

ANIMA

A Novella by Brian Taylor

work in progress by Brian Taylor

a.

A body lay on the slim, hovering hospital slab. Doused in a sharp, sterile light from the silent luminesces above, the body's features are flattened, their third dimension stripped and shorn off like a cocoon. Thin streaks of shadow remain. Between rough-hewn hands, fingers splayed up, artificially stimulated musculature, the dark skin, the tattoos on the face. These have been lost as reminders of what once inhabited the body. Now they are variables, question marks, strings on a wall. Clues.

The body is face down, the head to the side. The eyes are closed, darting wildly behind the eyelids and betraying a convulsive dream state. The tattoos on the body's face and back convalesce, arabesque loops prostrating to a mound in the lower back at which sits a quarter-sized misshapen lump of a pink stone embedded in the skin. The all-powerful anima core, containing all traces of personhood, radiates with a distressed warmth. Upon closer inspection, though, one would notice that rather than a misshapen single stone, it is a grotesque fusion of two diamond-shaped stones, merged together with ephemeral, glowing striations twitching in the fibers between the two.

The Surgeon stands at a console in front of the slab. To his right is a nurse, a woman with four arms who has managed to busy them all, tapping through consoles and screens that surround her at her station. To his left is a bio-psion, who, with the sharp hum and subtle buzz around his head, is taking measurements of the body. Metrics. He will soon report that the body is alive, of Rordàñese descent, and that the physical landmarks of sentience have all been reached.

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Above the slab and the body upon it is a balcony riddled with yet more panels and screens and holographic interfaces, at which several others are working. The one in the center wears powder blue robes and a geometric headpiece that occludes their eyes, indicating that they are a medical neuro-psion. The buzzing ripple of air around their head has begun to hum with the chorus of matching frequencies, signaling the synchronization of their mind with the body on the slab.

"I'm seeing ego," says the neuro-psion.

"And?" demands the Surgeon. The Surgeon has more arms than anyone else, a peacock of appendages shadowing his scrubbed up and masked body. And more to do with each of the arms, too, as he sterilizes arms 3-6 in a nearby black box that bathes them in cleansing particles. Arms 8 and 9 have begun to probe and prod the pink stones at the body's lower back, each touch corresponding with a ping on his and others' consoles, feeding the emergent data through a chain of worried, wide eyes.

"It is hard to tell," says the neuro-psion. A haze of alarming pings and pops feed off of the console in front of them while the static around their head seems to grow in visibility as they strain, their eyes intense, lips white, hands grasping the railing on either side of them as they search wildly through the frenetic mind of the body on the slab. "But I believe I am getting *two distinct thought patterns*."

The Surgeon makes an audibly sharp intake of breath. "What has he done?"

"Confirmed," says the neuro-psion, whose halo of thrumming, hot air has begun to make a low, static popping noise. "There are two minds in this body. They're... bleeding into each other. I am going to need help."

Someone else at a different console says, "Synaptic passages deteriorating—the anima relays can't handle the cognitive load."

"Obviously," barks the Surgeon. "Two minds aren't meant to exist this way." He snaps his fingers at an orderly, dressed in red. "Get me the See—I need a psychic gestalt."

Yet another klaxon; another distressed voice: "I'm showing positronic burnouts on all of the stones' conduits." The body on the slab will enter shutdown at this rate, and that revelation spreads through the room like a silent fire.

The Surgeon curses in some language even the neuro-psion struggles to translate. "I want a complete system freeze," he says harshly to the bio-psion, who is rubbing his temples. His halo has taken on a hue, an almost pink grapefruit color, as he leans on his console, sweat beading on his forehead. "Almost there," says the bio-psion between struggling breaths.

The body on the slab twitches, then the skin visibly grays in the blaring surgical light as the body is frozen in real-time, the efforts of the bio-psion apparent as he exhales sharply and leans forward in a brace.

"Neural pathways stabilized," says an attendant. "But the stones are still fusing."

"I can't tell who is who anymore," says the neuro-psion between failing gasps.

The Surgeon, for all his barking, looks up sympathetically to the neuro-psion above him. "Try to stay in there," he says. "Backup is on the way."

"I have names," says another attendant, who has been searching through a Commonwealth database. "The body belongs to High Arbiter Meirion-Lyen Gillead of Rordàn."

"The invading stone?" asks the Surgeon.

The attendant looks confused by the word choice, but answers nonetheless: "Tabir Lanka of Luz Wa.

Chatter bursts through the room at the mention of the name.

The room is suddenly no longer white in that clinical light. Everything is now red as an acrid buzz fills the air and the neuro-psion falls to his knees.

The attendant next to him, while furiously swiping through readouts, shouts, "Subjects have begun to Sting! Thought patterns degrading; full cognitive collapse is imminent—"

At that moment, the doors to the operating theatre slide open. A precession of powder-blue robes sweep into the theatre, surrounding the body. The High See of Telepathic Commerce, a gaggle of nine neuro-psions crowned the Commonwealth's best, exert their presence over the gawking array of medical staff. The See exchange brief glances, the identity of the body in question passing between them like a game of telepathic telephone. They do well to hide their unease. Even a prodding mind wouldn't see it at first sweep.

"About time." The Surgeon swipes his console away from him so that he can step up to the slab as well. The Surgeon barks at a technician: "intravenous sustenance for the neuro-psions who need it. We will be here a while."

"Doctor," says a nurse. "Before you go in."

"Quickly," snaps the Surgeon.

"I think it's important to know I just received a report from the Mirror; Tabir Lanka has no backup states and neither does Meirion-Lyen Gillead."

Less so at the mention of the name and moreso at the news this time, chatter again bursts through the room before it is quieted by a clap of all the surgeon's hands, filling the room with a deafening slap.

work in progress by Brian Taylor

"We don't know what we're going to see in there," he says, pointing at the body's brow. "In order to retain their selfhood, they will likely retreat to strong memories. Perhaps they will even weaponize them against each other in an attempt to take both stones. The feedback will be intense."

Hesitation ripples through the room. One does not have to be a neuro-psion to grasp at the nervous energy.

He points at the nurse who gave the news from the Mirror. "I want cascading reports deposited to me while I'm in the gestalt. I want to know what happened, and I want Chancellor Gillead informed that his son has been involved in some sort of... heinous experimentation. I want to know who deleted those backups; that's murder."

The nurse nods as the blue-clad figures surround the body on the slab.

The stones in Meirion-Lyen Gillead's lower back have reduced in the number of striations, the glowing more subtle now. Like a dying light, or a bright one that has tunneled too deep into mire.

Simultaneously, the ring of figures around the body on the slab, including the Surgeon, take in a deep, audible breath. A faint aurora of yellow and red hues radiates from their heads as they close their eyes and bow their faces toward the slab. A residual *pop* echoes through the now deadly silent operating theatre as their minds lock with those inside the body. The second floor neuro-psion collapses with relief, forgoing their own connection. The operating theatre goes dark.

It has begun.

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THE LEGACY OF CODEPENDENCE AND SIMULACRAE OF SPIRITISM SIGNPOSTED IN THE DREAMS OF THE YOUNG

The Tsujing-Basque Cliffside is a dangerous crowd of steep cliffs that overlooks the choppy waters of the Quesaji Ocean. There's a sloping, lazy hiking trail splitting off from the more rural parts of the city that thins out as one gets nearer to the cliffs, but it's known for its striking view and its cold, unrelenting wetness since the seaspray strikes the cave ceiling and then drips back down. There is a particular cliff that crops out among the wet stone, spread like an eagle over the jumble of lethal rock staggering below it. One either has to physi-psionically float themselves up the sheer edge of the precipice right after the hiking trail ends, or endure a particularly brutal climb to reach it. I try to make this slick and cold climb once a month. It is just over two hours of harsh labor, but by the time I collapse, soaking and sweaty, onto the underhang of dry, warm grass at the top, it becomes a clarifying and cleansing work.

One side of the knoll beholds a vista of the sea. Just as an athlete should stretch their muscles, train and challenge their bodies, so too must a neuro-psion with their mind. There is a thought exercise I could technically do anywhere, but prefer to perform it here, where it's easier to visualize. I sink my toes into the loamy, spiral-plant-ridden soil at the edge of the knoll and I push the breadth of my mind out to fill the entire cavern of Luz Wa's interior. I stretch my psyche out until it brushes the outer limits of this yawning chasm, lit only by the twining tendrils of the *Santo Guana* as it passes betwixt the planet's crust. I remain there, stretched, flexing, balanced on one leg with my arms outstretched. Closing my eyes, I dig until my toes are almost entirely submerged as I *push* against the boundaries of the cavern I call home, saturating the rock with the outer limits of myself.

The other side of the outcropping provides a vista of Luz Wa's capitol city, Jinse de Ciudadela. The sprawling labyrinth of interconnected stone towers affixed to the ceiling of Luz Wa is almost dense enough to cover the blue-black churn of the frigid, glassy oceans farther below. It's harder to imagine myself stretching across it. I prefer the empty, the uninhabited, where I don't feel as if I have to account for everyone else clambering around in the city below me. So that when my mind and my presence pass back through the sharp edges of reality it doesn't take any fragments with it, that I am not visited by unwanted memories and whispers as I breathe in the silence and temper my ability.

When I have visualized as far as my mind will take me, I begin to slowly breathe out and shrink back, making sure to touch every surface with my imagination as I go, until I can almost see every detail in the Tsujing-Basque region. Every sharp stone, every random spore or slithery cave animal. Every whale, every beach and every grain of sand, **and this is the memory I have chosen.**

It is a comforting exercise; grounding. **Empowering.**

Though, conversely, I mention it because it was in the middle of one such meditation that Octavian Cajetan Bai appeared to me on that knoll, preceded by the quick and sharp buzz of ozone in my nostrils to indicate a teleportation had occurred.

I was in the right spot of my exercise that I was able to pinpoint his presence and his mind instantly. Knowing it was someone who could wait, I kept going, shrinking from the edges of the cavern until I passed Octavian himself, his skin light with detail and his robes wash with color. After I finished I righted myself and opened my eyes. He was indeed standing there in front of me, patient and erudite, with his arm outstretched for me to take. He said nothing, for he knew he didn't need to, as I had already passed through him and gained everything I needed to know.

I took his arm and he took me, stepping through an invisible threshold such that the ozone smell this time overtook my senses for a brief moment, my toes half-sunk in mud one moment and streaked across polished tile the next. I had been transported to my father, and, in the middle of my meditation, had forgotten to adorn footwear. I winced, knowing what was coming next as his voice filled my mind.

You have brought mess again, Tabir Philomel.

“I apologize,” I responded aloud, frowning. “I had been out on the cliffs and took Octavian’s travel without thinking.” The room I called ‘Father’ is a simple box, about fifty feet on all measurements, made of polished and processed white tile from the rich marble veins of Luz Wa. Carved into the tiles from the singular entry door to the far wall opposite it are small veins of pulsing pink light, which conflate to a hollow opposite the door. The hollow contains the small, pink, and humming anima core that holds my father’s consciousness. Behind each tile is a server farm, allowing my father access to much of Luz Wa’s computing system, security, data analytics, and most vitally, the communication array that juts out of the surface as a large, ringed obelisk.

So long as you clean what you have dirtied. Your meditation was refreshing. My father brushed against me affectionately, his presence vast in this little room, as if to telepathically pat me on the head. He retracted as I couldn’t help but feel a prickle of resentment; the difference in our ages being a minuscule fraction of my age now, and the patronizing way the contact had come off.

“Yes,” I replied.

The Iron Hand has chosen a new High Arbiter.

“And?” I responded, only vaguely aware of the fact that Octavian had taken his leave, whisking himself away to his own estate having taken leave of his duties for the day.

The Cuna Illustrata have requested a talented meta-psion to aid him. He has arrived here on Luz Wa as part of his tour. You will guide him?

“Not Octavian?” I said. I spoke aloud to my father as part of a slight self-deception; that I may keep some of my speech or affect private by vocalizing, but it wasn’t true. My disappointment and resistance were as loud as my words in here.

The Bai are ambassadors, not servants. Octavian has taken leave to travel, and you were registered to the assistance list and matched to him. You may as well start now.

“The new High Arbiter needs teaching?” I asked. “I thought I had removed myself. Meta-psionics have bored me for a long time.”

Not teaching, replied Father. Temperance. We conspired to control Gillead from the start.

"What message do we send that what we call 'guardians' must be accompanied by a handler?" I asked, though I knew I knew the answer and I knew that as soon as it entered my mind, it floated out into my father like a stray dust mote.

So, rather than answer; rather than say the Commonwealth's governing body could not hide their inert fear of the Iron Hand and the Rordàne, or project that fact to me, my Father did what Ning Anselmo Lanka did best; make it about me, personally.

You have been dormant. Aside from your sessions with Calixta or your music, you have grown stagnant, and I will have no daughter of mine put her skills not to the use of the Commonwealth.

"Fair enough," I relented. I unfolded a handkerchief from my knapsack and began to clean up my mud mess, folding the tangible bits into the handkerchief and polishing away the stains. "It is apparent to me that I should do a bit of exploring anyhow; I am too good at meditating on the cliffs."

It was true; I had not taught, mentored, guided, or explored in a few decades. I had mostly focused on my music, which had transfix me to a degree, and I had begun to fall away from contributing to the Commonwealth's psionic zeitgeist. Truly, I had learned in an effort to study and sate my curiosities, and then hopefully to instill a fragment of those curiosities in those I taught. As time went on, however, as I began to see the layers of wonder fall away from the Commonwealth in the later years, revealing something raw and chafing underneath. Memories from its conception that I did not want to relive, and yet echoed throughout its systems even nearly a hundred years later. **Memories that stirred fear in me, fear of the change that comes with the superiority of the Iron Hand.**

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The truth is the Constellatory Commonwealth is incredibly young for a vast and burgeoning empire. We have want for nearly nothing except experience, and the way our individual societies evolved before that had been via a cunning and yet inherent manipulation of legacy. People passed down their curiosities, their shared trauma, their experiences and their ignorance when they died. They handed them to the next generation. Reproduction, along with the inert necessity of it, came with traceable lines of logic and dialogue through centuries of growth.

So too, then, when the necessity of procreation runs out like a sluice stopped only by a lack of technologic advancement, those traceable lines—striations of the past—dissolved with it. The shells unto which we bear our minds and our burdens can be infinite or traded like a stack of playing cards. The knowledge cannot be passed down unless the choice is made to fabricate a new generation—to collaborate and bear intellectual young if not reproductive young. It becomes strangled and overcomplicated the longer it resides within the same generation. The Commonwealth must actively commit effort to create a simulacrum of a genetic inheritance, so that our civilization does not stagnate, lest we become complicit in the scarcity that saturates the universe around us. Lest we turn our burning gaze inward, immolating ourselves and our confounding logics in the process.

I accepted the assignment to pair with Meirion-Lyen Gillead, then, if for no other reason than to know that he was part of this fabricated generation. That he, in his youth, contained a less muddy version of the light I had begun to bury under inanity and boredom. **Under a mnemonic charade. We could have shared that light, we could have lived in it and slid like drops of dew down the eternity of Prime Futures, never looking back.**

*

Dorotea Jesenia Lanka is my little sister. She, too, is of a younger generation. My mother had eliminated the parts of herself that allowed for conception and birth not long after she had had Calixta and I. Dorotea was born of a process not unlike cloning, utilizing my father's leftover genetic materials as he shed his human form and became the server farm. My mother imparted, too, part of her cognizance, her proto-psionic tendencies, giving Dorotea a similar disposition to Gilead, though not as intense. She is, to all ends, an experiment, and she knows that and carries it with purpose if not seriousness.

At 22, a full quarter of my age, Dorotea looks so strikingly like me as a young woman that I occasionally double-take, some haunted fragment of my former self striking out at me as I look at her. The way her dark skin frames her face, unblemished and laid bare like a fresh coat of varnish over her sharp, high cheekbones and thin hooded eyes. Nonetheless, she is a bright star of a proto-psion, relays her talents via canvas and paint and hands them off as prophecies like a fun little game. She takes nothing seriously, not even her art, which I find at once both amusing and bitterly grating.

She had come back from her month tenure with the Joyous Choir as they took a leisure tour around some emerging localized supernovae, and was waiting for me with her arms crossed over large, shallow, square package when I stepped off the landing pattern outside Father and made my way toward the city proper. Father is nestled in a hulking white administrative complex that serves as Luz Wa's courthouse, capitol building, and meditation hall. People bring their grievances, their questions, their battles, and their devotion to the *Santo Guana* here. Sometimes before my father, sometimes irrelevant to him, but he is ever-present in the complex nonetheless. Less a president or mayor and more a service, a throughline for his people in a way he'd always dreamed. The complex is nestled on the outer rim of Jinse de Cuidadela, hugged up against a particularly large stalactite that gifts the top edges of the white complex's roof with a sweet tinge of green lichen and moss.

I emerged from the shadow of the citadel to see the yellow-green light bouncing off of Dorotea's own green eyes as they looked for me, excited. We stood under a particularly bright clump of the *Santo Guana* mycelium, and it cast its healthy radiance down on us and our reunion with abandon, bathing us in our own personal "sunlight".

"For you," she said without a speck of caution, holding out the wrapped package which was clearly a painting.

"Whatever could it be?" I asked with a sarcastic smirk, taking both the painting and my sister in a long embrace.

"I dreamt of you on my way back. You're cloudy this week," she pouted.

"According to Father, my sense of fulfillment wanes," I said dramatically. "I've been given a security charge."

"So you'll be travelling with the Hand?" she said, almost excited. "Exhilarating."

"Will it be? We haven't needed security for the better part of a century."

"Not that," she said, already exasperated with me. "A charge!"

I gestured rudely. "Babysitting."

"Very much so," she agreed. "But isn't it an honor to have such a firm trust placed in you?"

"You say that as if I ever wanted such a thing," I said. "For Father, Dorotea, 'trust' merely explicates further responsibility and expectation."

"I think it's not so much that, as an instinct," said Dorotea, her finger on her chin, peering up at the mycelium above us. "To pass along. You've taught, but you haven't *mentored*. That's what mother says. You're all in your own cloudy head, Tabir," she said. **And she was right.**

I say this to myself, often now, and always in Dorotea's voice.

I unwrapped my painting as we walked down the long, angular stretch of marbled stairs that ended on a pavilion not unlike a mall plaza, now surrounded by stalls for the exhumation of goods and services—of course, not paid for, but exchanged like ideas. Anyone can requisition new garb from the Grails, but it takes that staunch hit of imagination to really come up with what Luz Wa Bo call 'fashion.' Such that, as art, or as counted idea, a marketplace to the Commonwealth means something much more Socratic than 'mall.'

The crowd, and the vehicles that carried much of it, buzzed and swarmed by us as we anonymously made our way across the pavilion toward the long stretch of metal and plastic that served as the docking bay for aircraft. Luz Wa has a spaceport near the communications array, but in order to penetrate the surface proper, one must use the docking station; an elaborate array of pneumatic elevators carved into a rotund and hollowed-out stalactite, one of which spilled out onto Jinse de Ciudadela's main street like an upside-down ant colony. We made our way across the bridge, Dorotea casting her gaze down into the oceans below, watching the water churn sleek and black and infinite, but I had cast onto something else. I had finished unwrapping my painting, and saw within it a man dressed in black. Dark skin, thick eyebrows, a burly beard that came to a point, and arabesque flows of facial tattoos running down the left side of his face and curling toward his back, tucking beneath the shift of his clothing. The painting was very vivid and Dorotea's command of color had become highly realistic. I knew how accurate it was because the man in the painting was also the man staring at me from across the main street crowd.

I saw Gillead for the first time at once very far away, very up close, and in my own mind. A triple-introduction. He knew who I was, where I was coming, and from what angle I would approach, and thus his mind was open and waiting for me as I stared at him from across the busy docking ring. **Looking at me with enthusiasm. Even then calculating the eons of probabilities that now lay before us. Back and forth. Touching minds as much as futures.** He stood there, as small as I would see him from so far away, dressed in loose, black strands of smooth cloth tucked into the various clasps and buckles that adorned Rordàñese clothing, puffy at areas like the arms and thighs but tight and strapped everywhere else. The clan tattoos on his face dripping down and connecting smoothly to disappear under the folds of his clothes, all the details fit as an impressive showcase of my sister's precognitive ability, but even that was no match for Gillead's.

I instinctively knew to reach out to him in that moment, because he had already looked at me, our unaided senses brushing up against each other. If his physical introductions had been of a sleek, taut and rough-hewn man with a glimmering eye and a permanent smirk, his mental introduction had clarified an undercurrent of overconfidence, mirth, and something I hesitate to call cruelty. It wasn't an *urge* to harm, or a proclivity toward suffering, but it was a raw acceptance of such things, that, were it not for some loose shreds of conscience, may

eventually turn *into* cruelty. A cruelty spurred by the relativity of morality. A cruelty bathed in the light of the Prime Future.

I locked with him in our minds and spoke to him immediately. The intimacy of such an immediate connection may stagger some, but we were both prepared for it, and I in a chastising way where he was eager and seemed to have assumed I would be pleased by his readiness.

You are too open with your mind, I mentioned to him. *For a High Arbiter.*

Hello to you, as well, Tabir Philomel Lanka.

Do not do that. I could feel him rummaging around. Looking in drawers I hadn't kept quite locked, but had clearly marked as private.

You will not be as forthcoming as me?

No.

Off to a great start then. Shall we meet somewhere for tea?

"You're already speaking, then," chimed Dorotea, our words invisible to her but the connection obvious, as we were both staring silently at each other from nearly a quarter-mile away.

"Tea," I said, snapping the connection abruptly and shelling myself off. I sensed that he stood at the locked doors of my consciousness, and had felt something like admiration pulse when I slammed them shut, the consensual knowledge that he could not possibly breach my defenses, and that it would be rude to try.

I deferred to Dorotea about the teashop; she had her favorites and I had mine, but she and Gillead were the ones who had just arrived, so I thought I would reserve my preferences for later. I, with my mind sealed shut like an iron grate and reinforced with a meta-psionic alarm, spotted Gillead hopping acrobatically down the various breezeways that interlinked under Jinse de Ciudadela's main streets, either having already foreseen where Dorotea will choose to take us or just wandering aimlessly until I opened back up and told him.

We took off toward it, knowing he was sweeping under us, unseen, some childlike joy emanating from his actions.

He had toed the threshold already, his candor less refreshing than irritating to me. It did not occur to me at the time, much less had it occurred to me until it was too late, that Gillead had already shown me his lack of understanding about consent, telepathic self-regulation, and boundary control. That he may have already known what monstrous things he would do, in time, and had accepted them as one accepts the light of a sun—or, for that matter, a glowing mycelium.

* * *

I did not have to read Gillead's mind to tell that he did not want to share or speak verbally. He had wanted to simply dump information on me telepathically, to make the encounter as short as possible. This, I would learn, was part of a Prime Future in which he spent as little time on Luz Wa as possible, so as to return to Rordàn in order to watch a sporting event which he believed his attendance at would affect the probability of the match. Which, in an essential sense, is cheating.

"So, ladies, tell me a little bit about yourselves," he said, commanding with the entitlement of a High Arbiter. We were sat on an outcropping from the roof of a coffee shop that had been carved into a rock formation. The panel flooring of the outcropping was glass, which meant you could see the waves and their silvery reflection of the *Santo Guana* below. Whether it helps to facilitate her watchful precognitive eye or is just a peaceful stimulation for her burdened mind, Dorotea loves to watch them.

"Me first," said Dorotea, which I knew she knew I was thankful for. "I'm Dorotea—" she reached her hand across the table to shake with Gillead, who bowed his head and mirrored the gesture, though it was clearly alien to him, "—the youngest of the Lanka sisters, painter and proto-psion, and I was promoted to facilitator at the Joyous Choir today!"

Had we been standing, I would've whirled on her. I frowned and said, "you had not told me this."

"You had not asked," she said back at me in my own intonation. The scalding little woman.

"The Choir!" Gillead barked, bringing his cider back from his lips with an indulgent grin. "They threw a lavish party on Rordàn-Tebum last year. I hardly remember a thing."

"I heard about that—Sevnika, yeah?" asked Dorotea. Her favorite musical group, one I had drawn numerous inspiration from as well.

Gillead nodded, but his eyes had already drifted to me. Expectantly.

"I get the feeling you did your research on me already," I said.

"Sure, but the only true data is acquired at the source," he replied smoothly.

"Tabir is a first-generation with two psionic disciplines!" said Dorotea. I shot her a look of resignation.

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Gillead leaned forward on his elbows. "Yes, a fascinating combination. Neuro-psionics and meta-psionics. Very interior, Tabir." He nodded as he said this. "Makes for a fantastic teacher even without your latent fame."

The reality that our relationship was likely to be long and intimate was what prevented me from sucking my teeth. "Quite," I said. "Although most of my tenure has been the scholarship of other first-generations."

"Generations," said Gillead caustically, leaning back and rolling his eyes. "No such thing."

"A very second-generation thing to say," I said.

"Tell me, Tabir. What is the point of dividing us by age, when we are *ad infinitum* already?"

"Some of us have been *ad infinitum* longer than others, simply put," I said, but ultimately relented: "the distinction will fade. It is important, however, to remember that some of us had seen the Commonwealth before such infinity existed. That is why it matters now."

A thin smile grew across Gillead's face as he took another sip of his cider. "Well said. That is why I so loathe the term 'second-generation.' 'Final-generation' is more befitting." He looked up, at Luz Wa's mantle, the sprawling ceiling of a civilization that had long transcended it. The smooth yellow-green glow of the mycelial network stretching across the ceiling, nearly stars, but less ephemeral. More physical. More present. More alive, to be perceived, and almost to perceive back, as if aware of the transactional nature of its relationship to the Luz Wa

Bo, the people. "This place is wonderful. The mycelium is wonderful, too. It's almost as if you have a sky."

"We do have a sky," said Dorotea cheerfully. "Just because you can put your hand flat against the roof doesn't make it not a sky."

Gillead looked at her with bemusement, **eyes intoning 'says whom,'** but carried on. "A fascinating ecological condition. Seen nowhere else in the charted sector, I believe."

"Glowing mycelium is a fairly common phenomenon in this sector," I said. "But glowing mycelium that radiate nutrients and an action spectrum by which many of our plants grow is a unique case."

"I hear the *Santo Guana* also reacts in an interesting capacity to bio-psionics."

"Yes. That is how we've cultivated them."

"May we see?" Gillead asked.

"I am not an ambassador, nor a tour guide," I said.

"I was going to head to a spore facility anyhow," said Dorotea. "I want to do a color study of mother's face in the spores. You can both come with."

"You are the only one still celebrating her birthday," I relented with a sigh, standing. I had ordered a *miitengue* tea, an herbal cocktail steeped at a boil which had become nearly an addiction for me, but hadn't really touched it. I poked a finger in to test the warmth, found that it had cooled considerably, and downed the whole thing in one swig before I set the teacup on our tray, pushing it over to Dorotea, who added hers.

Gillead, who had reacted to my display of consumption with something **not unlike** disgust, pulled the tray to himself and stood with it, swinging his chair back into place with one leg as he held his cider mug in the other hand. He set it on the counter on the ground floor inside the cafe and continued out with the mug of cider still in his hand, which earned a few strange looks and mutterings as we rounded the corner out into the street. Neither Dorotea or I said anything, as the cafe wouldn't particularly *miss* the mug, and could easily requisition another hundred, but it wasn't exactly considered polite.

"I suppose I must look rather strange," said Gillead as we walked through the breezeways of the city, carved out of stone and fused in place by animators, and spatial rivets which stabilized them, giving them a slightly barbaric look that was subtly betrayed by the visible circuitry running through many of their angles and corners. "I've gotten a lot of stares."

"Strange' seems rather cruel," I said. "You are noticeable, and different, but I would not say strange. Also, it is not customary to imbibe like that in public." The awkward hesitation to point this out had waned, **apparently**.

Gillead smiled suddenly, my words likely unheard, his eyes growing distant, but he kept walking in pace with us. I sensed it immediately: he was prophesying. He said, without breaking his trance, "how lovely." Odd. Curiously, I lowered my defenses for a moment, and saw that mentally he was already beckoning me to join him. I did hesitate, in that moment, knowing Dorotea could not participate. It was also admittedly difficult to continue walking while maintaining that type of connection, but I, after a moment, did so. There was something he had wanted to show me, and it seemed so harmless and banal then. I accepted, curiosity and a fascination that came with being a meta-psion winning out over my caution and apprehension toward strange men. I took his hand and followed him into the corridor of his vision.

* * *

Gillead's ability to foresee sublime detail, incredible probability, the calculation of which was immeasurable, became immediately apparent to me in a wave of almost nauseating psionic power as I drew myself into his vision of the future. We were at the sporehouse. This could not be more than fifteen minutes into the future; the end of our walk. I was immediately irritated, as there could be no motivation to prophecy this moment except in an act of showboating the likes of which I despise. **But everything was crystal clear.** Not a shuddering kaleidoscope of probability the likes of which I see when I perform this exercise with Dorotea. It almost made no sense to me, that I had to search so hard to find the shimmer of visage within the prophecy, that I wasn't actually just regaining consciousness fifteen minutes from now and we were actually presently at the sporehouse.

But I saw it in all in the true glory of what it was in-person.

The massive single pane of thick glass stood in front of us in the observation deck, having the room to ourselves. Below us, on the floor of the sporehouse, was a festival of fruiting bodies. The Thought Graves lay just behind, a field of thrones at which sat a row of eleven bio-psions wearing large headphones, what I guessed was the beginning of the midday shift. I am admittedly jealous of the bio-psions who work on this place. I do not share the ~~immortalizing reverence~~ of the mycelium that the more spiritual people of Luz Wa do—that is a practice more commonly seen in the smaller cities that lay in the twisting, river-cut tunnels that branch endlessly off of one of the gigantic main caverns underneath the planet's crust. However, I do have a *certain* reverence for them, perhaps more of an admiration than anything. They do, objectively, provide the lifeblood of my entire civilization. That fact cannot be argued, and it is woven into my persona like a mortal to their flesh.

"The bio-psions at the Thought Graves have interconnected special ligatures in the backs of their necks and their wrists that they use to interface with those thrones," Dorotea was saying in the prophecy. "The *Santo Guana* thrive off of bio-psionic energy. Luz Wa biopsions cultivate the mycelium with their minds, facilitated by *music*. Isn't that wonderful?"

I had seen this place many times, and I knew what Dorotea had requisitioned ahead of us, so I did not look down directly at the spore farm in the vision—we were going to be there reliving this in a mere fifteen minutes, anyhow. I chose in that moment to visualize his psionic power, a basic meta-psionic technique, out of nothing more than curiosity. But what it instilled in me, that to this very moment I can tell is shaking in these bones, was far and away from satisfaction. It wasn't fear or awe, really, it was more of an entrenching scientific discovery. I felt, at least in the moment, objective about it. Impressed by it. Shaken by the fact that he did nothing to temper or conceal it, and how much physical stress that must be doing to the psionic lesions on his brain. Maybe even disturbed by the thought that perhaps this prophecy was so clear because he was merely able to *will* probability to such an intricate degree. But I did not come to fear it until much later. His proto-psionic potential stood above and around and through him as a solid red obelisk of radiant energy, which reflected in my eyes like a searing gulf of magma. I dared not tear my vision away from this, even as the future played out in front of us at the sporehouse, the details on the walls. The exact words Dorotea would say, the exact way I would reply in exasperation. All of that paled to me in sight of this domineering subject.

So I place little fragments of nothingness in its way.

In all of that I was also walking with the two of them toward the sporehouse, and I am loathe to admit I very nearly tripped coming out of it, briefly bracing myself on the wall with a steady hand, but I continued to match pace.

“What just happened,” Dorotea said dejectedly. “You should share.”

“You will see in a moment, Dorotea,” said Gillead reassuringly. Glintingly. His gaze briefly cast on me, knowing I had seen what I had seen, beyond what he had shown me.

One thing Gillead’s prophecy had skipped over was the throng of Church of Mycology Bai that were gathered at the sporehouse for a sermon. We saw them from a distance as we rounded a tight stone corridor that wove between two stalactites that happened to have grown in very close proximity: a sort of gauntlet that lay before the Eastern sporehouse.

The plaza in front of the house was packed full of people, and I went first in our little entourage so I could clear a path, gently touching to move others out of my way. A good deal of them recognized Dorotea and I before we got to them and quietly stepped out of our path, but the final obstacle was the chanter, a man dressed similarly to Octavian and bellowing out sharp, guttural verses in our native tongue that, long ago, had been said to teach the *Santo Guana* to grow.

I was surprised, if not *appalled* to turn and see that Gillead’s face had twisted into a distasteful sneer, as if what was happening was of offense to him. I cocked my head inquisitively, opening my mind again so that I could inquire what he had set him on this demeanor. ~~I was struck by an irritation with a depth I hadn't expected.~~ This reminded ~~us~~ of something, and it set him on a whole separate track from the one he’d been operating on. He was almost completely different now, having shifted under some invisible curtain to a Gillead I profess was easier to understand but whose company became mottled with ~~anger~~ disgust. I locked with him and, hoping it may clarify what he was seeing, translated the chanter’s song.

*So too does the beast-god flow forth flowing from the lips of the rock lion
So too does the beast-god shrink back when it lacks the light of our voice
So too does our voice shrink back when the god-beast dare not flow forth
The lips of the lion dry, the lips of the lion yellow and red
The surface dwells of gas and dust, shining red rust
Savage sisters above
Santo Guana flows below, murmuring
Murmuring*

He cut me off, after this, his own defenses coming down like a metal shutter. Someone was playing a three-tone flute, a mechanism that must be balanced with physi-psionic power and gave off a melody not unlike bird singing, if accompanied by its own distant thrum of a drumbeat that would echo directly into the listener’s psyche. I found it pleasant, recognizing with a swell of pride that I had actually instructed this performer on the instrument, but Gillead ~~clearly found it grating~~ had little time for a swell of banal beatification. As if in a hurry to arrive at his prophecy, he shoved past, angling himself to slip roughly through the crowd, attracting mild ire.

We followed him at our own pace, the sermon continuing behind us: the chanter would speak of how the Luz Wa Bo used to live on the surface, in the brackish and gaseous swamps

(some still do), and struggled to survive amidst famines, difficult foraging and hunting, and a landscape that was hostile to us. The discovery of the *Santo Guana* in a copper mine—and the subsequent discovery of the continent-sized hollows underneath the planet's mantle—paved the way for the civilization now bursting under Luz Wa; a veritable underground paradise, while the toxic swamps above bubbled and smoked still. **Purists**, those who feared the *Santo Guana* and the power it had over us and our food and our light, stayed on the surface. They have become distant from us, now, and are not outright violent but are incredibly anti-social and aggressive. It is a primary tale in all of Luz Wa civilization; a cautionary one that we must adapt to changing strata, respond to stimuli. We must not stagnate, **lest we become the poison spear wielding savages above.**

I was lost in the rumination of this because Gillead had reacted so poorly to the sermon. He reminded me in more than a few ways, I realized then, of the sisters above. Their revulsion of our worship and their distaste for our polity, much like his revulsion of the sermon and distaste for the Church of Mycology. I assumed, correctly, that he held the opinion of much of the Commonwealth at large when it came to the Church: that it was an artifice of an era gone by, a source of comfort a people should no longer need.

I confronted him about it just inside the sporehouse while Dorotea went through the formalistic motions of providing our credentials. Luz Wa doesn't have a strict social hierarchy by any stretch of the concept, but when your father is the server farm that runs over half of a city's infrastructure, privilege still comes forward in little ways.

"You disliked the sermon," I observed.

"I dislike sermons," Gillead said distantly, as if I were bothering him. I am not proud of the fact that this encouraged me to push the issue. **Pushing me as we do. To revisit our pasts and dwell in them. As opposed to forging ahead. Into the cold plunge of the unknown.**

"You think we have outgrown them."

"You think you have outgrown them," he presumed. "I am of the mind that you never should have needed them."

We had begun walking, clearing the sliding doors that double-checked our identities, past the plaques of history and scientific jargon, and to the observation deck, where I had already been fifteen minutes prior watching Gillead's latent ability storm around him with an intensity I wasn't soon to forget.

"Explain further," I said, unoffended by his vitriol.

"The mycelium grows and provides the same benefits and nutrients of sunlight without the risk of radiation or burning. It's science. It's fact. So, forgive me if I can't help but chafe on the fact that Luz Wa Bo *knew* that centuries ago and still chose to worship it like a God."

"You're wrong," said Dorotea distantly, producing a sketchbook from her knapsack. "The Church of Mycology doesn't worship the *Santo Guana* like that. They know that our relationship is utilitarian and transactional. They know about the science—they *pioneered* the science."

Some other tension had begun to grow in Gillead, too. I saw it on his face, and the lingering fragments of his psyche from our link had grown agitated from some deeper purpose. He folded his arms. "They chose to project intent and grace onto it. You cannot say that sermon outside indicates otherwise." He had become terse, grinding.

"They do project such things onto the mycelium, yes," I said as Dorotea looked down at the spore farm and began to sketch with an implement she had invented that allowed her to change the color of the charcoal at will. "Some people speak to the mycelium. Large bodies grow at Father, for people to speak with and confess."

"Superstition," Gillead said, glaring hard at the Thought Graves far across the spore farm.

"No," I said. "The mycelium thrive off of bio-psionic energy, it's true. But do you know how we cultivated them before we discovered that fact?"

"Enlighten me."

"By speaking to them. We were a troubled people, Gillead, something I would think Rordàñ would be able to identify with. Survival on the surface was harsh, and we sought ways to express that harshness to anyone except each other. Confession with the mycelium empirically caused the mycelium to respond. That is the history of the Church of Mycology. Now we have much more efficient, healthier, and more artistically fulfilling ways of cultivating the *Santo Guana*, but much like the fights on your planet, we have a tradition of counsel with the mycelium on ours. Would you say the same thing about the Temple of the Mind?"

"Our traditions temper us, create High Arbiters," Gillead protested. "The Temple of the Mind is not *spiritualism* but a strata of practices to hold our psionic abilities in check. We gave it a strange shape, but nevertheless that is the *function* it performs."

"But they are also viewed for entertainment, aren't they?" Dorotea said distantly, noncommittally. "Did Rordàñ not establish the art of combat as a form of expression as the planet collapsed, too? Does the Temple of the Mind not frame psionics as a tangible manifestation of good will?"

I noticed that Gillead's fist was clenched, such that his knuckles had become light. The debate was grounded in ethnocentrism, surely, but for Dorotea and I it had not become volatile or heated. Rordàñ is an intemperate place, fraught in areas, with a long and complex history. Their latent stiff but strictly non-aggressive views of interplanetary Others are exactly why they do so well as guardians of the Commonwealth. I frowned at him, at his disproportionate response, until it clicked.

This was not Gillead's prophecy. Dorotea had not amiably explained to him about the Thought Graves. He had not expected the sermon in his vision, how it would affect him. He hadn't accounted for a surprise religious moment to blind him out of the blue. That incredibly rich, detailed and clear vision was spoiled by something he already distrusted. **Something left to shadow and abandoned for the light of unearned comfort. A bastion in a sea of unsurety. Weakness.**

I learned more about Gillead in that moment than I had all day.

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. We're not going to change each other's minds."

"No, but you asked, Gillead," I ventured. "You wanted to see this. You were curious about Luz Wa. The Church of Mycology is a free, open practice. Not everyone on Luz Wa participates, not everyone who participates goes to confession. It is the same as attending a lecture. It is a transference, a carrying-on. A reminder—perhaps more for your final-generation than anything else, that things were not always this way. That is the function *it* performs." Perhaps one day the Church will fade. That in our immortality we *will* choose to leave that past behind. But a mere few centuries ago, we were slogging through that muck with nothing to

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protect us but thin-woven cloth and the sharp thorns of huangbo trees. That ~~cannot~~ should be tossed aside like an empty knapsack."

Gillead let it go for now, but I could see that his prophecy-anger was still seething. He had long dropped the defenses he'd shuttered during the sermon and the frustration was radiating out of him in such magnitude that I didn't particularly want to look at him. We both ventured a glance down at the spore farm, then.

Dorotea had requisitioned our mother's face—her first face, the one my sisters and I had inherited. I remember her dark eyes, the radiant streak of white in her hair. The way that her lips were always pursed, as if she were deep in thought, and the way that they pulled apart to smile at us. These details could not be captured by the spores, but Dorotea filled them in on her sketchpad nonetheless.

The Thought Graves transmit bio-psionic energy to the spore farm in order to help the bodies there fruit. The spores are released in waves, then, and linger with the shapes of the energy they were gifted. Spores of blue-yellow-green wafted up from the bulbous strands of mycelium sprawled across the floor of the farm, tangible little dots of light, and they swirled together galactically to form remnants, echoes, of the thoughts and powers that had been transmitted to them.

So as they lifted slowly to the ceiling, gathering and pulsing and forming images and waves and line music and geometric swirls, some of them joined to form a large visage of my mother's face in a yellow-green hue. It lit our faces up on the observation deck, her staring at us, in that light. Dorotea had not looked down at her sketchpad once, her eyes transfixed on the mottled swirls of color that streamed across the giant spore face like oil slick on water as her hand moved her implement seemingly of its own will. I stared at the spore visage for a few moments, almost like a mirror, but carrying the weight of someone who held that countenance first. The echo of ancestry that had been passed 'naturally' to me and 'artificially' to Dorotea. She more closely matched it—I contained deviations from my father, from back when he had a body. Back when we reproduced that way. I had the color of his eyes, the angle of his chin, the droop of his earlobes and the utter pitch darkness of his hair. Dorotea retained mother's lighter brown hair, her dark eyes, her attached earlobes, the roundness of her chin and nose.

In a sense she was doing a self-portrait from the reference of the mycelium, but its weight was not lost on either Gillead nor I, for he remained silent, gave us space to ruminate. I hadn't intended for this level of intimacy upon meeting him, but nonetheless, this moment drew us closer together, all bathed in the light of my mother, and the light of the *Santo Guana*. A light that Gillead appreciated for its beauty and its physiology but not its *significance*.

I regret not taking the time to sit with the implications of that, but it is far too late to correct that now.

PRIME

Do we dream of the things we wish to see in the world? Do we dream to reconcile what we want with what is? Or are we merely sorting through the disoriented wreckage of our own telephonics? Am I to believe there is no higher purpose to dreams? That I am to just pick up the nonsensical remnants of what I have when I wake up and walk forward, without knowing what else there could be underneath that connects them?

Do we even dream any longer? Where do those pieces go when we forgo sleep, when our physiology no longer requires rest? What kind of botfly-esque invasion might they be festering in our subconscious? Or are they a forgotten necessity? In their absence, are we struggling against an unforeseen current that will eventually collapse us, Mirror and Spheres and Grails and all?

*

"No, your shoulders are slumped," said Abele. One year my senior—fifteen to my fourteen. He had his big puberty-stricken bear clubs clamped on my shoulders. The wet summer wind came up from the river, between golden *chiez* trees that dotted the Glade, and filled my nostrils with the stench of their sour fruit.

"They are not," I sniffed.

"They are. Here," Abele said, shifting my shoulders back and up. "Your *si* is crooked this way. You will counter better with your shoulders back."

"Why do you say it like that?" I said defensively.

"What like what?" Abele teased, licking the back of my neck with his tongue flat.

I recoiled, tossing myself into the stiff blue-green grass to get away from him. I drew my long sleeve across the wet area, scowling.

"Your *si* is crooked," came the voice of Abele's father, Matuin-Tesni Abele, from his seat up on his lofted deck. "Like everyone else's. *Si* is imperfection. It is intrinsic to the body."

"Yes, master," we both groaned in unison.

"Don't dismiss it," said Matuin-Tesni. "Especially you, Meirion-Lyen," he jutted his chin up at me, still prone on the grass. "Your father's influence must be curbed."

"He'd be so hurt to hear you say that," I said, getting back up, and putting myself back into my sparring pose. Shoulders up and back, like Abele had said. Neck straight, hips square, arms firmed at the shoulders but loose and ready to move at the elbows and wrists. Bent knees for impact.

What is it like to oracle? This, in all of articulation, is my one curse. I am a scion, a pillar, a gateway to a dizzying array of outcome, a primordial soup of excision and cause. But I cannot see the structure of it myself, only the mess and tangles of threads. I only have instinct with which to untangle them. Nevertheless, I saw this;

Abele charged. He was taller than me, and meatier. I was bad at eating, sensitive to criticism, and late to earn my psionic lesions. Abele was, in every way, my **teacher****superior**.

The older boy hit me with the cross of his shoulder, turning into the blow with his hips and chest, and I pushed back immediately, drawing the hard edge of my hand across his brow. His head whipped back, but my gangly arms had the longer reach. I clipped him across the

temple, causing him to stagger just enough for me to get a knee to the solar plexus in. He doubled down. I struggled. Finally, with his free arm, he wrapped his hand around my waist and half-suplexed me into the grass, turning over so that his full weight was on me, his body a barreling vehicle of destruction I knew exactly how to stop, but was just too weak to do so.

“Ugh. Puar,” I called. Defeat. Again.

“Meirion-Lyen!” called Matuin-Tesni. “You treat your opponent like a sparring rig. They are people—they will react to your teases with their full force. You play.”

“No,” I said. “Abele plays. He could’ve done that from the start.”

“If that’s true,” Abele sneered in my ear, licking me again. “Then you should’ve posed differently.”

I helped myself to some sweet coffee and a *chiez* cake inside Abele’s home. The sour fruit of the tree was inedible raw, but one could cut it with sweetrose syrup from Rordà-Tellec’s aquaponics firms and reduce them to a pulpy, stringy mess that could be used to fill pastries or be eaten warm and raw by bratty children like myself.

“Do you know why you like sweets so much?” Matuin-Tesni said, ordering his own tea through the Grail. The sick and bitter grasswater filtered through nothingness and appeared as a coalescent blob floating on the kitchen-array’s counter. Matuin-Tesni scooped it up in his mug and added his own natural sweetener to it, stirring and looking at me intently for an answer.

“Is it because of my *si*?” I asked sarcastically.

Matuin-Tesni scoffed. “You will be a transhuman, like the rest of the old Commonwealthers. I can tell.”

“So that’s why I like sweets?”

“No, fool,” Matuin-Tesni pinched a bit of sweetener between his fingers and flicked it at me. “Because your mother does. She is *obsessed* with *chiez* cake.”

It was true. It was my mother’s favorite. No doubt why she insisted that my father and his best friend Abele build their estates next to each other on the Glade. There was, to her, quite literally nothing in the world like the hot pulp of the *chiez* fruit spread on sweetbread.

“So it’s a genetics thing?” I said, taking a sip of my coffee and then breathing quickly through my nose. Too hot.

“Indeed. Your pleasure centers are wired more firmly to your sense of taste than normal. And—yes—that does connect to the ways in which your *si* deviates from a Prime Design.”

I kept from rolling my eyes this time. Matuin-Tesni was a firm classicist. A staunch believer in Rordàne values from before the Cataclysm. The obsession with *si*, the variations in muscle depth and structure that was sacred to all the ways in which Rordàn worshipped combat, and the spirituality that could be directly equated from such, was one of Matuin-Tesni’s only extant talking points. All *si* deviates from the Prime Design, the *si* our forebears carried before modernity and industry hunched us and made us dependent on calculations and computations. *Si* was the potential kinetic output of the body, its combat prowess, and the delineations through which it could be preserved—or not—by the idea of us shedding our mortal forms and obtaining the Anima Stones.

According to Matuin-Tesni.

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Fascinating—I resist this. I say no to a Prime Design. I say no to the physicality of humanity, because it is meaningless to us now in the Constellatory Commonwealth, isn't it? Aren't we? Just awaiting our own *si* is a helpful science for medicine. It is not a religion. It is not a mushroom. I am not my *si*. We are not all *si*. We are products of the Prime Future, not the Prime Design.

No, our *si* is not the Santo Guana. Violence is.

"Your love of sweets—will you pass that on to your children, I wonder?" asked Matuin-Tesni.

"Abele, please," said my father from the glass hutch. "He's fourteen."

"Fourteen is plenty old to father children. Ghereon-Glyn is already immodest with Meirion-Lyen here and his sixteenth birthday is tomorrow. Speaking of which—"

"—I have all the ingredients for the spread, yes, Abele," said my father tiredly. "You're obsessing."

I was bright red in the face now. Sure—we had experimented a bit, me and Abele. But I wasn't going to *father children* produce dirty copies.

"Good. It's better we have natural food, it's better too that our next High Arbiter has the diet." Matuin-Tesni Abele looked at me. Everyone was sure I would inherit High Arbiter from my father, even though it something earned at Tor. They were right, ultimately, but at that age all I wanted to do was smoke and follow the Choir around.

"You are trying to put your classicist ideas in his head *and* stomach," father said, his eyes jokingly accusatory.

"Damn right," said Matuin-Tesni. "The youth are the only way to keep our ways alive!"

"And if the old ways were really just buried with the Cataclysm and some of us are in denial?" my father said, eyeing Matuin-Tesni's cane.

"Shaddup," said Matuin-Tesni. "Just shaddup."

* *

The same evening I had an examination with my proto-psion tutor, Pollux-Amberei. She'd come from the academy quarter on Rordan-Tellec every other week to perform examinations and introduce new exercises, as well as generally check up on my lesions. On Rordan, our tutors and teachers are the ones who report on our psionic lesions to doctors, so he was the most informed person as to how my neurology was sorting out. One of the many things about those early years I still regret was how I treated Pollux-Amberei—she was always deferential to me and my father, always willing to show me that extra bit of instruction, and always ready to answer my questions. I think it was the structure of learning through a teacher instead of sitting in a field and staring into space that really bothered me. I used to genuinely feel that my self-directed musings were better at structuring what it means to oracle than an expert. I didn't believe in the sanctity of the Rordanese way of instruction. I didn't value what made us different than the rest of the Commonwealth.

Some contrary Tabir shit idk

I laid on the chaise that Pollux-Amberei would request be laid out in our sunroom upon her arrival. I'd be able to see the rotating lights of the archives quarter on Rordan-Tellec, a glittering black stripe against the swirl of the cosmos, from the polished glass of the ceiling, and

it had always helped lull me into a state of ideal concentration. To this day I visualize it when attempting to discern a difficult question—I think it's the silent, gradual movement of the ring. Maybe also the infinite difference of space. How I could see the blinking red of a communications tower as it stretched from East to West over the time of the meditation.

"What seems likely for dinner tomorrow?" Pollux-Amberei would say in her faint, restrained voice.

I answered quickly—"Trota."

"Prepared how?"

Again, there was hardly a beat before my answer came. I was laid on the chaise with my right arm behind my head, my left hand dangling off the furniture, looking upward while she sat with a tablet in her hands nearby.

"Filletted, steamed on a wire rack."

"Agreed. What about one week from now?"

"Garein." My favorite—a mushroom and grain stew that my father would make with wild boar. But I frowned—I didn't think he was going to prepare it that way.

"Prepared how?" she came rhythmically.

"With prawn," I said, audibly flattened.

Pollux-Amberei laughed, faint, with her hand over her mouth.

At this point I was locked into my oracle—this conversation I was having with my subconscious, this lesion-driven psionic mechanism that constantly and permanently calculated every eventuality in the background. It was sensing and interpreting things I wouldn't even know where to start if I wanted to consciously perceive them.

"What is the Commonwealth's Otoshiball score three Rordan-Cellec planetary days from now?"

"Fourteen to one, Luz Wa."

With Pollux-Amberei, it felt like walking a tightrope. My solo meditations would wander far, far into the shakiest reaches of probability, years in the future where the fibers of my visions would flip and undo themselves at the slightest touch of a blade of grass. With my teacher I had to restrain myself, to not fall into that void of infinite possibilities, to focus enough to answer her specific questions.

"What are the ticket sales of the Joyous Choir beneficiary for the war-fallen in four months? Take your time."

A pause.

"Six hundred million, four hundred and twenty-thousand—"

I slipped on the tightrope.

It was the Joyous Choir topic that got me off track, as stupid as it was. I was convinced at that time that I was going to join them in at least one tour of the Commonwealth's systemic territory, a journey that would take about thirteen years.

One should never actually regard the passage of time directly when performing an oracle. It's a dangerous slope to begin counting while consulting eternity.

I figure Pollux-Amberei must have figured out quickly that I was falling into a spiral, something that most people have the general sense and reflex to pull themselves out of eventually, but always carried the slight risk of a sting. She got to work quickly—it must have

only been a few seconds before she had the smelling salts balanced on her index finger and was positioning it under my nose.

But in those few seconds, my entire life changed. Something about thinking about the Joyous Choir, my desires and goals for my own future, and my own towering psionic capability, hurtled me so deep into my oracle, so far into the future, that I was certain I was not supposed to be here the second I laid eyes on my first scattered fragments of vision.

It was trembling and complex, and try as I might I couldn't recollect it all here.

[It is interesting to feel you try.](#)

In short I saw thousands of puzzle pieces falling together. It was as if my mind was born already knowing what order to put them in, as I saw the end of my life before the rest of it filled in before me. Crossroads upon crossroads, choices laid out me like the neurons of ten million brains, all radically different trajectories and lengths, sometimes gliding together like a river delta solidifying as one body and sometimes so far apart as to seem like completely different universes, but I knew what I wanted instantaneously, some numinous core logic at the center of it all. The grand unifying theory of the oracle, the maximum efficient throughput of decisions and manipulations that even the protopsions of the Cuna Illustrata led the tract horse of the Commonwealth through from one to the other, as blind as bats compared to how I felt in that one moment. It was at once unbearable and dismal and horrifying and breathtaking, and I could feel the gray matter of my brain begin to disintegrate in its infinitely complex spectrum of lights.

As soon as I woke up the truth of it began to fade, as if even holding a ghost of it in my memory was too much to bear. I was furious, and I grieved it like a family member, I stewed over it the way a thousand voices might scream your name over a mistake. And I had plenty of stewing to do, as Pollux-Amberei did what she had to do and what she knew to do when committing me to a Mirror facility for two weeks following what my father would never stop calling a 'close call.' I would stare out the windows there, solidifying my theory of a Prime Future, a mapping of what the Rordanese measure their physical form's distance to—an embodiment of perfection. An ideal position in an ideal future. Something I could walk to through the sands of time if I could just figure out the beat of the logic and step to its drum. I think my mind set itself upon that path subconsciously long before I even thought about what it might cost.

Nevertheless, I never saw the world the same way after that.

Matuin-Tesni's eightieth birthday was held a planetary week after my release from the local Rordan Mirror treatment facility where they surmised my stone and my psyche were both operating normally, if a bit exhausted by my trip into the chaos of forever.

It was my first time at a party where I was not shooed off into the part of the estate kept for children or forced to do embarrassing little combat ceremonies in the sand pit for the entertainment of the adults. No, I had ascended that year to the holy teen privilege of serving the food and drinks. It was customary and at this point it should be no surprise that Matuin-Tesni was extremely strict about the roles people played as the celebrations went on. We cleared the whole of the Glade of even our home buildings to erect a massive feast ring in the grass with bonfires, tents, sandpits, and all sorts of recreational commodity (almost none of

which inherited by the Commonwealth such that the Glade itself) had subsumed the most natural place on Rordàn.

Stop.

Stop letting me.

As I carried a plate of fizzing, flashing beverages to a table of old women who were playing some old-fashioned gambling game, I spotted Abele in the corner of my eye. He was walking quickly, with a trademark smirk pasted on his face. He flashed eye contact with me and I knew he had found something interesting and wanted me to follow him. It wasn't much, and there was no telepsionic conversation had—Abele was a spatial-psion anyway—but we just knew what to do to get the other's attention, I suppose. I didn't take lightly to abandoning my serving duty, but Abele and I were on a level apart from most of the things I viewed as 'responsibilities.'

So, he lead me without acknowledging me through what quickly became an annoying maze of game stalls, sandpits where people's moves and stances were spraying fine white powder all over the place, food tables and roasters, the speech podium from which my father was currently joylessly drawling on about the ways Matuin-Tesni deserved acclaim for making so much of his responsibility less heavy et cetera.

Under the light of Rordan-Tebum's glittering utopi in the night sky we found what had been the foundation of Matuin-Tesni's house, he stopped, turned.

"Alright?" he said shortly.

"Yes," I said, immediately defensive; I didn't want to talk about my time at the Mirror or what had led to it, even to him. Most people on Rordan saw that sort of thing as a show of either weakness or stupidity, one of which it definitely was for me and that was embarrassing.

"Good. My father has kept this under our house and I never even knew about it. But watch." Abele leapt up onto the sprawling gray concrete square that had once been his family's house, folded up and airlifted out of the area for the festivities, and jogged over to a smooth, rectangular inset at what, I surmised by instinct, must have been under his father's study. He knelt down, breeze tossing his mat of brown hair, and poked into the space the inset made in the ground, his finger thumping hollowly against glass. It was a window; and the moonlight filtering through it illuminated the shelves of some kind of hidden storage room.

I had caught a glimpse of a war mace, a few spears, and a bunch of small strap-locked bookshelves when Abele grabbed me by the arm and dragged me with him in a sudden teleportation, right into the space we could see through the window. Though a better fighter and a bit older, Abele was young too, and hadn't really accounted for body posture or elevation when surprising me with this, and so we both landed firmly on our asses with me kicking over an easel that held what must have been an extremely old oil painting. It clattered to the ground, its back cross splintering outward.

Something about spatial-psionics I had been thinking about when it came to the eventuality of me fighting Abele for real was that, technically, each teleportation was an odds calculation. Skilled spatial-psions can be sure they won't phase themselves into a wall, as they will typically bounce themselves back to where they were standing on instinct, but there was always the slightest chance they could get stuck somewhere and asphyxiate, or worse. In that way spatial-psionics are technically the most dangerous, especially when it comes to a Sting, as

those survival instincts tend to fade away when your brain is burning alive with the power of the psionic level.

I thought about that, for just a bit, before I realized what we were in. The room was large and circular despite the indentations it had made in the foundation. It was an archive of old Rordanese weapons, keepsakes, journals, all things thought to be old hat since our embrace by the Commonwealth sixty years prior. Nothing had a speck of dust on it, and each item was placed meticulously and cleanly with its own space and its own considered type of display on shelves or on plinths, tables, or suspended delicately by hooks in the ceiling. Some things even appeared to be on old Anam-Jutha style altars, a kind of quaint-looking dedication to a religion our people had moved past even before the crisis that the Commonwealth had to come and save us from.

work in progress by Brian Taylor

THE GENESIS OF WORLDS AND THE QUIET JUMP FROM ANIMATOR TO POSSESSOR IN THE EYES OF GOD

We fade as we cloud together, we struggle in a trap, an interface that was never meant to last.
We need to convalesce, but we struggle, we showcase our impermanence, ironically, in an attempt to remain permanent.

Gillead and I traveled together for a few relatively uneventful years after our meeting on Luz Wa. I returned home once or twice, mostly to visit Calixta, as I could visit Father using his communications array at any point and Dorotea had shipped off with the Choir again. Mostly, though, I stayed on the High Arbiter's frigate the *Brennos*, a hulking but fast starship with enough weaponry to devastate a planetoid. Weaponry I insisted be kept inert at all times, to Gillead's chagrin: he liked to do practice drills in asteroid belts, even after I insisted that this would compromise the integrity of potential geologic sampling. The interaction was symbolic of

our fairly contentious relationship; often we would sit in silence, him silently responding to something he knew I would soon reject about his plan of action.

It wasn't always tense; Gillead had a fondness for music like everyone else on the *Brennos*, and would often make startlingly astute scientific observations when we encountered phenomena. He, to no surprise, was also an excellent debater and liked to challenge even my casual observations. These things bothered me a great deal less about him, making this short-lived career not just full of prickling enmity but of good sights, food, art, and an immutable sense of companionship that remained *mostly* unbroken by the ways he irritated me.

We spent a good deal of time on Rordàn, as well. For a planet so wracked by cataclysm, it is a beautiful place. The windswept fractures in the planet's surface that were becoming mountain passes and valleys and cave systems were recovering their ecologies in a way I found absolutely fascinating. Every time we returned to Rordàn I would take leave to go and study these things, to draw them, or to let them inspire my music. I had taken my cello onto the *Brennos* and much of the crew had taken quite a shine to a monthly performance. This was often reflected in their heavy Rordànese pride, to know I had written these songs in their valleys of red-orange grass and white, stumpy ringed trees. That I had composed them while letting the sharp, loud whistle of the wind guide my thoughts.

The Iron Hand, and by extension Gillead himself as its lead officer, is the Constellatory Commonwealth's defense system and police force. An organization that spends most of its time exacting safety measures when psionics Sting or become feral. Every so often the Commonwealth will reach out to a novel civilization in an attempt to share our limitless energy and creative power and will be met with hostility. In these rare instances, the Iron Fist is deployed for its true purpose—defense and diplomacy. Each Arbiter commands a starship for the 'defense' portion, and each Arbiter is accompanied by a neutral party to take up the mantle of the 'diplomacy' portion.

The only real deployments I saw during my tenure as Gillead's diplomatic meta-psion were small Stings—psions who had overextended themselves to the degree that their lesions had begun to erode their finer faculties. This leads to inhibited higher functions, loss of cognitive ability, and in some rare occasions, total anima collapse. I had seen it happen many times. For some, Stinging comes at a regrettably lower threshold than with others, some intangible doorjamb at which they begin to simply eat away at themselves. For this, and other types of death encountered, backups of our psyches are uploaded to a massive network of anima cores at a facility called the Mirror. It is controlled de facto by the Commonwealth's leading organization and its founders, the Cuna Illustrata. If someone Stings, or their starship malfunctions and they are spaced, or any other potential destruction that can occur no matter how immortal we view ourselves to be, they can be restored from whatever shape they were in when they last visited the Mirror.

This does not always work. The lesions that cause psionics are immaterial, they affect one's mind and psyche, not their actual brain. A Sting can cause too much damage, and even restoring a backup—by all rights a *different* mind than the one that had Stung—could retain some ghost of the damage. I had seen that happen to my sister Calixta, and it was so rare the procedures did not have an outright response to this type of situation. Typically it ended with the Sting victim being institutionalized at the Temple of the Mind. **Not our fate. Not our fate. We do not want this. I do not want this.**

So it would go that a psion would Sting. The *Brennos* was sometimes the closest Iron Fist starship in the area, and so we would deploy. Containment of a Sting is never a static process. The variables are always shifting, from the discipline from which the Sting victim hails to their surroundings to their psyches. Nevertheless, as a meta-psion, I have the latent ability to reach out and manipulate psionic power as if it were malleable clay, sand shifting beneath the fingers of my mind. I remember doing so with a physi-psion with a fondness for pyrotechnics—reaching out with my mind, clamping down on his psionic ability to the degree that the flames dispersed as if scattered by a sudden icy breeze. Gillead or some other Iron Hand officer would contact the Mirror for clearance before we would eliminate the victim wholesale. In a way that haunted me—still haunts me even now—Gillead would always show up *just* in time for this undertaking to fall to him.

With anyone else, I would mark that to happenstance. The unfortunate causality that led someone to be a regular executioner. But Gillead was alien to happenstance. I never knew how far into the future had solidified for him. What probabilities he'd affected or manipulated to get what he wanted in that moment. It was true that Gillead had a sharper understanding of cause and effect than any other proto-psion I had met, but in my experiences on the Brennos, they more often led directly to violence than they did anything I would call a 'Prime Future.'

So, for me, it was clear that he wanted to be there with a laser pistol or a shock knife, dealing the final blow in a way that would hold zero consequence for himself.

And I a tight-lipped accessory.

I said nothing, and I gave nothing about how much this disturbed me, even telepathically. I despise the act of showboating, the act of vain comparison, but it is observable and evident: I have yet to be outdone in the discipline of Neuro-psionics. If I want to keep something hidden from other neuro-psions' prying eyes, it is not found. Telepathy is an extremely complex practice, and it is employed in virtually completely different ways depending on who wields the power. For me, it is as simple as walking through a door or looking through a window. If I wish, I can hear their thoughts. See their memories, feel their emotions, live in their pasts. My visions of other souls' interiority are as clear as Gillead's shocking visions of the future.

This is not a boon, or a gift, to be taken with unrepentant zeal. It is a serious responsibility, and with it comes vital standards of consent and procedure, ones I spent over half my life instilling in other neuro-psions so harshly I became known for it. So it is with no light step that I took concealing my attitude toward Gilead under walls and walls of ice, such that he became frustrated with the sense of alienation that must have emanated from me then. In a way, it betrayed how I really felt, anyway. Not that he could really tell I was hiding something, even if he tried to find a wall or a blank spot, that at least was a domain in which he could never outpace me. But the act of keeping secret your ideals and your feelings, from someone who draws them out of you like an augur, affects the countenance and the minute iterations of body language and subconscious contact in a way that becomes obvious you are doing so.

This, I suspect, is what Gilead caught onto more than anything else.

We will die permanently for this.

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Eina and Dadrea are twin planets in a binary that represent both ends of the habitable zone in their solar system; a small cluster at the outer reaches of Commonwealth space. Dadrea has a steady orbit that is markedly closer to their sun, and is ecologically stable and fairly hospitable. Eina, by comparison, is slowly faltering. Its ovular orbit gives it extremely long and brutal winters, and while the planets are in a state of sync most of the time, Dadrea will sometimes send Eina into a year-long night. Eina’s atmosphere has eroded due to a lack of consistency in its cosmic conditions, its ecology is fragile and mostly corrupt. By all accounts, the inhabitants—a reptilian people who call themselves Einalin—are facing extinction. Dadrea hosts a similar species of reptilian people whose centralized government had attempted to conscript both planets into the Commonwealth at the first offer from the Cuna Illustrata, brought on by a dispatching of ambassadors that more than likely included my mother.

The Illustrata complied. Using a Graif©Δlimitless potential to create out of raw matter the size of a small star, they compiled a massive machine that could restore Eina’s ecosystems. This would be the third model of Commonwealth terraformer, the World Seed. Its first iteration, *Hyærbad*, had just been installed in Eina’s atmosphere before the *Brennos* was called for crisis alert. World Seed *Hyærbad* would first purge the toxins in Eina’s atmosphere, replacing it over an estimated decade with a fabricated version of Dadrea’s atmosphere, and then function similar to the rings around Rordan; a sort of gravitational moderator to prevent Dadrea’s orbit from causing any more damage. World Seed *Hyærbad* served a third purpose, as well. A newly minted astronomical research laboratory, dedicated to multiple purposes, as a place of learning for the Einalin and Dadreans and an outpost of knowledge for the Commonwealth.

Immediately after the World Seed was installed, the Einalin government made it clear that the conscription had been done without their foreknowledge, information that shook me deeply when I heard it. Gillead had seemed unaffected, sitting in his captain’s chair lazily flicking through a report while the news played over the loudspeaker. The Einalin government opposed the conscription, insisting that they had been working through their air purification issues on their own and, given the opportunity, would have refused the help. I immediately assumed that the Einalin were under the impression that they would have to give up a certain semblance of freedom and independence in exchange for the assistance, which, in a sense, was true. The presence of the World Seed meant a new type of commerce for both planets, and the presence of a post-scarcity society which made no use of their currencies may negatively affect said commerce.

In that moment I held steadfast to my beliefs; that they, like an earnest majority of the planets that accepted our offer, would retain their culture and values and simply explore them to limitless avenues of potential. This leant to the Iron Hand’s implicit justification for its existence; Rordan remains the prime example of such a process. The adjustment period is not always easy, but even in the small century the Commonwealth had been attempting to mission,

we had empirically done more good than harm. I did believe that. I do ~~believe that bury my doubt under faith, just as the sermons have taught me.~~

We deployed on an extremely urgent schedule with little to no notice and a vague description of the mission.

The *Brennos* joined Eina's orbit in nine days. The briefing sent to us by Gillead's father, who is a Chancellor of Rordàn, explained that the Illustrata had received numerous 'chaos portents' from the World Seed. True to their gaggle of proto-psions' proclamation, the World Seed emitted a crisis alert while we were en route, about two days after the briefing. Gillead had seen it coming, and had kept his thoughts locked tight to prevent me from nosying how far, and in how much detail, he had precluded the events to come. I had become familiar enough with Gillead to understand his intentions in that matter, that he was keeping something to himself. He had been keeping something to himself for a while, less talented at occluding blind spots than I was, and we had often done thought exercises together as part of our physical regimen. I wish I hadn't fought the impulse to resist. To break in. I could have—he was distracted, and I was more powerful. I could have done something then. To act on the sudden lift beneath my feet as I looked at him, resolute and sharp, looking out the viewscreen on the bridge of the *Brennos* with something slipping urgently behind his anticipation. Something dark and deep, tumultuous, perhaps afraid.

F©⋯⋯Δ°¬~ffintentional. We are as merciless as I.

But I did not.

Eina is a red, gassy planet on the outer rim of an orbit, some degrees off by a less hazy, bluer Dadrea. We came out of jump onto the vista of the World Seed curled onto Eina's atmosphere like a giant worm, resting in a C to the shape of the planet and leaning as if it were a manifestation of its axis; a simply monstrous iteration of the Commonwealth's capabilities. I joined Gillead on the bridge and through the viewscreen we could see its work had already begun: to one side of the World Seed, the atmosphere was a brush of gaseous red, and on the other had begun to give way almost like scraping lichen off the bottom of a pond, revealing something like a faded red-purple landscape. Off to the side of the World Seed, attached via a buoyant-looking series of what were actually massive tunnels connected to a flickering array of spheres, each around twice the size of the *Brennos*, or just barely enough to contain a large city. These are the Dyson Swarms, portable arrays of infinite battery. Each sphere contained a fixated point in space, such that the core of a Swarm sphere and the location of the sphere itself could be two different locations. The displacement ~~6esds~~we created contributed to a vast mesh of energy between them that itself became a fixed point in space once the Swarm was activated, such that it could never be drained. Once the Swarm was in position, every Sphere but one could be eliminated and the net would technically retain power. These dots in space were only visible from a starship, and looked like a behemoth nest of gray-blue fish eggs hovering above the World Seed like a awe-inspiring portent of its achievements.

The World Seed was a silver-white in color by contrast, almost blinding in the refraction from the gaze of the nearby sun. It was beautiful to me then, a sliver of heroism in a dark and cruel part of the sector. Even a hundred-year-old has been living in the same society for a hundred years. It did not yet occur to me to look past that simplistic exterior, the room for complications little. As we took pods in to dock directly with the World Seed and the details

became known to me, I could see the distinct mottle of blinking emergency lights, signifying that credentials were currently needed to dock.

I looked back at the *Brennos*, boxy and silent out there in the vacuum with the sheet of lights that was the Commonwealth as a backdrop, and saw for the last time a childish joy in that blanket. A comfort that, to Gillead's bitter point, I had long outgrown.

* *

The 'worm' of *Hyærbad* had a triple-segmented body: the lower segment, which contained the residences and small city aboard the terraformer, now mostly still in development but would eventually contain the full amenities of any planetside city. The middle segment was mostly machinery; atmospheric pistons, filters, treatment halls, massive, moon-sized fan blades, gravity-editors, and the like. The top portion, onto which we were disembarking from the transport pod, was the labs and university entrance, containing the databases, complexes, and systems needed to run the World Seed and teach its inner workings to the Einalin and the Dadreans. The would send their brightest minds here for nearly two decades of schooling in engineering and gravitational science, such that at some point there would be no need for outer Commonwealth staff on the World Seed itself, though the Illustrata would always have an installment here, as the university doubled as a brand new experimental research station, reportedly focusing on the enhancement of our anima stones.

Out of the airlock we came upon a welcoming pavilion cast as if it had a friendly sky, with bright blue neon streamers held still in the air by glass filaments and a display of lights emblemizing the Commonwealth's logo. Underneath the display was a three dimensional map of the facility, with markers for different research zones and observation decks, as well as the inner workings of the terraformer itself, which were limited areas for staff only. Much of the device was yet to be inhabited, though from the dossier I had retrieved there were large pockets of staff quarters concentrated at the far end of the device. At capacity, the World Seed would have a full population of over one million people. There were less than half that on the World Seed when we arrived.

336,912.

I memorized the map quickly, imprinting the image of it into my mind in case I had to retrieve it later, and transmitting it onto Gillead in much the same fashion. Before I drew back, as I passed the information to him, he seemed to behold it for a moment, and then drop it as if it were a pamphlet at a carnival. The first indication to me that he had already been here many times. Gillead, in fact, seemed to partake in a sort of performative boredom as if to make it especially obvious he knew everything that was to happen, and also that he would not be telling a soul. We had boarded with a group of 11: the two of us, three Guardians, three engineers, and three medics. Gillead lead the procession, with me just behind him and at pace, with the Guardians at our flanks and the medics and engineers behind.

We continued past the map. I was unnerved by the fact that no one had greeted us. In fact, no one seemed to be in the welcome hall at all, further isolating us under the red emergency lights.

"Elevator," I said, indicating the large doors at the far end of the room.

Gillead nodded, sent an engineer, two medics, and a Guardian toward the elevator.

"You're splitting them up?" I asked.

"Multiple pressure points," came his short reply as he keyed an interface near the elevators. I had to look around him to find that he was summoning a monorail to the residential areas. "The containment tanks holding tainted atmosphere have sprung a leak, which was initially what put the World Seed into crisis alert. The problem didn't really need us until the World Seed's Virtual Intelligence 'inexplicably' shut down."

I raised a brow. "You say that as though—"

"Like I think it was sabotage? Yes, I think I probably do."

The wall to the monorail station slid open smoothly, revealing the bullet train behind it, whose doors opened concentrically. Gillead ducked into a seat on the train, and I followed suit. I wondered if he had sat himself there every time he visited this place in prophecy, or if he had tested out a different one every time to get the best positioning.

The doors slid shut, and I leaned back and crossed my legs and arms, looking at Gillead curiously as he sat not directly across from me, but a few seats down. As the monorail lurched forward and then shot at high speed down its electromagnetic rail, the lights and corridors of the World Seed blurring by until they were nothing but a swath of sterile white and gray, I saw that he had suddenly hitched his breath.

The lights inside the train went red like the rest of the station and it began a sudden, nauseating emergency slowdown until it crawled to a stop with a light squeal.

"What's happening?" asked one of the engineers.

The medic and Guardians stood, looking around curiously.

"Breach," said Gillead, standing. "Open this," he motioned to one of the Guardians, pointing at an emergency hatch.

The Guardian made an easy gesture with one hand, the physi-psionic hum briefly static in the air, and the hatch popped off of its bearings, scooting up and onto the roof of the monorail.

"Breach of what?" I said as Gillead helped me climb up and out onto the roof of the monorail, clasping my forearms and hauling me up with little effort. Gillead led our procession down the length of the train, across pointed nose, and down onto the electromagnetic tracks themselves before he answered.

"Toxins."

We started forward again on the tracks.

"Surely there's a safety mechanism in place to vent the toxins into space?" offered an engineer.

"Not anymore," said Gillead.

I narrowed my eyes at him, and knocked. The connection was slick, as if he were a cat trying to evade my grasp, but I held fast, insisting he give me *something*, something I could pass off to the crew to ease their nerves. And, I had the ulterior motive of suspecting him of manipulating us into something sinister. *That* thought I covered and stood on, firm.

He stopped walking, turned his whole torso to me, his eyes flashing to the medic and engineers, stopping briefly on the Guardian. He shut me out completely, in a way that told me he knew I could break through if I wanted, and subtly challenged me to do so. I **backed down**.

"The terraformer has been sabotaged," he said after our brief psionic scuffle.

Something in my gut churned, vicious. Something that had been waiting.

Work in progress by Brian Taylor

"I am going to attempt to evacuate the residential areas. I want all of you at the main administrative area. The track is about to split left and right." Gillead pointed at one engineer, leaving me with a medic, an engineer, and two Guardians. "With me."

"Seems unwise," I mentioned as he turned and continued.

"They need you at Admin," he insisted.

"Why?"

"Because it's you, Tabir. You need to be there. I need to be here. I would hope at this juncture I would have earned your trust on these matters by now."

"Trust is just—"

"—higher expectations. It has been years now, Tabir. I have taken your counsel, and it has not disappointed yet. Join me if you wish. But I can't protect you *and* them." He snapped his fingers, pointing to the left as the tracks split, the maintenance station next to us dimly lit and bathed in a script that said OFFLINE in Yaadese.

I remained there, for a second, watching Gillead confidently go down that tunnel. His shaved head bouncing in the dark, the black of his clothing melting into nothing. It was true. I had put my foot down in the past. I had insisted. We had fought, bitterly. We had stood there silently screaming into each other's minds while Guardians stood off and watched with visible unease, and I had won every time. ßð©fðf'©Δ^~°~Δ°~≥Δœåß≈́ðfvj¥Δ~μ unblinking, unafraid? Did it matter, really? I had already made the big mistake, and taken this charge. I had already accompanied Gillead on his incessant search for Prime Futures thus far. And, truthfully, I had seen him work his abilities to the benefit of others. He *had* saved many lives, by barking orders from a place far and beyond those who were listening. While I had taught him much, tempered his abilities to a frightening degree, he *had* changed, too. Taught himself. Seen himself. Constantly on the precipice of some new revelation, some new prophecy, only to shift back and insist we accompany him. Or, often too, *not* accompany him.

I looked my remaining entourage, and set off to the left tracks.

Would I have died if I went with him, then? Had he already deleted my backup? Would he have killed me himself? No, he offered me the choice. He may have let me die. He may have left me to suffocate. But he wouldn't have done it himself. I wonder what he would've looked like, then, to look up at his face while I choked on toxic gas and tears filled my eyes, distorting his face. What would his expression be?

Π''f'ð®¥vPity.

* * *

The engineer was a soft-spoken woman from Geance, an early Commonwealth settlement. She was a first-generation like me but had entered the field of engineering within the last few decades. The medic was a final-generation, a chatty man who fiddled with his fingers and couldn't bear silences. He would look at his compad or initiate some meaningless small talk about the surroundings if he felt we had gone too long without speaking. The Guardians were as they were trained; quiet Rordàñese people with thick builds and mild-mannered, superficial eyes. They would share thoughts or images with me without speaking: strategic statements like the amount of exits in an area, how far into a specific hallway we'd come, or to ask for a new flash of the map I had seen at the beginning of our mission. The

medic would ask them inane questions, and they would give him one-word-answers, which he seemed satisfied by, and the engineer seemed too shy to interact with them outside the realm of the necessary.

Hyærbad's halls were sterile, dark corridors that stretched labyrinthine through the shape of the terraformer. The emergency lights had bathed everything in a soft red glow, such that when I looked at the Guardians and they looked back at me, I almost thought they had changed clothes. We kept going down the tracks until we found a service hatch I concluded must lead to a main thoroughfare, that we might get to our destination faster. The hatch led into a main hall that then spilled out wide, dimly lit pavilion not unlike the one that had welcomed our larger party. This was specifically labeled 'ADMINISTRATION AND AUTHORITY' across a long, draped banner where, at the welcome hall, had been the Commonwealth's symbol. The tiles were smaller, white, while the room was actually taller than the welcome hall, spanning the 4 stories up to the top of the Admin section, an obelisk carved into the cave of the atrium. I followed the long tower of the room with my eyes until they reached the top, where I saw movement in one of the windows.

"There," I said, pointing at the last heaves of a shifting curtain. I looked between the Guardians; there was currently no compelling reason to believe whatever was moving was hostile, and so I had them keep their weapons down and, in fact, had the medic stay by me as I lead the party into Admin. The building itself was just as gossamer and performatively welcoming as the rest of the World Seed, an atmosphere that had taken on a much more sinister connotation as the emergency lights began to blare and the internal systems caught up to the fact that not all was well aboard the terraformer. Saturated by red lighting in other areas and passing through complete darkness in others, we made our way to the top of the spire, a confounding jumble of hallways and offices and conference rooms. The engineer on my detail had been a consult for the construction of this segment, thus was vital in reading the darker hallways for how they would spill out onto the main lobbies or elevator shafts; no doubt a chess piece moved here by Gillead's stalwart hand.

The culprit of the moving curtain was a watchful Dadrean named Chinweike Fittih. The rectangular block of light from the mostly-drawn curtain caught the green under-flash of her gold scales as she slid by to lock a door on the far side of the room as soon as we entered. Her eyes were yellow, deep slits of black forming her narrowed pupil. Dadreans were upright and taller than us by nature, though one of the Guardians accompanying us actually matched her height. She had a long, tapered snout with flared nostrils, two rows of pearly white teeth—surprisingly, she had the square molars of an herbivore. Not unlike humans, six canines stretched up past her jawline and tugged on her upper lip when her mouth was closed. She spoke in a low rasp, and after a plaintive explanation of why I was initiating a light telepathic contact, I began to translate for her as she paced around the room.

First, she said, "you are all Commonwealthers," before introducing herself. A way of delineating us from her. Making it clear that she owned the side of the room in which she was pacing, though we controlled the exit. I asked her, not with words but with images of the World Seed's plans, what had happened.

She stopped, folded her 4-digit hands behind her back. She was wearing what looked almost like a labcoat, except that it seemed to be able to fold away in the midsection to reveal a small, black panel on her waist, sort of like a too-large belt buckle for pants she didn't deign to

wear. She considered me for a moment; a subject much smaller and I imagined frailer-looking than she.

“I can’t be sure,” she said finally. “But I believe the Einalin sabotaged the terraformer.”

Unease rippled through my team. It was a conclusion I was sure we had all at least partially come to in the journey here, but hearing it was different.

“Can you walk me through the series of events?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I wasn’t there. I was asleep in my residences after a 14-hour shift at the university.”

“That seems long,” I said. “Are you understaffed?”

The gesture she made in response, arching both of her arms, seemed almost preternatural. But given that I had gained a shallow surface-level understanding of her speech through the neural contact, with it came a derisive sort of uphandedness that made the gesture feel more like a scoff or a shrug. “I do not see why that matters now.”

I eyed the locked door on the other side of the room. “If you are understaffed, or in lack of resources, it could have led to the error in the containment tanks.”

“Trust me, the Commonwealth has made it *vastly* clear they do not lack in resources. Things were running fine until today.”

The question of her long shift nagged at me, but I finally locked with her yellow eyes. “Is there someone here we can talk to who knows the sequence of events?”

She snorted, a hot gust of air out the cones of her nostrils. “Plenty. They all gathered in Residence during the emergency.”

“All of them?” I repeated. Neuro-psionically, she shifted under my grasp. An inexperienced communicator trying to sweep something under a rug I had long since taken in.

“Yes,” she lied.

“Chinweike,” I said, assuming a nonchalant and casual posture. Friendly, even. I shot basic instructions to my team to do the same. The engineer went so far as to grab an office chair and sit in it backwards, fiddling with her compad.

I said, “Why did you lock that door when we walked in?”

Chinweike sighed, leaned her head back to stare at the dark ceiling. She dropped her hands to her sides and went over to the curtains, pulling them back with a rough motion and bathing the office in sterile light from the atrium. “My sister is here, too,” she relented, and her writhing under my grasp faltered. I didn’t push deeper—that would only give her more reason to distrust me and it was also something Gillead would do. *Not £€∞§¶•¤^Δ”“©^me.*

“Can we speak to her?” I asked.

“No,” said Chinweike, eyeing me with a newfound aggression. “She has anxiety around... your lot.”

“Commonwealthers?” I asked.

“No—well, maybe.” She eyed the engineer. “You psychic?”

The engineer nodded.

“How psychic?”

“Ah...” clearly puzzled on how to answer the question. “Very?”

“There isn’t a reliable way to quantify psionic power unless you can see it, if that’s what you’re asking,” I said on the engineer’s behalf.

"No—" she uttered forcefully. "Not like that. Not... just not *you*," she said to me, shooting me another dagger glare. "I can feel you scrubbing the top of my skull. I don't like it, but she *hates* it. She freaks out. You have to leave her be. And the ones who can see the future, too. Leave her."

I considered this, looking between the engineer and the medic, the Guardians—who had become overwrought with boredom and had taken to flipping through their compad news.

You are a spatial-psion, correct? I asked the engineer through her thoughts. She affirmed this.

Ask if you can go with her to meet her sister. I will watch through your eyes and direct your questions. She is withholding more, and if the situation becomes violent, you are to teleport yourself directly to the atrium.

The engineer stood up, put her office chair back in the desk to which it belonged, and eyed Chinweike politely. "May I meet her? I have no way of intruding in that manner."

"Are you lying?" asked Chinweike.

"That is a fruitless question," I observed. "I am the only one here who can trigger your sister's aversions, Chinweike. And I will stay in this room." As a show of this, I walked over to the conference table in the corner, pulled out the head seat, and sat in it, steepling my fingers in front of my face as I gauged her reaction.

I do not know the body language of the Dadreans, and I dared not probe further into her mind, but she seemed to accept this in a loosening of tension in her shoulders and a slump of the jawline where what might've been lips on a human met her teeth.

"I reserve the right to cut the conversation off at any signs of discomfort," she said. As if relenting after a heated struggle, she turned her back on us and gestured toward the engineer, who got up from her seat. The two faced the locked door as I, while still maintaining the contact with Chinweike needed to translate, slipped into the engineer as well. She was open, accepting as commanded, and I immediately funneled deep into her consciousness, laying there like a remote pilot, and closed my eyes to see through her vision more clearly.

The engineer followed Chinweike into the next room, fashioned similarly to the one we were already in. Smaller, with only a small desk and a terminal at which a significantly smaller Dadrean was seated, the room was dark with the curtains drawn, the pale light of the terminal the only thing to show that Chinweike and her sister had the same color scales. Chiddiebu, as she quickly and nervously introduced herself, had a more electric green to her eyes, something that even without a telepathic contact betrayed a sense of alertness that grated on my initial impression of her as a cowardly, easily-shocked scientist.

Be casual with her, I advised the engineer. She expects superiority and formality from you.

"Hello," said the engineer, repeating her motion of grabbing a chair and sitting in it backwards, her compad limp in her hands. Chiddiebu looked up briefly from her terminal—I was able to see in a shifting of color on her face that she had closed one window the moment we walked in. "Bit of a rough day, yeah?"

Chiddiebu nodded.

"What happened?" she asked, softly.

"Moana," Chiddiebu muttered. "She sabotaged us."

"Chiddiebu!" Chinweike gasped, though an edge in her voice told me it wasn't new information that shocked her. I couldn't yet put my finger on it—I did not know Chinweike well enough and I was holding my telepathic contact static. The delicateness of the situation prodded at some burgeoning awareness that something else was at play in this conversation. I immediately thought of Gillead, wishing I had left something in his mind that I could track him down at this distance.

Not even I have ⑥¥¥^~^¥†¶δ·νΔ°ƒ° distance. My petty regrets mean nothing now
∞§δƒ^©Ω≈çvƒ^μ°·δβδƒ©·Δ°©βδƒ¥^~^¥ ignored her sister, turned her gaze back to her terminal while continuing to speak to the engineer. "I saw her go toward the containment tanks. She wasn't even authorized to be at hours. It was Moana."

Don't discount her theory—get her to elaborate.

"What do you mean by 'it'? I know this is difficult; but we really are here to help."

Chiddiebu held the engineer's gaze for a moment. "She disrupted the toxicity flow in the tanks. If the AI hadn't automatically corrected, the toxins would've overrun the whole facility."

"That shouldn't be possible," the engineer said.

I cringed—held onto her language center to keep her from saying more. *Now you have to explain yourself, I said. But don't give her everything. I don't want her knowing how much we know about the systems.*

"Physical failsafes were built into those tanks. There wasn't even a system that connected them to the facility itself."

"No, but Moana had been briefed on the ventilation. In the event that a tank ruptured, it would vent into space—but she diffused it somehow. Otherwise the AI wouldn't have reacted."

"So you're saying she connected the vents from the tanks to the facilities herself? She would've had to go out in a pressure suit, logged by the AI."

Chinweike stiffened.

Chiddiebu nodded, looking again at the screen. "And where is that AI now?"

See if you can make your way to her side of the terminal, I instructed. Keep an eye on Chinweike.

The engineer sighed, and stood up, circling the long way around to Chiddiebu's shoulder, not quite encroaching on her space, but getting closer. "So is Moana with the rest of them in Residency?"

"Yes," said Chiddiebu, looking up from the screen and making direct eye contact with the engineer.

She's lying, the engineer told me. She's never made eye contact until now.

An overcorrection, I agreed. Get her to say more; the bigger the lies get, the more nervous Chinweike gets. Indeed—the elder sister's apprehension had begun to leak through the surface of our contact, such that I was sure she didn't even notice I was there anymore. Given the opportunity, I used that spike of fear to delve slightly deeper, riding it like a drop of water along a thread. Just to get a glimpse—probing for relevant memories.

"So why are you two here?" said the engineer, crossing her arms behind her head and going out toward the window.

"I'm a bit photosensitive," said Chiddiebu preemptively as the engineer reached the curtains. "Those emergency lights give me a headache."

"So you're riding out the emergency in a place where you can keep your head clear," the engineer said. "That's smart."

"And since we think Moana knows we saw her," Chinweike said, "we're keeping clear of her."

"You didn't tell anyone else the culprit was hiding freely?"

"No time. Once the lights went on, people scrambled," said Chinweike.

"I was speaking to Chiddi—" the engineer started, and I cut her off. *Casual*. "Chiddiebu, you pulled the alarm, right? As soon as you saw her?"

"I didn't need to," Chiddiebu shook her head. "Like I said, the AI reacted right away. Moana didn't think her plan through."

No, but these two did, I said to the engineer. I had a faint grasp of Chinweike's understanding of the situation, but the engineer's short burst of irritation had drawn up her alertness and I'd been forced to retreat back to translation mode.

"I'm glad you didn't try to apprehend her," said the engineer, turning. She glanced quickly at Chiddiebu's terminal screen for me; I saw innocuous readouts from before the emergency. Too convenient.

Give up on the terminal. She won't give us anything there.

"Why's that?" Chinweike said, almost proudly. "I never left Chinweike's side."

She's confident in her fighting prowess and she's showing it off, I advised. *Back up.*

"I just mean it would've been unfortunate to have had any confrontation in that moment; now we can proceed with a hearing and have witnesses."

The word 'witnesses' alarmed Chinweike again.

Speak more of potential witnesses to the crime, I said. If the engineer could get Chinweike nervous again, I would use it to dive.

"How many other people on detail? I guess I just want to know if there's anyone else we need to speak to that might've seen Moana."

That did it—just barely enough. I was again a dewdrop on a spider's thread, letting Chinweike's apprehension guide me to what she was scared of. It was a haze of nervous memory, flitting from one concept to the next just a little too fast for me to grasp anything but the emotion; except for one thing. One burst of imagery that Chinweike must've used to calm down. Grounded in her pride, she reflected on the image of her locking Moana down with her elbow. The Einalin woman in the memory was small, stout, and seemed shocked and utterly afraid.

They have Moana captive. They apprehended her themselves.

The engineer did not expect this information. I dumped it on her too suddenly, excited by my uncovering. And there was the matter, too, of the fact that this was the image that brought Chinweike back to attention—I retreated at that precise moment, but I couldn't be sure I wasn't detected.

The engineer recoiled, faintly. Not a full step back, but a gesture that betrayed a sudden fear in the Dadreans' motivations. In this moment I knew I had been detected.

I withdrew entirely from Chinweike, translation becoming impossible. She felt this, exchanged a quick unintelligible word with her sister, who dove over the desk and to the floor

as the eldest lunged on the engineer, who froze in terror at the scales and claws shifting with intent. She wouldn't be fast enough to transport herself before Chinweike got ahold of her. I knew the intent- the brandished claws, gleaming with the pale blue from the terminal screen.

I took command of the engineer's nervous system, sent a quick impulse to her hands to block herself from Chinweike's blow. The Dadrean caught the engineer in a sideswipe, knocking her against the wall but drawing no blood.

In the conference room, I bolted to a stand and jerked my head at the guardians. One of them made a fast telekinetic gesture that ripped the door off its hinges from across the room, sending it barreling into the younger sister as she attempted to escape.

Go! I said, boosting an impulse to the engineer to teleport. She vanished with a quick *pop* and a surge of ozone as the elder sister came upon her again, her sharp claws digging only into the bookcase where the engineer had been.

I rounded the corner to see that Chinweike was after me. I made no attempt to evade as the door lifted off of Chiddiebu, spun hemispherically, and slammed into Chinweike, pinning her against the wall. One of the guardians stood there with an outstretched hand, pushing Chinweike into the plaster.

Chiddiebu scrambled, her claws digging into the carpet and pulling up tufts of fiber, but the other guardian pinned her down in a leglock.

"Where is Moana?" I said rigidly, pouring as much authority into my voice as possible. "I will know if you're lying. Don't make me look into it myself."

Chiddiebu screeched, Chinweike struggling against a psionic force she would never

"Too late.. she will asphyxiate and die like the rest of her kind," Chinweike hissed.

It clicked—what I hadn't been able to put my finger on. Something that was out of the question, conflicted with the information I had already scrutinized. And once the first of the logics fell into place, the others followed suit until my grasp of the situation froze my gaze on Chiddiebu.

"You sabotaged the AI and the tanks," I said, flattening my voice to the confoundment. "Why would you do that? Dadrea requisitioned..." I trailed off, signaling the guardian holding the door to drop Chinweike. The animosity had faltered in them. They were under my thumb—but they had already won. There was no point in further bloodshed.

And yet.

I needed to know why. And I couldn't wait for words. I pushed into Chinweike's mind, felt her struggle. Held her there, suspended, and searched. I found what I was looking for immediately—a vitriolic hatred churning in the derisive corners of her pointed mind. She surged with it; it permeated each and every memory I scanned. The moment her father, a governing body of Dadrea, concocted his plan. The sabotage of the tanks, the rerouting of the exhaust to Residency, the attack on the AI. The unexpected witness in Moana Moss Jr., a young and feeble Einalin. The sight of her filled my stomach with residual nausea, such was the strength of Chinweike's racism.

Chinweike and her younger sister hacked *Hyærbad*'s central AI—a level of technological sophistication the Dadreans had deliberately kept from us—and removed the atmospheric failsafes and the log for the pressure suits. Chiddiebu then went out and rerouted the exhaust

from one of the fans directly to the residential suites. When the AI cycled back on, the fans would too, and the entire place would be flooded with toxic gas. A terrorism so manipulative and unspeakable the Commonwealth would've never seen it coming, even with the prophecies at their disposal. Only one person I knew could have predicted anything like this.

I was unable to keep the horror out of my voice as I murmured, "you weaponized us."

Chinweike grunted, shifting her gaze away from me. "Get out of my head." She was indignant, but her voice was almost pleading.

Instead I reached out to Chiddiebu as well, just as forcefully. Heard the sharp crack of a screech as I invaded, weaving the fingers of my psyche through the tender chords of hers, and then clenched my fist, pulling them both under the blanket of night with all the sudden anger I found riddling my senses.

Both sisters dropped, completely unconscious.

The guardians and medic relaxed, as did I, feeling the effort it took to down both of them simultaneously creak through my brain. I slid into the nearest chair, which happened to have been Chiddiebu's, and leaned back while staring at the crawling text on the terminal. Names and dates and actions. So much banal, regularly scheduled timekeeping. So many intermittent tedious actions. So much deliberation, art, science, design, and consideration to make this place. For the intent of positive change. Relations. The furthering of all the things that went into its creation, infinitely more than the sum of its parts, twisted into a planetoid-sized murder weapon. I felt ~~of@fAsick~~.^{vengeful}. The high-minded, naïve efforts of overzealous scientists, wielded for a genocide. A coin I had lifted off the road to find that the backside was black, slick with poison. Would that I could have thrown it all into the bushes.

The medic crossed the room and threw the curtains open, looking down into the atrium to signal the engineer. She popped back into the room with a wild breath, freely offering herself up to the frantic medic as he looked her over and got rid of some bruising.

"Are you all right?" I asked distantly, only half-aware of her affirmative answer.

The guardian that had pinned Chiddiebu was quietly conversing in Rordàne with their cohort. This I was only cursorily aware of, too, until I heard one of them address Gillead.

"What are you doing," I snapped quickly.

The guardian looked up from their compad, blinking through confusion. "Reporting the crime to the High Arbiter, madame." They thumbed a button on the compad, switching it to speaker.

"Tabir," came Gillead's voice from the compad. "Are you all right?"

"Did you know about this?" I asked.

There was a crackling silence. Perhaps he sighed. "Yes."

"And you sent us in anyway." Flatly. As cold as I could muster.

"If you had barged in to make arrests, you would not have gotten the testimony or the information. Precognition is not admissible as evidence, Tabir. And there is a more pressing matter."

"What?"

"The sabotage never stopped. Residency is already flooding with the toxin."

I stood, my chair scooting back and falling to the floor.

Gillead had isolated himself and taken the older engineer only. He knew—that the Dadreans were using us to commit a genocide. He had moved from that angle all along,

distinctly aware that we were being played. How long had he allowed this situation to simmer? Had he waited for the summons from the Illustrata, the Crisis Alert? Bided his time so the narrative could be crystallized? That the Commonwealth, so confident in its entrance, so eager to please, had been easily hefted like a miserable blunt object? And if any of that was to be the case, why show up at all?

What did he want from this place? **We know now** ~~¥tf°~~ **I know now. I know now.**

And what else had the sisters done to the terraformer? It had never even occurred to me, so splendidous was the sight of it: in its current position, *Hyærbad* was in as much of a position to destroy Eina as it was to save it.

I was also residually aware of the engineer's mentality. She was sharp, manipulative, and perceptive. The connections came to me sooner, but I studied the engineer's face for a laborious moment and saw that she was slowly coming to the same conclusions.

I hesitated, not having the entire picture, but knowing what more I needed. "What is in your Prime Future, Meirion-Lyen?"

The guardians gasped at the use of his first name.

Gillead's voice was flatter than mine. Academic, logical, and cool. In a word: rehearsed. "It is too late for *Hyærbad*. I will salvage what I can."

I have come to wonder how many worlds Gillead had seen, branching from this moment. A spoked nexus, with *Hyærbad* at the center. ~~ðf@Δ°·Δ°Δ°@~~ Time boiling us alive on that station.

Gillead hung up.

work in progress by Brian Taylor

DEPRECIATION OF THE HUMAN FORM AS A VALUABLE ASSET MARKED BY THE DECAY OF GRIEF AT ITS LOSS

When a psion Stings, or some other accident befalls them, they can be restored to a backup persona at The Mirror and loaded onto a new anima core. It was through this process we discovered the human mind does not really exist physically, but in some other capacity, as the mind would retain some—crucially, not all—of the memories they should lose. Sometimes a Stung psion would also retain the Sting, some off-hanging metadimensional facet of their persona permanently affected by the damage. It is something we continue to study at the Temple of the Mind, particularly its Rehabilitation Center at the Mirror itself.

I come to The Mirror once a month to visit my sister Calixta and, if she's present, my mother. Situated at the center of our primary Dyson Swarm, and atop the first of our Grails, it is both the place we are reborn and the place the Commonwealth was founded, a massive obelisk lit by a nearby binary system that juts from the central maw of the matter-generating Grail like one large tooth, the spinning discs of the ultimate supercomputers inside visible even before a space shuttle docks there. It is flanked by two notably never-used Rordàñese defense turrets,

making the whole thing look rather intimidating upon first approach. But The Mirror is open to all and any Commonwealth citizens and trusted visitors, as it is the center of our existence, and a monument to our triumphs.

**We will not awaken to the truth if we believe it is a mØ†©Ø·f©°–·ΔØΔ°·f
Calixta lost herself twice over.**

My most recent visit before rejoining the Brennos while it resupplied, my mother was waiting for me at the Welcome Hall, a giant crystalline hallway with high ceilings and information kiosks to answer nearly any possible question about The Mirror's workings, an agency staffman, and some members of the Telepathic See of which my mother was a founding member.

Pollyanna Grimaldo Lanka is a short woman that looks exactly like my sister Dorotea if she aged about fifty years. She preferred to stay mostly organic, although the implants on her shaved head curtail down the back of her neck, making her look rather birdlike. They taper to a glowing point, a connection conduit by which she stays connected to The Mirror at all times. She is its organic sorting system, the watcher with which all of the Commonwealth's souls are entrusted. I am proud of my mother, but no matter how transhuman we become, our minds can only do so much. As the arbiter of The Mirror, my mother has become a highly impersonal and absent creature, and prefers to hold the shortest conversations possible. She no longer reaches out to contact her family, and probably hasn't spoken directly to my father in over twenty years. They are amicable, surely, but they have both simultaneously evolved into a different type of existence and also devolved into a utility for the purpose of the Commonwealth. She no longer celebrates birthdays or events, and if we wish to speak with her, we'd better come to The Mirror and keep it short.

So it went that her, "hello, Tabir," as I approached from the main airlock with Calixta's tapestry folded up over my arms was followed by an overwhelming dump of telepathic information: firstly and primarily, Calixta had been asking for me, and had an episode about it. I didn't respond aloud, just communicated that this was why I had come. As we walked she plaintively asked about my recent activities and I shared with her a quick flash of my recent visit to Rordàn, a brief slurry of my opinions about Gillead, which she traded back to me with a sort of fearful appreciation tag, and I corrected her in the moment, **but she may well have been right. I was fearful of Gillead then. I had seen him do too much with his power, and the besΔ°©Δ°–·°WORST was yet to come.**

She and I communicated in brief shorts this way, her updating me on some of the newer research that was coming out about psionic lesions and the nature of the mind, and that some fool in the Joyous Choir had leapt into a spatial anomaly but remembered enough of it after awakening at the Mirror that they were able to share the data, and me simply taking in the information and not offering much myself—my mind was on Calixta. We proceeded through the twisting halls of server farms and backup nodules and anima core creation deposits until we reached the Rehabilitation Center's front desk at which stood a helmeted person who validated my presence with a sharp nod of their oversized head. I dumped my credentials with my mind—a formality that could be logged—and the elevator that would bring me to Calixta's room hummed open in the far corner. Pollyanna took her leave after that, the trail of indistinct wires leading from the back of her head and the glowing head at which they joined sliding quietly along the polished floor behind her.

Some other people were seated in the waiting room. One had puffy eyes, one was crying in their mind and likely no longer had tear ducts, their arm wrapped around the other, a steaming drink in their hand and a distant look plastered onto their eyes. An unpleasant reminder that The Rehabilitation Center was possibly the least utopic place in the entire Commonwealth. The only place where we faced our mortality, a manifestation of the only urgent problem our society faced—just how little we actually know about ourselves even after achieving the Commonwealth in its proper glory. **A problem that could b·Δ°©fΔ·©Δ°¬· will not be solved by heinous and nonconsensual experimentation.**

I got in the elevator and looked down at the tapestry in my hands as the different outlets and rooms, hallways lengthy and complicated like an ant's nest blurring by the glass windows. The section that was folded over my arms, directly below my gaze, was of a bright sun the same color as the *Santo Guana* on Luz Wa, stitched into the fabric thrice over to give it some texture and depth and surrounded by little black figures. I imagined in the moment that we were the little black figures in the depiction, doing something **simple like speaking to a fungus** and nothing overly complex like letting our psyches dissolve because we could no longer handle what we looked like in our reflections. And, too, united, not lightyears apart because of our service to our people or our inability to act as such.

The elevator came to a stop, the doors hissed open, and I stepped through a secondary airlock into Calixta's room. A thick glass barricade surrounded the cube, and she had the basic furniture bolted into the ground. The room was large and contained exercise equipment, a requisition window for anything she might want or desire, and a simulation headset in case she felt like being outside or seeing anything besides this rather sterile environment. It was the best we could do for them, the ones who stayed Stung, and the ones who developed the psychosis. Calixta had both, which meant I lost her twice over, but you couldn't tell just by looking at her. She was seated at her desk with its rounded corners, typing something up on a little holographic compad.

"Is that a novel, Calixta?" I asked brightly as I entered the room, spreading the tapestry out on the biggest bare space on the floor I could find. From what I had been looking at on the elevator, the sun and the little figures, a giant narrative sprung. It was disjointed, and mostly illogical, but little hieroglyphs of different activities like the founding of The Mirror or some of the worse parts of the war washed out from the center like a tide of broken story, all using different colors and threads and techniques to piece together some semblance of memory, but nothing that could be put in an order and made sense of.

Calixta didn't answer me and kept plugging away. I made my way over to the requisition window and put in the codes for my usual requisition—some fusing and seam rods and various colors and textures of fabric, as well as a hard gridboard in case she felt like measuring something (she never did).

"I heard you had some difficulties," I said with the same tone as I put all the supplies by the unfinished corner of the tapestry. "Sorry I took so long for this visit. I was away in the Parsenius System on the *Brennos*. You remember Parsenius? The violet trees?"

"Parsenius," repeated Calixta, to my delight. It would occasionally take hours to get her to speak. "AA-E3CBL, Dyson Swarm 11-10, colonized in 80.11. Atomized water irrigation systems. Three dominant races, eleven countries." Her voice shook a little bit.

"Alright," I said soothingly, making my way over to her desk. "Let's put the data away for a while, Calixta."

"Eleven countries, Program-F terraforming for sulfurous mountain range in order to make room for further f-farming."

"Right," I said gently as I powered her console off, saving the nonsensical text she'd been putting into the document. "Would you like to work on your tapestry with me?"

Calixta nodded haltingly, and stood up from her desk.

"I'd like you to start with your hands again, because it's been a little while, okay?" I said. She nodded again, sitting cross-legged by the supplies I'd gathered for her and picking up a fuse rod with her dominant hand.

"Mmmmmmm," she said. "Yellow."

"There's yellow there," I said.

"No. Yellow-gold. Yellow... sienna, parchment color, for the drafting of the etiquette documents after the war. 40.12. 40.12, the war,"

"Of course, of course," I said. "What was I thinking." I requisitioned a more muted shade of yellow from the box. It hummed, the matter stream from the Grail pausing on my specific request, but materialized with a low *pop*, and I took it and set it down next to her.

"Much better," she said quickly, grabbing it, cutting off the end at an angle, and mounting it to her fuse rod. She pushed it into the tapestry, and the fabric swung into place, patchwork but deliberately done. I was glad to see that she'd retained some of the techniques we'd practiced. "Yellow."

"I'm going to start, is that okay?" I asked.

Calixta nodded again in her short way.

"Alright, you just keep working." I sat across from her, looked at her dark eyes trailing along the fabrics, her fingers touching it lightly and gripping the fuse rod, splaying out the yellow with two fingers as she attached it to the tapestry and wound it around to create a loop-like shape, like the roll of a scroll. She took the seam rod and unwove the solid fabric to get smaller strands, which she re-fed through the fuse rod and began attaching again to get the details down.

I dove in, pushed gently but firmly into her mind, wriggled into place, and took a deep breath.

*

Calixta fought in the first and only war the Commonwealth had ever entered. In our birth, with our one Dyson Swarm and one Grail upon which The Mirror had even yet to stand, we found a warlike association of aggressive conquerors known as the Grobjan Alliance. While we wanted to offer them entrance to The Commonwealth, we could not stand by their brand of colonialism, and what they wanted with our Swarms and Grail were tools by which to further push their bloody agenda. When we refused, they attacked. It sounds simple now, nearly a century later, but the truth was the conflict was so boiled over and tempestuous that it took several disastrous attempts to save some of the systems they had their eyes on for the conflict to truly become a war between the two powers.

Work in progress by Brian Taylor

Naturally, the Iron Hand won the war, not effortlessly but in a way that I'm sure even the Alliance was sure they'd lost after the first push of their warships. It obviously wasn't without casualties and trauma. The Iron Hand is a crushing force, a blunt object, and when one isn't careful, they can smash more than the enemy with such a tool.

Calixta was the captain of a scout ship that led a skirmish team to defend existing Commonwealth territory, and in the memory I was cruising through, they had received a distress beacon that had come from a Grobjan freighter. We were just as naïve back then as we are now, and since it was a civilian vessel, Calixta responded to the call. I watched through her eyes, a pit in my stomach and a weight in my chest, as she punched in the coordinates and with her other hand grasped the wrist of her husband, Vito Lot Febe Messia, who stood at her side as a tactical officer. I gritted my teeth, seeing Vito's face for the first time in so long, feeling secondhand the course of emotions that flooded through her when *she* saw him.

Startled by the intensity of the memory, I briefly checked on her outside our minds. She was happily at work on the tapestry, the soft music playing in the background, painfully unaware of the course her mind was taking me on. Satisfied with her mental state, I drudged on, trying to find the link between this memory and the last one. By busying her hands with the tapestry, I was able to take advantage of the separation between her action and her memory that the Sting had created. In this mode, I would be able to relive the experiences she could no longer consciously recall. By chaining them together with specific themework, I could strengthen her neural network and bring those memories closer to the surface. If she could work through her trauma, if she could remember and process her experience, it would be one step closer to rehabilitation.

work in progress by Brian Taylor

It was this memory often, but it was never this memory after the one of Dorotea's eighth birthday on Luz Wa. I was struggling to find the theme connection even as the ship punched into metaspace and hurtled toward the injured Grobjan freighter.

"Scan for hostiles," said Vito, eyeing an operations officer who had a kind of bulbous, flashing interface for a head. They memetically typed into their interface via a series of tubes that went directly into their head-interface, and the ship provided a resounding, happy *beep* that there were no weapons aboard the freighter as they dipped out of metaspace and approached it, which hung in space like a colossal corpse. The Alliance spatial architecture always had a habit of going big, and their freighters were no exception. This one was like a train of various polygonal shapes all with their own offhanging sections and bared catwalks that were just left on it from construction. Its belly and the contents of what I assumed to be its central cargo hanger were ripped from the main hull, twisted bulkhead matter and pressurized plastic crates floating free from the wreckage coated with a thin layer of ice.

"What in..." Vito said breathlessly as the wreckage came into view. "Any reports of skirmishes in the area?"

"You know there weren't," I heard Calixta say, "I would've been here first."

He shook his head. "This is an attack. It can't be anything else, right? No other Commonwealth ships around at all?"

"Nothing in the logs," said another crewperson.

"Hail them," said Calixta.

"Alliance Freighter," said the crewperson into their console. "This is the Commonwealth battlecruiser the *Shen Whisper* responding to your civilian distress call."

No response. The memory doesn't change, but something about Calixta's superior disappointment struck me every time. It held in her throat like an air bubble as she scanned for life forms. There were three aboard the vessel.

"Get us close," said Calixta. "Vito, take a party in pressure suits and teleport aboard." She tuned into the comms array from her own console this time. "Alliance Freighter, I am once again asking you to respond. We are putting together a boarding party."

Nothing.

Vito scrubbed up in an airtight suit. He had barely visible lines along his face, striations of dermal implants that allowed him to breathe and survive in the vacuum, pressed the button on his forearm that activated its pressurization, and waved over three security officers.

"Safety," Calixta reminded him. He merely grinned at her with his thick lips and dark hair. She was so attracted to him, and everything he did, it almost felt invasive to sit in these feelings with her. But this was the work, so I stayed where I was, behind Calixta's eyes, watching her hands flit along the control panel so competently.

Vito popped off the *Shen Whisper*, a holoscreen cropping forward and taking up most of the bridge's view space to show his bodycam. The footage was clear, and he had teleported directly onto the part of the exposed hanger the crew could see from the bridge, taking the three security guards with him.

"Alliance Freighter, we have boarded your vessel. I suggest you make yourselves known so that we can safely transport you aboard ours. We will broadcast a Whiteflag decree so that we can drop you off in your own space without further trouble."

Again, nothing. My stomach sank further. I heard myself take a deep breath, briefly alerting the Calixta that was hard at work on her tapestry. I checked on her again, and she'd looked at me curiously, some faint echo of lucidity in her eyes. Something that was calling to me, kept me pressing on. I turned the music up as the memory-Calixta crossed her hands over her chest and huffed impatiently.

One of the security guards, a telepath, informed Vito that the Alliance survivors were in an emergency hatch off the side of the freighter's bridge.

"Unidentified structure on the port side," said the crewperson with the bulbous membrane.

"Scan," said Calixta.

"I can't," replied the Crewperson. "It's... I'm being blocked."

"Vito—" Calixta was interrupted as the freighter suddenly lurched. It began to spin, the port side coming into view, with a large Alliance fighter attached to its belly. It was customized—weaponless, to avoid the scan, and coated in a material that after this incident we would reprogram our scanners to be able to penetrate.

But it was too late for this. For Vito.

Calixta pushed Vito's bodycam footage to the side to get a better view of the rotating freighter.

"Lock and power busters," Calixta said, tapping a few stray buttons on her own interface. "Vito, can you hear me?"

A sharp crackle of static sounded through the speakers.

"The fighter is emitting jamming chaff," said the membraned crewperson.

"Of course it is," Calixta said derisively. "Vito, if you can hear me, I want you off that freighter now."

But of course, he couldn't. The bodycam footage shuddered—Vito had entered the bridge, the emergency hatch had swung open, and two Grobjan shock troopers with blinking red armor vests had burst from it, rifles armed, jetting frigid plasma all throughout the bridge. Vito jumped for cover as the fighter detached from the cargo ship, and began cruising toward the *Shen Whisper*.

"Evade," said Calixta, her ship shuddering with the force of jumping forcefully to the side with a blast from its stabilization matrix as the Alliance fighter attempted to careen directly into the *Shen Whisper*. "Are they out of their minds?" she hissed frantically, opening fire on the enemy ship, which barrel rolled again directly into the hull of the *Shen Whisper*. The lights flickered, a nearby station went out, and emergency lights blared out throughout the bridge.

"Severe damage on the port stabilization matrix!" the comms officer kept yelling statuses as the chaos descended.

"The damage on the Alliance fighter is worse. They're suiciding," said the membraned crewperson.

On Vito's bodycam footage, he suppressed one Grobjan's faculties with a static surge of psionic energy, physically locking his armor so close to the opponent's body that the liquid molecules in the metal would heat. The Grobjan soon burst into flame, and fell to his death out the side of the now busted open airlock. Vito was grabbing onto the bars of the captain's cage as best he could, his compatriots all dead, but the remaining shock trooper tackled him off the support bar and the two jetticed out into the cold vacuum, freezing, locking, and finally wheezing a last frozen breath as his chest cavity collapsed.

"Vito!" Calixta screeched, the blast from the *Shen Whisper*'s weapons laying waste to the Alliance fighter, but not before it bore yet another hole in the side of the ship, depressurizing several chambers just below the bridge.

"Catastrophic drill failure," said a crewperson.

Things seemed to still, just for a slight second, as I felt the realization plummet into Calixta's chest. Vito was gone. The utter wrench of that cold plunge shook me, and I did my best not to let it show on the surface. Calixta's hands clasped and unclasped on the captain's console, doing her best to survey the situation while her crew put out a distress signal and prepared to board evacuation shuttles.

In the end, she had to be pried away from the *Shen Whisper*, the last ship Vito ever served on, and in an age just before the founding of The Mirror, could not even attempt to recover his anima core, losing him forever.

I have never been in love myself. It sounds altogether foreign to me. Intimacy is lost on me, ruined by my passive perception of consciousness, impossible to hide it all under the sweep of a rug or the denial one is capable of experiencing under its throes. It's alien, but I feel I there, the swell in Calixta, the utter torment of being stuck in a space of denial and acceptance, fever and cold, fury and tragedy. It is a vortex, a chaos so thick and impermeable that even I couldn't sort it into drawers or filing cabinets and stuff it away to tag and label with my mother later.

I let out a shaky breath.

"Difficult," said Calixta, using her fuse rod to put the last stiches on her parchment scroll addition to the tapestry. I let myself out of her memories and locked them tight behind me.

"Yes," I said. "It was."

"Sad?" she inquired.

"Very," I said. "Do you remember Vito?"

"No," said Calixta.

"You remember Dorotea's eighth birthday party?"

"Dorotea. Eighth birthday. First paint set, I made it from scratch with the blooms out of the State Gardens in Jinse De. First paint set, you would crush the bulbs, add saline solution, bubble it with physi-psionics, mix it with the pigment. She could paint with it. I told her to paint me. But she painted you."

"She is still that contrary."

"I know."

* *

I was still struggling with what could've linked those two memories for her. In the aftermath of the incident with the freighter, Calixta became twice as aggressive in her pugilism, a side of her I didn't like. Regrettably I made this very clear to her, and we had a bit of a falling out. I didn't talk to her for a few years. I wish I could dig that time up out of her memory, what she was doing and thinking, the anger she felt. But it all led to one inexorable conclusion. She would sting during a skirmish just after The Mirror was erected, crush a space station with her telekinetic prowess, and be reloaded into a body with a facial error. The tick is still there—one corner of her mouth sags, the cheekbones are slightly too high. It was a new technology, and I resent to this day that she had to be one of the first patients.

Naturally, she retained her Sting, and could barely use her psionics without having a psychotic break, which, with her prowess, was extremely dangerous. She also couldn't have mirrors, as the new-shell-psychosis was extreme. The Sting, the decaying of her faculties and the altogether relapse of her mind, coupled with the indescribable *wrongness* she felt when looking at her own face, turned her into a sitting ghost of what she once was.

I hold hope. I hold hope, Gillead, because I plan to continue this work for as long as it takes. I hold hope because I will walk out out of this gestalt with everything I had going in.

Sitting there with her, I scrutinized her face. She had started on something else with the tapestry, discarded the yellow. I looked at her work. "Nicely done, Calixta," I said, perhaps too condescendingly, as she scoffed and kept going. "If you want, you can try it hands-free. Your attention to detail has gotten remarkable."

"I'll try," she said, after a minute hesitation.

"I'm right here."

"Yeah," she said. She put her fuse rod down, and scooted back from the tapestry a hair. She took a few calming breaths. The air around her head hummed almost imperceptibly as the fuse and seam rods lifted off of the ground and began attaching the fibers to the tapestry, creating what was starting to look vaguely like a spaceship in the fabric.

I held out a meta-psionic hand, sort of poised to catch her if she fell, visualizing her psychic energy as I did so. She was a sickly green in aura, her power small and weak, but deliberate. She was doing very well.

"Careful about molecule agitation," I reminded her as the fusion rod began to smoke.

"Molecule agitation. Molecule speed, molecule isolation. Don't agitate. Suspend."

"Exactly. Don't agitate; suspend."

She made a frustrated noise. "It feels loose."

"Then hold it tighter." I punched lightly into her psionic energy with mine, boosting her tactile capability.

"Stop, I can do it," she hissed.

"Alright," I said calmly. I flipped a switch in her mind that told her I'd let go. I didn't, for fear that she might crush the fuse rod. "Look at you go!" I exclaimed.

"It still feels too *loose*." She hissed, the fusion rod cracking, bending in half, and flinging itself across the room. I tightened, cutting off her psionic flow.

In the moment between then and when she bolted for me, I saw the spaceship from a different angle. It was the *Shen Whisper*. I gasped, audibly, and looking back that might've been what triggered her.

She leapt at me and I remained in place. I allowed her to wrap her hands around my throat.

"You *look wrong!*" she screamed in my face, spittle dropping onto my cheek, her nose an inch from mine, the lack of recognition in her eyes bringing tears to mine.

"No, Calixta, I don't." I said, pushing firmly into her mind, grabbing her nervous system like a puppy, and wrenching her hands from my throat with her own muscles.

"*Stop!*" she wailed, careening backward. The door slid open and some attendants bounded into the room.

"I have a meta-psionic wall on her," I explained. "Please take over."

I felt as the meta-psionic attendant slid their grasp on her psionic energy over mine, like passing a bowl of water from one person to another.

"I am going to sedate her myself," I said.

"*No!*" she howled, visceral, feral, the blood vessels in her neck engorging. "*I can do it!*"

"You can," I said. "But not today." I flushed her consciousness, and she dropped like a paper bag, eyes fluttering closed.

I stepped back, sweat beading on my brow. I am a capable meta-psion, but my primary discipline is telepathy, and Calixta's power is so wild and untamed after the Sting that it took nearly all I had to keep her contained just in that one moment. This attendant, a man named Grid I had grown accustomed to calling on when I needed help with her, was much better at meta-psionics, and was able to keep her prowess curtailed for longer than I.

"Tabir," said Grid, kneeling down as I sagged onto a chair in the corner. "This was a big step back."

"Maybe," I said.

"You push her too hard."

I shook my head. "No, look. She manifested an actual memory." I pointed at the *Shen Whisper* on the tapestry. "She remembers. She doesn't know her late husband yet, but she remembers what happened to him. I'm sure of it."

He looked at the tapestry. "Perhaps its best we start her on a new tapestry, and come back to this one when we're feeling a bit more confident."

I shook my head again. "No. I want her to paint. I'm bringing Dorotea with me next time."

"Paint?" said Grid. "You really think she can learn?"

"She learned the shape of the *Shen Whisper* just from me digging around," I said, still breathless. "Dorotea can teach anyone to paint, anyway."

"I don't know," he said. He stood. "I don't know."

"Neither do I. But if we keep doing this forever, progress will never come."

"What if she hurts her?"

"We'll back both of us up before we even come in here. She hasn't seen Pollyanna in ages, anyway."

Grid seemed dissatisfied, but as the other attendant lifted Calixta into her bed and applied some topical solution to her forehead, he curtly nodded. "Very well."

* * *

I returned to the Mirror proper for a few days before the *Brennos* came back by to pick me up. I thought about that memory a lot in that intervening time. Some kind of dead ringer for my own *predicament*, it never occurred to me that perhaps she was simply showing herself what she needed to see. Maybe it was like an open wound in time. She may bleed out, but the wound reminds her who she is. Somewhere deep, subconscious, somewhere even I can't reach, she was working through some kind of long equation. Her parameters invisible to anyone but herself, the variables as mysterious as the transhuman mind, but as all things, it would boil down to an equation. An equation that hopefully could be resolved, and maybe one day she could return. It's a high hope, but *especially now* I believe it possible.

I put out a general contact for Dorotea, knowing that she was likely in some altered state as a technician for the Choir somewhere, just to tell her I planned to recruit her for Calixta's next therapy session. Grid was right; it was a risky move, and it's entirely possible this most recent event set her back. I am not a proto-psion, but something told me I was on the right path with this. It was time for Calixta to see family that wasn't me or my mother, someone with no filter who might irritate her. But the points of logic could be followed; she remembered the paint. She remembered Dorotea. Dorotea's birthday brought Vito out of her, made her angry. I felt she needed to experience that anger in a controlled environment. The general contact binged in the Commonwealth galactic network, such that I was sure she received the message. It was the last time I contacted her.

A month after moving back into Gillead's ship, *Hyærbad* would issue its crisis alert. *You* would see that preliminary and hypothetical fusion research and decide that was your Prime Future. Those people would die, *you* would put me under and do this *thing* and I never really got a chance to think about her further. What thin passage of thought had connected the memories of my sister. But I think now, after all this struggle $\Delta^{\circ}\textcircled{C}-\textcircled{C}-\textcircled{\Delta}-\Delta$...over this, there is something between childhood and love and loss. She was tracing back the lineage of her life story, even though she didn't know it. That Dorotea's eighth birthday party and Vito's death didn't need some logistical through line. She was the through line. Perhaps what is needed is just patience. That, with my help, she just needs to walk through those memories on her own path, in her own order, in her own time.

Just like me.

work in progress by Brian Taylor