the map above.

“I concur...” he said simply.

Cleito beamed with pride at her answer.

“...although, young one, there are some factors you have neglected to consider.”

Something in Cleito was flattened by her teacher’s reply. “Such as...?”

Vayd knitted his hands together as he pondered the starmap. “Firstly, I think the United Forces will do everything in their power to *drive* the Colonials to violence. The Admiralty is ruthless, but they are patient as well. Above all else, they are aware of the benefit of being able to paint the Colonials as aggressors. There was much precedent for such things on the Old Earth, and my peers across the Chorus believe it is well within their remit to achieve.”

“I see...”

“Secondly... you consider only *military* dimensions. You are not considering humans and their propensity for subterfuge... a tactic that the Colonial Militias employed extensively against superior Alliance forces during the late months of the Turmoils. Many humans in the galaxy are sympathetic to the Colonial cause, and they will utilize every asset they can if push comes to

shove. The Alliance and its United Forces are an entity reliant on order, discipline, integration, and coordination. Find ways to *disrupt* that order, to *disrupt* that coordination, and one will find that a more distributed order of battle is more difficult to counter.”

Cleito hadn't considered that. “I suppose it makes sense that a swarm of bees could overpower larger creatures...”

“Finally...” Vayd murmured, turning to face the starmap. “In all of this, we ignore the most important fact of all.”

“Which is?”

“That all the things of which we speak... *all of it!*... is mad folly, driven by the blinding hubris of a deluded few.” Vayd chuckled, then shook his head in sadness. “War... what a terrible waste of life itself. So much beauty that could have lived on from it all, if only there was patience for dialogue and room for ingenuity. I only wish that *they* could see it the way that we once saw it...”

They were quiet for a while as Cleito pondered her mentor's words, trying to ascertain what he might've felt beneath that mask of his.

“I do still agree with your original answer,” Vayd reassured her, “Though I'm afraid not *quite* for the same reasons you came to.”

“I understand,” Cleito murmured, trying to mask her disappointment. “If this is folly, as you see it... then why are so many humans committed to pursuing that course of action?”

“A long explanation, which I will impart in due time,” he answered. He held out an arm towards the center of the room, watching as the candleflies swirled to rearrange themselves into a

highly detailed layout of Bastion and its orbiting planets. "I'm afraid I must attend to my duties for the day. I am due soon for meetings with my counterparts from Nyumbani and Pallas XI, and there is much to do before the P3 conference at the end of the week."

The Partnership, Cleito thought to herself. *Of course*. It had been Vayd's dream and obsession for years now; a Partnership for Peace in the Pleiades, a tri-power initiative that the Chorus hoped would deflate the tensions brewing in the sector. It had taken years to even convince the Alliance to *entertain* the idea of an audience, let alone overcome Aurum's influence in the intricate circles of the Alliance Assembly, or gain Cygnus's impatient attention. Arcadia's shift towards the Alliance threatened to shift the balance of power in the Pleiades, and Cygnus's attendance was, clearly, a ploy to placate the Arcadians and drive them back towards neutrality... but for a legendary diplomat such as Vayd, it was a workable enough angle to begin negotiations for a sustainable peace."

"I understand," Cleito said as she bowed to her teacher. She tried to hide her feeling of disappointment that her lessons would have to wait. "I look forward to receiving your readings for the week."

He nodded graciously. "Amidst the turmoil of this galaxy, Cleito, it is the privilege of the Chorus to nurture the cause of peace. Such is our duty, such is the burden we have taken as adherents of the Old Ways."

"I understand," she answered plainly.

"With that... our time is ended. I must be away."

He peered down to study her for a moment, musing to himself about something Cleito could not overhear, then turned to follow the light from the now-open door behind them.

Daylight now illuminated his frame as he looked back to nod at her, the aurous eyes of his Mask still gleaming at her through the dark.

“Peace be with you, Cleito.”

“To you as well, mentor.”

Cleito stood a while in the dark once he left, watching as the candleflies drifted aimlessly about the Astrarium in quiet azure waves, slowly fading to black as they returned to their hives within the room’s hidden catacombs.

A lifetime of questions, she pondered aimlessly to herself, amid a drought of so many answers...

She took a deep breath in, held her cloak close to her chest, and began the long walk downstairs to begin the day’s work.

Embassy Row–Arcadia

Pleades Sector - 384ly from the Old Earth

March 6th, 2481 – 0970hrs (local reference)

The Logician arrived at his visa appointment exactly at the hour, an occurrence so unexpectedly punctual that Cleito had to swipe shut her holocrux and hide her hand within her cloak as he entered. Faced with the prospect of such embarrassment, she was suddenly grateful for the concealing privacy of her mask.

“Vn’dana,” Cleito murmured courteously, managing to maintain her composure.

“Vn’dana’taik,” greeted the Logician in return. He wore a stone-grey Mask carved with Clan Hauei patterns, the flowing inscriptions of a philosopher written upon his forehead. A feather sown into the side of his hood denoted him as a parent-to-be, and Cleito already found herself keen to aid the traveler in his safe passage.

“Please sit.” Cleito gestured to the circular dais opposite her own. “There is much to discuss, and others I must aid.”

Like most other places in the Chancellery, Cleito’s duty chamber was a curious mixture of human and Choral designs; braided carpets lined the floors leading in from the Great Hall, while calligraphic tapestries were illuminated by bioluminescence within bone-grey grooves on the walls. The consular offices felt more barren and sanitized than the private chambers deeper in

the tunnels, but such things were designed to adhere to the Third Venna Conventions and seem less off-putting to native human visitors.

The Logician knelt slowly upon the dais, scanning his eyes around the wild growth flowing down the walls of the chamber, the ankle-high desk filled with human-printed paperwork, and the combed grey sand filling the recesses between them. “Have you worked here long, Journeyer?”

Cleito was still. “I arrived on Arcadia three solar months ago.”

“Hrm!” the Logician exhaled a sigh of surprise. “Bound to one nest for so long? All without roaming? I’d go insane living on a station like this, however magnificent it might be.”

Cleito chuckled. “Arcadia is said to be the nexus of the Orion Arm. There is much to see and do here.”

The Logician signed appreciation. “I’m happy for you, young one. Few of our kind would willingly accept such a duty.”

“Speaking of which...” Cleito inquired, “Do you have the passport issued to you by the Arcadian Home Office?”

“I think so.” The Logician reached within his cloak, and produced a green-gold booklet that seemed fresh off an Arcadian press. “This is it, yes?”

“Of course.” Cleito pulled a ritual utensil from her cloak and offered it to him. “Here—you’ll need this.”

He looked at the utensil curiously, holding it in what appeared to be his writing hand. “What must we do, then?”

“Firstly... preparing your paperwork.” she answered simply. Cleito opened a drawer within her desk, and laid out a dizzying array of paperwork for the Logician to work through. The eyes of his Mask widened when he saw the height of the last few documents.

“This form...” she tapped the document furthest to the Logician’s right- “Is a blank application form for your FA-196 group passage visa. You will need it approved to enter Alliance-controlled space. The second form is for your Captain, and the third is for declarations of any prohibited objects or monetary instruments you may be carrying. It’s likely that the Starport will want to inspect your vessel before proceeding further towards Earth.”

The Logician watched as she pulled out more papers and began to fill them out. “What are those?”

“These?” Cleito gestured to her forms. “These forms confirm proof of your identity, proof of your ‘citizenship’ with our Chorus, and other miscellaneous items- all of which I’ll be completing for you and forwarding on to Aurum’s consulate.”

“Must this all be done on paper?” asked the Logician.

“Do you own a Holocrux?” Cleito asked.

“No.

“Do you possess money to purchase one?”

“Do I have... what?”

“Money,” Cleito answered patiently. “Human currency.”

“Oh. Yes, of course.” The Logician chuckled to himself. “Such *convoluted* systems...”

Cleito bowed respectfully. “Excellent. In which case... these forms must be filled out by you. One of our Acolytes can aid you with translation.”

The Logician went quiet for a moment. “Alright...”

“Finally... you will also need a photograph taken within the last six solar months. It will need to be of your bare face, with your Mask held directly next to it.”

“What *is* that? A ‘photograph’.”

“An imprintation of three-dimensional light onto a two-dimensional plane. Humans use them to generate visual images.”

“Oh. I see.”

“They do too,” Cleito remarked, tapping her finger upon the last form. “An Acolyte can aid you in procuring one.”

“Mmm.” The Logician nodded in understanding. “May I ask you something?”

“Certainly. That is my duty here.”

“What is the *purpose* of this tedious duty?” the Logician asked, tilting his head to indicate confusion. “This is many days of waiting for a few hours of transit through this sector. It all seems quite frivolous. Why is our vessel not permitted to pass any further? We pose no threat, have followed biosecurity measures to the letter, and carry no cargo except our own.”

Cleito nodded. “I understand your confusion. Human culture is very different from our own—their territorial nature and lowered emotional intelligence means they are far less trusting than we are. A lack of control over their environment causes them distress.”

“Curious.” The Logician cocked his head. “Is there no way around it?”

“Not without violating certain covenants made between the Chorus and the Alliance, no.”

The Logician nodded, looked down at the forms spread before him... then gathered them up, stowed them within his cloak, and rose to leave. Cleito stood up in turn.

“I will speak to our Captain and return shortly.” The Logician bowed in gratitude. “Your guidance has been helpful. Thank you for your time.”

“Could I ask you to return on the next solar day?” Cleito asked, cupping her hands in humble appeal. “We have many in need of our advice, and humans are quite particular about their schedules.”

The Logician waited for a moment. “I suppose I shouldn’t bother asking why, should I?”

Cleito held two fingers to her Mask in a knowing smile. “Humans have a certain *knack* for overcomplicating things.

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Caldwell Commons–Arcadia

1052hrs (local reference)

Later that day...

Crowds jostled in a maddening swarm as Cleito and her escort tried to squeeze through the claustrophobic hurry of Arcadia’s West Emporium, a maze of groundworks burrowed into the parks of Caldwell Commons, hosting a vivid array of farmer’s markets, swap meets and *Marchés-aux-puces* to vendors from across the system. Glass lanterns dangled from rope nets overhead as simian robots crawled across them with bundles of produce underslung, veering around ochre tapestries drooping tied by their corners. Colorful cloths hung over stalls filled with fresh-grown produce, hand-made goods, and glittering works of jewelry, staffed by humans that came in so many colors and styles that Cleito could never hope to witness them all. A mouthwatering aroma of pies, soups, spices and cleanmeats filled the air, an essence so rich and alluring that Cleito was tempted to remove her Mask to take it all in.

“Veg!” cried one farmer, wearing a blue synthsilk dress and a wooden collar dangling with gems. “Fresh Arcadian veg! Lettuce, carrots, bluebeans, gourds- all of it right on order!”

“Books!” cried a trader , “Rare books, lovingly made with ancient methods- masterworks from the *greatest* scholars of Al-Naeem! Find anything you could possibly-”

“LEMONAAAAADE!” bellowed a small boy standing atop a mountain of polyresin hardcrates, with his embarrassed sister burying her head in her hands in a tiny stall just below. “BUY MY SISTER’S *LEMONAAAADE!*”

“*Batteries!*” called out another merchant to Cleito’s left, a bearded man in a reddened robe with baggy hemp pants tied off above two prosthetic shins. “We got *every* kind of battery on order! ORB batteries, rust batteries, scav’d lithium batteries, oak-grown lignin batteries... even *beer draff* batteries for all you sports fans out there!” The merchant grinned wildly and pointed to a passing trio in matching jerseys, who whooped and hollered along as they passed. “Batteries, batteries- all hand-made right here in Caldwell Commons, and custom-soldiered to suit *any* tinkerer’s needs!”

Cleito felt a hand grip her shoulder.

“Did he say *beer draff*...?” Lola muttered from behind her, leaning in so Cleito could hear her through the clear bioplastic of her helmet visor. “Is that even a *thing*?”

“*Focus.*” came a stern voice from even further behind, belonging to Corporal Eli Baynes- Lola’s immediate superior within the Embassy Guard. “Eyes *sharp*, Guardsman. Keep an eye out.”

“Dude, chill.” Lola sighed and kicked the gravel as they walked. “I just thought it was *cool*, is all...”

“Shop later. We’ve got a *job* to do.”

“Cleito and I made this run a *dozen* times already,” Lola groaned. “It’s just a *grocery trip*, man, not some door-kick action flick.”

“Captain’s orders,” Eli replied, showing no sign of relenting. “Eyes *sharp!*”

“Yes, Corporal.” Lola looked to Cleito and shrugged dismissively. “*Hardass*...” she coughed.

Eli's eyes narrowed on her. "*What was that?*"

"...Cut glass, Corporal!" Lola pointed to an imaginary point behind them, now covered by the passing feet of pedestrians. "Watch your step."

"Mmph...!" Eli nodded gruffly, keeping his hand on his gear belt and his eyes glued to the people surrounding him. "Copy that."

Cleito kept inching her way through the crowds, her eyes wandering to the various trinkets and talismans lining the top shelves of the stalls, wishing she could stop to browse through it all. They rounded a corner into a calmer section of the marketplace, an open-air bazaar hall filled with the more laidback vendors sat quietly in sturdy wooden rollaways. Further down, Cleito could see several permanent local storefronts built into the walls near the public theatre, with the curtains drawn on the windows of the flats just above them. Cleito led the trio towards the shop, a façade of colorful murals hand-painted upon stucco walls, with carts of Arcadian fruits and racks of imported spices lining the ivy-lined archways preceding the entrance. They climbed the short ramp leading up to the store and nudged their way through the push-door; a bell dinged, and a young cat *meowed* as soon as they crossed the doorframe.

Inside was a *mélange* of various tables and shelves lined with assorted small-fare goods, ranging from fruits and fresh-baked pastries, to hand-carved furniture and refurbished motherboards, to multitools and emergency rations still unexpired from the War. A certain smell of cinnamon lingered in the air as they passed into the center of the store, and soft floorboards seemed to creak beneath them with every step they took further inwards. A frail human man in a dusty apron peeked out from a kitchen behind the counter, startled at the sight of Guards but smiling in relief when he saw who they were escorting.

“*Cleito!*” grinned Abe Zahur, “*Mwanagu*— it’s so *good* to see you.” He smiled brightly as he came out from behind the desk to hug her in a warm and gentle embrace. Eli put an anxious hand to his belt, but Lola gripped his wrist and shook her head firmly. He finally relented, wincing apologetically, and waiting with his hands to his front as they spoke.

“*Vn’dana, Zahur.*” Cleito waited until she was released, then cupped her hands and bowed to him in the Kaya custom. “It’s good to see you well. The Ambassador sends his regards, as well as his regrets for having to miss the wake for Floria Fallow.”

“*Ndio*— my best regards to him as well! And not a worry about those regrets- he’s got bigger things to worry about, what with the P3 on tomorrow’s tomorrow.” Zahur dusted his hands off over a sink, and went to hang his apron on a hook near the kitchen. “Out shopping today, are we?”

“We are.” Cleito set two fingers upon her cheekbone, a emotive sign for trust. “I’ve been sent to call in a favor from the Ambassador.”

“Hah.” Zahur put his hands on his hips. “After all that nonsense ending the embargo with Cygnus? Say the word.”

Cleito reached into her cloak and produced a handwritten list to hand to Zahur. “We need all of this delivered to us on short notice.

“That *it?*” Zahur asked incredulously. “You could find all this at any co-op or corpo-lot on the station.”

“Vayd’s making something special. He needs high-quality goods, but we don’t have enough time to browse the Emporiums ourselves.”

“That, and they’d haggle you worse than *tourists...*” Zahur pursed his lips as he read through the list once again. “Yes, you shouldn’t bother yourselves if you’re in a hurry.”

Cleito produced a lump of Alliance Credits in her other hand. “Will this be enough? We can compensate you with more later.”

Zahur wrinkled his nose and held up his hand to refuse. “No, no— no money. Tell Vayd it’s the very least I can do to repay him.”

Cleito cocked her head in confusion. “Zahur...”

He shook his head, extended his arms towards her, and folded her fingers back over the money. “I insist. Tell him he can pay me back by *visiting* more often!”

Cleito nodded gratefully. “I’ll relay your wishes back to him.”

Zahur winked, then took a few steps back to call to someone upstairs. “Kijana!” he shouted, waiting a few moments for a reply. “*KIJANA!*” he boomed again, louder than Cleito had expected.

After a short pause, there was a quick scampering of feet, and young boy appeared at the foot of the stairs, wearing a black tunic with ornate red-gold patterns and sporting a pair of plush headphones around his neck.

“*Kijana!*” Zuhur exclaimed. “*Nenda kwa mjomba Wong, mwambie akusaidie kupata kilicho kwenye orodha hii.*”

“*Babu...*” the boy protested.

“*Fanya ninavyosema!*” scolded Zahur, “*Vinginevyo, hakuna holos kwa wiki.*”

“*Ndiyo, babu...*” The boy sighed, then took Vayd’s shopping list from Zahur’s hand, and stomped his way out the door.

Zahur chuckled at the boy’s poor attitude, then turned to Cleito. “Children and their Holos... well, I guess I ought to be glad he’s not out chasing girls yet. *Hah!*”

“Who was that?” Cleito asked.

Zahur waved a hand dismissively. “Just my grandson. He’ll get everything on the list for you. After that, I’ll swing by to bring it all to Vayd myself while the boy watches the store.”

“I see... of course.” Cleito bowed respectfully, then fastened her Mask back onto her face. “Thank you, friend.”

Zahur smiled and winked. “Anytime, Cleito. You know, you should come down and visit more often! You’d be a hit with Senior Garcia’s boys, and I heard Emilie’s granddaughter finally ended things with that *scamp* from Catch IV...”

“Ehrrm...” Cleito fumbled her words. “I’ve been quite *busy* with the Conference just ahead...”

“Ahh... what am I saying!” Zahur interrupted her and waved his hand dismissively. “You’re out on embassy business, and here I am blabbing like a schoolkid. I ought to let you go.”

“Thank you.” Cleito put a hand to her arm to sign sympathy before she walked to the door. “I will try to visit, if I ever find the time.”

Zahur nodded knowingly, grabbed his apron off the hook, then slipped back behind the desk to keep working at the counter.

Bells jangled as they left the building and descended the ramp, finding themselves back on the busy streets of Caldwell Commons.

“So...” Lola hooked her right arm under her left to stretch it out, then swapped sides to do the opposite. “Where to next?”

“The tramway,” Cleito murmured, sounding as formal as she could. “After that, towards the Garrison District. But first... Corporal?”

Eli turned to her and stood at attention. “Yes, ma’am?”

“It would be best if *you* led the way, while Lola stays back to guard my personage.” Cleito gestured back the way they came, in the direction of the tram station. “I would feel *far* safer if you walked... maybe ten, twenty meters ahead of us. Surely to make sure things are *clear*.”

Eli was stunned as his eyes darted to his charge, then to Lola stifling a smirk under a mask of professional bearing, then back to the expressionless stare of Cleito’s own Mask.

“Ma’am, yes ma’am.” Eli stood at ease, turned to about face, then marched onwards down the street.

Lola finally cracked up, and punched Cleito in the shoulder. “*Dick* move, Cleito...!”

Cleito cocked her head. “Do you really think so?”

“Oh, hell nah,” Lola muttered. “Guy was driving me *nuts*. Thanks, Cleito.”

A sense of appreciation filled her chest as she followed Lola through the lamplit lanes of the Commons, her head still buzzing with the errands of the day ahead.

Outskirts–Garrison District –Arcadia

1121hrs (local reference)

In all her travels across the vastness of the galaxy, Cleito had never seen so many kinds of flowers assembled all in one place.

The smell of fresh bouquets hit her nose almost immediately after they entered the Floristry, passing through the greenhouse doors with Lola close in tow, and Cleito found herself dumbstruck at the legions upon legions of lush flowers laid out before them. Four glass walls, a tall glass ceiling, and a variety of wooden shelves and nostalgic props were the only distinct features of the room; absolutely everything else in her field of view was flowers, flowers, *flowers*.

Rows of chalkboards and dusty calligraphy gave names and faces to all the little blossoms surrounding them: lavenders, lilies, lilacs, lotuses, magnolias, mallows, marigolds, matthiolas... Asters to zinnias, zamias to amaranths, practically every shape and color seemed to be just within arms' reach. Cleito had never known it was possible for any being in the galaxy, let alone humans and their strange machines, to fit so many disparate varieties into one shared space. Flowerbeds seemed to hang from the walls and shelves like tapestries, with vines dangling so far down from the rafters that they brushed against the bouquets and knotwork rings below. Patrons sat in reclining wicker chairs, reading or sipping drinks or talking softly amongst themselves. A gnarled old cherry blossom towered high over everything else, its branches adorned with soft paper lanterns which seemed to glow against the sunlight with an almost hypnotic beauty.

“Hello!” chirped a metallic voice from beside her.

“Hm?” Cleito looked in the direction of the voice, and almost failed to spot its speaker; she looked down and saw a short and stubby robot barely taller than her waist, whose delta-shaped head sported an upper niche filled with hydrangeas.

“Oh.” Cleito held up a nervous hand to wave. “Hi there.”

“Would you two like some complimentary tea?” The robot held out two white ceramic cups filled with a steaming hot liquid. “Today’s blend is: *‘green tea and chrysanthemum.’* Dietary information available upon request.”

Cleito looked to the robot, then to Lola, then to the patrons quietly reading in their reclining seats. She was unsure of the protocol for accepting such a gift.

“Say yes...” Lola whispered, elbowing her gently as she accepted the robot’s tea. “It’s really good here...”

“Uh... yes?” Cleito answered quietly and took the white cup gingerly. “Thank you...”

The robot nodded, cupped its hands together, and bowed slightly. Cleito bowed back, uncertain if the robot would even understand the gesture. As Cleito and Lola started to walk away, it poured itself two more cups and waited for the next patrons to come.

How curious, Cleito wondered to herself.

Two men stood behind the wooden counter at the back of the shop, one youth with glossy black hair and a vacant expression, and an older, stockier with a stubbly grey beard and a pair of mechanical palms spread wide across the counter. The latter smiled wide and waved as they

walked in, while the other sighed and flicked open a browser on his holocruX as he slouched back against the shelving.

“Hello, Cleito!” laughed the elder man, a smile spread wide across his face. “Glad to see you kickin’ around here again. And Lola- don’t think I don’t see you behind that visor of yours.”

“Hiya, Connor!” Lola waved back as she walked towards the counter. “Likewise! Sorry I couldn’t swing by to help out on Wednesday, it’s just been a busier week than expected...”

“Ah, it’s fine. I know the Guard loves to yank the old leash sometimes.” Connor sidestepped over to his right and gave his boy an unacknowledged pat on the back. “Besides! Sean here managed well enough getting his essay turned in, isn’t that right?”

“Mm-hm.” Sean’s gaze never left his holocruX, even when his father’s umbrage at his impoliteness made itself apparent.

“Well!” Connor clapped his hands together, then signed a quick set of instructions into an app on his HolocruX. “I take it you’re here to pick up the order, yes?”

Cleito nodded affirmation. “Is it ready? We’re in a bit of a hurry.”

“You bet. H-70, would you bring it out for us?”

A bipedal robot appeared from the storehouse behind him, adorned with vines and tufts of perennials, carrying a white-printed cardboard box atop a silver platter. Connor beckoned the robot closer to him, taking the box and peeking inside before setting it on the counter. The robot wandered back around the corner without fanfare, the sound of hydraulic legs growing fainter as walked off to the back rooms.

“Rush order took the wife and I all morning... but Vayd’s a *special* client, y’see.” Connor leaned his elbows on the counter, gently pushing the crate to their side. “Never much cared much for the Maskfolk in the past, but I gotta say- Vayd’s pretty keen for a xeno!”

Sean looked up from his game and stared at his dad in wide-eyed shock. “*Dad...!*”

“Huh?” Connor looked down at his son’s embarrassment and let out a hearty laugh. “Ah, see, *that* got your attention, huh? Well then, maybe I *ought* to be a bit more xenophobic, if it’ll get you back ta’ focusing on *the customers*.”

Sean rolled his eyes and went back to his game. “You’re *embarrassing* the family.”

“Could say the same about *you*, kiddo!” Connor ruffled his son’s hair, prompting him to pull away and storm off behind a shelf filled with succulents.

Lola winced and rubbed her hand on the nape of her neck. “So... are we all settled, then?”

Connor nodded. “Yup- payment went through just this morning. If you need plant food, the ‘bot by the door can help you out- otherwise, feel free to come back anytime.”

Cleito bowed graciously. “*Vn’dana*. Have a nice afternoon.”

“Likewise, Maskfolk.” Connor nodded. “And Lola... I meant what I said about your brother. The offer still stands if you’re ever lookin’ for work again...”

“I’m not,” Lola answered politely, smiling as she turned to head to the door. “But thanks again for the offer.”

Connor waved gently as they crossed the koi ponds to the exit, watching as the cherry pedals slowly fell in their wake.

Lake Hudwall–Arcadia

Pleades Sector - 384ly from the Old Earth

March 6th, 2481 – 1930hrs (local reference)

The Banquet began in the fading glow of Arcadia’s Golden Hour, and Cleito could feel a cool breeze blowing across the pavilion as vast atmospheric filters covered in ivy drifted in freefall overhead. The distant lights of the Central District and its boroughs seemed to glitter like diamonds upon the water as revelers talked and laughed and danced amongst themselves, and for a few fleeting moments, Cleito could picture what life was like before the fall of the Golden Age.

Cleito descended the bright steps to the rear pavilion of the Multifaith, a varied marvel of architecture whose many spokes housed sacred spaces catering to most major (and some minor) religions practiced throughout the Pleades. Rabbis conversed with Imams as Clergymen explained their relics to curious Buddhist monks, all while Bastionese pagans sat and debated philosophy with humanists visiting from nearby Cygnus. Guests ventured between long tables covered in vibrant tablecloths, each filled with disparate foods from each of the Multifaith’s nearby communities, staffed by robots and human volunteers serving meals to the poor and prosperous alike. Arcadia’s artificial star slowly faded in its cage at the fulcrum of the Hab Drum, and Cleito no longer needed to squint to see the furthest buildings bathed in facsimile twilight.

Cleito walked past honeycombs of sleek-curved chairs and wide oak tables, felt the fresh dew upon her feet as she crossed the walkway line to the grass, listened to the string quartets playing in the bandstands nearby, and stopped suddenly to evade a frisbee being thrown across through the field by a pack of sweaty humans and overclocked robots. Cleito waited for them to pass, then sighed in grateful relief.

It was evenings like these, away from the monotony of the consular offices and the bustle of the inner districts, that Cleito could appreciate the tranquility of the world the Arcadians had been blessed with. Lola had said that it had only taken the Pantheon's autonomous fleets a matter of months to construct Arcadia, and only a matter of decades to terraform Bastion into a garden world... before the invasion came and razed it all down. On nights like these, Cleito could almost imagine what the rest of the garden worlds must have been like, what they must have *felt like*, in the decades before the War brought wrath and ruin to the Alliance and the Orion Arm.

Finally, she came to a crowd of well-dressed patrons at the overlook of Lake Hudwall, whose golden waters stretched out into the horizon, then up into the distant reaches of the outer drum. At the center of it all stood Ambassador Vayd, bearing a crest of Arcadian lilies upon the shoulders of his cloak.

"*Surely*," chided a woman in a clean black suit and purple tie, "You must realize that you're chasing after a pipe dream."

"What you're doing is *noble*, Ambassador..." sighed a man with a tight-trimmed beard and the sleek dress whites of an Arcadian naval officer, "But the Pax Humana is dead and gone. The Pantheon, for all the good they did us, is never coming back. Only Antheia survives, and

when she falls offline... what then? Our fleets *must* be ready if another crisis were ever to engulf the galaxy.”

“Tonight is not about the galaxy,” Vayd said softly, signing a smile upon his Mask. “Tonight is about *our* differences, here on Arcadia alone, and the many gifts we can share amongst each other in spite of them.”

“A noble sentiment,” murmured the woman scornfully, “But as I’ve said, you’re far too optimistic, Vayd. You can’t *possibly* hope to broker a peace with a few *hors d'oeuvres* and a *soup kitchen*.”

“I think you underestimate our shared love of food, Chairwoman Jahani. I’ve found that what bombs achieve for war, meals can achieve for peace.”

“Food...” The naval officer chuckled. “Well, at least we have *that* in common.”

“Drinks too, perhaps?” Vayd wondered aloud. “We share that much as well... and now in abundance, thanks to the generosity of Lumin’s esteemed ambassador.”

A gold-chromed android wearing a tuxedo vest and rose lapel approached them all with a platter of refreshments. Where others took tasters of port and champagne, Vayd reached for a simpler glass of water. Jahani narrowed her eyes on the bunch tapping her glossy purple nails against the stem of her glass as she opened her mouth to speak.

“The way I see it,” continued the chairwoman, “Foreign investment in Bastion V is a *necessity* for its recovery, just as its arable farmland is a necessity for cross-sector food security. The Alliance are *fools* to think that exporting Rune’s *police state* on Aurum will win over the Bastionese, let alone Cygnus and the *rest* of the Pleaides Sector.”

“Kindly spare us the *bullshit*, Mrs. Jahani...” A man in a white suit rolled his eyes as he took a long sip from his drink.

“*Excuse me?* Care to elaborate, Mr. Moreau?”

“Cygnus just wants to *indebt* their neighbors so they can *exploit* ‘em later on,” Moreau said scornfully. “Neo-corporate *scum* like you? You all just want to *profit* off the poor, starving masses beyond the Pleaides. You make me *sick*, you parasitic *hag*.”

“There it is again!” laughed Jahani, shaking her head in disgust as she sipped on her champagne. “That cheery Alliance pastime of yours... always presuming the worst in people, then bombing them into *oblivion* because of it. What with all that United Forces propaganda crammed into that thick skull of yours, is there even *room* for the notion that it makes *no sense whatsoever* for us to treat Bastion and its people as *assets*? Is it even *conceivable* to you that we see them as equal partners and fellow shareholders in this galaxy of rich opportunity?”

“How about as *human beings* with *human rights*, *hm?*” interjected an Aurumese naval commander, dressed in a sleek slate-grey uniform with golden accoutrements. “Did *that* ever cross your mind?”

“Please,” Vayd murmured, holding a calming hand between while as the Arcadian officer put a cautioning hand on the Commander’s shoulder. “This Multifaith is sacred to many of the locals. There’s *hardly* any need to fight here...”

“Oh!” Jahani scoffed, ignoring Vayd entirely. “Well, how *very* xenophobic of you, Commander Raymond, to presume I meant only humans. Tell me, has Aurum finally stopped seizing property from alien landowners? Or has Admiral Rune finally decreed that the refugee camps housing all those poor souls from the Frontier are no longer a, quote, ‘security risk?’”

“A *difficult* situation to resolve...” the commander admitted. “Rune... we haven’t always agreed with Rune on certain issues. But at least our ends *justify* our means... not like the way you lot exploit the Coldfolk and sell out entire *colonies* to pirates just to get rich quick. At least the Alliance still *stands* for something!”

“Theirs not to question why’, eh?” Jahani smirked, holding a hand of mock daintiness to her forehead as she collapsed into the arms of her assistant. “Hold me, Ms. Felicia, while I *swoon* over this man’s selfless heroism!”

“Mock me however you’d like.” The commander calmly held his hands behind his back and shrugged. “Some of us serve something *greater* than a profit margin, ma’am. It’s not something I’d expect any *Colonial* to understand...”

“Oh, how *noble!*” Jahani cackled, folding her arms in disgust. “Why, it brings me so much *relief* to know that Aurum’s *selfless* and *benevolent* military dictatorship is annexing foreign lands on behalf of the *common good!* How *proud* your dead comrades must be that you’ve held their torch *so high.*”

Commander Raymond suddenly fumed with rage, clenching his hands into white-knuckled fists as he stormed quickly forwards. “Oh, you *ungrateful little...!*”

“If I may...!” Vayd interrupted, setting his glass upon a table and striding gracefully between them. “Might I ask a question? This old alien needs something clarified about you humans.”

The Commander hesitated, releasing his fists in time for the Arcadian officer to set a much firmer hand upon his shoulder. Jahani’s smile was still drunk with an air of smug superiority, but

Cleito noticed that where there was once absolute confidence in her eyes, there was now a look of sudden, sober wariness.

“Fire away,” said the Commander, his posture now straighter, more composed.

Vayd bowed his head as he thought for a moment. “Was the Old Earth not destroyed the same way?” murmured Vayd, gesturing towards the citizens laughing amongst themselves at the other end of the banquet. “By being *lost* in a crossfire, that is.”

“Pah! Don’t be ridiculous.” Jahani scoffed as she waved a dismissive hand in his direction. “The Collapse was a result of corporate irresponsibility at the *highest* levels,” Jahani answered plainly. “Short-term profit was put before long-term prosperity. Any *idiot* with a calculator could run the numbers and game the probabilities.”

“So I hear...” Vayd murmured, then turning to the Aurumese man opposite the chairwoman. “And you, Commander. If your goals are to protect your citizens... to ensure their survival and prosperity in the post-war age... I take it that Bastion’s prosperity is the Alliance’s prosperity, yes?”

“Precisely,” the Commander said cordially. “I’m glad *you* understand, Ambassador. The Alliance seeks to keep the peace on Bastion for the benefit of *all* of humanity. Cygnus, as far as we can see, would *exploit* the planet and its resources to expand their influence in other areas.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Jahani countered. “We’d amplify existing commerce to the sector, ensuring *fair* exchange for critical resources provided to-”

“So, the problem lies with *trade*, then?” Vayd murmured. “Both sides require Bastion’s food exports, and can’t afford to be locked out.”

“Yes.” The Commander muttered. “Clearly...”

Vayd turned to the Arcadian. “Why not make Bastion an open planet, then? No one benefits from a ground war if it disrupts or destroys the food supply... what do *you* think, Lieutenant Commander?”

The Arcadian naval officer looked at him as if he were absurd. “Well, *Ambassador...* that’s all well and good, but it doesn’t stop local actors on the ground from stealing harvests or raising hell for the people down there. Bastion’s government is fragile as-is, law enforcement’s scant outside the major cities, and Arcadia doesn’t have marines to spare for security aid.”

“So, the problem is a *security* issue?” Vayd continued. “Should this not be a *collaborative* dialogue, then? Arcadia remains in the Alliance, after all, and the Bastion-Cygnus transit corridor is a favored route for Colonial traders.”

“That’s why we’re *here*,” Commander Raymond nodded. “Arcadia has no standing land army, so Aurum was petitioned for aid. It was our honor to be selected by the Alliance Assembly to serve as peacekeepers here.”

Jahani sneered. “More of Rune’s posturing to assault Cygnus and reignite the Turmoils, no doubt...”

“Rune’s influence is a topic for another discussion.” Vayd cautioned her. “Let us focus on the compromises we can make today, here, and *now*. Is there no reason the United Forces and the Colonial Militia Administration can’t *collaborate* on achieving local security objectives? Why strain tensions here if a war on Bastion is a zero-sum game?”

“What *else* would you have us do?” wondered the Arcadian. “This entire Sector depends on Bastion’s exports. If nothing is done to aid them, their crisis *will* spread to other systems. Their government is in shambles. We’re drifting dangerously close to famine, Ambassador, and we can’t afford half-measures anymore...”

“And mandate or no, we *cannot* tolerate any of Aurum’s forces on our borders,” Jahani hissed. “Not after what Rune’s forces did to us in the Turmoils. It’s too easy a pretext for invasion.”

“One solution,” Vayd proposed, “Could be to petition the Alliance to *alter* the peacekeeping mandate. Recall Aurum’s forces, and substitute them for a UF member state with closer, less strained relations with the Pleaides.”

“Out of the question,” growled Commander Raymond.

“It could *work*...” the Arcadian murmured.

“Out of the *question!*” the Commander repeated, a look of sullen frustration now on his face. “The Assembly is beholden to the will of its constituents, *not* to that of foreign interference.”

“...though I doubt there’s enough votes in the Assembly for that, especially with Rune’s influence.”

“Is it not a start, at least?” Vayd pondered, briefly ignoring Raymond. “It would appease Cygnus without sacrificing the Pleaides’ security needs, thus defusing the present flashpoint until cooler heads can prevail.”

“*Welllll...*” Jahani smiled a wicked smile, clacking her nails on her slick white teeth as she mulled over the idea. “Ambassador Creek *would* enjoy working with a different embassy than Aurum in furthering our interests. Perhaps Nyumbani... or Tiantong! So many *lovely* opportunities to explore there.”

“I concur.” The Arcadian nodded in affirmation. “I’m certain that Their Eminence might also be open to the idea, if it were to be raised in parliament.”

“I’ll visit them in the Central District as soon as I can.” Vayd nodded gracefully. “In the meantime, I urge you to speak to your ambassadors. Run the proposal by them. See how they react, and perhaps, we can deliberate from there before the P3 conference properly starts.”

“This is an *outrage*.” Commander Raymond shook his head in disgust, then turned to the Arcadian officer. “I’d expect nothing less from the Colonial and the alien, but from *you*, Lieutenant Commander? It amounts to nothing less than insubordination. You *know* I’ll need to report this up the chain to UF Regional Command.”

“Go ahead, sir.” The Arcadian shrugged. “I’ve got nothing to hide. I’m here on orders from the Arcadian Republic, not the United Forces.”

“Aurum fields the largest and best-trained army in the United Forces,” the Commander continued, looking to the others in indignation. “We saved Bastion from the Edocii twenty years ago. We’ll proudly do it again.”

“Aurum’s honor is not in question,” Vayd gently reassured him, keeping his voice soft and neutral. “May I ask you, Commander Raymond... to whom do you swear your allegiance? Is it to the Alliance? To Aurum, or to Rune, or to humanity, or to-”

“To humanity,” Raymond answered, speaking without hesitation. “Always has been. Always will be.”

“We share the same allegiance, then,” Vayd murmured, gesturing towards the assembled leaders surrounding him. “We *all* share the same allegiance. Aurum... Cygnus... the rifts run deep since the bitter years of the Turmoils, but beneath all the armor, the honors, the *gravestones* of those who fought and died for either side... is there not a *human* there beneath?”

Jahani’s expression turned suddenly solemn, while Raymond watched with disciplined focus.

“I ask you...” Vayd murmured, “*All* of you... isn’t it better to bring an *end* to that cycle of pain, than to hold it as our only heirloom?” Vayd turned to them, looked every one of them in the eyes, their golden glow shining among the cracks of his mask. “This crisis is *bigger* than any one of us here today. The present crisis on Bastion may very well impact *all* of humanity, if handled indelicately.”

“It’s not realistic to hope for peace,” Jahani sighed. “Since the *Fall*... well. We know *better* now.”

“Of course it’s not realistic,” Vayd chuckled. “That’s why we have to *try*. Cygnus is dedicated to the advancement of humanity and its allies, correct?”

“Among other things...” Jahani answered. “Yes.”

“Aurum’s interests, then.” Vayd turned to face the commander. “They are—as they have *always* been—to protect the human diaspora, and to safeguard humanity more broadly. Correct?”

“Of course.”

“Then I pray you both heed your fellow humans,” Vayd said gravely. “Peace is an agonizing compromise to make, but we have *all* witnessed the alternative. War has wounded these worlds, but the time has come to heal. In the face of such adversity, what greater value is there, than that great and enduring hope which once united... which *today* unites... and which *will forever* unite us all... than our shared cause of *humanity*?”

There was silence among the gathering as the wind blew, the trees swayed, and waves rippled across the vast gulf of the water beyond.

“Well...” The commander stiffened his lip and nodded briefly in approval. “To that hope of humanity, then. However far-fetched it might be.”

Jahani narrowed his eyes at him, weighing the possibilities of so many probable outcomes... then reluctantly took her half-empty glass and, with a perfectly blank expression on her face, raised it to the opposite end of the gathering.

“Here, here.” A human with white robes and a velvet sash held up their glass in salutation. “To humanity!”

“*To humanity!*” cried the nearby guests in unison.

“To humanity,” Vayd finished, then noticed Cleito waiting for him by the railing at the edge of the overlook. He nodded briefly to her, then began shaking hands with the guests as he began to shuffle outwards and walk her way. Cleito waited patiently for his approach, turning away an android with a platter of drinks, and bowed to her elder upon his arrival.

“You handled that incredibly well,” Cleito remarked, signing an emote of concern on her mask. “What you said about the Turmoils...”

“I don’t know if it made a difference,” Vayd admitted. “I saw the emotion in their eyes near the end of it... I think I struck a chord, but will it be enough to influence anything? Only time will tell.”

“You think so?”

Vayd nodded, leaning his elbows on the railing as he looked out upon the water. “All of us have our struggles within, Cleito. I’d wager *they* are open to peace, but as for their superiors...”

Cleito dwelt on that for a moment or two. “You’ve always seemed so *certain* of yourself.”

“Not always,” Vayd chuckled sadly. “This mask hides it well, but my faith in diplomacy ebbs and flows with the years.”

“Why keep going?” Cleito asked. “You’ve served longer than any other in your post...”

“It is because I *refused* to leave them.” Vayd leaned further upon the railing, picking a blossom from his crest and toying at its pedals with his frail old fingers. “We all did, those few of us Masks still left from the pre-war days. You would have understood our duty, if only you’d seen it...”

“The War?”

“Stars above, no!” Vayd chuckled, a warm laugh with a hidden darkness of melancholy upon it. “No, I meant the Golden Age itself. Oh, what I would do to see it again through my younger eyes...”

“You *always* go on and on about that *first day* on Aurum...”

Vayd's eyes widened in surprise. "Have I *never* told you that story?"

Cleito shrugged. "Not when I was old enough to remember."

"Saved that tale for last, have I? Hah. Well..."

Vaayd looked out upon the water, closing his eyes in meditation as he seemed to center himself around his memories.

"It was fifty years ago now, and ten before the Fall... back before the Admiralty seized power over the Alliance, back when warfare was a practice as antiquated and historical as medicinal leeching, back when Aurum stood tall as a beacon of the Pax Humana sworn among the Old Earth's diaspora.

Cleito listened intently to her mentor's story, remembering a feeling of simpler days in transit aboard the Clan-ships, left with nothing to do but listen to stories from their elders.

"I first arrived on Aurum to collect my human-issued passport," Vayd remembered, holding a finger to his cheek to emote a sense of serenity. "We landed on the outskirts of the city of Aubade, a few kilometers north of the Antheian peninsula. I was young then, still an acolyte, impatient and inattentive to my mother's orders aboard our vessel."

"You?" Cleito chuckled. "An *acolyte*."

"Ancient times, I know." Vayd laughed at himself before continuing. "I remember taking my first steps onto the golden grass after a lifetime spent aboard our ships, seeing lush moss and snowfall painted upon the closest hillside, the smell of ocean salt and warm spice like incense upon the air... oh, what I'd do to relive those very first steps down towards the city!"

Vayd spread his arms wide, as if to recall the scale of his memories. “Vibrant cities filled with exotic machines and inventions, homes overflowing with lush vines and ornate tapestries, soaring academies dedicated to the careful study of every question conceivable, gleaming vistas overlooking ebullient gardens... I remember seeing lovers by the waterside, dancing as foamy tides washed upon its endless shores. It was the most beautiful thing my young eyes had ever seen... and it was only *one* city! To even *imagine* the scale of what humanity had achieved, where so many of the Ancients failed? That childish wonder, that maddening faith in humanity, has never since left me.”

Vayd sighed, a hint of reverie now faint upon his voice as he talked. Cleito watched as he opened his eyes to the world again, looking out upon the lake as it glistened with evening’s light.

“I wandered the city like a bird across the sky, trying to decipher how it all worked. No poverty, no gluttony, no hatred nor malfeasance... what clever illusion made it possible? What folly of philosophy? I befriended many by way of endless questions, often staying nights with families that offered to host me. In time, and with difficulty, I began to comprehend its workings. The Pantheon sourced provided the abundant goods necessary to sustain basic living, helped advise the Republic’s policies and rehabilitate the sick, the criminal, the hurting and vulnerable... freeing humanity to live in accordance with their nature.”

“Then *the War*...” Cleito murmured.

“Then *the War*,” Vayd echoed, slowly closing his fist around the flower. “Ironically, first contact with the Edocii was an exhilarating time to be alive. The discovery of Spillspace baffled and enamored our scientists, the Edocii exchanged many technological gifts with us. The public was *obsessed* with their claim that they hailed from somewhere beyond our observable horizon

of the universe. Humanity's curiosity was offset only by the diplomatic enthusiasm of the Chorus, and for a time, the representatives of their 'Exalted' ones showed us the same courtesy and humility we extended to them. If only we could have known what hellish *atrocities* they'd unleash, once they struck down the Pantheon and betrayed the Alliance..."

Shore flies buzzed around the algae at the base of the overlook, loitering at the divide where water met metal and swayed along the current, and Cleito watched as the Arcadian sunset fell to a simple shimmer of violet. Vayd looked down upon the water, the talismans on his cloak swaying in the hollow breeze of the filters overhead, then knit his hands in solemn contemplation.

"The friends I'd made... the ones that *served* and *survived* it all... they were never the same after the war. All of them had *changed*, somehow. All those miracles, all that wonder... all washed away in the tempest."

Vayd went quiet, and Cleito watched as the wide eyes of his mask narrowed back to the older, more tired stare that he'd taken on in his advancing age.

"I dreamt of seeing a new world bloom from the horrors of the War... a feat we all thought unthinkable as we stood amidst the ruin." Vayd chuckled gratefully, then leaned further on the railing to look out upon the waterfront. "I was younger then, short-sighted and doubtful that the Way of things should take its course. In hindsight, I was foolish to think that woe would last forever. After all this time, it brings me joy to see that world now blooming in my twilight years."

"With respect, mentor..." Cleito turned to face him. "The work is still far from done. We've *both* seen the situation on the ground. Even *if* the P3 conference succeeds..."

Vayd shrugged. “I’m confident enough in our trajectory that I feel no fear in drifting a while. Even still, I’ve lined up many to replace me... and humanity is capable of *wonders*, Cleito. *Wonders*.”

“What would you tell *me*, then?” Cleito asked, desperate for answers that could help her understand what kind of being needed to be—if not for the Chorus, then for herself. “What would you tell me, if I had to act through your Mask, and live through everything that you lived through all those years ago?”

Vayd thought for a while, then lowered his head and watched the ripples rise and fall against the quay.

“The work of a peacebuilder will *never* be done, Cleito. Miraculous though the Pantheon was, it is naïve to idly hope for an easy end to suffering. There will always be pain... there will always be wars to fight, causes to believe in, loved ones to mourn... but such futility should not deter us from our duty to our descendants, to our ancestors, and to *ourselves* to hasten the inevitable balance of peace.”

Cleito had hoped for something more... *profound* than that. “So just... ‘don’t give up’? That’s *it*?”

“That too,” Vayd chuckled. “You will understand it all someday. Give it time.”

Cleito pondered that for a while. As the words sank in, Vayd let the blossom drift slowly onto the waterside, and continued looking out upon the gleaming lake beyond. The humans ate, and talked, and laughed amongst themselves, lost in conversation as street lights lit up across waterfront and diffused through hazy clouds in the distance. There was a feeling now, some intangible emotion felt but could not describe; a certain tranquility, she ventured, a oneness that

seemed to defy all the doubts she'd felt in the months leading up to the P3 conference. Cleito sighed with disappointment at her mentor's answer, trying to content herself by appreciating the beauty of the gathering and of the Arcadian twilight beyond.

"There is one last thing," Vayd murmured softly. "A minor complication we must discuss."

Cleito looked to him with reverent obedience. "Yes, mentor? What is it?"

"I need to speak to you in the Solarium tonight," Vayd murmured, leaning towards her to ensure that no others were close enough to hear them. "There's been a shift in our plans."

"Why?" Cleito whispered, suddenly worried. "Is it Airy?"

"No...." Vayd waited until a pair of Rabbis passed to resume speaking. "We've had tidings from the embassy on Aurum. Admiral Rune delivered a speech to the Alliance Assembly this morning, briefly alluding to recent developments here in the Pleaides." The Ambassador's voice was low and focused, as if he was still pondering something within the privacy of his mind. "I need to brief you and others on certain changes to protocol for the conference ahead. We can't risk any further tensions between the Alliance and the Cygnans right now. If Rune's many eyes are upon us, then we *must* be ready to adapt."

"I..." Cleito trailed off. She remembered Lola... the plans they'd made for this evening... how excited they'd been about the night ahead. All of it was now trampled by her duty to the Chorus's will. "...Of course, Mentor. I'll await you in the Solarium upon our return."

Vayd didn't reply, instead turning to watch her for a moment or two. Cleito turned to meet his gaze, then looked back down at the table where her sandwich sat half-eaten.

“You hesitate, young one. Is something the matter?”

Cleito waited for a moment, trying not to betray the clash between her duties to the Chorus and the pledge she’d made with her friend. Finally, unable to escape her Mentor’s expectant stare, she looked him in the eyes and answered.

“I had... *existing plans* for this evening,” Cleito admitted, hanging her head in reverence to her elder. “Lola and I were hoping to go... ‘drinking.’ It’s a human tradition, apparently, where you venture out and...”

“Yes, I know the tradition well.” The Ambassador cocked his head at her in curiosity. “Lola Roberts... the Guard, yes? Your new friend.”

“Yes, Mentor.”

“Hm. Where did you hope to go drinking? Certainly nowhere in Embassy Row.”

“No, Mentor. We had planned to visit the Boardwalks. We were going to meet at the tram station once her shift ended.”

Vayd folded his hands in a gesture of authority. “In an hour or two, if I’m not mistaken.”

Cleito bowed. “Yes, Mentor.”

“In that case... go and enjoy your evening, Cleito.” Vayd nodded graciously to her. “Remember to eat, and to hydrate, and we will meet tomorrow afternoon in the Chancellery’s study. You are dismissed.”

“Mentor...” Cleito’s voice trailed off as she thought. “If these changes to protocol are urgent enough to warrant what little time you have...”

Vayd held a hand up to cut her off. “I haven’t spent decades rebuilding the Pleaides just to prevent two friends from enjoying the fruits of that endeavor. It is unwise to waste this opportunity. The briefing can wait until tomorrow morning.”

“Truly, mentor, we can find plenty of time after the conference...”

“No. I won’t hear of it.”

“Mentor...”

“Go, now! Go and be young.” Vayd raised a hand from his cloak to dismiss her. “Your Elder demands it.”

“But mentor—”

“Shoo. Shoo!” Vayd stood up and brushed her away. “Shush, and away with you! I’ll have no more of you until tomorrow.”

Cleito held a hand to the cheek of her mask and bowed. “Thank you, Mentor.”

Vayd brushed her away once more, then folded his hands into the long sleeves of his cloak and withdrew to mingle with the assembled leaders of the Multifaith. Cleito watched him as he departed, feeling a deep-set sense of both gratitude and shock for her allowance of free leave at such a crucial time in his endeavors. She wondered, for a time, what Vayd must have been like at her age; whether the time he had sacrificed or been robbed of during the War had swayed his decision, or whether her excursion was truly a non-issue for the Chorus’s plans.

Cleito flicked open her holocrux to check the time, and— realizing she was now long overdue for her rendezvous with Lola— rushed to make the tramloop back to Embassy Row.

6 | Pulse

The Boardwalks – Entertainment District – Arcadia

Pleides Sector - 384ly from the Old Earth

March 5th, 2481 – 1945hrs (local reference)

The IPA tasted bitter on her tongue, and Cleito had to fight the urge to gag. *This* was it? *Beer?* That drink Lola always talked about, preserved through nearly *ten thousand years* of the Human Era, refined through countless methods across countless generations, transcending cultures and civilizations and the Old Earth itself? *This* bitter swill?

Cleito tilted her head back to try and help it down. It didn't do much.

Stars glittered in the cosmos projected above her, waltzing in clusters across the backlit rows of wisterias dangling from the ceiling of the club. Shadows came and went along a backdrop of moonlight and vibrant neon, creeping high upon the wooden walls of the pergola, stretching far along the Boardwalks and the quiet lake beyond. There was a *pulse-pulse-pulse* of music all around them, lights shifting at every beat, subwoofers sending vibrations so deep into Cleito's skull that every thought seemed to reverberate with it. Multicolored shapes and patterns danced like comets over every surface, so sudden and disorganized that it made her dizzy, made her nauseous.

She finally gulped down the IPA and tried to curl the disgust into a human smile. Cleito knew little of money, and less of alcohol, but even she knew that an 'overpriced' drink like this

was too expensive a gift to be ungrateful for. Lying to one's friends was against the Old Ways, though, and since the Mask-emote for gratitude would be a lie of sorts, a human smile seemed the least complicated response.

"Thank you very much for this," shouted Cleito, fighting to be heard over the music. "Never had a drink like this before."

Lola nodded to her, clinked her glass against Cleito's, and took a long, heavy gulp, spilling some of it across the front of her big black 'SECURITY' shirt. Cleito repeated her earlier motion, trying to funnel more of it down her throat and into her stomach, immediately wishing she hadn't. How had Lola finished *three* of these already?

Cleito turned to look behind her so Lola wouldn't see her retching. The humans opposite the bar waved their arms and bodies in seemingly random motions, sometimes alone or sometimes together, and Cleito was struck with profound confusion and curiosity at the act. What *meaning* did it have? What *purpose* in all that chaos? Maybe it was like honeybees from the Old Earth, she thought to herself, how they amassed in hives and imparted their thoughts through the tiniest, most imperceptible motions. But humans were not like nature, she thought; they were something else entirely.

It wasn't her idea of 'fun', in any case.

Curiosity brought her here, far more than Lola knew. The station's Entertainment District was a far cry from the Embassy Quarter, with its quiet gardens and sunlit sculptures, where Cleito could sit alone with her thoughts and meditate for hours on end without interruption. There were even animals there, squirrels and insects living within the station's ecosystem, and it

calmed her to remember that even here, surrounded by humans and their cold, lifeless machines, she was still connected to life itself, to the Way of things.

No, she'd come here out of curiosity, she'd told herself; because she wanted to know why they did this to themselves, why recreation involved awful drinks and faceless strangers and dizzying neon nights. For the Masks, free time brought meditation, reflection on the self, a certain clarity of mind that humans only wanted to be rid of. What was the *point* of it, she wondered? Why did it *unite* them this way? When she was wiser in the ways of humans, wiser in the ways of nausea and bitter drinks, maybe Lola would help her find out.

Hopefully there would be less beer.

Then there was *Amber*, whoever she was. That figure from her dreams, that renegade rebel, that familiar musician she knew yet knew nothing about. She'd be somewhere here tonight, Cleito reminded herself. Maybe she'd finally meet her, talk to her, figure out what the dreams had meant...

"Not a fan?" asked Lola at last, shouting over the music.

Cleito realized her first drink was half-full to Lola's fully-empty.

"Tastes... hoppy!" Cleito replied, remembering the only word in Baselang she knew that described beer.

"*Happy?*" Lola shouted, not hearing her.

"HOPPY!" Cleito had to scream, "Tastes HOPPY!"

"Mmm! Gotcha!" Lola grinned at her, then gestured to the well-dressed human behind the bar. He brought out another glass while she talked. "You know, it's okay if you don't like it! You probably won't like the first one- but you'll get used to it eventually!"

Cleito gagged at the thought, but she figured Lola might be right. Cleito had hated culturing cells when her mother first taught her, but after she realized all the many things she could create from nothing but nutrients, all the foods and dyes and paints and even clothing blueprinted in the genetic code, she'd started to take a fondness to it. Perhaps drinking with Lola would be similar, somehow.

Cleito glanced over at the mirror at the back of the bar and saw herself staring back at her, bioluminescence dancing in her eyes, two glowing blue streaks traced across her cheeks and back along her jawbone. It'd been Lola's idea of course, one of those "Cleito, you'd look badass if you went out like that!" kind of things, a misappropriation of living things grown with living purpose. It felt wrong using it that way. All life was sacred, and cell-paints like that were for expression, for communication of feeling, not for vanity- but she'd decided to play a little looser with the Old Ways tonight, for learning's sake. Seeing her own face glowing in the dark, Cleito thought she looked more spirit than human.

Maybe I'm comfortable with that, she murmured to herself.

"*What's it like?*" Lola shouted once again. "Growing up like..." she gestured in Cleito's direction. "Well, growing up like you did."

Cleito was confounded at Lola's question. "It's... *very loud in here!* You *really* want to start a conversation?"

Lola stared at her for a moment, not understanding. Finally, Cleito groaned and moved the stool closer to her, cupping her hand against Lola's ear and shouting over the bass.

"IT'S VERY LOUD IN HERE!"

"I KNOW!" Lola screamed back. "HUMOR ME! I WANT TO KNOW!"

"WHY?"

Lola leaned in to shout in her ear; even then, Cleito could barely hear her. "Because you're not *getting* it yet!" she waved her arm at the pergola, out at the lights and the DJ booth and the Boardwalk and the bumbling humans behind her. "Drink some more! It'll make *sense* soon!"

"It's *so intense!* I can't hear myself *think!*"

"That's the *point!*" Lola screamed out at her, suddenly drunk on epiphany. "No no, see, that's it! That's the point! It's like... it's like *anti-meditation!*"

"Like *what?*"

Lola shouted into her ear. *"LIKE ANTI-MEDITATION!"*

Cleito was surprised at how profound the idea was, until she realized she had no clue what it meant. She leaned back and tried to sip more of the beer as she thought about it. It didn't really help.

"Meditation is... (*blegh*)... about reflection. Control of the self..."

"It's not *about* control!" Lola shouted. "It's about the *opposite!*"

"So... *losing* control of the self?" Cleito ventured.

"Yes!" Lola exclaimed, clapping her hands and laughing. "YES! Exactly! That's exactly it! Loss! Of! Control!"

"Okay...!" Cleito tried to smile again, suddenly intrigued at the breakthrough. "So then... why IPAs?"

"WHAT?"

Cleito took a deep breath and screamed at the top of her lungs, loud enough that the other patrons glanced over.

"WHY! THE BEER!"

Lola smirked and leaned over towards her ear. "Tradition! Drinks just help the process! The losing control part. For us? It's... *a social* thing. It's *opening up* to people you wouldn't normally open up to. Whatever the fuck 'normal' is, am I right?"

"And that's... *fun* for you?"

"Yes!" Lola exclaimed, pointing to Cleito's unfinished drink. "Yes, Cleito, *so fun*! You'll get it in a sec! C'mon, *humor* me on this!"

Cleito tried to think about it through the ear-splitting noise. "I think... there *has* to be a better ways of having fun."

Lola shook her head and looked out behind her. "Okay, fine! Rather try dancing, then?"

Cleito looked behind her at the crowd, seeing a dense mass of clothes and hair and bare skin, writhing in apian motions she didn't understand yet. Cleito turned back to the bar and leaned forward on it like the other drinkers did, noting she felt a little lighter, a little freer than she had a moment ago.

"It was peaceful," she answered, screaming into Lola's ear, "Growing up on ships like ours. Very, *very* quiet. Nothing like this place."

"What do you DO?"

"Out there in space?" Cleito went on. "You explore. You witness the universe in all its beauty. Then, you meditate on the ways of things. Dwell on the ones who came before, the things you're made of, and—"

"You *WHAT?*"

"You *MEDITATE! IN HARMONY!*" Cleito shrieked the words, loud enough to attract a few worried glances.

"OH! WOW!" Lola exclaimed. "SOUNDS KINDA BORING!"

"CAN WE GO OUTSIDE?"

"SURE!"

So Cleito picked up her drink and followed Lola outside, pushing past crowds of humans staring up and down at her with emotions she didn't recognize, and went out to the edge of the dock. It was quieter out here, more peaceful, even with her ears still ringing. Across the horizon, the station's landscape curved upwards, curved for miles until it hit the starlight, vast enough that Cleito could feel a cool breeze on her face. She considered putting her Mask back on, wanted the comfort and belonging she felt wearing it, but then she realized that Lola might look at her differently, that she'd waste all the effort she'd given to being human for a night.

"So... meditation?" Lola asked while they walked along the dock. "That's *it?* Come on, I'd go *crazy*. That's so boring!"

Cleito winced a bit at that. "We *explore*. Both in space, and... what's that word?

Spatially? Spirit... ally?

"Spiritually?"

"Just... in and outside of ourselves. If that makes sense." Cleito tried to figure out how to phrase it. "It's about... being in harmony with the world. With the life you encounter, and the life you cultivate. With the *Way* of things. Do you understand?"

Lola chuckled. "Deep as hell, dude, but like, you ever get tired of it? Being..." she threw up two random fingers to her face in an imitation of Cleito, "*In harmony with the world*, as you put it."

"No," Cleito answered firmly. "Not really. The Old Ways are about... helping you find *yourself* in all those lives, all those stars, and finding others, too. Realizing *your* place in the living world, in the Way of things. Does that make sense?"

Lola looked at her for a moment. "Uhhh... kind of," she asked, and drank some more.

Cleito sighed and sat down on the edge of the dock, setting the glass beside her. She looked out at the artificial moonlight glimmering on the lake, curving up across the horizon, and wondered if either of them would ever fully understand the other.

"I mean... I think I get it," Lola said, joining her on the dock. "It's... just mindfulness, right? That's the word for it. It's a thing in some of our cultures, too."

Cleito emoted relief, then caught herself and tried another human smile. She knew she'd gone too wide when Lola gave her an awkward, too-wide smile back. Cleito sighed and looked out across the lake.

"Do humans ever get... tired of things like this?" she pointed back to the nightclub. "The drinking? The dancing, the intensity, the chaos? Losing *control* of everything, like you said?"

"*Hell* no!" Lola laughed, rocking backwards on the boards. "Why would we? It's *fun* to lose control sometimes. I mean, it's part of being human. Makes life worth *living*."

"No, but I mean... control of *everything*." Cleito looked Lola in the eyes to try and better understand her reactions. "I mean, I've been trying to understand humans. The People of the Masks believe that *everything* is connected, somehow. Humanity to the Old Earth... the Pax Humana to the Golden Age after it... then the War and the Edocii to the Pantheon they destroyed. Humanity watching its colonies burn, then slowly break apart, just like the Earth did..." she stopped for a moment. "Is that what it means to be human? Just losing control of everything, over and over again, while we drink just to lose a little more?"

Lola went quiet for a moment, pondering the thought. "Yeah..." her voice trailed off for a moment. "Wow. Holy fuck."

Cleito didn't know if it was pride and disappointment rising in her chest. "Is that it?" she asked hopefully.

"No, Cleito. Holy fuck, that's definitely *not* what being human's all about."

Cleito emoted annoyance.

"Look, you're thinking *way* too much into this." Lola grimaced at her, then gave her a weak smile. "The point is to *not* think for a while. Life sucks, but sometimes? You just need a *break* from all that thinking. Just... drink some more and *have some fun*, alright? Trust me, it'll make sense soon."

Lola took a long sip of her beer, and after a moment or two, Cleito reached down and reluctantly did the same. When she finally got to the bottom of the glass, it didn't taste any better to her than the top had. She set it down beside her, then laid on her back with her legs dangling helplessly over the side, staring up at the city lights above. Cleito was grateful for a friend like Lola, but sometimes, left in the privacy of her thoughts, she hoped the stars would have better answers for all the questions she still had.

Then, through the murmur of the water, through the muted pulsing of the club, through the laughter and the carnival games and all the sounds of the Boardwalk, Cleito heard the first of the whistling; softer than the waves, softer than the wind, softer than any other sound she'd ever heard before.

Lola's boots swung carelessly over the sides of the dock, but she arrested their momentum when she finally heard it too. She sat up a moment, brows furrowed as if to try and make sense of the noise, then squinted her eyes as she peered out to the districts in the distance.

"Is that..."

An instant later, a flashing red glare began to blanket the drumward stretches of the station; crimson splotches grew brighter and darker, eventually pulsing into sync as other sirens began to wail in neighboring districts off in the distance.

Cleito froze in uncertainty.

"Lola...?"

"That's a lockdown alarm..." Lola muttered breathlessly, sitting up suddenly from her perch on the edge of the dock. "Coming from the UF Garrison."

“Is that normal?” Cleito murmured. “Do they drill on... what day is today again?”

“Shit...” Lola looked to the district, then back to the Boardwalks behind them, and grabbed Cleito’s hand. “C’mon, we need to go.”

“What...?” Cleito sputtered the words out as she was yanked along behind her. “Hey, wait!”

“I’ve got a job to look after you,” Lola answered, slapping herself twice and exhaling deeply. “*Hooo-kay. Sober up Lola, sober up, sober up...!*”

“What’s happening?” Cleito shouted. “Where are we going?”

Lola didn’t answer her, instead leading her off the dock and towards the main streets of the Boardwalks, wide paths filled with soft synthetic teak and carnival games glittering with lights, now being shuttered by their operators as the crowds of people began to file out with anxious haste. When Lola saw how dense the crowds were becoming, she pivoted to the right off the concourse and jumped down onto the sandy beaches of the lake.

Beachgoers huddled by bonfires watched the Garrison District with nervous appraisal or scrambled to gather their belongings, sometimes jumping in surprise as they passed when they saw Lola’s black security shirt and Cleito’s strange and unfamiliar mask. Cleito trudged uneasily across the shifting sands, trying to wrench herself free from Lola’s iron grasp as she was pulled along, trying to catch any sort of glimpse at the disruption in the distance.

Finally, they came to a public restroom on the walkways just above the beachfront, a ferrocrete alcove surrounded by blue-glazed tiles and infoboards now filled with local alerts. Lola

checked their surroundings, then ushered her into a vacant family restroom with a sturdy-looking door and lock.

“Stay in here,” Lola ordered. “Lock the door until I get back. I’m gonna go see what’s going on.”

“Lola, don’t you think you’re a bit-”

“Don’t argue,” Lola said, stumbling on the loose lace of her boot, still already halfway out the door. “Just... trust me on this, okay?”

Cleito was still for a moment as she considered Lola’s words. “Okay. I’ll stay. Text me as soon as you know what’s happening.”

Lola nodded, giving her a smile of reassurance too wide to be wholly sober, then ducked out the door to leave Cleito on her own. She sighed, flicking her hand to lock the door with her Holocrux, then slumping down with her back against it.

A few minutes later, a red-lined government pop-up forced itself onto the full width of her holodisplay, and Cleito read through it as the distant pulsing of music stopped and was replaced by a masculine voice on repeat.

“Lockdown; lockdown; lockdown. All citizens, please remain calm. This is not a drill. Reason for lockdown: civil disruption in neighboring district. Cooperate with all Arcadian Guard personnel and tune to AllNet for further details. Lockdown to continue until... 20:20hrs... local station time. Thank you for your cooperation. This message will repeat.” A pause. “Lockdown; lockdown; lockdown. All citizens, please remain calm...”

===

Nearly an hour passed until the urgency of anxiety faded into boredom, and the annoyance of the repeating message began to bore itself into Cleito's skull.

"Lockdown to continue until... 23:50 hrs... local station time. Thank you for your cooperation. This message will repeat."

Cleito sighed in frustration as she sat cross-legged at the center of the bathroom, trying to center herself on the inner peace buried within her. Meditation was her preferred way to pass time when idle waiting, but the sheer *volume* of the voice outside made it almost impossible to concentrate on anything else...

"Lockdown; lockdown; lockdown. All citizens..."

"Stars *ABOVE!*" Cleito slammed her fist into the door and kicked over the plunger in the corner of the room in frustration. She flicked open her holocrux for the fifth time in ten minutes to check for any reply from Lola; not only was there no reply, but the local Allnet seemed to be altogether offline. Surely, the Embassy would have gotten news of the lockdown by now, and Vayd would be worried to death...

Finally, she got tired of waiting.

Cleito signed a command to unlock the door, creeping forwards and *slowly... ever-so-carefully...* inching it open. A trio of bonfires now crackled to embers on the beachfront ahead of her, and Cleito could see the red lights from the Garrison District reflected on the silent lakes beyond. Where there were once voices of laughter and conversation from the bustling venues around them, there was now only the coolness of facsimile wind and the incessant murmuring of the public safety announcement.

Cleito removed her Mask and sighed gratefully, grateful for a breath of fresh air after an hour trying— unsuccessfully— to make peace with the horrid stench of the lavatory. The beachfront seemed all but empty; it would be so *easy* to venture out, to find somewhere more *tolerable* to await Lola’s return...

“Cooperate with all Arcadian Guard personnel and stay tuned to the AllNet for further details...”

Cleito frowned at the loudspeaker. *Why would they tell us to stay tuned, if the AllNet isn’t even online?*

Inspiration struck as she noticed that the message was emanating from a loudspeaker near a safety board just a few dozen meters beyond the restroom; its cords trailed into a rusted maintenance box with a door hanging open on one hinge, slowly creaking in the breeze. If she could *only* venture out and disconnect it, fast enough that no one saw her, she could meditate in peace until Lola finally returned. It wouldn’t cause any harm, after all; most patrons had seemed to have evacuated the beachfront already, and Cleito would make *certain* she plugged the speaker back in once all was said and done.

A rational voice in her head nagged her to stay behind the safety of the locked door, but after it weighed that argument against the onerous stench within, Cleito was already lurking at the entrance to the ferrook alcove, peeking around the corners to ensure the coast was clear.

Arcadia’s inner fusion reactor had darkened to a dimness resembling moonlight, and the night outside was calm and quiet. Dying embers crackled in ritual circles made of abandoned booze-bottles as wind and water swept sandcastles back into the dust from which they came, with column lights casting long shadows across the sidewalks beyond.

There were no signs of life nearby, save for the atmospheric processors drifting in freefall overhead, and the city lights of the Central District sparkling in the distance.

“Reason for lockdown:” the message droned, booming from a loudspeaker barely twenty meters ahead of her, “Civil disruption in neighboring district....”

Cleito crept slowly ahead, feeling the sleek teak texture of the sidewalk give way to the soft grit of white sand. Facsimile moonlight glistened at the peaks of the waves beyond, and Cleito could see her shadow cast long before the beach beyond as she skulked behind the bulletin board where the loudspeaker stood.

She saw the bioluminescent glow in her own eyes reflected in dark glass as she peered into the cablebox, trying to make sense of the mishappen wiring and exotic silicon circuitry within. *One of these should disable that bloody noise...*

Cleito pulled a random red wire, and watched as a nearby light flickered out and coated her in darkness. She sighed in disappointment. A moment later, she fished through a rat’s nest of wires as crickets chirped from somewhere in the grassy overlook to her west. She pulled out a cord of blue wires braided together, then peered to the other side of the infoboard to see that it had fizzled out to a pale screen hungry for video input. Cleito kicked the sand in frustration. After a few more minutes of carefully toying with more cables, she finally gave up and proceeded to disembowel the entire cablebox of anything not nailed down: at long last, the loudspeaker cut out, and Cleito was left with blissful... *tranquil*... silence.

The night was now quiet enough that Cleito could now only hear crickets on the beach’s grassy overlook, the crackling of the deserted bonfires... and two voices screaming somewhere in the distance above the lake.

Cleito froze, suddenly alert, suddenly realizing she'd made a terrible error. She listened closer, trying to discern what the noise was... only to realize the voices weren't screaming in a tone she recognized as fear.

Instead, it sounded to her like... *exhilaration*.

Peering out from the side of the infoboard, Cleito searched the skies for the source of the noise. The faded lights of Arcadia's cities coruscated in the distance, and Cleito watched as far-flung searchlights swung across the open space and roved across the valleys, the lakes, the filters floating by in freefall—

The filters! There!

Cleito's heart sank as she saw two faint figures drifting in open freefall, streaking near-horizontally across the landscape above the centrifuge, tumbling slowly but uncontrollably across the open expanse. She couldn't see much detail; one figure was swinging their arms wildly, two red-yellow circlets seeming to glow on their wrist as they thrashed about, with a head of bright blonde hair peeking out from a slouchy grey beanie. Meanwhile, the other figure drifted just behind them, a headless body of metal and wires with a blurry teal hologram where a face should have been, plummeting calmly through microgravity.

The duo fell diagonally downwards relative to the landscape of Arcadia's centrifuge, and a curious mixture of fascination and terror paralyzed Cleito as she realized they would impact near the Boardwalks.

"*AMBER!*" came a shout from the metal one, so faint that Cleito could barely hear it in the distance. "*Breathe in, chill out, try to pierce the water with your feet first...!*"

“Oh shit, OH SHIT, OH SHIIIIIT!”

The woman crumpled herself into the fetal position just as the two of them hit the water, skidding across the lake with so much force that Cleito thought they’d shatter to a million pieces, only to gradually slow and disappear beneath the waves. There was quiet for a moment, a fatal silence that both stunned and bewildered Cleito, and she briefly wondered if they hadn’t survived. A few moments later, a metal shape floated listlessly to the surface, and a moment after that, the blonde-haired one named Amber emerged from the lake, now belching up water and gasping for air.

Cleito watched the moonlit figures from behind the safety of the infoboard, now feeling an unusual mixture of stark fear and flabbergasted curiosity at the sheer audacity of their stunt.

“Holy FUCK...!” Amber cursed between sputtering coughs, sweeping a long tuft of soaked hair out of her eyes as she swam to within standing depth of the shoreline. Breathless, she looked up at the searchlights panning across the cityscape overhead, up at the dozens of kilometers’ worth of open space between them and the skyscraper-rings on the horizon, and simply waited for a moment in what seemed like speechless awe.

A certain calmness returned to the night, a passing moment of peace, an almost-normalcy that seemed to ebb away with the ripples on the waves. There was a pause of total silence as Cleito waited for something to happen.

“YEEEEAH!” the unknown woman now screamed into the night, throwing her fists upwards in rapturous triumph. *“WOOOO-HOOOOO! Holy SHIT Indie, you beautiful bastard! I can’t believe that actually WORKED!”*

Amber rocked back and forth in the water, briefly disappearing beneath the waves before kicking her feet and throwing her hands in the air, howling with maniacal laughter all throughout. Beside her floated the second figure—apparently named Indie—now more easily visible to Cleito and showing no signs of life or movement.

“YES, YES, *YES!*” screeched Amber, oblivious to the headless robot’s stillness.

“HAHAHA! Take *THAT*, you IA *fascists!* WOOOO!”

Cleito watched nervously as she kept cackling, pulling off a slouchy grey beanie from her head and combing her fingers through her drenched hair, still hyperventilating with astonishment. She turned to her companion with an adrenaline-crazed look of disbelief on her face.

“Holy shit, Indie! Did you see that?! That was *insane!* How the *fuck* did you pull that off?!”

A pause.

“...Hey, uh... Indie...?”

The robot lay motionless in the water, and Amber suddenly froze in terrified realization.

“Right! *Fuck!* *INDIE!*”

She shot up out of the water and scrambled to her feet, stuffing her beanie into her jacket pocket before grabbing Indie’s lifeless chassis by the arms and dragging it to shore.

“HELP! OH MY *GOD*, SOMEBODY *HELP!*” Amber shrieked at the top of her lungs, seeming to miss that she was now screaming out onto a silent shoreline. “MY ROBOT BROTHER IS DYING, AND *HE NEEDS A RICE BAAAAATH!*”

Cleito felt an avalanche of confusion and a small pang of pity as she watched the stranger crying desperately for help, spiraling further and further into panic and desperation, then finally sobbing with despair as she reached the beach and pulled the robot to the shoreline.

Who in the stars is she? Cleito wondered. Who are they?! Why had they been crazy enough to go jumping about in freefall? Could they be related to the lockdown...?

Cleito looked back to the safety of the bathrooms, remembering that Lola had told her to stay put until she knew it was safe. She had no way to know what the lockdown threat was, if the strangers knew something she didn't... or even if they *were* the threat. *If they needed help, though... what would the Old Ways bid me do?*

Cleito donned her Mask and took a few steps out from behind her cover to get a better look, hoping the stranger would be too preoccupied with mourning her friend to take notice.

“HEY!” cried the woman, *“YOU IN THE SHADOW!”*

Cleito froze. Chills ran up her spine, and she ducked quickly back behind the billboard.

“DUDE!” sobbed the woman, her voice suddenly turning to anger. *“I’m right here, smartass! I can see those eyes in the dark! Don’t be a douche, man, this is a serious emergency and I need some HELP, GOD-DAMMIT!”*

Cleito abandoned the board to bolt for the restrooms, heart pounding with sudden terror, sprinting as fast as she could to clear the beach.

“WAIT-WAIT, PLEASE!” Amber sobbed, falling to her knees. *“He’s dying for real this time, he’s not waterproofed n’ shit, he needs HELP! Please... help...!”*

Cleito held a hand over the door panel, ready to unlock it with her holocrux and duck inwards... but as she stopped for a moment, hearing the stranger's voice now sobbing in despair, she remembered what the Old Ways had taught her, and considered the Ancestors and the examples they'd set for adherents such as her. *If the lockdown had begun nearly an hour before they showed up...*

Finally, Cleito rushed to the edge of the sand as Amber laid beside her lifeless companion, watching the water still trickling from its lifeless frame.

"Please help me..." tears started to well up in Amber's eyes as she sat helplessly on the sand. "I-I can't live without him... he's *everything* to me..."

"Huh?" Cleito asked, overwhelmed with confusion. "Is he... *alive*?"

"He's gonna *corrode*..." sobbed the stranger with runny-nosed despair. "Oh fuck, oh God... I finally got him *killed*!"

Cleito got a better look at the stranger sobbing before her, now illuminated by the fake moon and the dying firelight. Amber wore an olive-drab jacket sown in with textile patches and covered in crude graffiti, rolled up to the elbows of two bony arms covered in tattoos and bracelets, with two neon glowbands- one red, one yellow- jangling from the wrist opposite her holocrux. A head of long blonde hair seemed to pour out from within a slouchy grey beanie, soaked with lake water and already beginning to mat in tangled knots.

"Can we still save... *him*?" It felt odd to Cleito to gender such an object. "I mean, you said it needs—"

“...Rice bath. Right!” Amber suddenly jolted to her feet, clapping her hands together with a renewed sense of urgency. “Okay, rice, rice, *rice!* We need to find a rice bath, right *the fuck* now. Help me carry him!”

Cleito knelt and did as she was told, fumbling for a handhold amidst a body of polished silver and dark grey wires. *Where is its head?* She wondered to herself. *How in the stars could she be... ‘related’ to this thing?*

“No, no! Hook your arms around his shoulders... fists upwards... like this.” The stranger bent her arms at a right angle to demonstrate. “Yeah, like that! I’ve got his ankles...”

“Do I just-”

“Got him, GO GO GO!”

Amber shot forward with the robot’s ankles in her white-knuckled hands, running at what felt like the speed of light, and Cleito was suddenly and forcefully *yanked* along behind them. Sand clouds flew up at their feet as they raced off the beach, then onto the sidewalks, then onto the rampway up the Boardwalks, the clay of Cleito’s talismans frantically jangling and clanking against the plates of the robot’s torso and shoulders.

A spike of fear ran up Cleito’s spine as she realized they were rushing headfirst into a military-enforced lockdown zone, in the middle of a public emergency in the dead of night, with no knowledge of whatever dangers might be awaiting-

“*RIIIIIICE!*” cried the stranger as the trio burst onto the Main Street promenade. Amber panting frantically, paced in place, scanning every building lining the road with a frenzied air of

panic. Finally, not finding whatever she was looking for, she veered left to the inland outlets of the Boardwalks, pulling a desperately confused Cleito along with her.

“WE! NEED! *RIIIIIICE!*”

They kept running for what felt like years, darting between abandoned stalls and eateries, desperately banging on doors and windows for help, throwing up calloused hands in panic as they kept working their way down the avenue.

“What’s your name...?” Cleito half-asked, half-shouted as they ran, Indie’s chrome shoulders still tight in hand.

“Hey man...” The stranger looked back to her as she frantically checked the menus by the door of every storefront. “It’s... uh... Amber...?”

“Peace, Amber...” Cleito cooed, hoping to calm her down. “In the end... there is peace.”

“Oh my *GOD!*” Amber looked back over her shoulder, her face teary-eyed with panic and desperation. “Why the *fuck* would you *say* that?! He’s my *brother!*”

“I meant... be tranquil! We need to think *clearly*...”

“Right... *fuck*... okay!” Amber sniffled a bit, then took a shaky breath inward. “Uhh, rice, somewhere with rice, somewhere selling *rice*... co-op stores, food banks, wholesalers, curry corners... hell, I’d settle for a *noodle stand* at this point!”

“I think I saw a food store on the way here...?” Cleito muttered, searching her memory for other places they could try. “Up near the tram station, just a short way further spinward...”

“Perfect...!” said Amber, more to herself than to anyone else. “Wait, *fuck*, if they saw us near the taxiport...”

Taxiport? Cleito wondered. *What?*

“Okayokayokay... look, if anybody asks, I’m a disgruntled ex who got sick of being left on read and- oh wait, *shit*, nono! We’re idiot tourists, we didn’t know any better, and we’ll be back to guzzling beer and huffing flowers as soon as we know he’s safe and drying up...”

“Huh? What?”

“Look look, just *play it cool!*” Amber’s teeth gritted as she checked each street corner for cameras. “We’ve got IA heat gunning for us like the roar of the *FUCKING* sun, and if he and I don’t get into a speakeasy soon, we’ll be names on a *FUCKING* plaque!”

“IA...?!” Cleito was confused beyond words. “Huh?!”

Amber sighed angrily. “Uh... *Internal Affairs? Doh!* Don’t you even know about-” Amber looked back at her, then fell silent with wide-eyed confoundment. “Oh my God. I *just* now realized you’re an alien. Like, hey. What the fuck is *up*, man?!”

“Are you a... I’m not a...” Cleito looked directly upwards towards the drum of Arcadia’s interior, fumbling for an answer to her question. “The *ground*, apparently?!”

Amber followed her gaze and looked frantically up at the landscape overhead, up at the roar of air filtration units slowly drifting by, up at the glaring red lights of district-wide lockdowns now seeping across the distant cities overhead.

“Oh my *God*, I’m losing my fucking *marbles!*” Amber wailed, sagging her shoulders in dismay. “Get me *out of this fucking hellscaaaaape!*”

They kept up their wild pace for a while, sprinting as fast as they could down the Boardwalk promenade and out towards the residential neighborhoods bordering the

Entertainment District. As they approached, Cleito could hear hushed whispers and doors locking in the flats around them, no doubt startled into hiding at the sound of their hurried footsteps.

Finally, after what felt like years of frenzied sprinting, they came to a shuttered storefront with open green awnings and an abandoned sign filled with chalk drawings of various fruits and vegetables. A cold breeze whistled down the alleyways around them as they approached the entrance, and a feeling of uneasiness fell over Cleito when she realized how quiet the block had now become.

“YES!” Amber shouted in relief, kissing the air as if to pray to distant gods. “Thank *fuck!* Finally, a decent foodseller...”

Cleito held her tongue as Amber stormed up to the door and searched for *something*—maybe a console, maybe an intercom, maybe a lock to break to get inside. Finally, she sighed in frustration, then set down the robot’s ankles so that the center of its weight was now hefted onto Cleito.

“HEEEEEEEY!” shouted Amber, now furiously tugging on the handles and banging on the door. “*ANYBODY IN THERE?!*”

Fuzzy shadows shuffled around behind the glass, then eventually went motionless.

“What is their *deal...?*” Amber wondered, tapping her foot impatiently. “It’s only twenty hundred, they shouldn’t be closed yet... do places *usually* close this early around here?”

Cleito shrugged. Amber sighed.

“Yo!” Amber called out, rapping her knuckles hard against the glass. “Sorry to bug you, but it’s *really* an emergency! We just need to buy some rice for my brother! It’s a really long

story, he got soaked in the lake by the Boardwalk or whatever when we fell in from half the station away, and he just *really* needs some help...”

More shuffling. No replies.

“I can *see* you in there!” cried Amber, now beginning to fall between fury and panic like she had before. “Please, he’s going to corrode and die, *we just need help...!*”

Cleito could hear muffled voices whispering from within. The lockdown message played on repeat from the speakers on the street corner, and Cleito found her stress now mixed with a healthy portion of worry for Indie’s apparent survival. Amber tapped her feet with an impatience that quickly morphed into despair, and she began to pace anxiously back and forth.

“*Don’t use rice!*” came a voice from within.

An awkward pause.

“...Huh?” said Amber. “Sorry, come again...?”

“Don’t use rice!” the voice said again, louder this time, followed by angry replies of ‘*shut up, dude!*’ and ‘*just get her to go away!*’

“Uhh...” Amber turned her head in confusion. “Why the fuck not?”

“Rice will corrode his circuits!” came the voice from within. “You should use *gel silica...*”

“Oh!” exclaimed Amber. “Okay. Cool!”

An awkward pause.

“Well... do you sell that?”

Another murmuring of voices.

“No! Go away!”

Amber folded her hands and searched the doorframe for security cameras. Seeing one, she muttered obscenities to herself and stared hard at the camera.

“I’m not leaving!” she cried out stubbornly. “Not until I get what I need to help him!”

More whispers from within.

“We’ve got *knives!*” called a voice, followed by refrain of frantic voices telling him to *shush!* “We’ll... we’ll *defend* ourselves if-if we have to!”

“What the fuck?” Amber called, pulling her head back in confusion. “Why the *fuck* are they so on edge?”

Cleito set the robot on the ground, taking care not to crush her forearms under its top-heavy weight. “It could be the lockdown...?”

“Sorry...” Amber’s eyes seemed to pop out of her head. “The *what* now?”

There was a moment of awkward silence between them as the public message looped on a nearby loudspeaker. Amber winced when she realized what was happening.

“*Yeaahhh...*” Amber sucked in air through her teeth, and looked up the street she’d just come hollering and barreling down, banging on every door in the process. “*Wow...* this... this probably isn’t a great look, is it?”

Cleito shook her head, unsure of what to say.

“Great,” she muttered, folding her arms and looking at the locked door before them.

“*Smooth*, Amber...”

Cleito watched her for a moment as she cupped her face into her hands, breathed slowly inwards, then outwards for a time... then came up calmer, more composed, and balled her fists in determination.

“Right!” Amber said at last. “Got an idea. Help him up and follow me.”

They ducked into the alleyways behind the outlets, pushing past recycling bins and compost carts as they tried to maneuver the dying robot through the confines between the Arcadian homes. There were sounds of doors slamming and locking around them as they went, and murmurs of alerting the Guard or even the Military to come and investigate. Cleito now tensed at the prospect of becoming the burning center of a diplomatic incident, shuddered at the possibility of humiliating the Chorus and ruining everything Mentor had worked so hard to build... but she was interrupted mid-thought when Amber pulled her into a divide between the flat blocks, filled with storage boxes, coolant pipes, and all sorts of utilities for the buildings within.

“Keep watch,” Amber whispered harshly, motioning her to set down the robot.

“Hold on a moment!” Cleito said incredulously. “Since *when* did I ever agree-”

“Just...” Amber held her hand up in tense, anxious uncertainty. “Please... *help*, okay? I can pay you *big* for it if that’s what you want. I just want to save my brother and *go*.”

The promise of money did nothing for Cleito, and the nonchalance with which Amber had just tried to bribe her made her immediately suspicious... but there was something about the

crack in Amber's voice, something about her concern when she talked about her 'brother', that made Cleito think twice about abandoning her.

"Fine," Cleito sighed, anxiously checking the alleyways around them. "But I *need* to be getting back soon..."

"Just a sec," she replied in turn.

Amber took a dirty nail file from her pocket and jammed it into a bolted-shut control box, forcing a gap large enough for her to stick a pair of aluminum chopsticks into. She fumbled around with the knotwork of wires until she eventually fished out computer jack, shaped in a way that reminded Cleito of a cat's paw sculpted to rectangular dimensions. After fishing through her trouser pockets, Amber produced a rugged-looking screen from her hip, plugged a thumb-sized adapter into it, then plugged the cat's paw into the adapter in turn.

"What's that?" Cleito asked.

"Fuckin' *Solardeck*..." Amber muttered, more to herself than to Cleito. She banged her hand twice, thrice, four times against the deck, then opened a keyboard on her holocrux and started chicken-typing into it. "*Please* work like you were advertised..."

Lines of code and text Cleito couldn't even begin to understand began to scroll upwards across the blank black of the screen, moving like textual waters falling in reverse, until a pixelated checkmark appeared on the top-right of the screen and three lines of green text were marched up the stream. A moment later, every fan on every heat pump on the block began to whirl to life, roaring with so much power that the alley now felt like wind through a canyon.

“FUCK yes!” Amber shouted, smiling through gritted teeth and pumping her fists into the air yet. “FUUUUCK yes! Indie, you *magnificent motherfucker!*”

Cleito tilted her head and looked uneasily across the alleyway. “What did you...?”

“Quick, prop him against that fan!” Amber barked, flipping switches on the robot’s joints to lock them into place before lifting him to his feet.

Cleito did as she was asked, helping Amber lean the robot’s torso against the closest fan while it blasted out cool air. Finally, when they both let go and the robot stood propped up against the outflow, Amber slid back against the bricks and let out a sigh of exhausted relief.

“Whoever the *fuck* you are,” Amber panted, pulling off her beanie and wiping the sweat from her forehead with it before looking Cleito dead in the eye. “You are a *badass*. Thank you.”

Cleito held her cloak tight to her chest, tilting her head in curiosity at Amber’s strange nature. For the first time since she’d seen her in the water, she noticed that Amber wore black scout’s boots, caked with a layer of old mud and dusted with sand just above it. *Mentor always talked about their boots...*

“Just gotta wait until he dries...” Amber muttered to herself, seemingly oblivious to Cleito staring her down. “*Escape routes...* maybe I can make some *calls...*?”

“You’re Colonial,” Cleito realized. “From the other side of the border.”

“Yeah...?” Amber cautiously raised an eyebrow. “What about it?”

“You’re the one they’re looking for.” Cleito leaned forward to peer closer at the outworlder. “You’ve got to be. Your boots... you’re with the Colonial Militia, aren’t you?”

“Nah, not really...” Amber folded her hands and shook her head. “Not *anymore*. I mean, I did a stint in the CDF for a year, but... it was a shitshow, so I didn’t stick around.”

The lockdown... Cleito wondered to herself. The United Forces on high alert, right in the heart of Arcadia, only two days before the P3 conference. This could throw off every part of Mentor’s plans... I need to find out what’s going on.

“What *are* you, then?”

“I’m an independent *gig worker*,” Amber chuckled, setting her hands on her knees and leaning over to *breathe*. “My brother Indie and I go from planet to planet, doing odd jobs to make money so we can *keep going* from planet to planet. It’s an honest living... well, *proverbially* speaking.”

Cleito knew enough of Bastion’s slang to know what a gig worker was. “That means... you’re a *criminal*?”

“Depends.” Amber raised an eyebrow. “By *whose* definition of ‘criminal’?”

The answer took Cleito by surprise. “Arcadia’s...? she asked incredulously. “The Alliance’s...?”

“Hah!” Amber scoffed. “Not to get all hoity-toity here, but is it *really* crime if the system itself is fundamentally broken?” Amber spread her arms wide, a smug smile spread wide across her face. “I mean, *come on*. Between Rune *corrupting* the Alliance and the corpos on Cygnus trying to grab up all the Colonies, folk like the two of us are less criminal than the ones *actually* enforcing the law.”

“Right.” Cleito looked up at the cityscape in the distance, now plunged into a dark red of emergency lockdown. “*Law-abiding...*”

Amber caught her gaze and begrudgingly sighed. “Okay! Valid point...” she muttered, “But I promise, it’s not *that* bad...”

“What did you two *do*, anyways?” Cleito asked. “Are you connected to the...?”

“Of course not!” Amber exclaimed, narrowing her eyes. “Why do *you* want to know, anyways? You’re not going to try and *turn us in* or something, are you...?”

Somewhere in Cleito’s mind, there was a spark of inspiration, and she steadied her focus so she could breathe it into a flame.

“I simply work for a Godparent,” Cleito murmured, half-lying to try and catch on to Amber’s claims of being a ‘gig worker.’ “A Godparent *very* keen on keeping the UF here pacified. A disruption like *this...*” she gestured to the loudspeakers playing on repeat nearby, then up to the crimson lights in the districts overhead. “It’s more than a *small* inconvenience.”

“You?” Amber muttered. “You’re *non-human*. Godparents don’t-”

“Recruit aliens?” Cleito put two fingers to the cheek of her mask- a gesture approximating a smile. “Well... mine does. And he *won’t* be happy to know how much you’ve stirred up the garrison here.”

There were *technically* no lies in her explanation, no violation of the Old Ways, and now, Amber seemed to watch her with a seriousness she hadn’t displayed before.

“Okay... listen,” Amber muttered, slipping her hands into her jacket-pockets, “I’m *not* trying to get mixed up with anything right now, okay? You probably get this all the time, but I’ll

say it anyways: this is *alllll* just a big misunderstanding. I just want to help my brother not die, then get the *hell* off this station.”

“Amber... relax.” Cleito watched her through the expressionless stare of her mask. “I’ll keep your brother *and* your secrets from the Guard, if you swear to help me keep mine. I can *help* you if I know what happened.”

A small grin slowly crept across Amber’s face. She seemed to *like* the sound of that, reluctant as she was to talk about what happened.

“Well, the garrison wasn’t us,” Amber sighed. “Honest truth. We were hired to go do a job in a top-floor office down near the Central District... y’know, like, an office prank, except for an *executive* office.”

“A ‘*job*...’” Cleito’s mind raced as she tried to memorize everything Amber said. “Which was...?”

“To paint a big ol’ phallus on the window of some middle-manager before a meeting with his boss. The tougher to wash out, the better!” Amber snickered to herself, as if recalling some fond memory from adolescence. “Oh, man... the guy was apparently a *raging* asshole to his staff, and they decided they’d had enough. They hired a Godparent, who hired some cheap help, then hired *us* two. Great pay, not *too* much moral debate about some intra-office payback, and the pitch the Godparent gave for the plan sounded fun enough that we were like, ‘sure! why the hell not?’”

“Right...” Cleito murmured, baffled at the idea of someone breaking so many Arcadian laws so *openly*. “All *very* valid reasons.”

“You’re telling *me...!*” Amber cackled, now throwing all pretense of secrecy to the wind. “Literally just- sneak in, elevator, rooftop, maintenance platform, phallus on the window. Piece of cake.!”

“So this... *office prank...* triggered the garrison?”

“No clue *who* caused that,” Amber shrugged. “All I know is that we’d finished up when the lockdown started. Armed guards were waiting for us on the roof- *waaaay* more heat than they should’ve had in there. So Indie here...” she gestured to the robot- “...had to *improvise* a way out. I’d say he did pretty well with the landing.”

Cleito pondered for a moment. “I was curious what you were *doing*, making a jump like that out into freefall...”

“Heh...” Amber nervously rubbed the back of her neck. “Damn corpos...”

“So...” Cleito’s trailed off as she carefully debated her next words. “What about the ‘IA fascists’ you were cursing out when you landed, hm?”

A silence fell between them.

“*Fuck*,” Amber muttered under her breath. “You *heard* that...”

“Relax,” Cleito assured her, doing her best to feign the confidence of a hardened human criminal. “Our secrets are safe, remember?”

“Not here,” she muttered. “Internal Affairs is a... *closed-doors* kind of topic, y’know?”

Internal Affairs? Cleito wondered to herself, but decided to keep her mouth shut.

“*Fuuuuck* me...” Amber sighed. “What a day...”

Amber reached into the top pocket of her jacket, and pulled a tiny black-tipped cylinder that she kept fixed between her lips. Shortly after, she pulled a tiny metal box embossed with skulls and roses, then thumbed open a lid and held a nub inside to the tip of the cylinder. A tiny flame flickered out of the top, lighting the alcove and the space between them in a warm orange glow, and Cleito's eyes widened as she saw the... *signar... cigar... cigar-axe?* She fumbled in trying to remember the word's suffix.

"I thought those are illegal here," murmured Cleito. "My friend says they get *tar* in your lungs..."

Amber blew slowly outwards, and Cleito watched in awe as a cloud of hologram smoke drifted out of her mouth, seeming to glitter against the flames as light rays traced themselves from the projector at the tip of her false cigarette. The wisps seemed to fizzle and flicker as they drifted upwards, stuttering and lagging in midair playback, until they finally faded into the atmosphere beyond.

"I'm tryna *quit*, y'know?" Amber smirked wryly, tapping counterfeit ashes onto the ground below. "My brother here wanted to help me get clean, so he bartered a scrapper for a spare projector, then bashed this thing together for me. Helps a lot."

Cleito shook her head, then traced a smile on her mask. "Sounds like you two really care for each other."

"We do." Amber looked up at her and flicked the lighter shut, pursing her lips as she did so. "You saved his life, Cleito. Or at least... well, I *hope* you did. If he lives through this, I've got no clue how to repay you."

Cleito watched her with muted curiosity, trying to keep contact with her dim green eyes, wondering if the luminescent glow she'd put in her own irises made it too easy to catch her gaze.

“Tell you what,” Amber muttered, exhaling a puff of voxels as she listened for approaching alarms in the distance. “You seem *alright*, Cleito. How ‘bout I add you on Freesia and we can meet up or something *after* all this dies down? Hell, maybe buy you a *drink* for saving Indie, assuming we’re not in some UF holding cell by end of the night...”

“Freesia?” Cleito asked. “I’m not on there. I do have a Hedera profile, though...”

“*Hedera*? That Runist *shitstain* they call a netsite?” Amber scoffed, shoved off from the wall, then stumbled to her feet. “Fuck that. It’s just another front-end for IA’s mass-surveillance *bullshit*. If I were you, dude, I’d delete that app and be done with it.”

Amber swiped a doc out from her holocrux, and Cleito felt a buzz on her own. Opening it revealed a prompt to accept Amber’s contact details, a few rows of info written in a hideous pink font, backgrounded by a photo of Amber and Indie wearing inflatable yellow floaters while surrounded by friends and alcohol.

“Got it?” asked Amber.

“Got it,” Cleito answered.

“Good.” Amber grunted as she lifted up Indie by its shoulders—by *his* shoulders, Cleito corrected herself—then raised him to his feet and began towaddle him on his locked legs over towards a recycling chute.

“What are you *doing*...?” Cleito wondered.

“What does it *look like*?” she smirked. “Finding us an exit.”

Cleito froze when she realized Amber's intent. "Wait. How do you know that feeds into—"

"Ally-*oop!*"

Amber hefted Indie's chassis over the rim of the chute, wiping her hands on her jeans as a thunking sound of metal reverberated off the walls of the chutes below. Cleito watched in utter astonishment as Amber stretched her arms, touched her toes, and rotated side to side as if to limber up for some imminent feat of acrobatics. She unzipped her jacket, turned it inside out, then tied its sleeves around her waist before hoisting herself up to sit on the rim of the same chute she'd just chucked her robotic 'brother' down into.

Cleito watched with astonishment as the scene unfolded before her. "You said he's your '*sibling*', right?"

"*Adoptive* sibling," Amber shrugged, tying her hair back into a bun and tucking the solardeck back into her pocket. "No quotes. We do a bit of bantering, sure, but I know he'd do the same for me."

"What, throw your *lifeless body* down a chute going stars-know-where?"

"I *meant* that he'd help get me out of a tough spot," Amber chuckled, putting her hand to her chin in mock-contemplation. "Though I mean... we'll all be compost *someday*, right?"

"You're insane."

"Sure hope so!" laughed Amber, grinning with wild enthusiasm. "Life's more *fun* that way. Seeya 'round, Cleito!"

Amber smirked wryly, then held up a two-finger peace sign before falling backwards and following her brother down the chute.

That... that happened, Cleito thought incredulously to herself, wondering how she'd even *begin* to explain all of this to Mentor, to Lola... to *anyone*, really. Holding the hood of her cloak tight in her hands, Cleito searched the lanes around her and began the long trek back to where Lola had left her hiding on the beachfront.