The Mortal Gambit

by

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Nicholas Mori has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in English.

___________________________ [Scott Elliott]

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Prologue

You are about to read the diary of Ferrolentius Barr-Valenz, a humble Earth-denizen from Maxima. I will let his words speak for themselves, except when they cannot. I shall curb his colloquial ramblings and provide context. After all, not every reader is an enthusiastic scholar of Earth History, as I am.

Why did I bother to transcribe and annotate a denizen's journal? Because Valenz provides unique insight into the uprising of Zember Ratatosk-Mazonas. As you will see, Valenz is responsible for Mazonas's downfall.

Some critics accuse Valenz of inaccuracy, claiming his use of dialogue derives from a creative memory, rather than objective observation. These critics prefer the terse memoirs of Maloc Swevelom-Turbo and Moesia Salutis-Qita. I do not consider Valenz's style a barrier, but a challenge. I have facilitated the narrative, to ensure his nebulous attributions never stray into outright falsehoods.

I am the first historian brave enough to venture into this tangled historiographical endeavor, but it has its merits. Valenz's memoir is not only better written than that of Salutis and Turbo, it helps us understand why Earth fell out of contact with the Cardinal Federation for almost twenty years.

One last request to readers— I urge you to interact with this text without using a SuppliMental System. Valenz’s literary style should be enjoyed unfiltered. Let us pretend to exist as denizens, and process this fascinating tale for what it is. You might be surprised by how much we can learn.
May 9, 1068 TST

I was kicking my frustrations into the splintering bedpost when Captain Moesia entered the dormitory, wearing the full uniform of a circuiteer. Heat rose into my cheeks, spurred equally by guilt and defiance.

“Breaking your toes won't bring him back,” said Moesia, calmly. “And if you damage Arcadio's bed, he might slit your throat in the night.”

“Whatever,” I muttered. Part of me wondered how the Captain of the Blues would react to my blatant scorn.

She took another step into the room and I tensed. “I have something for you. Something that will help you survive.”

Despite myself, I glanced at the physical book she was holding out to me. “What is it?”

“A notebook.”

I stared for a second, then balled my hands into trembling fists. “A notebook? That's going to keep me alive? Not a weapon, but-- paper? What am I supposed to do with this?”

Moesia ignored my petulant tone. “I give a notebook to every Blue recruit. Some use them as training logs, others employ the pages to catalogue the strengths and weaknesses of their rivals. For you, it can function as a diary.”

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1 Terrestrial Solar Time is the calendar used by the citizens and denizens of Earth. In Imperial Cardinal Time, this date would translate to approximately +0.15.27.42. Inconveniently, Valenz will continue to use TST throughout this document, and for consistency I will use this calendar system as well.

2 "the Blues": Slang for members of the Circuit team Zealous Indigo.
I accepted the notebook without meeting her eye. The leather cover felt smooth against my new callouses. With my thumb I flipped through the pristine pages. For a cheap construct, it was beautiful. But it didn't mollify me.

“How will a diary keep me alive?” I demanded.

“It won't,” said Moesia. “But it may keep you from going numb.”

“I don't need help to--”

“You're angry now,” she said. “And anger is preventing your fear of death from swallowing you whole. But anger doesn't last long. Use this diary as an outlet for youranguish, and your mind will be clearer. If your mind is clear, you are more likely to survive in the arena.”

I stared at the empty pages. Their smell reminded me of warm bread. I thought about Quill and my fingers tightened along the book's cover. Moesia couldn't bring him back, but she had shown me more kindness than I deserved.

“Why are you doing this? I'm not a circuiteer.”

“But you are still a part of this team,” said Moesia. “Without talented skirmishers, our circuiteers would be helpless. You are important to us.”

I tried to conceal my utter skepticism.

“I want something from you,” she said. “A promise. No more fighting with your Squadmates. I cannot allow you to be a barbax in this team.”

I opened my mouth to put words to clotted emotions. I wanted to ask why she had selected me during the auction, when I am nothing but a liability. Instead I
swallowed, and nodded.

“You _do_ know how to scribble³, right?”

“Mm.”

The color in her artificial eye adjusted to match her biological one. “You're not the only recruit who had a thorny beginning here. Remember that.”

I lowered my gaze to the floor.

“Don't make trouble for Chalcedon-- you're lucky to have an Exark as good as he is. Don't waste that luck with impertinence.”

“Yes, Captain-- I mean, thank you.”

Moesia left me standing there, fingers wrapped tightly around this diary.

Moesia is right. I'm scared. I survived the Pit, but I didn't escape anything. I will enter the Nucleus, day after day, until I die. I'll probably be splattered across the arena in chunks, killed by an opponent or a Kepler⁴ or an Ome-Beast⁵. That is the fate of an auxiliary. Our purpose might be accomplishing objectives to aid our circuiteers-- but our reality is a bloody death, in front of millions of spectators.

I have to get Brevity out of this mess-- but I'm not sure how, but I'll make it happen. This diary will be a reminder that I still can accomplish something with this life.

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3 Scribbling: The act of writing by hand, creating words without an electronic interface. Scribbling is an activity of denizens with lower social value, like Valenz, who don't want their actions and motives to be tracked by the Cardinal Array.

4 Kepler: Slang for soldier automatons of the Kepler Corporation (founded -634 TST). In this era, “Keplers” are the primary providers of planetary security. They also feature as enemies in Valenz's Circuit match varietal.

5 Ome: Slang for biologically engineered organisms of the defunct Prometheus Company (founded -1549 TST), and still used on Earth to refer to any artificial biotech creature.
of mine-- something worthwhile.

You-- whoever you are-- hold the evidence of Ferro Barr-Valenz in your hands.
You deserve some explanation of how I ended up here, lying on a mattress in the
dormitory of the Blue Barracks. I should tell you about the sister I have to protect-- about
the brother I have to avenge. I should start at the beginning.

I was born in Maxima near the end of 1050 TST, into a life and body thoroughly
unremarkable. Fed on the meager diet of discount Vita-Ome, I'm a sinewy collection of
sharp angles and greasy hair. I read too much, speak too little, and often hide my
untimely laughter with an unconvincing cough. As of today, I am an auxiliary for the
Blues of the Maxima Circuit. A pleasure, I'm sure.

I'm what citizens would call Grid\(^6\) scum-- and it's not an entirely inaccurate
reduction of my identity. Our apartment is on the seventh floor, but you can still feel the
hum from the subterranean generators. I grew up there with a brother who is stronger
than me, and a sister who is smarter than me. Mum always worked extra shifts on Grid 7,
maintaining the infrastructure. Due to the frequent electromagnetic pulses, automatons
can't do the repairs, so it's either humans or sophisticated Omes. Human labor is cheaper.

Even with Mum's overtime and the subsidized Vita-Ome from the Maxima Dole,

it wasn't enough. There's the hunger rooted in the depletion of nutrients, and then there's

a hunger that comes from eating the same government provided nutrition every day of

your life. All my friends, everyone I knew, hungered for a new flavor, something

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6 The Grid: Slang for the Energy District of Maxima. It is home to many poor denizens, like the Valenz
family, who live off municipally subsidized “Vita-Ome” food products and work on the power system.
different. For that, I needed disposable income. I was savvy enough not to seek out employment on the Grid. I started Ome-snatching.

I'm a good runner. I think that's why Shiver relented and let me join her crew. I naturally became the subject of most jokes during our snatchings, but it was worth it. Each time we escaped with a Bio-Recyling Ome, I felt myself moving closer to the life I desired.

I learned a lot in my snatching months. Shiver only communicated important details in writing, so I had to learn to scribble effectively. All Grid scum know how to write, but it's different when you're doing it every day, rather than as a novelty.

Writing only amplified my love of reading. Quill laughed each time I headed to the library, but I became fascinated with the preserved hard books, from the era of physical text. I polished up my rusty English on the works of Heliconia Chung\(^7\) and Emily Dickinson\(^8\) – their pieces are short enough for me to get the gist. I even promised myself that if I become a citizen, the first thing I'll do is buy a complete hard set of Emily Dickinson's poems. What a joke.

When I started Ome-snatching, only Gold District restaurants maintained protective grids on their food-waste recyclers. Therefore, Shiver's crew focused on grabbing Bio-Recycling Omes from Silver District establishments. I was earning a solid 45 Vamps a week, which was more money than I had seen all my life. It was enough to get Brev's and Quill's attention too.

What did I want the Vamps for? Not for the virtual wonders of a Swell Room, not

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7 Heliconia Chung: Essayist from the Late American Republic (-1591 - -1508 TST)
8 Emily Dickinson: Poet from the Early American Republic (-1785 TST - -1729 TST).
for contraband narcotics, not even for better food at home. I wanted to escape life on the Grid. I was checking the monetary requirements for becoming a Gaozian in the Axon— I dreamed of working at a Silver District library. I was done with the Grid. I hated the constant hum, the static that ran through my hair when I crossed over certain streets, the sneers I would receive from Silver Districters. I hate denizens who have the snobbery of citizens, almost as much as I hate citizens themselves. Perhaps in a Gaozian Club, I could promote new theories-- perhaps I could make a difference.

I had a contact on the hard market who was offering me 150 Vamps for a D-Class Ome. If I took the job to the group, I'd be lucky to see 15 Vamps-- if I split it with Brev and Quill, I'd get 50. The prospect was too tender to resist. My siblings weren't interested in hard literature, but they wanted money. So you see, it's my fault that Brev is here-- and that Quill is dead.

And that brings us to my failed raid on *The Blueberry Lounge*.

Typical snatchings occur at night, but I assembled my siblings in the alley at dawn. The cherry stench of Maxports[10] drifted from the road between the grease waxed walls, which looked older than the Federation. Several dolers slunk in and out of the choice corners, appearing misshapen in their charity garb. We stood only three hundred

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9  A Gaozian refers to a dedicated scholar. Academically minded denizens join so called Gaozian Clubs where the planetary governments grants them subsidies to philosophize, create works of art, or simply entertain other Gaozians. It seems highly unlikely that Ferro would have been able to buy entry, considering his background and lack of full education. The Axon, of course, is the a slang term for the University District in Maxima.

10  Maxports: Slang for the standard vehicles belonging to the Maxima Municipal Department of Public Transportation.
meters\textsuperscript{11} from the back of \textit{The Blueberry Lounge}, and I could see the gentle pulsation of the glass-protected Ome.

Quill whispered to me to hurry up. I silenced him with a raised hand, making him grimace. Is it unusual for an older brother to envy his younger sibling? I definitely did. Quill was lanky and muscular, with a defined chin and a deep voice. He shaved regularly, and somehow wore the municipally issued clothing with flair. His skin was a shade lighter than mine, etched with little white scars from various friendly scuffles. People would often mistake Quill as my older brother, and no wonder that they did.

Brevity tapped the pulse-rod against her boot. She was chewing the corner of her mouth, as she often did when Mum didn't get home on time, or when there wasn't anything left to eat at dinner. The room she shared with Mum was filled with broken circuits and semi-Vamped batteries. She was constantly building some device out of the mechanical scraps that littered the Grid. The pulse-rod, for instance, was her own creation.

The city buzzed. It was 6am. The municipal shift from energy efficiency to maximum energetic productivity was our cue, and we ran forward.

The increased power reaching the Kepler security systems would cause them a half minute of recalibration, as they refocused their inputs. It was a minor advantage, but it was the best moment to strike. Of course, high end Keplers would not have this refocusing, but no Silver District restaurants could afford those models. They'd either be running old hardware or something new and experimental.

\textsuperscript{11} Meters: This outdated measure still persists on Earth. Practical conversion for 300 Meters offers 148.55 Salenes.
The Dolors watched us reach the glass encased Ome. Brevity brandished her pulse rod, jabbing the energy lock and the swiveling sentry-Kepler, overloading the mechanisms. Quill and I used Jagg knives to break open the weak points on the encasement. The Ome's translucent skin glowed pink. I could see the bits of decomposing food waste inside it, and the occasional bursts of energy traveling along its spines, into the wires. Quill lifted away the glass and I slashed these wires open, wrapping my hands around the slippery organism.

And that is where our endeavor came to an end.

The alley tiles glittered beneath us, then immediately locked us into place. I could feel the hairs along the back of my neck rising, but it wasn't an electric charge. My body was just refusing to move. The Ome, too, had become rigid in my grasp. It was a biological trap, a triggered enzyme, which left us paralyzed and utterly vulnerable\(^\text{12}\). We couldn't even speak.

I had ten minutes to feel a wave of shame and guilt before the Urban Security Keplers arrived. Beyond the repression they represent, I hate Keplers for their languid motion, their angular limbs-- their featureless “faces” and that ever-glowing central camera.

The biological trap released us, but there was no point trying to run. The Keplers, after scanning us for any potentially hazardous possessions, carted us into a Security Maxport. The vehicle had separate stalls, one for each prisoner. I could hear Quill kicking his anger into the metal barrier next to me. Brevity remained quiet.

\(^{12}\) Muscle contractors are often used to quell civil disobedience, non-lethally.
I knew where we were headed. Grid scum didn't get second chances-- even Quill at fourteen was a year past the clemency point-- after a routine trial, we would be shipped into the lower sectors of the Grid-- dangerous work that we were not expected to survive. Life in the Cardinal Federation promises security, shelter, and food, but only if you stay in line. As long as you do not defy the status quo, you're allowed to live. Mum was probably already being notified that her three children were all on their way to be condemned to the brief hardships of the prison Grid.

But of course, I was wrong. Otherwise, I wouldn't be writing these words. The automatons didn't drop us off at Urban Security Headquarters. Instead, the vehicle descended a ramp, released us onto the tiled floor of a cargo bay. A few dozen Webers\(^{13}\) were unloading equipment, and sliding massive crates along powered rails towards different blast doors. I caught Brevity observing the stocky frame of the Webers, their unthreatening design and their powerful limbs. I doubt she had ever seen such an expensive labor automaton before. I certainly hadn't. There were Keplers present, but none had the gray markings of Urban Security. These ones wore gold.

“Where are--”

Brevity silenced Quill with a hand on his shoulder, nodding towards the symbol glowing on the doors, on the far wall, the shoulders of the Keplers and the Webers. It was an eight pointed star, encapsulated by an elliptical band. It was the symbol of the Circuit.

“What do we have here?” asked a woman in turquoise, approaching us at a brisk

\(^{13}\) Webers: slang for labor automata from Weber Inc. (founded -1552 TST). For centuries, mechanized labor was the target of great civil enmity, until the implementation of the Earth Welfare Act, or as Ferro calls it, “the Dole”.

Mori: The Mortal Gambit
march.

The Kepler, addressing the woman as Deputy Auditor Seleuko, informed her that arrest details and personal files for us three had been transferred to her personal Mozi\textsuperscript{14}, who had already given preliminary approval.

“I see,” said Seleuko, examining us and tilting her head tilted. Quill was glowering, though I couldn't tell if he was glowering at me, at the Deputy Auditor, or at the whole situation. Brevity's fingers twitched, yearning to fiddle with a nonexistent mechanism. Looking bored, Seleuko confirmed the purchase, and thanked the automatons.

The Keplers gave rudimentary bows, and returned to their vehicle. I shivered, the spindly motion of their limbs reminding me of spiders.

Seleuko stepped forward then, and congratulated us. We would not be suffering the torment of the prison Grid, but instead had a chance for fame. She tilted up Brevity's chin, glanced at me, then pressed her fingers against Quill's biceps, testing the muscle.

Quill flinched away from her, and Seleuko released her grip.

“You have been cordially invited to the Pit,” she said, a smile sliding along her lips. “Impress the teams and you could become an auxiliary, or perhaps even a circuiteer.”

I had put the pieces together the moment I saw the symbol on the wall, but I took a step back, stammering politely to decline.

\textsuperscript{14} Mozi: slang for a software based unit of high class artificial intelligence, based on the prevalence of Mozi Corporation units (founded -302 TST). The term is so ingrained that even the Security Automaton is using the term-- or Ferro is paraphrasing from memory.
Seleuko laughed. “It is a choice between the prison Grid and the Pit, I'm afraid. But if you feel strongly, I can return you to--”

“No,” said Quill. “We want to be here.”

I gritted my teeth, but Seleuko gave an approving nod. She turned, and started walking. She called to us, without looking at us, “Though you've proven to Maxima what sort of people you are-- do not make trouble. You belong to Axapada and the Circuit now.”

We followed, not looking at each other.

I let various currents of guilt wash over me in that brief walk. Allowing my siblings to join me seemed despicably foolish. I had known I was risking the constrained comfort of a denizen's life-- the daily meal, the shelter, the basic stimulation. I just never thought I would be caught. My dreams of becoming a Gaozian now felt bitter and thankless.

We soon reached a door marked with the Circuit's symbol. Seleuko placed a hand against the metal, and the portal slid open.

The chamber beyond contained a noisy crowd of mostly young, mostly healthy denizens. Many wore Municipal shirts¹⁵ in various stages of fading color. Some glanced around scared, others leaned casually against the pillars, laughing or jeering. I even saw one boy, curled on the ground, asleep.

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¹⁵ Municipal shirts: As Valenz has stated, the city provides the necessities for survival to its denizens. This includes clothing, but the fashion choices are limited. Some citizens occasionally purchase these garments and wear them themselves, to make a statement. A pointless act, in my opinion.
“This better be the last of them, Seleuko.”

I jumped. I had overlooked the man-- a skirmisher from the Greens\textsuperscript{16}, sitting cross-legged next to the portal. It took me a moment to realize that his left forearm was augmented with metal plates. His biological hand had been replaced by a mechanical one. The Kepler-tech fingertips drummed peacefully against the soft human skin of his right palm.

Seleuko inclined her head. “There will be another match tomorrow, Captain Vark.”

Vark clenched his mechanical hand into an iron fist, spitting out disgusted words.

“No use complaining,” said Seleuko. “It will be as Axapada desires.”

She walked off. Vark grumbled to himself, then ordered us inside.

Quill entered first. I watched Seleuko striding off, gaze fixed on her Data-Patch\textsuperscript{17}. Then I stepped inside and the portal slid shut. Vark strode into the chamber, gently shoving denizens out of the way. Other candidates ignored us.

“It's my fault,” I said hoarsely, massaging my forehead with my knuckles. “I-- I'm so sorry.”

Brevity said nothing. I knew she had heard me, but she was staring out at the mass of people, all facing the same fate as us.

Quill gave my shoulder a gentle shove. “How can we blame you? You didn't

\textsuperscript{16} “the Greens”: Slang for members of Imperial Celadon.
\textsuperscript{17} So called “Data-Patches” are tools for denizens. They may provide many services of a SuppliMental System, but use only rudimentary intelligence and still rely on the initiative of the human user. I imagine one must feel quite naked if one had to use a “Data-Patch” to retrieve information and to communicate, rather than have access to the Cardinal Array.
know about the bio-nerve trap.”

Relieved, I began ranting about how such an installation would cost more than a KiloVamp a month\textsuperscript{18} and no Silver District establishment should be able to afford it, but Brevity interjected acidly.

“Well, as it turns out, they had it. Now we're here. You can't solve that with words.”

I couldn't argue with that. Not far away a scrawny boy with shivering hands was asking other candidates if they had the piloting knack. When they shook their heads, he moved on to the next conversational victim.

“Only way to survive,” he was mumbling. “Only way to survive.”

A crackle of white noise filled the chamber, and a panel in the center of the floor rose up, with Captain Vark standing on it. Some people in the corners were still talking to each other, but the majority recognized the shift in atmosphere, and fell silent.

Vark welcomed us to the Circuit with a harsh snap of his voice. Some people must have not looked sufficiently dejected, because he reminded us that no one was here because of talent or merit. We were criminals, and we were going to die. Those of us who had the skill to survive the Pit would have the right to die in front of an audience, as official members of the teams.

A woman to my left whimpered. Quill stared at Vark in defiance. The scrawny boy from earlier had closed his eyes, lip trembling.

\textsuperscript{18} Actually Valenz is mistaken. A collection of Silver District restaurants invested in redesigning the installation process, starting in 1067 TST, and being first implemented by a limited number of culinary establishments in May 1068. Among these, of course, was The Blueberry Lounge. It is therefore entirely logical that Valenz's violation of the law would not go unnoticed.
Vark flexed his mechanical fingers. “To determine whether we will evaluate you as a racer or a fighter, we have a little appetizer test. But whether you become a circuiteer or an auxiliary remember this-- you are still scum.”

“Hypocrite,” muttered Brevity.

Sweat coalesced on my palms as Vark ordered us to line up at the door on the far side of the chamber. There was a mad struggle to get there first, but one shout from Vark quelled the chaos.

I lost sight of Quill in the momentary struggle. He had pushed his way ahead, leaving me with Brevity and the gerbilesque boy.

“My name's Caviar,” he mumbled.

I didn't want to introduce myself, but I did anyway. “Ferro. This is Brevity.”

“Hi,” my sister added, without looking at either of us.

Caviar twitched. “I'm afraid.”

“We're aware,” said Brevity.

He shook his head, as if we were being dim. I contemplated calling to Quill, but he was chatting with some other denizens, laughing and even cracking a joke. He had gravitated to the only people in the room who looked as if they might survive the Pit.

How did he do that?

“My cousin was devoured by an Ome in the Pit,” whimpered Caviar. “Our family didn't even get to see the remains. There wasn't enough to--”

“Shut up Caviar,” I said, my pulse choking my patience. Brevity closed her eyes, and Caviar did indeed contain himself.
The line moved slowly. Every thirty seconds the doors would slide open, letting
the new candidate step through. They didn't return, so we couldn't tell who succeeded
and who failed. I took a few deep breaths.

Mum never let us display Circuit Matches in the apartment, but I've watched a
few events. Shiver in particular enjoyed watching old matches before sending us on a
snatching. She said it calmed her nerves. But those were tournaments, not pit
skirmishes. At least the Nucleus would offer teamwork and an objective. The Pit would
offer only death. I had to pass this “appetizer” test.

Mum would be devastated, but she wouldn't be surprised. She had warned me,
had begged me to stop snatching. My hands began to shake and I closed my eyes.

Soon Quill reached the doors. He gave us a last wave, then the metal closed in
front of him. I could only hope that he passed whatever exam he faced. Then it was my
turn. I hugged Brevity tightly.

“Good luck,” she whispered.

I nodded, turned and stepped into the featureless gray chamber. There was a hum
of energy, and the grayness crackled around me. I recognized the rapidly changing series
of smells. I had entered a Swell Room.

“Welcome, Ferrolentius Barr-Valenz,” said a Mozi, the voice filling the chamber.
Your assignment has three stages. You will have thirty seconds to attempt each stage.
Are you ready?”

Particles began to converge and formed a Capricorn. The vehicle looked new,
with a slender frame and gel support system. There was a full array of vehicle controls, which designated it as a racing class Capricorn. Then I realized that the engine panel was open.

The Mozi instructed me to identify the problem and fix it. On cue the gray light in the room turned purple, slowly fading towards blue. I had a feeling when it reached red, my time would be up. But the various cylinders and pulse channels looked fine. Nothing looked severely out of place. Each socket was connected to a different one. The light turned yellow.

“Can-- can I have a hint?” I pleaded.

There was no reply. Sweating, I touched the sockets, in case any one of them was problematically loose. The light faded into red, and a quick sound indicated that I had failed. The air in front of the engine panel glittered, and the exposed section became covered.

“Attempt to start the vehicle,” said the Mozi, quite crisply.

“What?”

The Mozi repeated itself, but the thirty seconds had already begun. I hopped into the Capricorn, examining the controls. Every vehicle I had interacted with was Mozi-driven, but I had seen enough racing synchrons. I pressed my hand against the

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belong to Silver and Gold District denizens, with a piloting Mozi in place. Of course, the Circuit exists to re-create the glory days of humanity, and thus heavier piloting burdens fall onto the shoulders of Circuiteers.

20 “Synchron”: The classical term for a projection in a virtual simulation room. They were originally named thusly due to their integration of the viewers' senses into the experience of the narrative. Of course, this temporary synchronization was never meant to impart educational information, as it placed too great a strain onto an unaugmented brain, so in some ways a “Synchron” is similar to a dream—remarkably ethereal.
translucent panel in front of me, then placed my hands on the two motion rods. My right foot locked against the levitation pedal, my left rested on the clutch. With my fingers in the grooves, the Capricorn hummed to a higher level of active power.

“Well done,” said the Mozi, and the color cycled up from orange to purple once more. “Now engage in a speed of twenty five kilometers per hour.”

And I knew I would fail that task as well. I had no idea about coordinating the motion rod acceleration with the clutch. I tried jamming both at the same time, but the engine whined and spluttered\(^2\). I restarted the Capricorn, but was panicking in the orange light, and stalled again.

“This exam is over,” said the Mozi. “Your results: One positive, two negative.”

The Capricorn glittered, and with a wave of nausea the room twisted. I was on my feet, and promptly stumbled to the ground.

“What does that mean? Did I pass or fail?”

“To be determined,” said the Mozi. “Depending on the results of other contestants.”

“What are my chances?” I asked, getting back to my feet.

I didn't expect an answer, but the Mozi advised me to prepare myself for the next exam as an auxiliary. Not a great surprise. The Mozi directed me to the far door of the chamber. I nodded, and walked out of the Swell Room.

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\(^2\) Whining and spluttering used to occur in old fashioned vehicles when stalled or experiencing debilitating technical trouble. You might be unfamiliar with the concept, but you would recognize the distressing noise if you heard it.
Interlogue I

Circuit Matches

The following interlogue is most likely superfluous. Almost every citizen and denizen of the Cardinal Federation understands what the Circuit is, and how a Circuit Match functions. However, there are mantle colonies in Ossium and Carnuiz, who may not be quite as familiar with the concept as the rest of us are. You may of course download the information directly from the Array if you are a citizen, but I provide this interlogue nevertheless, for the sake of context.

A Circuit Match is, at its core, a race. Four teams compete, putting forward three to five racers each, depending on the variant. Despite differences of vehicles and rules of engagement, the basic goal is always to complete the set track as quickly as possible, with a vehicle intact. When the first Circuit opened in -282 TST in Wellington-Helios, this simple racing structure was quite popular. It was the addition of the auxiliaries, sometimes self identified as skirmishers, that made the Circuit a galactic phenomenon.

While the circuiteers operate on the Circuit Proper, sometimes referred to as the Rim, the inner section of this arena is called the Nucleus. In it various teams of auxiliaries compete in dangerous objectives, whether it be maintaining control of a specific item or position, or something as complex as the vanquishing of a battle “Ome”. Each time an auxiliary completes such a task, it gives the circuiteers on their team a bonus, perhaps speed or extra equipment, depending on the circumstance. Indirectly, auxiliaries have the power to determine the fate of a match.
From the beginning auxiliaries had a high mortality rate. Introduced in Belladona-Helios on Mars in 399 TST, auxiliaries initially rode alongside circuiteers, deploying weapons to destroy opposing vehicles. The high cost in machinery eventually took its toll on the Circuit owners, and the Nucleus became the primary zone for auxiliary activity. There have been several historic efforts to increase the safety of the auxiliaries, but these measures are never popular. Most Circuits reverted to the more lethal regulations, but Auxiliaries have developed an unspoken code of clemency. The aim is often to maim, not to kill.

While generations of spectators have enjoyed the violence of the Nucleus, it is the circuiteers who remain idolized by the masses. It is important to note the following: one may volunteer to be a circuiteer. One must break the law to be viable as an auxiliary. The assumption is that auxiliaries are desperate criminals, so their deaths are tragic, but not a loss.

The Circuit is valuable, both politically and economically. The long history and popularity will allow Mazonas and Caston to use the Circuit as their battlefield. They will use the Circuit to compete for the rank of Tetrokon-- for command of Atem Province. We must acknowledge how critical the Circuit is, if it defines so much. But for now, let us return to the narrative of Valenz.

May 10, 1068 TST

I hate Arcadio. I absolutely despise him.

Sorry about the abrupt end to the last entry. After Arcadio and Scythia entered the
dormitory last night and he mocked me for using the notebook as a diary, I didn't feel like continuing. I loathe his smooth smile. He's always laughing at me with his eyes. I even hate his ridiculously curly hair. That's probably irrational. He's just a human body wrapped around a seed of cruelty.

Perhaps now is a good moment for a little confession:

I don't remember the exact words the Mozi spoke to me in the Swell Chamber. I usually have a pretty good memory, and I've done my best to write down everything that has been done and said around me these last few days with the utmost precision, but I've probably fallen short several times already. And yet I couldn't write about my experiences if I cut out all the conversations. My memory resonates with spoken words—almost to the point of cacophony. Reader, you'll just have to trust me-- this is as close to reality as I can scribble.

I'm glad I've said that. Let's return to the aftermath of that preliminary exam.

I was expecting to encounter Quill and the other candidates, but instead I found myself in a small chamber, glowing with the gold symbol of the Circuit. There was no instruction. There were no exits. I took a seat.

Within fifteen minutes the room's ambient light dimmed and the symbol glowed brighter.

“Ferrolentius Barr-Valenz,” said a different Mozi. “You have been selected to participate in the Auxiliary Examination. Congratulations.”

The symbol split in half as a holographic sword sank into it. The light deepened
to orange. The Mozi told me that I had five minutes before the exam began to ask questions.

I jumped to my feet, blood pumping. “What variant of Skirmish am I participating in?”

“A Pit Match is not officially a Skirmish. However, it will most resemble the variant Pandemonium. Would you like an explanation of the rules?”

I shook my head, knowing how much time that might take. “How many participants?”

“Fifty contestants.”

“How many pass the examination?”

“Twenty contestants.”

I felt phlegm sliding down my throat. “I-- do I have to kill anyone?”

“No,” said the Mozi.

“Is it bad if I don't kill anyone?”

The Mozi politely informed me that although the main objective was survival, the Captains were most impressed by valor.

Valor, of course, means a thirst for blood.

“Do you have any more questions?”

I hesitated. “Could I send a message-- to my mother?”

“Speak your message, and I will see it delivered.”

It wasn't profound or articulate, but I told her what had happened, that I was sorry, that I loved her. Then I ran out of things to say. The Mozi sent my message.
“Prepare yourself, Ferrolentius Barr-Valenz. Best of luck to you.”

I paced back and forth. I can't say if the wait felt fast or slow, but then it was over.

I had expected a door to appear. I had expected the ceiling to open and a vent of energy to launch me out. But once again, I was wrong. The floor beneath me dissolved, and I fell through darkness, screaming.

I plunged headfirst into a gelatinous liquid. I couldn't see anything, and I couldn't breathe, so I thrashed my way to the surface. The gel was harmless, and I wiped it from my eyes. Lights were beginning to come alive inside the massive underground chamber, illuminating the small, misshapen islands and the sea of purple gel. I could see several other contestants struggling to the surface, some already clambering onto the islands, and I knew I couldn't waste a second. I fought my way to the closest island.

The landform was made of some sort of sandstone. I dragged a chunk of it into the gel as I tried to climb onto the surface. At the same time, another contestant clambered up the other side of the island, only ten meters away. She was gaunt and bony, but her eyes were full of fire. Behind her, against the far wall, a large, old fashioned numeral shimmered into being. A daunting number fifty.

Words flashed across the numeral. *Weapons inbound.*

I looked up into the darkness just in time to see bits of steel flash on the edges of my vision. In the next instant, three swords had slammed into my sandstone island, buried to the hilt. There were several screams of shock, but of course no one was hit. The vectoring Mozis were too good for that.

The other contestant on my island lunged for the sword nearest her. All over the
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arena, contestants were grabbing weapons. I didn't move. I didn't want to fight this contestant, I had to find Quill and Brevity.

“Please stop,” I called to the contestant. She didn't look up at me. “I won't fight you.”

She pulled the weapon free. Her grip was loose and unprofessional, but she had no qualms about fighting me. Unsure what to do, and unwilling to find out if she had a killer instinct, I dived back into the gel. I was gambling that I was a better swimmer than she was.

What was I trying to do? Stay alive? Look for my siblings? I wasn't thinking all that clearly. No amount of time in that dark chamber had prepared me for this. All sounds, except my heartbeat, were muted beneath the gel.

I burst to the surface, gelatinous globules sliding over my cheeks. The light in the chamber had started pulsing, and the first screams were intelligible. I wiped my eyes clean and looked up to see the numeral fifty click down into a forty nine. People were dying.

“Ferro, what are you doing?”

I looked around wildly, feet flailing through the gel, until I saw Quill, crouched on a small island all to himself. In the distance metal screeched and more screams pierced the air. There was no shortage of bloodlust. Quill helped me up, and handed me a sword. I shook my head but he pressed the hilt into my hand.

“We're in the Pit, brother. If you want to survive, you have to be bold.”

I saw two contestants wrestling with each other, skin grating on the sandstone.
The woman's fingers locked tightly around the boy's throat, and he slowly stopped struggling. The glowing numeral reached forty six. Quill's eyes narrowed at the woman, who had now turned towards us. He was telling me to get into a defensive stance when another death, somewhere in the arena, turned the numeral into a forty five, and it blinked brightly three times.

“What is--”

A rumbling gurgle began, and some great invisible force started sucking the gel into the center of the arena. Those crouched in the gel screamed as they fought to get to land. I saw one girl scramble onto an island just in time to be stabbed through her shoulder. By the time the gel had been drained away entirely, the living numbered only forty one.

“But--”

Before Quill could express his answer, a shape leapt up onto our island, now only a hill in a rocky landscape, and bowled him over. An assailant had taken advantage of the overwhelming confusion to grab an easy kill. I kicked the man hard, making him drop his sword and slide down the little slope. Quill was back up and furious, but the man scampered away.

The number hit forty and the ground began to quake in earnest. I lost my sword as I clung to the sandstone, which cracked and disconnected from the greater rock mass below it. I tumbled over onto the hard canyon floor, the space previously filled with gel. My shoulder took the brunt of the impact it didn't hurt yet, so I jumped up. Immediately I had to dodge a rolling chunk of rock, the size of my head. The rumbling stopped, but
nothing in the arena remained stable.

“Ferro, are you solid?”

Quill remained standing on top of the largest chunk of the island, shaken and sweaty, but still holding his sword. I nodded, my shoulder rippling with pain.

“We need to move,” said Quill. “Otherwise it'll be over before we make an impression.”

It took me a moment to register what he said. “Make an impression?”

He was already pulling a spear out of the rubble, and handed it to me. “You know what happens if we don't get selected for a team, right?” I didn't take the spear, and he pushed it towards me again. “How many times do you want to fall into that gel?”

The numeral above us hit thirty five, and the rumble returned. The arena began to tilt. Both Quill and I fought to keep our balance. The arena stopped at approximately a fifteen degree incline, which was not bad until the earth was hit all over in sudden bursts of impact. We both fell to the ground, sliding a few meters down the incline. All the islands, now just large collections of boulders, shuddered and slowly began to slide down the incline.

“Run, Ferro!”

I took the lead, jumping up a boulder and rolling over some pebbles. Quill was having more trouble, but still managing to clamber over the sliding islands and easily dodged the tumbling rocks. But it was costing him valuable attention.

“Quill, behind you!”

He reacted instantaneously, throwing himself over a rock just in time to avoid the
saber slash. It wasn't one assailant, but two. They had teamed up to take down my brother.

“Get out of there, Quill!”

But he didn't. Dodging another swipe, Quill knocked one to the ground with his shoulder, then stabbed the less gifted duelist right in the chest. Quill picked up the dying contestant's saber and stabbed the his other opponent through the neck. It happened so quickly I didn't believe what I was seeing. Bitter saliva dried on my lips.

A scream behind me distracted my focus. The assailant from before, the one who had bowled Quill over, was dropping a twitching Caviar, whom he had held by the neck. Blood poured everywhere as the boy shuddered and died.

Then there were thirty contestants and the ground trembled again. The field righted itself violently, tossing everyone to the ground. Then the debris began condensing itself in a crude collection of stony walls and crooked pillars. The air became cold. I felt condensation form on my cheeks, and ice rose out of the ground. Spikes of ice grew out of the ground, forming walls and corridors instantly with the rock. Before I could scream his name, Quill and I were separated. The arena had become a maze of stone and ice.

I looked around for some sort of weapon and found a short spear lying a few meters away. I skidded over a patch of ice and picked it up.

“There are only thirty contestants remaining,” said the Mozi. The walls became both translucent and reflective. I could see my pathetic self staring dully at this visual bulletin.
“A brief update for those still active. The three greatest pearl fingers\textsuperscript{22} in the arena are Helix Kuna-Azaro, Tah Muroost-Avoor and Ferroentius Barr-Valenz.”

The ice walls flashed with the image of a middle-aged man, the image of a wispy girl, and then the image of me. They were highlighting weak links. I couldn't believe it.

“And the current contestant with the most number of kills is Ollie Nazomir-Borax.”

The image of Caviar's killer flashed up, a big grin on his wide face. He was not particularly massive nor physically imposing, but I could see bloodlust in his eyes. Borax would be a top pick in the auction if he wasn't killed. Whoever killed him, of course, would be the top pick instead.

The Mozi concluded by saying, “good hunting to all.”

The ice next to my head cracked as an axe whizzed through the air and slammed into it. One of the other contestants had taken advantage the explanatory lull to strike. It was the woman from the beginning. Her expression revealed a scavenger's hunger and she held a second axe in her other hand. She scampered towards me and I pointed my spear at her. I jabbed, but she ducked it, her blade hissing through the air. I dropped the spear and rolled aside.

She spat a curse at me as I ran down the icy passage again. I had to get away.

The passage was slick and icy, I stuck to the narrow avenue of gravel in the center of the corridor.

\textsuperscript{22} Pearl fingers: Slang for a rookie, someone not exposed to danger, hence the pearly clean sheen to their fingers. An archaic reference, when caucasian skin tones were pale enough to allow for a comparison to pearls.
I was nearing a corner when a blunt force slammed my already injured shoulder, and I collapsed. My opponent had thrown her axe at me, but the spin had hit me with the blunt side of the blade. The pain in my shoulder was incredible, but at least I still had a shoulder. I tried to get up. In the corner of my eye I saw her picking up my fallen spear. I was in trouble.

But then I heard the growling. A wolf was approaching from the passage around the corner. No, not a wolf. Wolves are not two meters tall. Wolves don't have purple spines growing out of their backs. Wolves certainly don't have six legs. This Ome-beast-- I'm not sure what its name was, was going to kill me.

I scrambled up, fumbling for the axe. The black claws dug into the icy ground. Steaming breath rose along the pink snarl. I was barely on my feet when it lunged. I threw myself sideways, the snapping jaws missing me, but a claw grazed my forearm. The serrated claws left bloody trails in my skin. Red blotches splattered the icy floor.

The Ome wolf turned to face me again, rising onto its back four legs, front claws raised, intent not to miss me again. My fingers were locked around the handle of the axe, but I couldn't feel them. There were only five meters between the wolf and myself. I had to do something.

I rose from my crouch in an instant, yelling and raising my axe to throw. I swung it through the air, but didn't let go. The wolf, not a pure killing machine, flinched just momentarily, but I took that moment to push myself in the opposite direction, running for my life. The wolf's confusion was over in an instant, and it bounded after me. I stuck to

23 I know what its name was. The “Ome” has been dubbed Lupothanatos, with the Latin root for wolf combined with the Greek god of death.
the narrow avenue of gravel, sprinting through a billowing fog of agony. The wolf was too large to take advantage of the solid surface. It slid on the ice as it pursued, giving me a chance. But then the icy ground turned to pure rock.

My momentary lead was lost in three bounds. I would be crushed and devoured on the fourth. Waiting until the last possible moment, I flung myself to the ground. Had I been less lucky, had my timing not been perfect, I would have still died. The Ome wolf sailed over me, back claws barely missing my neck. It righted itself in an instant. Facing those empty eyes I knew I had reached the end. My tricks, if you could call them that, had gotten me nowhere.

An alarm sound pierced the muffled music, and through the layers of ice I could barely decode a glowing 25. Five more people had died and the world turned sideways. I slammed into the ice wall and tumbled across the new floor, almost to the gap where the ceiling had become a yawning chasm. I dug my axe in, and held on. The wolf howled at me, approaching with steps that cracked the ice.

I closed my eyes, done fighting, but I felt a rush of air, not death. The beast had leapt over me. A horrible scream jolted me to my feet. My foe was being mauled by the Ome wolf. Her spear was rolling away along the ice. She had followed me, risking death by Ome wolf to make sure I died. For some inexplicable reason the wolf had ignored me, and taken her out instead.

I felt sick, watching the beast snarling and tearing at her, but she kept screaming.

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24 In keeping with the unpredictability of the Pit, constructed beasts will occasionally change focus to another victim, when the arena shifts at five deaths. Since this does not happen always, Ferrolentius Barr-Valenz was quite fortunate.
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She was still alive! Before I could consider my actions, I took several steps towards the Ome-beast and swung the axe into its skull. If the axe hadn't been so sharp, my poorly executed swing would have done nothing, but the axe sank into the biologically constructed brain. With a howl the animal died. Feeling numb and a stranger to myself, I tried to push the beast off of her, but I was too weak.

And then the arena righted itself once again, flinging me onto the ground. But five people hadn't died-- otherwise the deathmatch would be over. But in a pit match, the rules change the moment you think you understand them. The ice walls had melted, boulders sank into the ground, to be covered by smooth dirt. Two dozen dazed survivors staggered to their feet. I might survive.

“Quill!” I shouted, my lips dry and my voice cracking. “Where are you?”

“Ferro, you're alive!”

Quill was running towards me, sword in one hand, trident in the other. Both weapons were crusted with blood. Apart from a bruise on his cheek was bruised he seemed okay. Above us, a glowing twenty three bathed everything in red light. There were only three more contestants before the end of the match.

Quill was running so intently that I had to again scream a warning. He turned just in time to block the axe swing from the smiling Ollie Nazomir-Borax. He wanted to kill my brother.

“Get away from him!” I shouted, not sure if I was cautioning Quill or threatening Borax.

“Shut up Ferro!” shouted Quill. “Keep yourself safe!”
I turned to see a pair of contestants sneaking up on me with long serrated spears. I backed away, almost tripping when my ankle bent painfully. I must have twisted in my tumble. They were intent on taking me out. Then one of the spear wielders collapsed, a knife in his back. The other one turned, just in time to engage the new assailant. I turned and ran, as best as I could, towards Quill and Borax.

Their duel was a shrill clash of metal and blood. Both were wounded, but Quill had the advantage of two weapons. Borax was fast, a vicious lizard who dodged the trident thrusts, weaving back and forth and laughing.

I was twenty meters away when Quill finally had his shot. With a feint he stopped Borax for a moment and plunged his sword into his arm. But a blade through his bicep did not stop Borax. He used the moment to step in closer, cut Quill's trident in half with a swing of his axe, and then dug the blade into Quill's chest. In his agony, Quill twisted the sword, still buried in Borax's arm, bone fragments spilling onto the dirt. Then Borax struck again, the axe sinking into Quill's neck.

My scream contained no words, and I ran, ignoring my injuries. I had no weapon but I was going to make Borax suffer. I scooped up a fallen knife, and barreled into Quill's killer. His eyes glittered as I held the knife up, ready to stab him through that malevolent smile. But I couldn't.

I can't pretend it was mercy, or kindness. For the second time that day, I was paralyzed. Only once I was incapacitated did I notice the flashing twenty. I heard the congratulatory words of the Mozi. It was over. I could no longer kill Borax. They wouldn't let me.
Quill's blood was soaking into the dirt.

[Section omitted for the reader's convenience. Valenz and the other survivors are escorted into another chamber. They receive basic and temporary medical care. Valenz expounds on his emotions.]

“Congratulations, new candidates, and welcome to the Circuit.”

Seleuko's voice was dry and crisp. The soon-to-be auxiliaries stood bloodied and injured on one side of the room hastily patched up by medical Webers. On the other side stood six circuiteer candidates. I was too numb to properly register Brevity was standing among them. She had passed the appetizer exam, as well as the racing test. She would be a circuiteer-- she would lead an invigorating, semi-luxurious lifestyle. She would not be killed in the Nucleus-- she had escaped the doomed life of the auxiliary. Some part of me was proud of her. Next to Seleuko stood the four Captains of the teams. I recognized Vark.

“You have completed the examinations. Now you will begin your new life,” said Seleuko. “When your name is called, step forward. The auction will determine your allegiance and salary25. Displease us and you will return to the pit.”

Seleuko examined her Data-Patch. “Kuna-Azaro, Helix. Step forward.”

Azaro's face was sickly gray. His leg was bandaged up to the hip and he cradled

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25 Circuit Salaries reflect the value determined of a circuiteer or an auxiliary, and are paid both by the team and by the owner of the Circuit. The team will pay a daily salary of 0.1% of the original price at auction, provide free room and sustenance, and low interest rates for loans in the first year. The Circuit owner also pays 5% of that original price for each Match they attend. If the team wins the match, players may elect a raise or a bonus.
his right hand with his left, where he was missing fingers. As he shuffled onto the
glowing tile in the center of the chamber, the walls began to display images of his
combat. The montage flicked between his screaming flight from an Ome wolf to his
violent wrestling bout with another contestant. I was almost shocked to see him choke
the life out of his opponent.

The Captain of the Whites\textsuperscript{26} raised two fingers. His bulk allowed him to
effortlessly dominate the podium. He cleared his throat and bid three hundred Vamps, on
account of Azaro's tenacity. I'd later learn that his name was Stridon, and that he had
once cracked a man's skull with his fingers.

Lomach, the Captain of the Reds\textsuperscript{27} snickered. “Tenacious, you say?”

Stridon shifted irritably, unsure what the joke was. Lomach looked reptilian with
widely spaced eyes and a tongue that flopped over his lips. Lomach raised Stridon's sum
by fifty.

The bidding faded away around five hundred Vamps, and Stridon welcomed
Azaro to the Whites with an extended hand. Azaro looked at the calloused digits warily.

“Don't worry,” said Stridon. “Alabaster has the best Ome-technicians and
augmenters. We'll take care of you.”

Azaro nodded wordlessly and proceeded through the door behind Stridon's
podium.

I didn't pay much attention until Seleuko called Borax's name. I've never been
particularly vengeful. I don't hold grudges, as a rule. But watching him stand there, teeth

\textsuperscript{26} “the Whites”: Slang for members of Sagacious Alabaster.
\textsuperscript{27} “the Reds”: Slang for members of Valiant Crimson.
gleaming and arm heavily bandaged, I wanted to kill him. I could never relax until I had
given Quill some justice.

The auction ended at an astounding fifteen thousand Vamps, and Vark welcomed
Ollie Nazomir-Borax to the Greens. The walls displayed Quill's death again as Borax
limped toward the door. I watched him go.

My attention wavered again. Like jeweled beasts each contestant shambled up to
the front and endured the gaze of the Captains. I watched Seleuko observing the panoply
of physical maiming and emotional stress with no change in her expression.

Brevity stepped forward. It surprised me to see how calm she was. Hadn't she
witnessed our brother's murder? She was wearing the circuiteering uniform, and stared
straight ahead. She was almost smiling, but not quite. The Captains were enraptured by
her.

“Your racing was an inspiration,” said Moesia.

Unlike the other Captains, Moesia didn't wield the same charisma. She seemed
content to be overlooked, while surveying everyone with her mismatched eyes. The left
one was a pure jade green. The other one, hers from birth, was a steady brown. Unlike
Lomach's compliments, there was no guile in Moesia's words.

Stridon nodded his agreement as the wall displayed a clip from the circuit. A
small cluster of Capricorns grappled for first place on the curve of the track, but as
various obstacles rose and fell one Capricorn pulled ahead. A Vica28 within the cockpit

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28 Vica: A Visual Input Capturing Automaton. The acronym is vestigial, an English acronym. The two
syllables have persisted across language. Vica still commonly refers to any intelligent video
mechanism.
showed Brevity gritting her teeth and shifting gears, narrowly avoiding a falling pillar.

“It is a rare treat to see someone with a knack for racing,” said Vark. “We are fortunate you didn't end up in the pit.”

Brevity said nothing.

“I put forward one thousand Vamps,” said Lomach.

A thrilling auction began between Lomach and Vark. The final price for Brevity was thirty six thousand Vamps. Lomach gritted his teeth in annoyance as Brevity walked towards the door of the Greens. She glanced over her shoulder in my direction, then stepped through.

“Barr-Valenz, Ferrolentius,” called Seleuko.

I stumbled and fell as I stepped forward. My mouth tasted like iron, my tongue brushing the floor. I was weaker than I had thought. The remaining contestants laughed, but I struggled up again. I was sore. I was broken. I didn't care if they laughed. I just prayed that Vark would select me, so that I could see Brevity—so that I could get close to Borax.

“It's a pity,” said Stridon. “The brother's performance had a promising berserker edge. And yet it was this one who was determined to live.”

Lomach put forward a reluctant fifty Vamps, on account of my fortune. I stared at the floor.

Vark was watching the wall, examining my dodging the Ome wolf, then shrugged.

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29 36 KiloVamps is an extraordinary price. The average price of a circuiteer during this time would be 5 KiloVamps. Of course, the average price for an auxiliary would be 1.2 KiloVamps, so perhaps it is Borax who deserves lauding, not Barr.
He had made his investments already. I should have known.

“I'll put forward four hundred,” said Moesia.

The other Captains raised eyebrows and even Seleuko glanced up from her Data Patch. No one challenged Moesia, and I limped forward.

“Welcome to the Blues,” said Moesia.

I ignored her and stepped through the door. For a moment my stomach twisted as I fell through darkness. In the next instant, or so it seemed, I was sitting in a grassy meadow, listening to the peaceful buzzing of summer. My foggy mental state attached to memories of the Maxima parks. I felt a touch on my shoulder.

“Are you awake?”

I nodded my tender head. I felt stiff, but I could move my limbs and fingers easily. I glanced to my left and saw a girl around my age, looking at me with concern on her round face.

“How are you feeling?”

“I don't know. Fine, I suppose.”

She extended a small hand, introducing herself as Sonata.

“Ferro,” I mumbled.

“It's nice to meet you.”

I mumbled something that might have been agreement.

“I think I saw you in the waiting chamber. I was selected for the circuiteering examination.”

I looked around the meadow. A creek trickled towards us from an archway. The
meadow was artificial. I looked up to confirm to see the cavernous ceiling lit by a colony of Glowbugs. A few people were strolling along the grassy paths. The meadow was small enough for me to make out a door in every cardinal direction.

“What happened?” I asked. “Did I lose consciousness?”

Sonata pointed at a small bracelet on my wrist. Letters glowed into visibility along the band, informing me, *Regenerative surgery: Successful. Initial injuries: Two broken ribs, one broken ankle, one dislocated shoulder, one bruised shoulder blade. Current injuries: None.*

“They heal us up before we enter Blue Barracks,” said Sonata. “I’ve heard that the chief stitcher of the Blues, Selo Magari-Batum— she’s been doctoring the team for almost thirty five years! She’s famous.”

I looked around for the other recruits, but no one else was wearing the pale blue shirt and trousers that Sonata and I wore.

“The others aren't here yet,” said Sonata. “The two of us were the least injured of all the Blue recruits, so I’m guessing Magari released us first.”

“What are we doing in this meadow?” I asked. “How did we get here?”

“I don’t know. I woke up here, same as you.”

“And you didn't go explore?”

“I-- uh-- wanted to enjoy the sunlight a bit. I didn't want to get lost.”

“You can't get lost when you're in a cage,” I said. “But hey, soak up all that fabricated sunlight.”

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30 *Stitcher: A term used for the hybrid role of the team doctor-- both a healer and an augmenter. The Chief Stitcher is always a very gifted surgeon.*
Sonata wrapped her arms around her knees and looked away, saying no more. I felt a pinch of regret, but didn't apologize, and turned away.

I didn't have long to wait because Moesia strode up to us. She wore a tunic, like us, but of darkest blue. Her gait indicated both purpose and intensity.

She apologized for her delay, and she sat down in front of us, crossing her legs.

“My name is Moesia Salutis-Qita, but please use my first name when speaking to me. Formality exhausts me. Is that clear?”

Sonata and I gave uneasy nods. I couldn't gauge her at all. She continued.

“Sonata Mendallin-Chell and Ferroentius Barr-Valenz, what is your name preference?”

I opened my mouth but she raised a hand. “I am not asking what naming preference is listed in your profile. This is a new beginning for you.”

We stuck with Sonata and Ferro. Moesia inclined her head, then asked us about our origins.

“I'm from the Silver District,” said Sonata. Both Moesia and I looked at her in surprise. Sonata blushed. “I— I— would rather not talk about it.”

“You lived in the Silver District?” I demanded. “And you broke the law?”

“I said, I don’t want to talk—”

“But why? You have subsidized membership in Gaozian Clubs— you get a Swell Room stipend and—”

Moesia cut me off again. “Regardless of your district, you both belong to the Circuit now. You know what that means. Society will perceive you by your crime. Your death will be entertainment. They will say it's what you deserve. Even circuiteers cannot
escape this judgment. As long as every player is a criminal, there is no need for prolonged mourning, when you meet your fate.”

I swallowed. Next to me Sonata was staring into the grass. Moesia wasn't finished.

“However, you are also one of us, part of the team. You will be protected and nurtured, but it also means you will contribute. Have you considered which variant you wish to participate in?”

I asked what my options were.

“Skirmishers have four choices: Ascension, Pandemonium, Feralcanalia or Alpha Deathmatch.”

I will never enter a Pandemonium again, as long as I live.

Moesia went on to explain the three racing variants, and their specific vehicle.

Obstacle Racing with a Capricorn; Demolition Racing with a Manticore and Aerial racing with a Wyvern.

Sonata swallowed. “I— I don’t own a Capricorn or a Manticore or a Wyvern.”

“Are you sure?” I smirked. “Maybe you should check your other garage.”

Sonata’s cheeks filled with color and she balled her fists.

“The team will loan you a basic vehicle,” she said. “But I recommend insuring it.

If you don't have a vehicle, you have to join the skirmishers.”

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31 Though an impressive speech, these words are probably only a paraphrasing by Valenz.
32 Manticore: A battle vehicle with room for one Auxiliary to control the turrets. A Demolition Race, though about speed, is far more about staying alive. If it were not so popular, it would have been shut down long ago, due to expense.
33 Wyvern: A hovering vehicle with intense speed with a limited ability to fly. It is easily the most difficult race, but personally, it is my favorite. The circuiteers who brave the skies have such grace.
Sonata breathlessly asked for a recommendation.

“’My recommendation is Manticore. I think your cautious piloting style would work well in a Demolition Race.’”

Sonata swallowed. “But— but isn’t—”

“There is no safe event on the Circuit. The goal is not to find safety, but to find something you can excel in. Your best chance at preservation is excellence.”

Sonata nodded and settled back. The Captain of the Blues now turned her attention to me. “I reviewed your performance in the pit, and I would recommend either Pandemonium or Feralcanalia.”

“No Pandemonium,” I said, feeling my stomach clench.

“You are not a good fighter— but you did escape danger repeatedly. Pandemonium is about surviving the arena, not killing.”

I asked her what Borax was choosing.

Moesia raised an eyebrow. “Even if I knew, I would not tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Because your revenge is too hot and it is clouding your reason.”

“You have— you have no idea what I—”

“Perhaps Feralcanalia is the better option for you.”

“What is Feralcanalia?”

“Beast Fighting,” said Moesia, simply. “Mostly a variety of Omes, and occasionally some Keplers. Your evasion of the wolf impressed me.”

I stared at her. “I almost died. Many times.” I held up my arm to her, but the scar
had mostly faded. “I can’t face one of those wolves again.”

“The next time you do, you won’t be alone,” said Moesia. “You will have your squad. You will have proper equipment. You will have the chance to fight back.”

I said nothing.

“It is a skirmish with less—human killing. You do not fight other Skirmishers. Your opponents will be constructs”\(^\text{34}\).”

It certainly wasn’t appealing, but my options were limited.

“Sonata,” she said, turning to the girl. “I would like to escort Ferro directly to the Feralcanalia Exark\(^\text{35}\). If you don't wish to walk with us, I can ask Tertullio\(^\text{36}\) to meet you here.”

Sonata said she didn't mind joining us, and we set off.

The Blue Barracks are extensive. I’ll try to give a more detailed description of this underground ecosystem, but I caught my first glimpses of this new world. I tried to imagine the sophisticated Webers who had carved the ornate symbols and extinct alphabets into the azure arches. Light spilled across the veined marble walls from occasional panels. We passed the dining hall, and a recreational room lit by a luminous aquarium. We occasionally passed an auxiliary or a circuiteer, and I did my best to ignore their curious scrutiny. Sonata gave an occasional friendly wave— as if amiability

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\(^{34}\) This is not strictly true. While the objective is to kill the various beasts in the Nucleus, the auxiliaries compete for these kills actively with the other teams. Killing another player will result in a penalty, but it will only affect the score.

\(^{35}\) Since “Exark” is a rather old fashioned term, I thought I better define it. The Exark is directly in charge of all auxiliaries in their given event. Exarks are different from Decturs, who lead individual Squads, of which there are several within each variant. Since Exarks still compete and are the most talented, they often act as Decturs for their squad as well, hence the confusion.

\(^{36}\) Tertullio Vifor-Kaatan 1034-1070 TST, the Demolition Race Exark for Zealous Indigo at this time.
was some sort of resource in this hell.

An elevator took us down several floors, and we stepped out into a protected glass corridor. To both sides lay practice arenas, smaller but properly scaled. The one on the right was empty. The one on the left was not.

Sonata pressed herself to the glass to watch three auxiliaries fighting a massive holographic snake. I stepped closer as well, failing to hide my wonder. Unlike the competitors in the Pit, these auxiliaries were talented. Using Nitro Skates they sped between obstacles, grinding along walls and dodging the thrashing tail of the simulated beast. One carried a cannon slung on her back. When she landed on a little ledge she unhooked it, loaded it up, and fired a burst of energy into the translucent creature.

The simulation shuddered and focused its attention on the auxiliary, but another jumped up behind it, lashing it with a Thorn Whip across the skull. It reached back, gnashing with holographic teeth, but the midair skirmisher used his skates to boost into a backflip, both saving himself and lashing the creature again, across the mouth. The other auxiliary used this opening to unload her cannon into the open gullet, making the simulation ripple with the force, then extinguish entirely.

Moesia opened the portal into the arena.

“Chalcedon!”

The third auxiliary looked down from his vantage point, and tapped something on his wrist. The arena immediately began to level out, and all three skated towards us. Each of them wore variations of armor, colored black and blue.

“Captain, what a pleasure,” said Chalcedon, removing his helmet. His hair clung
to his forehead in a sweaty gray mess. I saw a brutal white scar along his cheek. This man had to be the Exark. “I'm sorry that I didn't have a chance to respond to your notification.”

“Not to worry,” said Moesia. “We can see you were busy. This is Ferro.”

Chalcedon’s gauntlet wrapped around my fingers in an old fashioned greeting. “You've decided to play in the Feralcanalian Games with us?”

“Um—yes,” I said, squirming under all the gaze of so many. “But I don’t think I could ever do something as impressive as that last simulation.”

“It'll seem less daunting with practice and time,” said Chalcedon. He turned to Moesia. “You were thinking of putting him on Moscow Squad?”

Moesia nodded. “Since Moscow Squad does not currently have a reserve.”

“Quite right,” said Chalcedon. “And I would say that—”

“You're the one who fought the Lupothantos, aren’t you?” said the auxiliary with the whip. He took off his helmet to reveal blond highlights and a grin of brilliant teeth. His eyes glittered with mischief. “We all watched the footage. Your screaming and tumbling— I couldn’t stop laughing.”

“Arcadio…”

“I’m only teasing him, Chalcey. I know he’s not as useless as he appeared. That wouldn’t be possible.”

I was speechless with rage, and didn’t fully register when Scythia introduced herself to me. She was still chuckling at Arcadio’s remark. She had a crooked smile and broken nose, but looked tough despite her small stature. Both of them were younger than
Chalcedon, just a few years older than me, but they appeared very formidable in their armor. My cheeks burned.

Moesia placed a hand on my shoulder. “Chalcedon will guide you from here. I wish you the best of luck.”

Sonata waved goodbye, and the two of them left. I now stood alone with three skirmishers who all knew just how unqualified I was to be there. Chalcedon even tried to hide it. He informed me, in all seriousness, that it was a talent to survive the Pit at all.

“Or just luck.”

Chalcedon shot a warning look at Arcadio. “We have a match coming up soon, but since you will be a reserve, chances are you won't compete. But just in case we'll train you up, and make sure that you are quite capable.”

I nodded without believing.

“Arcadio,” said the Exark. “Since you’ve demonstrated your willingness to opine, you are in charge of finding Ferro some training equipment.”

Arcadio’s jaw tightened. “What?”

“Teach him how to skate. Oversee him running a course in the Rhombus.”

“I don’t want to babysit—”

“You will assist our new recruit, while Scythia and I review Zel Cannon technique. Understood?”

Muttering to himself, Arcadio led me back to the hallway and down into an armory at the end. The black furnishings displayed images of what each slot contained and how many items remained in that category. I examined the image of a Caustic
Crossbow, revolving slowly with five exemplars available.

Arcadio snapped at me to get my attention. He removed his armor plating and opened the wardrobe door. After commenting on my scranniness, Arcadio pulled a compressed package of reinforced cloth and tossed it to me. “Put it on. I’ll find you some functional skates.”

I decompressed the package and pulled on the uniform. An idea struck me. Lips dry, I asked if I was allowed to contact players on other teams.

“Why?” demanded Arcadio selecting a pair of metal plated boots like the ones he wore. “You’re a Blue now. Other colors, other loyalties.”

I couldn't tell Arcadio about my sister. He'd just laugh. I noticed how well muscled he was compared to me, and lowered my gaze.

“If you’re going to be a Beast Fighter,” he said handing me my skates. “You have to start acting more like it. No one cares what you’ve gone through, okay? We’ve all been there. The sooner you stop moping and wetting yourself, the sooner you might belong.”

I failed to come up with a sufficiently biting reply. I felt my eyes growing warm but luckily Arcadio was striding ahead, no patience for my slowness, no interest in my answer. I pulled on the boots and hurried after him.

In the hallway I could see Scythia and Chalcedon fighting holographic monkeys. Arcadio led me into the other chamber, which was empty.

“I assume you’ve never skated before.”

“Of course not,” I said, trying to sound fierce but my voice cracked a bit.
Arcadio’s smile widened. “Here. Your gauntlets.”

I put on the gloves, the protective layer extended up to my elbows. They were very soft on the inside, and but the exterior looked sturdy. I could imagine myself bracing myself on these, when I inevitably crashed. The left gauntlet had a green panel at the wrist, while the right one had a red panel.

“Well done, you’ve noticed the control scheme,” said Arcadio, dripping condescension. “Press the two panels together to turn on the skates.”

I put my wrists together and I was lifted a few centimeters into the air. Heart pounding, I watched Arcadio do the same. Constrained beams of light flared beneath his skates, lifting him up too. The light looked like a straight line, but by raising my left skate up, I could see particles of luminosity moving around in a flattened circuit.

“Careful there,” said Arcadio, as I almost toppled over. He took a few steps on his skates, sliding across the grid floor with ease. “Try some basic movement.”

I pressed my left toes down as I took a step and felt a gentle acceleration. I hurriedly put my right foot forward and the quick shift in momentum cost me my balance.

“Not to worry,” said Arcadio, offering me a hand as I got up. “Everyone falls down on their first attempt. Well, not everyone. I didn’t. But it happens.”

I bit back a pointless retort and took several steps forward, this time with great purpose, and didn’t fall.

Arcadio gave an unimpressed shrug, then told me to try for more speed. I took more aggressive steps, and although I wobbled, I skated fairly well. My heartbeat was
deafening. I was done making a fool out of myself in front of Arcadio. With each lunge forward the little boost of speed grew until I was zipping along. Arcadio coached me through the basics of turning, and I returned to stand next to him, feet a little sore but feeling good about myself.

“Not bad so far,” said Arcadio. “Now try the green button.”

I did, not questioning it. A burst of energy ran through the Nitro skates, thrusting me forward, off balance, and slamming me into the ground. My newly healed body complained and Arcadio’s laughter rang in my ears.

“The green panel is the nitro acceleration,” he said, crouching down next to me.

“But I’m guessing you figured that out already.”

“You-- why are you so--”

“Experience is the best teacher.”

I struggled to respond and Arcadio’s face fell dramatically. “Am I being too tough on you? I’m so sorry-- would you like some special treatment?”

My head was spinning. I stumbled up onto my feet. “I don’t need this from you.”

“You’ll need a lot more than this if you think you can survive a Feralcanalia,” said Arcadio.

I ignored him. I removed my gauntlets and released the clasps on my Nitro Skates.

“What do you think you’re doing?” demanded Arcadio. “We’re not finished here.”

I left the equipment scattered on the ground and headed back to the glass corridor. Arcadio shouted taunts at me, but I didn’t care. I had seen my brother die. I had no idea
how my sister was doing. I couldn’t contact my mother. They expected me to simply begin training, to have the strength to deal with a monster like Arcadio. I had had enough.

I can't recall how I ended up in the small niche beneath a spiral staircase. All I knew was that it was dark, and tight, and I was all alone. There were occasional steps on the stairs, the humming clop of a Weber and the tangy scent of biofuel energy. No one was interacting with me. I was with myself.

I was upset, of course. I had failed to save my brother. Quill was dead, and Mum would not even be permitted to see his body. Underneath the guilt and grief lay a rumble of terror. I could still see the wolf bearing down on me. I flinched in the darkness, thinking of the hot breath, the scar on my arm, and I felt the fear reaching up to pull me into something dark and inescapable.

I compressed my feelings. I pushed it all down. I could not lose control. I was still alive, I had to remember that. My breaths felt hollow and didn't take in enough air, but I slowly calmed my shivering body. I stared straight ahead, not allowing the fear to approach again.

“Doesn't look too comfortable down there,” said Chalcedon.

I jolted. I hadn't heard him approach. The Exark was rubbing at his stubble, examining me with a reserved expression.

“How-- how did you find me?”

Part of me knew the answer before Chalcedon held up his Data-Patch. “We
always know where you are. That initial surgery was not just repairs.”

My stomach twisted. “I can't be an auxiliary. I-- I don't have it in me.”

Chalcedon sighed, “Ferro, get up.”

“I'm not going back to the training room. I'm not talking to Arcadio. I don't care what you do to me. I don't care.”

Chalcedon grimaced. “You're not going back to the training room. Not today.”

I didn't believe him.

“I have more patience for these antics in the first twenty four hours,” said Chalcedon. “And I have no desire to beat down your defiance-- it is that defiance that helped you break the law-- and it will help you survive in the arena. This is Captain Moesia's philosophy. Your life will be brutal and full of sudden suffering, but we do not have to break you down and build you back up from scratch to earn your loyalty.”

I refused to look Chalcedon in the eye.

“I'm giving you an errand,” said the Exark. “I need you to visit the room of Eusebio Jargonai-Luz, wake him up and escort him to the Circuit.”

“What? Why don't you send a Weber instead?”

Chalcedon folded his arms.

I stood up. “Fine. It's not really a demotion from auxiliary to messenger.”

Chalcedon looked at me for a few seconds. “Call yourself a skirmisher. Call us your fellow skirmishers. We are not merely the supplementary pieces of circuiteers. You have value, inherent to yourself.”

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37 The Cardinal government does not share the tracking information for its implant. The Circuit owners and team Captains add their own tracker, to keep inventory of their investments.
Mori: The Mortal Gambit

“Uh huh.”

Chalcedon ignored my tone. “I've told Lazuli to light your path for you, so just follow the purple panels, and you'll find your way there.”

As promised, the middle tile in the hallway in front of me glowed purple, the light fading in a gradient, showing my what direction to move in.

[Section omitted for the reader's convenience, Valenz is walking, muses on the possible advantages of suicide. His thoughts are not novel, so I see no need to bore you with them.]

The purple tiles led me to the circuiteer dormitories. I stopped at the door bearing Eusebio's name. Grimacing, I knocked. I heard nothing. I glanced over my shoulder and saw a circuiteer step out of her dormitory, give me a look, then walk away. I knocked again, louder.

After several futile attempts, I opened the door. A stench of peaches wafted to me, and I knew immediately that Eusebio had been taking some strain of Kick. The mere odor was giving me a headache. Holding my breath I waded into the room. Circuiteering gear, helmets, trophies, food parcels both untouched and rotting lay everywhere. I was suddenly glad that the narcotic smell was covering the other scents. I coughed once and took a small breath through my mouth.

Eusebio lay on his bed, though his blankets lay in crumpled heap on the ground.
He was snoring, scratching his bare chest.

“Sir?”

No reaction. I repeated myself, more forcefully.

A time panel on the wall told me that it was 10:24pm. Below it a reminder for practice at 10:30 flashed repeatedly. Grimacing, I stepped over a rotten cube of prime cut meat and touched his shoulder. Immediately, Eusebio's bloodshot eyes shot open, he spasmed and rolled off the bed, into a crouch.

“Who are you?” he hissed, wheezing and fumbling not to tip over. “What are you doing in my chamber?”

I introduced myself in a stammer. “Exark Chalcedon sent me to get you, and bring you to the Circuit.”

Eusebio's long hair was clumped together, streaked with flecks of gray. A trail of dried saliva clung to his cheek. “A fresh recruit, eh? Here to escort old Eusebio to his appointment?”

He couldn't be older than thirty five. There was something vacant in his eyes. He stood up straighter, wobbled, and almost collapsed again. I helped him to the sink. His hot saliva dribbled from his lips into my hair.

He splashed water on his face, blinked twice and stared at himself in the mirror. Then he slapped himself twice across the cheek and let out a contented breath. Then he rounded on me, still looking mildly deranged.

“Do you like it here, Ferro? Enjoying your new life as an auxiliary? Sorry-- a
skirmisher?”

I didn't say anything. Eusebio gave a wheezy chuckle. He started gathering up the elements of his uniform.

“Are you not excited for the glory? The exhilaration? Citizens will soon know your name, Ferro. Some will even cheer for you.”

He pulled on his trousers, almost losing his balance but steadying himself against the wall. Then he staggered back towards me. “Some see this life as a luxurious punishment for our crimes. But it is a blessing, my boy. Not the fame, not the riches--not even the exhilaration of death. You have a chance to achieve--”

He spat a viscous mess onto the floor, scratching at his tongue to remove the substance from his mouth. My gag reflex tensed as he looked back at me with the same craze in his pupils.

“You can achieve citizenship, Ferro.”

His fingers tightened on my shoulder and I felt his lips against my earlobe. But it was his words that stiffened me, not his touch.

“But-- but how?”

“The same way any denizen becomes a citizen.”

“But denizens don't become citizens!”

Eusebio smiled. “It might not be common, but the Cardinal Charter proclaims citizenship the right of the deserving. You know what that means today, don't you?”

In school we were taught that citizenship is awarded by the local Tetrokon to those who serve the empire most dutifully, with bravery, honor, and self-sacrifice. But
old notions change.

“How much?”

Eusebio shrugged. “I think the current price is 950 GigaVamps."

“But there's no way that anyone denizen can achieve--”

“Circuitiers can,” said Eusebio. “And so can auxiliaries. If you earn the attention of a prominent citizen-- perhaps a Bellitant or the Tetrokon-- they might assist you financially. If you invest your earnings correctly...well, it's not impossible that you could be hooked up to the Array. It's not impossible to become immortal.”

His breath condensed in little droplets on my neck. So that's why auxiliaries were motivated to throw themselves into the Nucleus-- that's why they were willing to die: for the chance to live forever. I felt sick. Such manipulation disturbed me far more than the drug addled state of Eusebio-- one of the great circuitiers of the Maxima Circuit. Not saying another word, I helped him get dressed and led him to the door.

[Section omitted for the reader's convenience, Valenz escorts Luz to the elevator; transcribes some of his ramblings.]

After Eusebio ascended the elevator, I stood there. I wanted to get out of this subterranean stronghold, I wanted to breathe the sickly sweet air of the Grid again. I had to escape. I yearned for the coddling safety of city living. But my crime, an action in my control, had stripped me of the most basic autonomy.

“Good evening, Ferrolentius,” said a crisp Mozi through local sonic outputs. “My name is Lazuli, and I exist to assist the members of Zealous Indigo.”

My heart sank. “Can I get out of here, just for a bit? I need air. I need sky.”
Lazuli curtly denied my request. I grimaced as he rattled off alternatives, like using a Swell Room for the illusion of sky.

“You know that's not what I want.”

“Perhaps I do, perhaps I don't,” said Lazuli, with a little harrumph41. “But I don't serve your desires. I serve the interests of the team. Oh, please don't look so painfully pensive. Let me point you in the direction of your dormitory.”

“Ah,” I said. “That's how this goes, then.”

“If I may venture a personal opinion,” said Lazuli, “You need to shift your mindset. You have spent your life thinking about yourself, have you not? That is the catalyst for your criminal activity. But now you have to reassemble your identity. You are a member of a team, and you must act that way. Do you understand?”

I said nothing.

“I would appreciate verbal confirmation, Ferrolentius.”

“I understand, but I don't accept it.”

“You will, in time. There aren't many viable alternatives. If you will follow the indicated tiles, I will guide you to your dormitory. A brisk walk, if you don't mind.”

I am a leaf, struggling to cling to the wind.

That brings us to the beginning, where Moesia intercepted me kicking Arcadio's bedpost. I wrote furiously last night, not particularly tired since I was so disoriented without sunlight cues.

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41 Harrumph: It was quite in vogue to give “Mozi” human-like personalities during this time. Though less efficient, this supposedly made them more personable.
I had almost reached the horrors of the Pit when Arcadio entered, followed by Scythia. Chalcedon was not with them.

“You're still here,” said Arcadio. “I thought you might have the self respect to transfer to a different squad.

He took off his shirt, revealing a nasty chain of scars along the muscles of his lower back. He glanced over his shoulder at me.

“What are you staring at?”

When I fumbled for words, he laughed. “You're pathetic, Ferro. What are you writing there?”

I tried to hide the notebook but Scythia lunged at me, fingers wrapping around my wrists, flipping me onto my back and pinning me down. I screamed in frustration as Arcadio picked up the notebook and flipped it open to an early page.

“This diary will be a reminder that I still can accomplish something with this life of mine-- something worthwhile,” he read aloud. Both he and Scythia burst out laughing.

“Dearest Ferro,” said Arcadio, stroking my cheek as I struggled violently and ineffectually to get free. “Are you a hero, would you say? You're going to save your sister, and avenge your brother? How brave you are!”

“Leave me alone!”

Arcadio tossed the notebook at me, the spine hitting me in the nose. “Let him go, Scythia. He needs his hands free to sob effectively.”

They prepared for sleep, chatting as if I wasn't there. I buried myself and my notebook under my sheets, pressing my eyes so tightly closed that they stung. I heard
Chalcedon stop by to say goodnight, heard Scythia and Arcadio giggling together, heard silence descend. The lights had dimmed. Only then did I find sleep, a simple release from consciousness that comes from exhaustion.

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Chalcedon woke me the next morning with a gentle touch. “How did you sleep?”
I rubbed my forehead. “Can't say.”

“Nightmares?”

“Not really.”

His steady gaze was making me fidget.

“So-- are there any other Squads for Feralcanalia?” I asked hoarsely.

Chalcedon glanced around the empty dormitory. “Of course. We have Nairobi Squad with five members, and Sapporo Squad with four.”

“Is three members a normal Squad size?”

“Well, it depends,” said Chalcedon, calmly.

“On how many auxiliaries-- skirmishers-- die?”

“And on how new recruits choose their event. The popularity of an event often coincides with sponsorships from the current Tetrokon in the system. Tetrokon Sevvu cares little for the Feralcanalia since she considers it cruel to the beasts.” Chalcedon suppressed a briefly sour expression. “But since the Shift is upon us soon, we have the chance for a more involved Tetrokon. If that happens, then we will have more
skirmishers in Feralcanalian Squads.”

“I see.”

Chalcedon straightened up and rubbed his shoulder. Through the thin fabric of his shirt I could see something pulsing and whirring underneath his skin. Chalcedon noticed.

“A little augmentation I selected after Sevu's Tenth Year Tournament. Something to keep me competitive with the youngsters.”

I looked away.

“Blue and White have a match in three days,” said Chalcedon. “And I want you to participate.”

I jumped out of bed. “What?”

He explained that there would be six Feralcanalia events in the match, which meant Moscow Squad would be participating twice. “I'll compete in the first one, and you'll compete in the second one. Arcadio and Scythia will play in both rounds.”

“But I-- I'll be useless!”

“If we tossed you in the Nucleus now, yes,” said Chalcedon. “But you have three days of training ahead of you. And not with Arcadio this time. With me.”

“I should just transfer to another squad,” I muttered. “As a second or third reserve, I won't be needed.”

The Exark's eyes clouded a little. “A transfer? Why?”

A glob of saliva rested on my tongue. “I don't want to say.”

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42 Squads range from a minimum of three members to a maximum of six. Bloodier events have larger Squads, but experienced Squads like Moscow, can function properly with three. In my opinion, Moesia Salutis-Qita put him on this Squad since his lack of talent would be compensated by the others.
“Arcadio's not as bad as he seems, Ferro. He's just-- ambitious.”

“He's evil,” I said.

Chalcedon shook his head, looking thoughtful. “Let's focus on your training. It will boost your confidence.” He ignored my skepticism. “It is now 9:00. If you train with me until 13:00, I will give you the rest of the day off.”

I could only be obstinate so long and my twenty four hours of unconditional patience were running out. I gave my Exark a nod.

“Wonderful,” said Chalcedon. “Let's get down to the Rhombus. All right, Ferro?”

I tried smiling and mumbled my assent.

Unsurprisingly, training went better without Arcadio.

“The basic tenet of Nitro Skating,” said Chalcedon, “is faith. If you do not trust your ability to control yourself, you will fall. Control is a product of speed and focus, both of which you possess. The Nucleus will be a debris field, but as long as you pay attention you will excel.”

While I skated back and forth across the arena, Chalcedon sat atop a massive block. Now that I knew the function of the green and red panels on my gauntlets, I used the boosts without tumbling to the ground. My doubts arose when Chalcedon activated a series of obstacles.

“I'm not ready to--”

“Of course you're ready. As long as you lean properly, you will be fine.”

I wobbled my way through the slanted obstacles, only boosting once. Chalcedon
slid down the edge of his perch and demonstrated proper technique. He folded his arms behind his back so that his wrists were touching. He proceeded to navigate the obstacles, reversing his hands when he wanted to activate the red panel.

“This form let's you control your speed with aerodynamic posture. Give it a try.”

I took a deep breath and imitated Chalcedon's stance. He adjusted my back posture, then stepped away. I started skating, indeed with more control. But on the far side of the room, one of my turns was too narrow, my ankle caught on the edge of a block, and I slammed into the ground. Without my protective gear I would have broken several bones.

Chalcedon approached me as I lay on the ground, groaning, and complimented my speed. “Now we just need to work on your turning. Not a bad start.”

I said nothing, but stood up again, ready to try once more.

I wish I could say I discovered a natural talent for Nitro Skating. That's just not the case. After each stumble and crash I picked myself up and tried again. If I paused too long I could hear Arcadio's laughter in my mind, so I threw myself fully into the activity.

We didn't stop until 13:30, but Chalcedon was pleased. He told me that I had made remarkable progress towards becoming an excellent skater.

“Isn't skating the easy part?”

“Relax, Ferro. Enjoy the rest of your day. Eat. Lazuli, guide Ferro to the Dining Hall.”

My food that day had taken the form of Chalcedon's nutrient blocks, so my
stomach was gurgling on my way up the elevator. I ignored Lazuli's smug suggestions of how I might improve my technique with more effort, and made my way to the cafeteria.

The large chamber glowed with a few hundred screens, most replaying content from the last Circuit match for attentive diners. A wave of aroma hit me, and I could only identify onion and meat among them—everything else was strange and new to me. Then I heard my name called, and looked around.

Sonata was sitting by herself at one of the circular tables, waving. An untouched plate of food sat in front of her. Relieved to see a familiar face, I approached, sitting down across from her and raising a hand in tired greeting.

“You look exhausted, Ferro!”

“I just came from practice.”

Sonata glanced over my shoulder to the entrance, then let out a sigh. I turned around to see two Circuiteers entering. Sonata poked a vegetable with her fork.

“Everything okay?”

“Mm. I guess so.”

My appetite overwhelmed my desire to discover the cause of her ennui, so I activated the table and brought up the menu. I had only seen such arrays of culinary choice in Synchrons. “Rainbow Trout? That'll just be Omestuff, right?”

Sonata shook her head. “I believe all the food here is evolutionary.”

“That can't be true.”

“It's part of our compensation. Real meals, Axpada calls them.”

I tapped the icon hurriedly. “I've never had evolutionary food before.”
“Oh, it's an interesting experience if--” Sonata broke off, sitting up a bit and staring at the door, then slumping down a bit.

“What's going on?” I demanded. “Why do you keep looking at the door?”

Sonata turned sourly to her small stack of vegetables. She speared a little blue tomato and stared at it. “How quickly does one develop feelings for someone?”

“Depends on the feeling,” I said, thinking about my hatred of Arcadio.

She said something into her closed fist, so I had to ask her to repeat herself.

“Attraction,” she said, blushing. “I have a serious attraction for one of my fellow circuiteers.”

“You've barely been here for a day!”

“I know! I know!”

I shook my head, almost smiling. “Who is it?”

“No, I don't want to say.”

“You can tell me if--”

She jumped so violently that she almost fell off the bench. I looked towards the door for the third time and saw Eusebio swaggering in, several circuiteers following him and laughing at something he had said. Sonata's cheeks were full of color.

“You can't be serious,” I said.

Sonata dropped her fork and picked it up in a hasty mess of limbs. Eusebio looked almost sober, with clear eyes and a blunt smile in place. To my surprise and Sonata's horror, he made his way over towards us, his purple plated keypiece ostentatiously swinging from his wrist.
Mori: The Mortal Gambit

“Ferro, right? You didn't mention that you're already beast fighting in the next match.”

I apologized for not informing him first, though he missed my sarcasm.

“You'd better be ready,” said Eusebio, tossing his long hair with an aggressive tilt of his head. “Your squad will be assisting my race-- and I refuse to lose another match against any scum circuiteer from the Whites. Understand?”

“Yes sir.”

He smirked, then tossed a glance at my fellow diner. “Hello, Sonata.”

She mumbled incoherently as the circuiteer left. Eusebio and his admirers found themselves a table across the room. Even then Sonata looked sickly in her anxious state.

“Him? He's smug and self involved and he's old!”

Sonata closed her eyes. “I know it's crazy, but--”

Thankfully a Weber arrived with my food in that moment. It wasn't an ordinary Weber, but a restaurant model-- with checkered markings and an excess of clean napkins. One limb deposited a covered platter before me, executed a quick bow, and strode away. Hissing steam rippled out from under the metal as I lifted the lid. It was not a mere block of protein and nutrients. It wasn't an Ome either-- the crispy fins were too uneven. This was an evolutionary fish. I sniffed it.

“It doesn't smell like fish. Well, not much.”

Sonata encouraged me to taste it, while glancing across the room. “Watch out for the bones.”

I first nibbled on the skin, but my hunger pushed me to take a larger bite. Any
taste was lost in a fearful sensation of asphyxiation.

“Weren't you listening to me?” asked Sonata, handing me an Aquatac\(^43\) while I pulled the little white bones out of my throat with shivering fingers.

“Why-- why would they--”

“Fish have bones. You know that, don't you?”

“All vertebrates, including Omes, have bones! But--”

“Evolutionaries don't have \textit{that} kind of bone\(^44\). Their skeletal structures are for their benefit, not our convenience.”

I took a swig of water, eyes moist. I intentionally ignored the laughter coming from the other tables. I used my utensils to cut myself a morsel and carefully put it into my mouth.

“That has no taste,” I said. “It's tasteless.”

“It's not tasteless,” sighed Sonata. “It's evolutionary.”

“I thought it would taste better than chunks of Ome,” I muttered, pushing it away.

Sonata tapped the table and a Weber arrived with an Aquatac of pale golden liquid. “Here, let's do this properly.” She cut me a small piece of fish, deboned it, and pushed the Aquatac towards me.

“What's this?”

“Wine.”

“But--”

\(^43\) Aquatac: a spherical drinking vessel from the Epsilon Company that never spills since it only opens to the touch of lips. Widespread use during this era.

\(^44\) The flavor bone, of course, offers little structural support to the “Ome” but is highly edible. Most evolutionary bones are far more difficult to swallow with a regular mouth.
“Taste them together without thinking about Ome fish. Taste them with your eyes closed.”

I pushed the smallest bite between my teeth and sloshed the alcohol across my tongue. It didn't taste good, that's for sure. But it was...complicated. Intriguing.

“The sign of good food,” said Sonata, dully, “is that it doesn't activate every taste receptor on your tongue. The sign of good food is that it doesn't always taste good.”

“That's twisted,” I said, pointing a fork at her.

“I don't necessarily buy into it,” she mumbled. “But that's what I was taught.”

I had almost forgotten about her cushy upbringing. “Silver District curriculum, huh?”

“No,” retorted Sonata. “It's just-- something my dad says-- said to me. He wanted me to become a food critic-- at least for a while.”

She picked up a miniature artichoke, then replaced it.

“He really dislikes the edible Ome industry, but doesn't want to upset the city prefect. He's on good terms with him. So he wanted to train me to critique Ome foods for him.”

I took a sip of wine, despite its stringency. “Wow.”

“He said I would be grateful to have that opportunity.”

“Is that why you're here?” I asked. “Because you spoke out against the prefect?”

“I did something far more-- nearsighted. I-- well-- I removed the Aegis45 around my father's vault and exposed his data.”

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45 Aegis: the common form of data defense during this period.
“What? But why--”

Sonata pressed her eyelids together. “I wasn't thinking, I just wanted to-- I don't know. He had me arrested.”

My mouth was dry. How could a parent send their child to the Pit?

“He didn't send me here,” said Sonata. “He wanted to put me under the halo 46 but I couldn't stand the thought of it. I chose this instead.”

My lips twitched briefly. “I had no idea that you were such a maniac.”

“I'm not a maniac!”

“You put on a good facade yesterday, but I see through you now.”

She caught my grin and sighed. The remainder of lunch was very enjoyable, with Sonata trying to teach me a basic appreciation for evolutionary cuisine. I was happy knowing I wasn't entirely alone.

Afterwards, we went our different ways and I returned to the dormitory. I settled down and continued writing. I've been at it for hours. I never knew I could be this prolific. I've had to request a Weber bring me some ice because my wrist has become so sore.

I will never be content in this acquired life. This is the wrong skin for me. It's getting late and I'm off to bed soon. But I can't distract myself entirely.

Quill is dead.

There's so little I can do. He can't be brought back. The least I can do is avenge

46 Under the halo: Punishment in the form of intense municipal surveillance for Silver District criminals. The condemned may lead a free life, but must behave flawlessly. Those who attempt suicide to escape this treatment are frequently paralyzed by the “halo” and prevented from completing their objective.
him. It means confronting Borax at some point, somehow. So I have to become a good auxiliary-- a good fighter.

More training tomorrow. I should sleep. Thanks for reading, by the way-- whether or not I'm still alive-- I appreciate it.

Good night.

May 11, 1068 TST

The Blue Barracks consists of seven floors, each given a Latin letter starting at the top with A and descending to G. Here's my understanding of this world so far47.

Floor A is the Primary Garage. The Capricorns, Manticores and Wyverns in active use by Blue circuiteers reside here, under persistent surveillance. No vehicle is identical, and those of the most experienced circuiteers-- Moesia, Tertullio, and Palendro-- are augmented with shields or weapons or boosters, depending.

Floor B is the Equipment Hall. This space contains protective gear and customizable weaponry, everything from Nitro Skates to Refraction Rifles. Again, constant surveillance.

Floor C is Magari's Medical Station. There are one hundred healing areas, and a surplus of Medical Webers. But according to Magari, she spends more time installing augmentations than healing injuries.

Floor D is the Recreational Space. It contains the meadow, the swell room, the

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47 Annoyingly, Valenz does not mention how he learned this. I suspect he received a tour, along with the other new recruits, from Moesia Salutis-Qita, since it is a common practice of Captains.
synchron projector, the library, the baths-- all the luxuries to distract oneself from the inevitability of death. The library isn't extensive, but I discovered twenty two hard books! If I survive the event, day after tomorrow, I'm going to read all of them.

Floor E consists of Living Quarters. That means the Dining Hall, Chef Jezba's kitchens (yes, a human chef!) and the dormitories. The sleeping chambers are based on seniority. Exarks and Decturs receive their own space. The remaining dormitories contain six beds.

Floor F contains all the training arenas for skirmishers. The Rhombus and the Danube are only two training rooms among many.

Floor G is the disciplinary zone. It is off limits.

“I want to start you off with a set of Laxx knives,” said Chalcedon, handing the bandolier to me. I stared at it in a panic until the Exark sighed and strapped it to my back. The handles alternated left and right, with six on either side.

Chalcedon ordered me to draw a knife and throw at the nearest pillar. Without much thought I pulled one out, tossed it at one of the many incongruent shapes in the Rhombus, and missed. The knife clattered along the floor.

Chalcedon grimaced. “Go get it, and come back.”

It took me three tries to even hit the obstacle, but when I did the glowing blade buried itself in the material up to the rounded hilt.

“Laxx knives are very useful,” Chalcedon explained. “They cannot pierce player armor, but if they make contact, they will release a small but debilitating electromagnetic
pulse. Same goes for Keplers. For Omes, Laxx has a sedative effect. You can use these to make openings for your squadmates. Ready to get started?”

Before I could answer, Chalcedon activated a panel and hundreds of little tiles started glowing on the floor, each generating a squat holographic bird. They all stood frozen, simulations at Chalcedon's fingertips.

“How, what are these?”

“These are the Point Pheasants,” said Chalcedon. “Of course, in the Nucleus they will be Omes, not holograms.”

This is what I pieced together from his explanation: Killing a pheasant is worth one point. They are not lethal, but they create havoc in the arena. Direct impact with a pheasant will knock a player down, making them easy prey for larger Omes, like Lupothanatos.

“So...how do I kill one?”

“Use your Laxx knives,” said Chalcedon. “A good stab is all it takes.”

“But how are we going to practice? I can't skate among holograms and pretend they're real.”

“True. But they'll be useful targets. This morning we will hone your throwing accuracy.”

My performance against the pheasants was pathetic. Despite the incredible feathery bustle, I would miss all twelve shots. Chalcedon would shut down the simulation, let me retrieve my knives, and I would try again.

“Focus on one, don't let the chaos distract you.”
“I know!”

“Predict the paths of the pheasants. Throw to their destination, not their position.”

“I'm trying!”

I've read many stories about weak heroes, accomplishing great things through incredible displays of will and grit. Real life doesn't work that way. You can't achieve something just by wanting it. You have to have some quantity of talent.

“I think you're improving,” said Chalcedon, after the fifth time I went to retrieve my knives without any results.

I scoffed but he looked serious.

“Your aim is getting sharper. You're missing by less.”

Perhaps he could see something I couldn't. “How many times are we going to do this?”

“Until you've hit one hundred pheasants.”

I dropped one of my knives. “What?”

“If you haven't accomplished it by lunch, we will continue in the afternoon.”

“But I won't hit one hundred if I try for the next five years!”

But as hours passed, I did make a little progress. No magical, instantaneous improvement, but my throwing technique was improving, bit by bit, and on my twelfth knife I hit a pheasant, squarely in the sides. The knife couldn't stick in the holographic material, flying through and leaving a holographic replica buried in the bird's side. With a squawk the pheasant fell over.

“One down, ninety nine to go,” said Chalcedon.
My wrists hurt, my gloved hands were developing blisters and sweat steamed up the inside of my helmet. But the next round I hit another pheasant, and after that, I hit two. By the time we stopped for lunch I had reached forty five, and I was aching. Chalcedon slapped a pad on my wrist and another on my shoulder, which eased the twinging nicely.

Sonata wasn't at lunch, but Nairobi Squad was. I had never been directly introduced to them, but Lazuli hinted strongly that I should make myself acquainted.

“Hi,” I said.

The Dectur nodded at me, and pointed at an empty space. She had red highlights and a chain of tattoos that wound from her torn earlobe down to her neck and probably further.

“This is our Dectur, Pylon,” said the young skirmisher sitting next to her. He didn't look much older than me, one knuckle rubbing unconsciously against his broken nose. “I'm Razu. You must be Ferro.”

The remaining members of Nairobi Squad introduced themselves in descending order of height as Tarilla, Phoboz and Silk⁴⁸.

“A pleasure,” I managed.

“No need to be so nervous,” said Phoboz. “Just don't order any fish today.”

I gulped and everyone burst out laughing. “I guess everyone heard about that, huh?”

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⁴⁸ It seems to me that naming conventions within the Blue Barracks are consistent with the policies of Salutis, who allows for self identification. Some of these are clearly nicknames, but this is the manner by which Valenz refers to them, and he will continue to do so.
“Of course we did!” said Razu. “Hilarious, absolutely hilarious!”

I sank lower into my seat, hating myself.

Silk gave me a playful shove. “Don't be so serious. We all reacted more or less the same way. Evo-Cuisine is difficult stuff to get adjusted to. We're all Grid people--we'd never had it before either. Trust me, it's not uncommon.”

I still opted for a soup on the table menu.

Pylon watched me, then tapped out a message on the table and slid it over to me.

*Do you feel ready for the match tomorrow?*

I furrowed my brow. “Is this-- um-- a private question?”

Nairobi Squad burst out laughing again, and Pylon even smiled.

“Pylon doesn't speak if she can help it,” said Razu. “She is a devout Lateralist*49*.”

“Oh,” I said. I knew enough about Lateralism to be thoroughly confused as to why anyone would follow it, but I had to make a good impression. “Very admirable.”

I'm pretty sure Pylon saw right through my words. “I definitely don't feel ready for tomorrow,” I said, answering Pylon's original question. “Is it normal to be put into play with so little training?”

Tarilla chewed her lip. “It's not normal. For some reason we've been receiving more recruits lately. I'm not sure what exactly is going on, but we have almost fifteen Ascension squads now. It's insane.”

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*49* Lateralism: a philosophy under which personal excellence and humility are principle tenets. Lateralism was founded by Nicholas Tang (-829 - -722 TST) the last great novelist, according to many Gaozians. Tang is remarkable for his vow of silence. He felt there was too much noise and poorly considered speech, so to mitigate he did not speak at all, after the age of twelve. The most devoted followers of Lateralism follow in this tradition.
I asked if Axapada was planning to announce a new variant.

“That's what we've been thinking,” said Razu. “But Captains are informed of any changes to the games. So either Moesia isn't telling us, or nothing has changed yet.”

My soup was not entirely lacking in flavor, but I found the Nairobi Squad conversation most enjoyable, because I could listen without contributing. Their discussion of the recent updates to the Feralcanalian metagame meant I could focus on something other than my fears for the next day. It meant I could hold onto a rope of thought that kept me from falling back into the pit.

Why was Brevity so calm during the auction? Was she okay?

I shook myself and tried to look thoughtfully concerned about the increased presence of spiked Keplers in recent matches.

“Only seven hours,” said Chalcedon, after I hit my hundredth pheasant. “Not bad.”

I collapsed, massaging my shoulder. “Are we finished?”

We weren't. The next drill was worse than the knife throwing. I had to skate through the arena, full of pheasants, dodging them and collecting discs. Colliding with a hologram would trigger a walloping effect on my suit, and knock me over, so I had to evade. After a few hours of humiliating pain, Chalcedon let me go.

“But what about other beasts?” I asked. “Surely it won't just be pheasants tomorrow.”

“You won't be fighting larger creatures tomorrow,” said Chalcedon. “You'll be on
pheasant duty. You can also distract and evade, letting Scythia and Arcadio eliminate the point-heavy targets.”

“I'm going to ruin our score,” I mumbled.

“Perhaps,” said Chalcedon. “But sooner or later you have to play. Nothing compares to arena experience.”

“Except staying alive.”

“I know you will survive.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

We walked to the elevator together, Chalcedon only occasionally giving a tidbit of advice. For example, a Lupothanatos will be less dangerous at the beginning of a round, because it will be hunting the pheasants as well as us. We entered the elevator together.

“How dangerous are the other skirmishers going to be? How many--”

“Feralcanalia is three versus three. I won't deny that your opponents might harm you, but chances are they will ignore you. Eliminating you is not worth the penalty.”

Arcadio and Scythia were already waiting in the dormitory, several diagrams projected of a potential Nucleus layout.

“Another heroic entrance by Ferrolentius,” said Arcadio.

“I think you'll be impressed by his progress,” said Chalcedon.

“Is that so? How gratifying. Shall we talk strategy, Ferro?”

“Yes, that sounds good,” I said, not meeting his eyes.

“It's a standard, four round match tomorrow. The first consists only of pheasants. A little warm-up. The second round will add either Lupothanatos or Squalorangutans.”
“I’m not familiar with the second one,” I said.

Arcadio gave me a falsely indulgent smile. “Of course not, my apologies. Squalorangutans are shark monkey Omes.”

“What?”

“They're land based, but when they scent blood, they go crazy. They're slower than a Lupothanatos, but they are just as deadly. And they can climb obstacles with ease.”

“Oh. Great.”

“We don't know which species we'll face tomorrow,” said Arcadio. “Either the wolf or the monkey. Wolves are worth fifteen points, monkeys are worth ten.”

“When do the Keplers appear?”

Annoyed, Arcadio took a deep breath. “They're around from the very beginning. They will be disintegrating Ome corpses for our convenience, unless you attack one of them.”

“What happens if I attack one of them?”

“Then all six Keplers will attack our team.”

“Why would anyone ever--”

“Because,” said Scythia, “each Kepler is worth fifty points.”

“The third round will bring out two chimeras,” said Chalcedon. “Always some deadly amalgamation animal. Each worth seventy five points.”

“Your little knives will be far less effective against them, so keep your distance.”

50 Chimera: The idea for these specially designed beasts was Greek mythology. The destructive power of the legendary lion, goat and snake hybrid inspired Ome-Engineers to create weird and deadly creatures.
“And of course, round four is the prize beast,” said Chalcedon. “Worth one hundred and fifty points. It'll be large, and often more sturdy than deadly-- very difficult to kill.”

I frowned. “So it goes pheasants, then wolves or monkeys, then chimeras, then the prize beast. And the Keplers are around at the very beginning.”

“Right,” said Arcadio. “Round one begins at the same time as the race, but our rounds are tied to the progress of the circuiteers. If we're slow to the kill, we'll have a menagerie on our hands.”

I tried to process all the information. Half of it dripped through my brain immediately.

“And what should I do?”

Arcadio considered me for a moment. “Scythia and I need movement. If I work the Thorn Whips and she has the Zel Cannon, we can take out Keplers, chimeras and prize beasts-- provided we have a clear path. That means you need to kill pheasants.”

“Okay,” I said.

“White doesn't have exceptional Beast Fighters,” said Scythia. “Just stay alive, and do what we tell you to do in the arena.”

“How-- how does our performance influence the circuit race? Will there be--”

“Don't worry about that,” said Chalcedon. “If you do your job well, it will help our circuiteers, and it will help our team.”

They started discussing complex strategies for the other match. I tried to follow, but their professionalism intimidated me. Scythia couldn't be more than three years older
than me. How could I do anything at all, with only two days of training?

They're still arguing, but I've been writing down the events of today, for your
benefit, and for my state of mind. Better reinforce the little I learned today and get some
rest. If I don't survive, my diary ends here. Wow.

Arcadio and Chalcedon have finally come to an agreement, which seems good.

When we were younger, Quill had terrible nightmares. Before going to sleep, side
by side, he would whisper his plan of staying awake all night, to avoid the ordeal.
Instead, I promised him that I would siphon his nightmares out of his head while he slept,
and if he still had bad dreams, he'd be allowed to give me one punch in the morning, as
retribution. I was punched often, but with time the nightmares diminished.

There's no one who can siphon away my nightmares.

There's no one I can punch for my trauma.

Does my melodrama have no limits? Thanks for putting up with me. If this is
goodbye, thanks for sticking around this long. Sweet dreams.

May 13, 1068 TST

I've been lying in bed for a while, notebook on my chest, trying to decide if I want
to record the events of yesterday at all. But I made a promise to myself, didn't I? I have
to chronicle myself. I lived. My story is not over.
The match started at nine in the morning, but I wasn't competing until the afternoon. Arcadio still woke me up at eight.

“Wipe the sleep from your eyes, gemstone,” he whispered, ruffling my hair.

“Aren't you excited for your grand debut?”

I pulled on my reinforced undergarments, seams closing into a single layer of protection. My armored uniform would go over this. Scythia was adjusting her boot and shot me an angry glance when she noticed my gaze. Arcadio was being efficient instead of vindictive. On his order, we left the dormitory and headed towards the dining hall. I couldn't imagine putting food into my stomach. My leg was shaking, my forehead dribbled sweat and my stomach felt like a sarcophagus.

Only senior circuiteers were sitting at the tables, eating evolutionary meals. Everyone else lined up and filed through, picking from a wide variety of nutrient cubes. This cuisine I was familiar with, but these products were far superior than what my mother could afford with our municipal subsidy at the Grid markets.

I asked Scythia for recommendations on what to take. She refrained from an acidic response, since she had a vested interest in my nourishment today, as it might affect the score. She recommended I eat a turquoise now and reserving a goldenrod and a magenta for later, to be delivered to our team booth.

I took a turquoise cube from the stack and separated it into cubic quarters, plopping one in my mouth. The flavor changed with each chew from my jaw—first tangy

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51 Evolutionary is a broader term than you might think. It includes traditional means of breeding, where animals are still selected for certain traits. As long as no human came up with the design for the animal, it is valid.
like an apple and ending with a nutty creaminess. The lingering fizz on my tongue was pleasant.

“Come on,” said Arcadio. “Eat on the way.”

We weren't headed to the Circuit directly. We joined Nairobi, Sapporo and our Exark in a room, one floor above. Everyone looked equally ridiculous in the smooth fullbody outfit, so I didn't stand out too much.

Chalcedon's pep talk was short and to the point. “Remember, beast fighters, today brings new peril. What's the price of recklessness?”

There was a chant from everyone of 950 GigaVamps. I blinked. Chalcedon acknowledged my confusion with a smile. He explained that those who could not buy immortality had to treat their life as a precious commodity.

“Any last words of advice?” asked Chalcedon.

The Dectur of Sapporo, who I know now as Isauria, spoke up and said, “if you must die today, then make your death worthy of your life.”

“But first make your life worthy of your death,” said Silk, to which there were some cheers. Apparently this saying comes up often among Blue skirmishers.

“Very well then,” said Chalcedon. “To the elevator.”

The Blue Circuit Zone was the space where we would wait for our event. I could taste the anxiety in the sweet smell of clean chemicals. The room contained an assortment of fluid chairs, medical beds and several wall displays of pre-match commentary. Preeminent circuiteering scholars weighed the robust character of Blue skirmishers against the dexterity of White circuiteers.
Razu came up behind me and gave me a nudge. “Come on, join me and Silk. There's a screen where you can see the spectators-- and a glimpse at the purple box!”

We walked past skirmishers assembling their delivered equipment and sat down in the far corner. Sonata gave me a nervous wave as I passed her, her helmet held in trembling fingers. I took a seat next to my fellow Beast Fighters, and stared up at the aerial portrait of the Circuit.

From the high vantage point of an aerial Vica, the Circuit of Maxima looks like an ellipse. From the Vica's elevation the track was drab and the Nucleus was dark. As it descended, details sharpened. The black and purple grid of the Nucleus glittered. Rich veins of marble constituted the pillars around the prime seats, filled with private Vicas. Citizens and upper crust denizens from around the Federation were accessing the match remotely.

In that moment, the primary Vica swung by the purple box, showing other the Circuit's Euditor, Chess Vadou-Axapada, settling himself into one of two seats. I had seen his image before, the curve of his belly, the fashionable Magellanic robes he wore, his broad smile. My jaw set.

“What do you all think?” asked Silk. “Will our Tetrokon show up or not?”

“Does Tetrokon Sevvu show up for these regular matches?” I asked, astounded.

Razu shook his head, “She is officially the sponsor of the Circuit-- being the richest and most powerful being in this swath of the Federation. But she never comes.”

All around us circuiteers and skirmishers were preparing for the first event. A few reserve circuiteers from both teams were driving around the track to rile up the crowd. I
could only imagine the fervor being relayed all across our stellar system and beyond.

A commentator began speaking -- not one of the spectating Gaozians, but one of the three local hosts. His voice echoed bombastically across the arena.

“Welcome to this much anticipated clash between Blue and White! Will Blue hold onto their upper hand against White? Will White turn their new circuiteers to their advantage and cause an upset? History is about to be made, right here, in the Circuit of Maxima.”

I don't have the energy or the memory to explain what happened in each race and skirmish. But it's awful, watching a match when you're invested in the success of your team. Blue spent the morning scoring a little higher than White and winning several races. But the score doesn't help you understand.

Silk was bowled over by a Carolingian\(^2\), which broke several bones in his leg. Tertullio crashed horribly when two White circuiteers rammed him off the course. Isauria received a poisonous welt from a locust, and Magari rushed her into urgent care at the end of the event.

Several skirmishers died. No one that I knew personally, since my circle of acquaintance was still fairly limited. But I recognized faces. Two were shot in an Alpha Deathmatch. One was trampled in Pandemonium. Their bodies were brought back, and Moesia, crying softly and unashamedly, gave orders to the Webers to preserve the bodies and contact the families.

I don't have a better word than nervous to describe what I was feeling. Part of me

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\(^2\) Carolingian: An Ome Beast of the chimera class, built more or less like a yak, with corrosive needles instead of fur.
was afraid. Part of me felt this was what I deserved. I would suffer for leading my siblings into harm. Each time I forced my emotions down, they rose up again and tugged me back under. The numbness and grief were eroding me.

Chalcedon, Arcadio and Scythia were a model of good skirmishing. Chalcedon used the Laxx knives to immediately activate the wrath of the Keplers and caused incredible confusion. Despite the perils, Moscow Squad had the entire match in control. The final score was 373 to 101.

You'd think that would be a victory for us. I certainly thought so. But our circuiteers that round were incredibly weak. One crashed, another was almost lapped, and a third's Capricorn had engine trouble. Blue lost the event, because the speed boosts and final time deduction of an incredible 27.2 seconds was not enough to close the gap.

As it turn out, auxiliaries really aren't so important. But I guess you already knew that.

My turn was coming up fast. My second cube had tasted like nothing. Arcadio came over to me, and gave me a nod. I walked over to the waiting equipment Weber, and stepped into the suit. Even with the anti-impact properties, I still felt vulnerable. I put my arms through the sleeves and tightened my collar.

Sonata and Razu approached me as I zipped up my Nitro Skates. They helped me into my gauntlets.

“It'll be better than you think,” said Razu.

“Oh, really?”

“Just don't get cocky.”

“Relax. You know what to do.”

“You're telling me to be both less and more self assure.”

“Exactly.”

I closed my eyes and pressed my helmet over my head. The hum of the “radio” connection established itself between my squadmates and me. The dark glass of the visor lessened and I could see.

The Weber strapped my bandolier of Laxx knives to my back. I felt the notches of my suit tighten and grip the knife carrier, pressing the material gently against my spine. I tried to pull out a knife to test the ease, but the bandolier was locked. Of course. My gauntlets, too, wouldn't work until the match began.

I only had a few seconds to catch my breath. Arcadio was striding towards the narrow elevator, Scythia behind him. He had his three Thorn Whips in armband form, wrapped around his left bicep. Scythia's thigh holster held the L-component of her Zel Cannon53. It was time.

Arcadio stretched casually as we ascended. Then the ceiling opened and we emerged into noise and brightness. My visor darkened to save my eyes from the glare. A Mozi spoke into my helmet.

53 The Zel Cannon is a the key weapon in the Nucleus. The user starts with a small gun: the L Component. There is then the E Component attachment, which amplifies the blast into a powerful, two handed weapon. The Z Component is even larger, and turns the weapon into semi-portable energy cannon. Auxiliaries start with the L Component, and must locate the additional E and Z pieces in the arena. While unwieldy, the Zel cannon is crucial for eliminating the larger beasts.
“Event 24: Demolition Race + Feralcanalia will begin in thirty seconds. Please approach your spaces.”

The Nucleus dwarfed the training floors I'd experienced. The ten meter walls all resembled smooth white quartz. An iron net arched over the wall, separating us entirely from the circuiteers. Beyond the walls sat the blurry masses of spectators, their simple presence making me feel insignificant and small.

The floor was mostly dark purple grid, on which we could activate our Nitro Skates. A network of ramps, rails and obstacles established our arena. I also saw rocks, clumps of dirt and even a large central hill. I asked Scythia if we could skate over dirt.

“Ferro, you idiot, move to your spot before we get a penalty!”

I jumped and rushed forward toward the blue circle with the crossed knives on it. Scythia stood to my left, Arcadio to my right, each about twenty meters away. There were seven seconds left. Across the arena the White Beast Fighters were mirroring us.

I could see the Keplers standing against the walls. They were not USKs. These Keplers arched their spindly bodies, each limb bristling with serrated edges. Their blank faces were etched with numbers. I noticed an extra set of arms, folded into their backs, which did not bode well.

“If you hit the dirt, you'll have to walk over it,” said Scythia. “And if you're too slow, you're going to die.”

The Mozi in our headsets began counting down. Following Arcadio's example, I bent my back a little and put my gauntlets at the ready. With the word “zero”, and the roar of the crowd, the match began. I boosted forward, dodged two obstacles, jumped
over a third. The speed exhilarated me. A sonorous birdcall echoed through the Nuclues as the quartz gates were sliding open, unleashing a storm of pheasants.

One bird ran directly at me, lowering its neck and catching my skate. According to my visor I was moving at moving at ten meters per second-- that is to say, my fall was agony. I tumbled several times and skidded up against a gentle dirt slope. Even with the protective gear, my head was spinning. Scythia and Arcadio were shouting at me to get up while the commentators tutted and the crowd laughed.

“You tripped over your first pheasant,” hissed Arcadio. “Get up now, you useless sack of shit.”

“It seems to me that we’re in for some comedy, friends!” boomed Amadeus Mqomenzi-Piso, his commentating timbre splashing over the entire Circuit. “Take a look at Ferrolentius Barr-Valenz, the newest addition to the Blues. Has he met his match already? Point pheasants can be quite frightening, after all!”

My cheeks burned and tears of pain trickled down my cheeks. But I was up, shaking, and immediately drew two knives. I threw them, missing one pheasant and nailing another through the neck. It was the first point of the match, and a ding added a golden digit, hovering over the arena. My fall must have been so ridiculous that everyone was distracted from their objective.

“Don't throw your knives now,” shouted Arcadio. “Stab the damn pheasants, they're not worth losing your weapons.”

I skated forward, aching, and picked up my two knives. The pheasant gave a last pathetic squawk as I withdrew the glowing glass blade.
“Find a path for yourself,” said Scythia, over our connection but as she skated past me. “Trace a route along the Nucleus, and fight along it.”

“Thank you.”

“If you don't die here, Ferro,” growled Arcadio, slashing a pheasant with his Thorn Whip, “I will kill you myself.”

I made my way through the chaos, a knife in each hand, green panel pressed against my forearm. I only slowed when a dazed pheasant wandered close to me, and I cut its head off in a swift motion, my stomach filling up with revulsion.

“A little killer instinct after all,” said Piso. “Along with his comedic instinct!”

The Whites took the first round, 11-14. A schimmiac screech echoed from a great distance. Trees sprouted up in the dirt piles, artificial things that matured in about six seconds. Then the Squalorangutans burst out of the doors.

There were eight of them, each four meters tall with dragging arms that ended in claws. Their lower jaws bristled with sharp oceanic teeth. When one of them bit a nearby pheasant in half, blood dripped down its long, hairless muzzle, staining the snow white body fur. A warcry rose from their throats.

“Ferro, this way!” Scythia's voice was sharp as she skated by me again.

While I had been staring at the new killing beasts, Scythia had fully assembled her Zel Cannon. She was slowing down her skating so that I could keep up.

“What should I do?” I pleaded.

“You're going to make sure I don't get killed,” said Scythia. “If a monkey gets too close, throw your knives at it, one after the other. That'll slow them.”
“And then you'll kill them?”

“I have to kill the ones Arcadio is luring.”

I could see Arcadio on the other side of the Nucleus, gently whipping some Squalorangutans to get their furious attention. Then he took off.

“Don't focus on him!” said Sycynthia. “You're protecting us both. Knives at the ready.”

We skated a little towards Arcadio, finding a safe niche devoid of pheasants and monkeys. Bracing herself, Scythia released a blast from the Zel Cannon. A brilliant arc of white and purple energy shot out and hit the three monkeys pursuing Arcadio. One of them died by decomposing instantaneously, one fell apart into pieces, but the other was only badly wounded. One of the Whites skated up and slashed its gurgling throat.

“Oh!” spat Scythia.

“Aim a little longer, Scyth,” said Arcadio. “Not bad, but--”

I turned to see a monkey leaping right at us. In a panic I threw both knives, both hitting the beast right in the chest, but I could not stop its momentum. The tranquilized beast slammed into us, knocking us onto the ground and trapping us under the sluggish body.

“Ferro, you slime!”

It was still moving, trying to get us, and Scythia couldn't do anything. Her weapon was no good at such close range. Even through my helmet, I could smell its putrid odor of carrion and wet fur.

“Kill it, you--”
Mori: The Mortal Gambit

My left arm was trapped, but I struggled to grab a new knife with trembling fingers on my right hand. Stomach twisting, I stabbed the Squalorangutan through the eye. I could hear the dinging of points added and ooze dripped onto my uniform.

We pushed out way out from under the huge corpse. It cost us valuable time. By the time we were skating again, the monkeys were all dead. Despite Arcadio's bloodthirsty use of his whips, the Whites had pulled ahead. The score stood 43-70.

“We can still pull back from this,” I said, trying to sound encouraging.

“Did the monkey knock out your sense or are you just an idiot?” demanded Arcadio. “We just lost two rounds. Our circuiteers have lost out on two rounds of bonuses. Each round matters, Ferro!”

The chimeras emerged now. The first had the body of a bear, with five jackal heads growing out of either side of its body. It stood about five meters tall when crouched over. It's barbed tail swung back and forth, menacingly. The other creature looked like a horse, but its black body was covered in tongues of flame, and jagged spikes. Each hoofprint glowed with fire.

I overlooked the remaining two Squalorangutans who had just been released as well. I really wish I had been more aware of that.

Arcadio ordered me to distract the bear creature. I watched it raise its muzzle and release an echoing bellow.

“I'm not doing that.”

One White tried approaching the flaming stallion, and a swift kick knocked him into a pile of dirt, ten meters away. Part of his uniform was on fire.
“Ferro, pull yourself together, or I'll cut off your fingers and feed them to you. Get to that Ursomar, now!”

Taking a deep breath, I put both knives back in the bandolier. I needed speed.

“I'm on it, Arcadio.”

“Less talking, more skating.”

In a moment of inexplicable bravery, I skated right up to the bear, dodging two pheasants and almost brushing its massive claw. The jackal heads started barking, but I was already off, whizzing beneath jaws the size of a Capricorn's engine system. With a roar, it came after me.

I can't remember any emotions. I just kept boosting and avoided obstacles as best as I could. I took sharp turn around a slanted tree, and began cabooseing the Ursomar in circles. Then the Cavallinferno galloped at me and I had to change directions. I skated past pheasants, patches of fire and mounds of dirt, hoping I wasn't about to die.

“Keep it up, gemstome,” called Arcadio. “I'm going in for the rodeo.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Arcadio taking a ramp, boosting and landing on the Ursomar's back. The crowd's roar almost drowned out Ome beast's bellowing. It tried to fling Arcadio off, but he lashed it with two whips around the massive neck, and kept his hold. A jackal head snapped at him, and he kicked it.

“Arcadio, careful!” called Scythia.

The White Zel cannoneer had blasted the Ursomar's back leg, throwing it off balance. The spiked tail lash up and knock Arcadio forward, over the side of the Ursomar. He fell hard onto the ground and I heard his groan in my ears.
“Arcadio!” The beast lowered its jaws for the kill, but Scythia fired her cannon early, the reduced power only blasting off two clawed fingers. It was enough pain to distract the beast for a moment, but Scythia was out of tricks. She had to recharge again.

It was up to me to save Arcadio's life. Isn't that something?

I rushed towards the growling Ursomar, throwing a knife right in its neck. The effect was minimal, since it had ten times the body mass of a Squalorangutan, but it drew the beast's attention. I dodged its powerful jaw.

Drawing another knife I skated up to the front leg, jumped and plunged the knife into the bone. I hoisted myself up on the improvised handhold in the matted fur, plunging the next knife just above the shoulder. The maimed Ursomar roared, the jackal heads snapping at me, just out of range.

I climbed up onto the beast's neck and held on. My whole body shook and a cheer rose from the Blue supporters. Were they cheering for my imminent death, or because I might slay the beast?

“Scythia, how can I kill it?”

“You can't! Just stab its back and weaken it. When I say jump, get off the beast.”

I drew more knives and started stabbing. Purple blood bubbled out and made the bear's back slick and dangerous. It arched its back to get rid of me, but it was getting numb. The White cannoneer's shot barely missed me as the Ursomar staggered, and I clung on with two knives. I slipped to one side and had to kick myself back up before the jackal heads bit my legs off.

I can't explain how I managed not to die. I suppose we're all capable of great,
crazy things when we're facing death.

“Jump!”

I had two seconds to fling myself onto a pile of dirt before the bear exploded. I landed on my back as the bits of carcass rained down everywhere. Above us the score ticked up 122-91, but the round wasn't over. It would come down to whether or not anyone could kill the Cavallinferno.

Arcadio was up, and skating towards me, gathering up his fallen whips. I was catching my breath, when I heard it. I had no time to dodge. Out of the tree above me the last Squalorangutan jumped onto me.

I struggled but it slashed my across the chest with its claws, tearing the outer material and busining me. I didn't have time to grab a knife and I blocked the next slash with my hand, a painful decision and one I regret.

The monkey's crusted eyes glittered with malice. It opened its mouth, full of rows upon rows of sharp teeth behind the heavy array in the front, and bit off my left hand.

I didn't process it immediately. Before I could, its head toppled off as Arcadio's Thorn Whip cut through its neck. Blood spurted everywhere. My suit began to close and heat up, trying to contain my wound. The pain hit me then in earnest. Arcadio stood over me, watching cry out in agony and like a total weakling...I passed out.

I wouldn't wake up until the event ended for us, 198 to 249. I woke up with the chief stitcher, Magari, standing over me.

“It's not so bad,” she was saying to the people crowding around. “Irretrievable, but at least the bite only went eight centimeters up his forearm. He's in no life danger,
none at all.”

She was shrunken by age but seemed completely capable, ordering Webers to bring me some specifically colored blocks. I looked at my left arm, feeling sick, feeling like my hand was still there, but I just couldn't--

“Ferro, listen to me,” said Chalcedon. “You need to relax.”

“I can't relax-- I just-- I just-- I-- the match-- we lost because of me-- I--”

“Eusebio still pulled out first place,” said Sonata.

I blinked. “What?”

Sonata shrugged. “Demolition Races are unpredictable. The chimera round bonuses allowed him to pull ahead. We won the event.”

“Not so bad for a first match,” said Chalcedon.

I didn't believe that.

“What use am I now?” I asked, holding up my shaking left arm. I was on the edge of vomiting.

“No less than before,” said Arcadio, icily.

I made eye contact with him. He was still a total bastard, but we had reached some sort of understanding. I saved his life, he saved mine.

Magari adjusted her lenses. “Replacement augmentation will be cheaper and easier, sooner rather than later.”

Chalcedon nodded. “Give him Manus III, and you can charge it to me for now.”

“I-- what? What are you doing, Chalcedon?”

My Exark looked at me. “If you want to survive here, you need to be adroit. You
will pay me back later, when you have earned some money. This way you don't have to worry about any interest.”

Magari mumbled something and looked at me for confirmation.

“How-- how much will it cost?”

Chalcedon was shaking his head, but Magari answered anyway. “8.35 KiloVamps.”

I was stunned. I wanted to ask for cheaper options, but I had nothing. No price would be viable for me. I had no money. My hand would not come back.

I closed my eyes and tried not try cry, but of course I did, in front of my Squad and my few friends and the stitcher. After I stopped, I swallowed and nodded. Magari put me under.

The next time I woke up I was lying in my own bed, in the dormitory.

It took me a moment to remember. I pulled back the sheets and stared. It looked like a continuation of my arm, only silver. My nerve structures were extended and reproduced in the metallic replica. I could still see the traces of my odd knuckles, the appearance of veins. Swallowing, I opened my hand, closed it, moved the digits. It was fully responsive.

“Magari knows what she's doing,” said Scythia.

I nearly fell out of bed. I hadn't realized she was there.

“Hi,” I said, foolishly throwing the covers back over my hand and forearm.

She told me to relax, with surprising gentleness.
“I’m fine,” I said, turning away from her concerned gaze. “Did I oversleep? Am I--”

“Chalcedon gave you a free day. No practice.”

“Ah. So that I can get used to being-- being damaged.”

Scythia looked at me for a moment. “Can I show you something?”

I shrugged. She sat down on the edge of my bed, removed her left boot and rolled up her trousers. I failed to cover my gasp. Scythia's leg was missing, almost up to her knee.

“It wasn't my first match, but my second,” said Scythia. “Against Red. I was also fighting off three wolves and my cannon had to recharge and-- well, you can imagine.”

“I-- didn't know.”

“I don't just tell anyone,” said Scythia. “Especially not rags like you. But you threw yourself at an Ursomar. You survived the Ursomar. You are a Beast Fighter."”

I looked down at my hand, stomach roiling.

“Everyone here has scars or wounds, Ferro. Get adjusted to that new hand-- realize that it is you as much as any other part of you-- and you'll feel better.”

Scythia zipped her boot back on. Where had the gentle light in her eyes come from? She gave my hand a squeeze, and she gave me a smile. “You're alive-- and you're one of us. Full squad practice tomorrow. Be there, okay?”

54 Skimishers often refer to themselves by slang terms, in relation to their event.
Feralcanalia: Beast Fighters
Alpha Deathmatch: Alphas
Pandemonium: Chaotics
Ascension: Ascenders
I nodded, and she left.

I've had the day to myself. What have I been doing? Well, you've been reading what I've been doing. I'm glad I can still write with my-- biological hand. I wouldn't put it past the Manus Company to record data from the movement of a hand. I've also spent a lot of time thinking.

I might have been happier if I had just died. I would be free from killing Omes, from the fear. Death is what I deserve for letting Quill die. By all chances, I was going to die yesterday.

But I didn't.

So what now? I have a debt to pay off. Chalcedon spent thousands of Vamps on me. According to Lazuli, the Manus III is a high end model.

I'm not gifted. My display against the Ursomar was reckless luck. But I can work at it. I can train. I can belong.

I'll leave things here. Tomorrow, I'll let you know how practice goes! Until then, wish me luck.

Interlogue II: A Historian's Intention

Up to this point, I have guided the narrative loosely, only dispensing refinement as Valenz has given me cause to. I intended to give an impression of Valenz’s humble roots, before he became the auxiliary who altered Cardinal
But how I need to skip ahead in his narrative, for it is grueling to hear about yet another training exercise. Details about this lifestyle are often mundane and meticulous. The reader of this document is interested in Zember Ratatosk-Mazonas, in Fulvio Xanomel-Caston. Not in Valenz. He is merely a vessel.

I won't skip ahead directly to Mazonas's Uprising, but I will start cutting out large swaths of unimportant events. There is something to be gleaned from life in the Blue Barracks as we approach the political drama.

November 3 1068 TST
Current Balance – 92 Vamps.
Money Owed to Chalcedon – 1.32 KiloVamps (!)

Brevity visited me today. I'll just write that again. Brevity visited me today.

After six months of no contact!

Lazuli interrupted practice with a crisp cough.

“Ferro lentius, there is someone requesting to visit you.”

I was still getting a feel for these chained Laxx knives, so Lazuli had to repeat himself. I tossed the Laxx knife with a grunt, watching the blade arc through the air. Its glittering chain trailing the trajectory, before the knife slammed into the ground. My gauntlet displayed a distance of 37 Meters. I grimaced.

“Who's the guest?”
“Brevity Barr-Valenz.”

I let my last knife sink. Arcadio gave a sharp whistle. Leto\textsuperscript{55} and Scythia exchanged looks. Sure, I had mentioned Brevity from time to time in the squad, but mostly they knew her as the Wyvern circuiteer from the Greens. My stomach grew tight and I glanced towards Chalcedon.

“If that's all right with--”

The Exark inclined his head. I hustled toward the armory, removed my equipment, and got into the elevator. Lazuli took me to Floor D, and I followed the glowing path to a room. Brevity was already sitting at the round table, tapping her keypiece against her palm. My frustration and my relief mingled. She looked better. Her cheeks were less bony, her hair was longer.

She stood up as I approached, but didn't look at me.

“Hello, Ferro.”

“Brev.”

I had thought I'd be able to keep the coldness out of my voice, but I failed. We both sat down, and I asked Lazuli to send drinks. She kept looking at her wrist.

“I hear Bellitant Caston is likely to be the next Tetrokon of our Province,” said Brevity. “When Tetrokon Sevvu steps down in December. Him or perhaps Bellitant Mazonas if--”

“Why have you been ignoring me all this time?” I asked. I tried to get your

\textsuperscript{55} Leto Darzi-Kezelle (1056-1102 TST): One of the casualties of my improved editing method. Darzi joined the Blues in September, but Valenz's entry was otherwise unremarkable so I did not include it. She became a fifth member of Moscow Squad.
attention at the auction. I've sent you dozens of messages. I've been trying to meet with
you for months.”

“I know,” said Brevity.

No words came to me.

“We both-- both had new lives to deal with, Ferro. I had to become a circuiter--
you had to become a skirmisher and--”

“Quill is dead,” I spat. “Quill died right in front of me. Do you even care?”

“Ferro--”

“I've spent these months in the jowls of death-- I've suffered for it.” I held up my
Manus III, and Brevity flinched.

“I-- I saw the match,” mumbled Brevity. “I try to watch most of your matches.”

A Weber brought out drinks. My Aquatac was brimming with pineapple juice.
Brevity stuck to water. She had almost emptied half her glass before she spoke again.

“I'm-- I'm sorry.”

She was not apologizing for her avoidance. She was ashamed of her family, and
apologizing for her shame. My heart softened. She loved me, but not precisely in the
same vein that I loved her. There would always be distance in her love.

“What's done is done. I've just-- missed you.”

We both sipped our drinks, but I was sure she had something to say. She would
not come here to examine our feelings. Not Brevity. After some hesitation, she asked
how expensive my Manus had been.

“8.35 KiloVamps. I'm paying back a loan from my Exark.”
“And how much have you paid back?”

“Almost two KiloVamps. The Inaugural Games for our new Tetrokon should help considerably. I think we get double bonuses for every round we play.”

Brevity considered this. Then, without any dramatic flair, Brevity placed a Data-Patch on the table. “I’d like to transfer 5.5 KiloVamps to you.”

I recoiled from the Data Patch as if it were caustic. “I won't take your money.”

“Why not?” asked Brevity, cheeks flushing.

“It's my fault I lost my hand-- it's up to me to pay for a new one.”

Brevity opened and closed her mouth several times, looking for tactful words. “I-- I don't know if you've noticed, but my races recently have been going well.”

I smiled. “Are you attempting modesty, Brev? You're the talk of the town! You and your Wyvern. And I've seen you race-- you're downright amazing. But even you can't be earning so much that you have KiloVamps to spare-- you should be upgrading your Wyvern.”

Brevity took a deep breath. “What if-- I had some money that I couldn't spend on my vehicle?”

There were three seconds of silence.

“You've been sponsored,” I said, slowly. “That's why you're here. That's why you have money to spend.”

Brevity lowered her eyes. “Sekmu Xanomel-Bellerophon approached me yesterday and signed on as my sponsor. It won't be official until the Inaugural Games.”

“Who?”
“She's the municipal prefect of Wellington. The niece of Bellitant Caston. Their whole family favors the Greens. She has raised my salary, insured my vehicle on her own responsibility and gave me ten KiloVamps to spend on my family-- for you and Mum.”

I wanted to refuse. I wanted to pay off my debt myself-- to make up for my own ineptitude-- but I knew I couldn't turn this down. I tried my best to smile. “Thanks, Brevity.”

We didn't speak much as we finished our drinks. I could sense her guilt receding. This would be her justification for focusing on her career, and I knew it. We left each other on friendly terms, which was the real prize. No matter what, I wish her the best of luck.

I should get some sleep. I want to make an impression in the Inaugural Games. I need to get up early and train some more if I want to master chained Laxx knives. I have to keep improving, and I have a long way to go.

All the best, Brev.

December 20 1068 TST
Current Balance – 13 Vamps
Money Owed to Chalcedon – 1.18 KiloVamps
“I would make a good Tetrokon,” said Arcadio.

We all laughed. Razu, Leto, Scythia and I were all sitting on the various flexible couches in a recreational room, while Arcadio stood on the table, drinking his nutrient juice. His eyes gleamed.

“What would you do, Arcadio?” snickered Leto. “You would take your quarter of the Federation and gamble it on a game of Rustlers.”

“Bah,” said Arcadio. “Only a fool gambles with his power. I would be wise and just and beloved.”

“What if an invasion of Cankerbees breaks through the border fleet and you have to deal with it?” demanded Scythia. “How would you be able to deploy Keplers and combat vessels? Don't you think your popularity would suffer if all your subjects have become mindless feeding grounds for the corpse pupeteers?”

“You are all blind,” said Arcadio, pointing his glass at each of us in turn. “Caught up in the propaganda. There is nothing special about Tetrokons.”

Razu looked a little nervous, but no Cardinal observing mechanism would be flagging Arcadio's treasonous speech. He had downed a glass of Jezba's wine before turning to his nutrient juice, and Arcadio was famously bad at holding his liquor.

“Oh, shut up Arcadio.”

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56 Rustlers: A game designed in 654 TST by the Nibelung Corporation, based on the conditions in the Western American Republic, approximately 1750 years before the Cardinal Federation. The objective is to capture or protect cattle. The game remained popular in Helios long after it had faded from popularity in other systems.

57 Cankerbees: Slang for Locusta Mezcavora, the species that ravaged Ossium and Carnioz Provinces from 899-1214 TST. Their parasitic nature means their culture is almost unintelligible to us. Thankfully, advancements in Kepler warfare allowed the Cardinal Federation to beat these fiends out of our galaxy, but they still linger in our collective memory.
“No, Scythie-- I know what I'm saying. They've got Mozis built into their skulls-- they've got augmentations and everything.”

“Of course they do,” said Scythia. “But that's them. They're all of themselves. That's why they're qualified, and you're not.”

Arcadio pushed his lower lip forward. “If I had SuppliMentals, I would be as good as any.”

We were all curious about which two citizens would replace Tetrokons Sevvu and Aximm tomorrow. It's only every twenty years that the Shift comes to our system, after all.

“He's not entirely crazy,” said Leto. She was listlessly twirling a finger through her long black hair. “Tetrokons mostly just do what their SuppliMentals suggest. We're really just rotating a different representative through a bureaucracy of capable artificial intelligence.”

“Exactly--” said Arcadio, pointing a quivering finger at her. “A good Tetrokon is a good listener. That's how it works. The Array doesn't elect anyone who isn't docile.”

“But not only are you terrible at listening,” said Scythia. “You're not a citizen. This whole declaration is moot.”

Arcadio sighed and leaned back. “Oh Scythia. It's just a matter of time before I become a citizen.”

“No you won't,” said Scythia.

“I will!” shouted Arcadio, and Scythia winced. “I'm saving up, you know. And tomorrow-- whoever the Tetrokon is-- I will impress them. And I will have a Tetrokon
“You only had one glass of wine, right?”

In past months I would not have dared to antagonize Arcadio, but since this was the third time he invited me to these post-dinner sessions, Arcadio no longer made me as nervous.

“I don't like your tone, Ferro. You're a squeaky pain sometimes-- always scribbling in your journal. Listen-- this is our chance. All four teams are competing-- if we excel tomorrow we will blaze a new era of Blue domination. Moscow Squad will take Feralcanalia to a whole new level. Ferro, make sure you quote me on that in that diary.”

The conversation moved on. Leto and Razu discussed the prospect of a Tetrokon sitting next to Axapada tomorrow. Inaugural Games are always grand. Hopefully I'll pay off my debts tomorrow-- but I'll put a dent into them, no matter what.

“Why do you want to become a citizen so badly?” asked Leto, eventually. She was reviewing today's bulletins on her Data-Patch. I still can't believe she spent money on a personal model, when there are plenty of spare Data-Patches lying around here.

“Sure, there's the immortality and all the rest-- but is it worth a constant connection to the Cardinal Array. Everything you do is measured, recorded and considered. Citizens have no freedom.”

Arcadio looked at Scythia and me, as if we could translate incomprehensible speech. “Freedom? What freedom do you have now? You're trapped underground, you're owned jointly by the Circuit and by the Blues-- you're forced to throw your life
into an arena for your salary-- and everything you do is monitored-- maybe not within
your mind-- but we are all under surveillance. What freedom are you talking about?”

“You have the freedom of anonymity,” said Leto. “Or you did before you became
a skirmisher.”

“Anonymity is not a luxury,” said Arcadio. “It is a sign that you have not yet
found grandeur. Those contented to be denizens are nothing more than cowards.”

Leto and Arcadio argued back and forth for another half an hour, and then I
decided it was time for me to retire for the evening.

“Done already, Ferro?” called Razu, suppressing a hiccups.

I held up my diary as an answer, and left. The corridors were quiet.

There's a good chance I could die tomorrow. It will be my first time using chain
knives in a match, so I might be at a disadvantage. We'll see, I suppose.

I was passing the library and glanced inside to see Moesia sitting alone at the
central table, bent over a book.

“Moesia?”

My Captain jolted, dropped the book and the interface closed. She looked over
her shoulder, saw me, and relaxed.

“I didn't hear you coming.”

“What are you reading, Captain?”

She picked it up and reloaded the page. The soft glow made her green eye darken
before adjusting. She shook her head.

“A collection of obsolete texts. Political theories of long ago. My curiosity
always stirs when our government undergoes a change. A superfluous distraction.”

I noticed two clasps on Moesia's uniform were unbuckled and her hair was a tangled mess. Her flowing tranquility, usually such a powerful aura surrounding her, was missing.

“Is-- is everything okay, Captain?”

“Please, Ferro. I would prefer Moesia to Captain. I've told you, haven't I?”

“Yes, of course. Sorry, Moesia.”

She looked at me for a long moment. “May I ask you a personal question?”

“Of course.”

“If you had not stumbled into the Circuit-- what would you be doing? How did you envision your future?”

I was baffled by the onslaught of the question. I mumbled something about wishing I could have been a Gaozian scholar.

“Of course, I'd probably be stuck working on the Grid in some way.”

Moesia frowned, staring at my diary, then nodded slowly.

“I recommend you find your way to bed, Ferro. Sleep will aid you most in the Nucleus tomorrow.”

She placed her book back in its repository and left the library. I reached out for the repository's touchpad, but then pulled my fingers back. I can be curious about my Captain's reading habits tomorrow. Tonight is no time for stray thoughts.

I headed to the dormitory, and put these words on the paper.
Interlogue III: Foundations of the Cardinal Federation

I am often surprised by how many citizens are not fully cognizant of our federal history--contenting themselves with the basic summary provided by the Array, and feeling no need to consult the historians who explore the circumstances of our origins. But to counteract the bias of Valenz and his compatriots, I will give the nuanced account.

Uriel Tiburon-Cataline (-38 TST – 44 TST) is the founder of the Cardinal Company. This company initially designed superior acceleration rings between Mars and Luna, but Cataline eventually turned to quantum repositioning.

In -12 TST he developed the first Nepthys Panel, which constituted the first instantaneous teleportation device. Before this moment human motion was limited by classical physics. Acceleration rings had been the fastest means of traversing space. Until Cataline, we believed we could not use quantum mechanics to transfer information. Now we know better.

Thanks to an ordinance passed by the Helios Parliament, corporations had permission to sponsor their own expeditions beyond the system. Critically, these corporations could maintain personal sovereignty in any colonies established, provided they maintained basic human rights.

The Cardinal Company used Nepthys Panels to transport people and raw materials to the edges of human exploration. Self sufficient colonies formed. We date the beginning of Terrestrial Standard Time to the founding of these colonies.

Cataline intended to maximize his colonial reach, so he offered a fraction of Cardinal stock to each volunteer colonist. Then he decreed that anyone holding more than .01% of Cardinal's market shares would be designated a
citizen in a Cardinal outpost. Those without stock would be tolerated, of course, but would not have the same benefits. Cataline's decree caused the massive exodus out of Helios during the 1st Century TST.

Of course, what transformed the Cardinal Company into the Cardinal Federation was the acquisition of major competitors. Between 5 and 34 TST, Cataline obtained control over the Mozi Corporation, the Kepler Corporation, Weber Inc., and finally, the Prometheus Company.

There was resistance to Cataline's innovations during the early years. In 34 TST parliamentary fanatics passed a decree banning further expansion by the Cardinal Federation. A zealot attempted to kill Cataline before his influence grew too far. The Cardinal Federation could have been a brief footnote in history, rather than a system under which seven hundred billion humans flourish.

And then, in 39 TST, Cataline ended any uncertainty of his ascension. He unveiled the Cardinal Array.

December 21 1068 TST
Current Balance: 7 Vamps
Money Owed to Chalcedon: 200 Vamps

Fulvio Xanomel-Caston is the new Tetrokon of the Atem Province.

We heard the news in the Dining Hall, before the match. Many had to stand, but we watched the displays where Gaozians argued about the various merits of the most likely candidates. Several claimed that Bellitant Mazonas would be the best choice for
Atem, since he had worked closely with several Tetrokons in the last century. There was a calm certainty in those who believed Caston would ascend.

For the Tetrokonity of Carnioz Province, the consensus was Genomere Daza-Felitas. When the Array announced her as Tetrokon Daza, her image flashed across all screens. When Tetrokon Caston's image followed, there was applause, but an undercurrent of groaning. The Gaozians had noted Caston was a lifetime supporter of the Greens. It seemed we were out of luck.

Razu looked glumly at his nutrient cube. “If only it had been Mazonas.”

“Don't say things like that,” said Isauria. “Caston is the better choice for the Confederation. And if we outperform the Greens, he still has to reward us, regardless of his allegiances.”

Lazuli's voice rose to silence the general clamor. “Settle down. Your Captain has something to say.”

The floor beneath Moesia had risen half a meter, giving her an impromptu podium. “Tetrokon Caston's request for the Inaugural games has arrived. He wants them to be brief.”

Outrage spilled from all corners. Moesia waited for Lazuli to restore order. “This means we will have one Alpha Deathmatch, one Feralcanalia, two Ascension Games and two Pandemoniums.”

The Alphas muttered angrily amongst themselves, but Moesia ignored them. “There will be two Wyvern races, two Manticore races, and two Capricorn races. In addition, there will be one race for each vehicle type, sine adiutorio.”
Several skirmishers stood up and shouted their displeasure. I hadn't heard the term before, and by the looks of Razu, Leto and Arcadio, neither had they.


“And what does that mean for us?” asked Razu.

“Isn't it obvious?” said Scythia. “It means no auxiliaries. A-- pure race.”

No one wanted to be thrown into the arena, but that's how we earn our living. To be denied access to the Inaugural Games-- which were always the most lucrative and glorious-- well, I'm not surprised that the skirmishers were furious. The circuiteers weren't pleased either. Normally with four teams there could be anywhere from fifty to one hundred races in the Inaugural Games. Not today.

Mutinous mutterings persisted as we ascended to our waiting room. But we didn't take our usual seats to watch the pregame. Moesia led us in two groups, skirmishers following the circuiteers, onto an elevating platform that took everyone out into the Circuit. Almost two hundred of us walking beneath an open sky, together.

Rain lashed the transparent barrier far above the Circuit. Clouds churned with thunder. We approached the purple box, as did the Greens, the Whites and the Reds. A great legion of competitors walked together towards the seat soon to be occupied by a Tetrokon.

Most matches could be viewed remotely and enjoyably, but no one wanted to miss an Inaugural Game-- the chance to share the same space as our new Tetrokon. Denizens cheered and waved flags, and even some citizens were there. I could recognized them by their private booths.
Anthems and music roared through the arena, and I was getting nervous. I had never known a Tetrokon of Atem to be anyone except Sevvu.

And then he appeared, next to Axapada. What can I say about our new Tetrokon? Well, he's beautiful. Yes, yes, I know, I'm sure all of his facial structures have been augmented and redesigned for maximum effect, but seemed to glow! His skin was shockingly pale, almost caucasian-- but the Caston and Xanomel families are old and still maintain some of that “European” genetic material. His lips reminded me of Jezba's wine. Each word that spilled from that perfect mouth flowed like banners of velvet.

“I am honored,” he purred. “To be your new Tetrokon and to lead the people of Atem-- the citizens and the denizens-- into the highest echelons of our most magnanimous Cardinal Federation.”

I applauded with everyone else. Caston wore the slim uniform of a Bellitant, medals gleaming. He had not yet assumed the purple tunic.

“Our Tetrokons have become unwilling to confront the issues that face the Federation. It is time to clean out the dust from our homes and pursue excellence. I will restore Atem, the first intersystemic Province, to its rightful position as the greatest Province in the Confederation.”

I can't say that Caston's words were any more moving than a speech given by Sevvu. But I've never listened too closely when citizens speak.

“We must begin to rethink some of our luxuries,” he continued silkily. “We cannot simply live for pleasure and for games. It is time to find a true purpose for your lives, be they brief or extended. If we fear our own advancement, we shall stagnate.”
Chalcedon's jaw next to me was tightening. Others like Phoboz and Eusebio looked bored.

“I am no enemy of amusement,” said Caston. “In regulated doses, it gives us the composure for our goals and our achievements. So, without further speech from me, let the games begin!”

A roar of approval rose from the crowd, from the circuiteers and from the skirmishers. Had I imagined the slight menace in Caston's voice?

“Okay,” said Arcadio. “We're using chained Laxx knives, Slyder pikes and Zel Cannon. Ferro, Scythia-- don't panic-- but we're going up against Green.”

“Do we know which Squad?”

Arcadio grimaced, as we returned to our zone. “We're up against Paolisto's crew. They're not friendly.”

“This is coming from the king of friendship.”

“Shut up, Ferro.”

I thought we would play immediately, but I miscalculated. There may have only been nine races for Blue to participate in, but Blue was one of four teams. Arcadio interrupted my writing about Caston's speech and demanded that I pay attention to the Feralcanalia between Red and White.

“You see-- look at Zabo,” he said, pointing to the Red Exark. “The Heliosling is absolutely viable.”

I squinted at the display. Zabo put a glowing pebble into the sling, whirled it around, and hit a Squalorangutan in the chest. It immediately caught fire and began
howling.

“It's a gimmick,” I said. “It has no defense, requires constant mobility and won't always do damage. What exactly would a Heliosling do against a Cavallinferno?”

“You're disgustingly simple sometimes,” said Arcadio. “If there are two chimeras, the slinger goes for the other beast.”

I felt validated when the Prize Beast, an enormous combat iguana, shrugged off the fiery pebbles. The bursts of fire couldn't damage the armor of scales. Arcadio shot dirty looks at me until our game, when he slammed on his helmet and marched ahead of us to the elevator.

I adjusted my bandolier with my six knives. Chains would be very useful, but they came at the cost of limited ammunition. I would have to conserve them.

When we were elevated into the Nucleus, I glanced up at the purple box. I wondered if Caston would care about this match, since he supported the Greens.

“Remember to watch out for the pheasants, Ferro,” said Arcadio.

“I thought the joke would have gotten old by now.”

“Not a chance.”

And we were off. Drawing two knives I eliminated a passing pheasant with the slashing technique I've honed with Chalcedon. The next thing I felt was a heavy impact, a shoulder rammed against me, knocking me off the grid and onto the dirt. The commentators gave fake groans at the uncourteous roughness of the Green skirmisher who had bowled me over. It was Arcadio's insults which got me back on my feet in a second. A minute later Seythia was hit, also seemingly by accident. They were trying to
neutralize us without drawing a penalty.

“Avoid these scumbags,” said Arcadio. “Focus on the objective.”

A Green circuiteer cut me off, thrashing his Thorn Whip menacingly. I dodged around him and kept going. The commentators were animatedly discussing Green aggression and Blue cowardice. I could hear Arcadio growling to himself. He was struggling to following his own advice. Right before the end of the first round, that same circuiteer whipped Scythia around the ankles, tripping her up. She slammed onto the ground, hard.

“Scythia!” I shouted.

The Green skirmisher's visor glowed red, indicating that he had warranted a penalty. Our score doubled from nine to eighteen, putting us in the lead, but Scythia was groaning and clutching her shoulder. Arcadio rushed over, and helped her up. Even with the protective mechanisms of her suit, she was shaky.

And then came the pack of Lupothanatos.

I hastily clasped the chain end of my Laxx knife to my gauntlet and tossed it into an obstacle. The glittering energy gain arced out, connected to me and the hilt, creating a crackling barrier across a section of the grid. I wanted to contain the Ome beasts, to give Scythia and Arcadio a little extra time. I detached the chain, hooked it against another obstacle, and drew another knife.

I began picking up speed with my skates, elongating the chain and beginning to spin it. The commentators remarked on my unorthodox chain style, but I didn't care.
Until I could upgrade my gauntlets into launchers	extsuperscript{58}, this was the best that I could do. I skated straight towards a Lupothanatos, and it recoiled from the spinning chain blade. When it clawed at me I changed my trajectory, sliding to the left. I released my hold on the chain, the Laxx knife slashing the Lupothanatos across the flank. My precision relieved and surprised me.

The beast lunged, but the numbing cut was already slowing it. I circled it, regaining control of my loose chain. I had to make a fist to hold it in my gauntlets. I was shaking a bit.

I slashed the wolf again. As it stumbled to the ground I pounced and slashed it across the neck. Our score increased, I was on the move again. In my mind I kept my own tally. That's a total of six Lupothanatos I've killed by myself in my career. Not bad.

The match hardly displayed our best skirmishing to the new Tetrokon. Scythia's usually pinpoint precise aim suffered from her dislocated shoulder. One of the Greens spent his entire time blocking and sabotaging Arcadio. When he lost his temper and knocked the Green circuiteer with the blunt end of his pike, the late game penalty was an immense point boost.

The final score was 301-213, which cost our circuiteers the race. Arcadio wouldn't talk to anyone after the match, and several medical Webers took Scythia straight to Magari. I sat and watched the following alone. Chalcedon joined me in my seat as I wiped sweat from my face.

\textsuperscript{58} Launchers: Skirmishing Gauntlets for advanced users of Laxx knives, chained or otherwise. The skirmisher can slide a knife into the slot on either gauntlet. To launch the projectile one merely must make a fist. Since the chain really slows the speed of the Laxx knife, many consider it essential to this version of the weapon type.
“I could have tranquilized that chimera if I hadn't missed,” I muttered, tossing the facecloth on the ground.

“You're too hard on yourself. I saw you fighting that Lupothanatos. Considering you don't have advanced gauntlets--”

I had no patience today for my Exark's wave of extenuating circumstances.

“Chalcedon, it doesn't matter if I did my best-- the results are up there-- we lost-- we stopped our circuiteers from winning. I should have--”

Chalcedon watched me struggle for words, then give up. “Dectur Paolistio is notoriously scheming, Ferro. He targeted Scythia specifically because he knew a penalty in the first round would be worth taking the cannoneer out of commission.”

“But-- but-- then why does the penalty system work this way? Why isn't the penalty higher earlier in the game, since it's more important then?”

Chalcedon shook his head. “If abuse becomes widespread, the rules might change. But they'll never be absolutely fair.”

“Why is that?” I demanded. “Why when we have Vicas, Mozis-- the Array-- how can we still overlook injustice?”

Chalcedon laughed. “You have a sharp mind, Ferro.”

“Don't patronize me.”

Chalcedon put a hand on my shoulder. “It's okay to emulate Arcadio in combat technique-- but don't let that stop you from receiving sincere compliments.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. I mumbled my gratitude. Chalcedon patted me on the shoulder and he moved on to talk with Moesia and Tertullio.
I spent the rest of the match watching Caston. The occasional Vica would focus in on his disinterested expression. Sometimes an eyebrow would flick up, but that was the extent of activity.

After the last match ended with a close contest between Red and White circuiteers, Caston rose and stepped forward.

“An impressive display,” he said. “I commend all you talented circuiteers for striving so fervently towards greatness. Auxiliaries too. But of course, there must always be a winner, and today that is Celadon. Please give your applause to the Greens.”

The Green fans cheered wildly, but there were many clenched jaws in the Blue Circuit Zone. Caston made a few last vapid remarks, then departed from the purple box.

“He's certainly in a rush to leave,” said Kravat59, sourly.

“It's no surprise,” said Tarilla. “He believes Earth has too much pretension.”

“Too much pretension?” I asked. “That's rich, coming from a citizen.”

“Earth has history that precedes the Cardinal Federation,” said Tarilla, simply. “To those like Caston, that gives us an inappropriate ego.”

Dinner was subdued, but I was pleasantly surprised by Sonata joining me. It's been at least a month since we've had dinner together. I congratulated her on her superb racing results.

Sonata hid her smile behind the corner of a napkin. “You didn't do so badly yourself.”

“Don't lie.”

59 Zimonus Qel-Kravat: A Blue skirmisher for Alpha Deathmatch. More or less irrelevant to the narrative.
“Didn't you score the most points on your team, using *Laxx knives*?”

“*Chained* Laxx knives. And Scythia was injured-- which distracted Arcadio.”

Sonata lowered her voice. “Did you hear that Axapada has called a meeting with all the Captains? They're in his offices right now.”

“Why? Is it something to do with Caston's ascension?”

Sonata shook her head. “I don't know.”

I'm in the dormitory now. Scythia is here, asleep. None of her injuries will be permanent. Magari left her in a simple robe, so her artificial foot and lower leg are visible. Leto's here too, watching old matches on her Data Patch, but Arcadio's down in the Rhombus, training to relieve his frustrations. I hope he gets some sleep.

I have something on my mind. And it's something I don't want to write down, given what happened in August\(^60\). It seems like divine retribution for me needling Sonata about her continued attraction to Eusebio. I must have the same folly inside myself.

How do you pulverize your emotions? Is it possible? I still marvel that we carry around all this irrational baggage, from Earth to each system in our Federation.

I wish I had someone I could confide in, but even among the Blues, I am alone.

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**Interlogue IV: The Array**

The Array also deserves more critical attention from scholars than we are

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60 On August 3\(^{rd}\), Arcadio stole Ferro's diary and read it aloud in front of the entire dining hall. This is most likely why he is nervous to put his thoughts on paper.
apt to give it.

Fusing both quantum communication and sophisticated Mozi technology, the Array takes in a staggering influx of data, processes it, and executes millions of tasks too trivial for oversight. Each Mozi in the federation is linked to the central mechanism, as are most advanced automata and, importantly, all citizens. This means the Array extends as far as our citizens and technology extend, meaning we are all perpetually connected, even without the constant use of Nepthys Panels and the more powerful Petrobolos Stations.

Even after a millennia we are still trying to achieve the theoretical-- to traverse any distance with this technology. Interference from inexplicable energies still tangle our transfers over distances greater than 44 lightcenturies. Therefore we have Array Signal Rings, scattered across the Federation, to confirm the connection and ensure stability.

It is thanks to the Array that our widespread Federation remains one united nation. It is thanks to the constant observation of the Array that Citizens can die and be reincarnated, entirely up to date. Without the Array, our lives would not be these.

January 18 1069 TST

Current Balance: 645 MiliVamps

Money Owed to Chalcedon: 22 Vamps

I guess this is the longest break I've had between entries. Five days! I'm getting sloppy. I'm not trying to absolve myself of blame, but I've been frequenting the library
and found the ideal method of taking my mind off...my distraction. My solution is an atypical cure for lovesickness-- pre-Cardinal revolutionary philosophy. You might ask, why not work my way through my feelings by writing them out? Well-- I suppose I'm still nervous that someone might read this and-- well, never mind. Point is, I'm talking about what I've read.

I was browsing our library's collection of hard books when I encountered a shelf of works written around -1500 TST. I recognized Heliconia Chung, but my eyes fastened on the simple green cover of Penelope Dactyl's *The Tyrant's Frying Pan and Other Essays*. I reached for it. Chef Jezba had told me about frying pans once-- a long lived technology for heating up food before intelligent kitchens and precision stoves caught on.

This book is fascinating. How does an author writing two and a half millennia ago seem to speak so directly to me? I've been studying her title essay over and over again these last few days. Here's a little sample from Dactyl:

"Consider the kitchen of geopolitical affairs: consider the flames licking the blackened kettle, consider the vegetables half chopped, the dripping sink, the trampled dishrag. It is rare that this particular kitchen has a garbage boy or a dishwasher on hand who might tidy up the place. Despite the best intentions of the cooks, they do not have the time or the money to remove the permanent hint of squalor.

Focus on the stove. Toss yourself into a cast iron pan. Roll your shoulders and make yourself comfortable as the gas flame hisses and activates.

An iron pan differs from the aluminum and copper varieties. Whereas the latter
are thin, simple compounds with atoms that excite easily, iron is more lethargic. It is 
stable enough to resist stellar nuclear fusion, so you will excuse it for not immediately 
heating up, simply because the gas flame is slapping its underbelly. You can safely press 
your hand to the surface of an iron frying pan for that first minute of heating, and it will 
not burn you.

Our societies are no longer flimsy aluminum or inferior copper. Our societies are 
all excellent iron works of craftsmanship. You and I are nothing more than diced onions, 
sitting next to each other in a pool of olive oil. The many tyrants of this world know this. 
They have inherited a well composed society. They have inherited complacent onions.

There are reasons you do not revolt-- heating up the pan is not only difficult, but if 
you somehow manage to do such a thing-- not easy for a diced onion-- if you get the 
tyrant to burn his hand and recoil-- you are trapped with a hot pan that does not cool off 
so quickly. This is why we shrug at our tyrants. We do not protest their seasonings 
(though they add too much salt). We fear the implications of chaos.

How much does the tyrant's frying pan reside in our minds, though? Is our 
hesitation a fear of pain, or simply belief in tyrannical lullabies and warnings of society's 
propensity to burn? How deep has the lie of stoicism seeped into our brains? Perhaps 
we are not onions, but slabs of raw pork. We've been sitting on the iron griddle for a 
long time. We are spoiled.61

61 Penelope Dactyl (-1601 - -1544 TST): Perhaps the most famous anti-corporate revolutionary in the 
post-republic period of American history. She used both violence and peaceful protest to argue against 
valuing humans based on their labor potential. Her writings were actually suppressed until 655 TST, 
thanks to Tetrokon Galbus. If you are interested to learn more about this individual I recommend Zego 
Vesma-Rupir's synchron series, The Words that Almost Toppled Civilization.
This was one of Dactyl's earlier collections, before she became an anti-corporate revolutionary. And although I'm often lost in her bombardment of metaphors, I like her style. She's right, I think. At least in some ways. We have a society crafted by centuries of advancement and refinement, slowly siphoning out that impulse to resist.

We can't have the luxury of swell rooms and galactic commerce and automated labor without the Cardinal Federation. Our lifestyles depend on the technology we buy from the Federated corporations (Mozi, Kepler, Weber, PrOMEtheus, etc.). Compliance is easy. Those who resist lose the semblance of autonomy. Most end up in places like the prison grid-- and the lucky few are made skirmishers, so their fates can be displayed as a warning to the entire, docile, world.

I think it's important to note that Dactyl was writing in a very different time-- a time where rebelling against the state offered some result. That's not the case anymore. There is no amount of public protest that could muster any threat to the immortal, well armed Tetrokons with their Bellitants, their Kepler armies, their Typhon fleets, their orbital cannons. I suppose I should just be grateful that our government is good to us.

My readings and musings are probably incredibly boring to you. If you've been so good as to follow along until now, thank you. I'll keep my half-articulated thoughts to myself, until I figure out what I'm trying to say.

Sonata has been spending a lot of time in the Moscow dormitory lately. Apparently Eusebio has started an ambiguous sort of sexual coupling with Pendim, a new
circuiteering recruit and friend of Sonata's.

“She's a vile insect,” muttered Sonata, leaning against my bedpost. “I hope she
dies in our next match.”

I put The Tyrant's Frying Pan aside and leaned over the edge of my bed to look at
Sonata. “You're crazy, you know that?”

“Stop saying that!”

Leto was in a corner, reviewing the last championship skirmish between Red and
Green. Scythia and Arcadio were in the recreation rooms, allegedly discussing new
strategies, but my brain conjured to its own brand of irrational and jealous fantasies of
their activities.

“Have you considered not caring about Eusebio or with whom he's shoveling?”

Sonata made a fist around her keypiece. “Sometimes you're disgustingly smug,
Ferro. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“People usually say I'm useless and scrawny,” I said. “And I was being sincere.”

The tension in Sonata's shoulders eased up a bit. “Oh. Sorry. It's just not helpful.
If I could get him out of my head, I would.”

“Well, pretend that he is. Lie to yourself. Focus on other things. It might help.”

“And then he'll fall in love with me?” said Sonata, rolling her eyes. “You watch
too many synchrons, Ferro.”

I didn't say anything. I rubbed the edge of Dactyl's book against my palm.

“Well, it's worth a try,” said Sonata. “Are you doing okay?”

I blinked, and the book slid out of my Manus III. “Me? I'm fine.”
She scrutinized me for a while. “Thinking about your sister and that dinner?”

“How?”

“Xanomel's dinner. You must have heard about it. It's been on all the gossip bulletins.”

I shook my head, a little sheepishly. “I've been reading a lot lately and--”

Sonata explained that Prefect Xanomel had hosted a dinner last night for her sponsored Circuiteers in Wellington, coinciding with Caston's visit to the planet. Brevity had met the Tetrokon of Atem, and according to the bulletins, had left a good impression with Caston.

“She hasn't told me,” I said honestly, leaning back into my pillows.

Sonata sat up and put her elbows on my duvet. “Is-- everything okay with you two? Is it-- difficult-- since you're on different--”

“It helps that we don't compete directly,” I said. “And we're okay. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

Sonata watched me, a hint of sadness in her eyes, but said no more.

Something I wanted to mention earlier-- Chalcedon hasn't been around recently. Even Pylon and Isauria don't know where he is. Lazuli has refused to answer questions on his whereabouts when he transmits Chalcedon's training regimen. I saw him this evening though-- which is partially why I'm finally writing again.

I was heading back to the dormitory after a rowdy dinner and I saw Chalcedon unlocking the door to his room. I called his name and he turned. The creases in his face
were deeper and his usually well groomed silver hair was untidy. His formal dress hung
from his exhausted frame.

“Everything all right, Exark?”

“Depends on your perspective. There's another recruiting push tomorrow.”

“But we just had one!”

Chalcedon scratched at the stubble on his cheeks. “The pit will contain one
hundred and fifty contestants this time.”

“That's three times the usual amount! Why so many?”

“I'm not allowed to say yet. My appeals to Axapada have gone nowhere. You'll
find out more in March.”

He shrugged away my continued questions, and I gave up. I walked slowly to the
dormitory to find you, my diary.

What to do with all these unknowns? Perhaps I'll read some more from Dactyl,
and glean a little wisdom.

January 19 1069 TST.

Current Balance: 3.6 Vamps

Money Owed to Chalcedon: 0 Vamps.

There's a lot to report. I'm still processing it, so let me just start from this
morning.
My awakening took the form of a shove that almost knocked me out of bed.

“Hey,” said Arcadio.

He was already wearing most of his skirmisher uniform, even though the daytime lighting hadn't activated yet.

“What's going on?”

“I'm going down into the Rhombus for some training,” said Arcadio. “Join me. I want to train against chained Laxx knives.”

“But--”

“Yes or no?”

I mumbled something about perhaps watching the Pit Match.

Arcadio cut me off. “Who cares what new scum joins our team? I need to improve. I'm taking advantage of the Pit Match to train in peace. And I'm inviting you too.”

“Why?”

Arcadio scowled at me. “You're so mentally clumsy. Keep sleeping if you want.”

He was already heading for the door when I called out in a loud whisper, “Wait, Arcadio!”

I got dressed quickly and followed him to the elevator. We didn't speak and I kept rubbing my sweaty palms on my uniform. Arcadio was staring coolly ahead, ignoring me.

My throat was feeling scratchy so I coughed several times, but tried to suppress them.

The elevator let us out on the training floor, and we headed straight for the armory.

“There's a Zel blast, avoid Thorn Whips and Slyder Pikes, and
don't think Shellbangs\footnote{Shellbangs: This weapon did not last long. Introduced into the game in 1044 TST, a Shellbang is a classical round shield that emits a powerful energy pulse when the skirmisher squeezes a handlebar. It faded from use entirely in 1088 TST, but in Ferro's time use was already declining.} offer much challenge-- but if chained Laxx knives are used properly, they could get the better of me.”

“Those are all player weapons, I said, stupidly. “Why would--”

“Were you in the Inaugural Games or not? Paolisto's strategy is a threat, and I need to prepare for it. Understand?”

We headed into the Rhombus and Arcadio loaded \emph{Landforms 4} as our practice field. We activated our skates and warmed up with a few laps.

“I'm putting in some stun pheasants,” said Arcadio. “We'll go until one of us is knocked off our feet. That means being aggressive, if necessary. Got it?”

I wasn't excited about this plan. Attacking Arcadio, even if he wanted me to, had no good conclusion. But I nodded, skating off to the opposite direction.

“I'm taking you down, Ferro!” called Arcadio, extending one of his pikes. “Don't make it too easy for me.”

I drew a knife and began increasing my stride. The holographic pheasants squawked and began creating their chaos. Arcadio rounded an oblique tower to my left and rushed me, blunt pike at the ready. I threw my knife ahead of me at a boulder, let it lock into the stone and swung a tight corner around it. The glittering chain spanned out, and I looped around a pillar, releasing the chain from my gauntlet and fastening it to the marble. My execution might have been a little sloppy, but I had formed a proper chain barrier.
Arcadio, being so close on my heels, almost collided with the trap. But at the last moment jumped and boosted, spinning himself over and landing with a graceful spin. I dodged a pheasant and turned a corner, but Arcadio was there. He swiped my knee with his weapon and knocked me to the ground.

“You're pretty good,” he said. “Considering you don't have launching gauntlets yet.”

“Do you have 2.5 KiloVamps that you'd like to give me as a present?”

Arcadio grinned. “When you make that defiant little expression, I'm almost tempted. Come on, again.”

This time I used my Laxx knives more traditionally, to eliminate stray pheasants. But when my slash missed the hologram, the projected pheasant passed through me, making my uniform jolt. The energy flung me into the air like a toy.

“Some things don't change, do they?”

“Shut up,” I said, getting back on my feet. My knee still throbbed from earlier.

This time I immediately drew a knife and thrust it into the nearest pillar. I pulled the glittering line of energy behind me and drew a second knife. Arcadio closed in on me, but I was ready. I blocked his attack with one knife and a stretch of Laxx chain. The impact of the clash jarred me, but I managed to attach the chain to the pike and evade backwards. Arcadio's immediate pursuit stopped. The Laxx chain had his weapon trapped. It only extended until it was cut off, as I had just done.

Arcadio was already drawing a second pike from his hip and extending it, but I tossed my knife between his legs, circled him before he could dodge, and wrenched the
chain up. I caught his ankles and he flipped, hitting the grid.

Flushed with victory, I retrieved my knives and turned to see Arcadio still lying on the ground, motionless.

“Arcadio!”

He started laughing, sprawled on his back. “Not bad, gemstone. You've really put those chains to good use.”

“Thanks-- are you okay?”

He sat up with a sigh. “Never better. Come on, again.”

The training was rigorous. Arcadio outsmarted my traps and I developed new techniques. Both of us were bruised and sweaty by lunchtime.

Arcadio sat cross-legged in front of a pillar and offered me a turquoise cube. “Eat up. And here--” he tossed me an Aquatac, which I gratefully pressed to my lips. “You're still not excellent, you know.”

I nodded, sucking down the water, eyes closed. “I know, but I'm trying--”

“Oh, I'm aware you're trying,” said Arcadio, smiling. “And I'm quite impressed--but without talent or sufficient augmentation-- there's only so much you can achieve.”

A little water dribbled down my chin, and I lowered my eyes further. Why had I thought Arcadio would ever accept me as anything more than his inferior?

“What's wrong, Ferro?”

“Nothing.”

Arcadio sighed. “I sometimes get so infuriated by the dregs on this team. The unprofessional, lazy idiots who think they can earn victory without any sacrifice.”
He said it calmly, but there was venom in his words. He pushed a lavender cube onto his tongue and rolled it against his front teeth.

"Chalcedon and Moesia are way too lenient with garbage," he went on. "They claim some specific leadership philosophy, but that's a cover for their softness. Blue should invest less in recruitment and more in augmentation— get the quality Skirmishers we have up to scratch, rather than wasting our time with chimera fodder. What's with that look?"

"Nothing." I cleaved the nutrient cube between my teeth, staring at my helmet. "But by your logic I wouldn't be here. Moesia gave me a chance. If she hadn't I'd be dead."

"I think it's bad logic to use the exception to define the rule," said Arcadio. "You're a spectacular individual, Ferro-- despite being frail and afraid, you became a real member of the Squad-- you're even reading hard books. Most recruits just panic. They give up or worse-- struggle at all costs for self-preservation."

Perhaps it was his way of showing kindness.

"Th-- thanks, Arcadio."

"Yeah, yeah, keep your ego in check, you glittering little scribbler."

We spent several more hours practicing, adding more chains and obstacles. Whenever I fell to the ground he would hold out a hand and help me up. By the end my torso was a portrait of bruises but we trudged to the elevator in good spirits.

"Tell me about that book you've been reading," said Arcadio, running a hand through his sweaty hair. "You've hardly put it down."

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I gave him the basics, assuming it would bore him, but he looked thoughtful.

“Have you ever thought how the system of recruiting through the Pit has shaped the way our society thinks of criminals?”

I hadn't. At least, not specifically.

“With some exceptions, those who survive the Pit are killers. The Pit sorts out the petty rulebreakers and the intellectual rebels, leaving only those who willing to be violent. Spectators watch us, and see the violence of our nature. We are criminals, so therefore criminals must be like us. Breaking the law becomes equivalent to being capable of murder. A way for society to keep denizens as a whole in line. What do you think about that?”

“I-- um-- very impressive.”

We ascended in silence for a few seconds.

“I've been here for almost three years,” said Arcadio. “Do you want to know something?”

I nodded uncertainly.

“I've collected 802 MegaVamps in that time.”

The elevator doors slid open but I just stared at him. “What? Did you just say--”

He nodded and strode out into the corridor of the recreational floor. “I had a good auction price, and I've been-- well, I've had some luck on my side.”

“There's no way you made that much money just by gambling.”

A sly smile spread over his face. “Have I ever told you about Sevvu's great-grandson?”
At that moment, Chalcedon stepped out of a room, looking serious. “Arcadio, Ferro-- we're having a meeting with our new recruits.”

Arcadio and I exchanged a glance. “I'll have to tell you about it later, then,” he said.

Chalcedon lead us into the chamber. The twelve other Beast Fighters sat on the floor or on various raised sofas, but there were four new faces as well.

“Ferro, Arcadio, I'd like to introduce you to our new recruits. This is Pantoum, Amanti, Shanzo and Joule.”

I nodded at them, and took a seat. Isauria and Rulog were whispering, and I knew why. With this many new members it was clear that Chalcedon was going to create a new Dectur.

“Now that our little princes have decided to join us,” said Chalcedon, “I have some items to discuss.”

“Can't we cut to the chase?” called Razu. “Who have you picked to be Dectur?”

Chalcedon set his jaw as others shouted out as well, making nominations and counter-nominations. His exhaustion from yesterday looked deeper.

“There will indeed be some reshuffling,” he said. “I've spoken with our Captain, and I am creating two new Squads.”

That accelerated discussion once more. Everyone knew Arcadio who would get the push, since he was easily the most talented. The debate was whether Rulog, Scythia or Tarilla would join him. Chalcedon had to call for silence. “Among our ranks I am promoting Scythia Eruz-Katal and Razu Tsa-Covost to the heads of Brasilia Squad and
Windhoek Squad respectively.”

There was silence. Razu's jaw hung open. I read shock on every face. Razu was a decent, if clumsy, skirmisher. He was not exceptional, and he knew it. He was never pushing to be a Dectur. Yet here he was.

“Bold choice there, Exark,” called Leto.

I looked to Arcadio, who's jaw was clenched. I could feel his cold aura coalescing around him. I have ever known him so furious.

Chalcedon straightened his collar. “I'm rearranging the existing Squads as well. Nairobi will take Shanzo and transfer Gavel to Brasilia Squad. Pantoum will also join Brasilia. For Windhoek--”

“Have you gone senile, Kratoz Rem-Chalcedon?”

I felt the collective intake of breath as everyone turned to Arcadio.

“Is something wrong, Arcadio?”

Arcadio stood up, fists quivering. “Since when has mediocrity been the standard for promotion? Since when have you ignored talent and quality?”

“Are you questioning my Dectur appointments?” asked Chalcedon, still calm.

“Of course I am!” shouted Arcadio. “I have been here for three years-- I have killed more chimeras in that time than Sapporo Squad combined. Has old age eaten away at your mind? What motivates you to act like a fool?”

“Sit down Arcadio,” said Chalcedon. He looked utterly unmoved by Arcadio's insults.

Arcadio stood there and just stared at him. “You've gone too far this time.”
Take a seat,” said Chalcedon. “And pay me and your teammates the respect—”

Oh, go asphyxiate yourself,” growled Arcadio. He stalked out of the room, leaving everyone chewing on the unpleasant silence. Chalcedon grimaced and read out the new Squad arrangements:

Moscow: Chalcedon, Arcadio, Leto.
Nairobi: Pylon, Shanzo, Silk, Ahza.
Sapporo: Isuria, Rulog, Amanti, Mend.
Brasilia: Scythia, Gavel63, Pantoum.
Windhoek: Razu, Joule, Ferro.

I had just been transferred from the Moscow Squad, my home these last months. I had some sympathy for Arcadio. What was Chalcedon thinking?

“Our next match is in seven days,” said the Exark. “I expect extensive training until then. It will take a great deal of effort to become tightly knit Squads, but I know you have the potential, all of you.”

Some people exchanged looks.

“As a sign of our Captain's appreciation, she has awarded everyone a 25 Vamp bonus. It is vital that you know-- you are important to this team.”

He dismissed everyone but the Decturs, and I trod the path back to the dormitory.

That's when Joule began tugging on my sleeve. “Excuse me.”

She looked older than most recruits, wisps of gray hair in the midst of the black

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63 Ahza, Mend, Gavel: These fellow Feralcanalia auxiliaries are mentioned earlier in Valenz's narrative, but they are not important to devote time to. For those of you who hunger for superfluous knowledge, I will say that Vez Ahza-Carling was recruited after Valenz, and Samos “Mend” Tyko-Savoy and Pequi Iosa-Gavel predate our narrator's arrival.
curls. Her fingers were worrying at her sleeves and there was a small quiver in her lip.

“You're Ferro, right?”

She spoke quietly, too. I gave her a nod and kept walking.

“Where-- where can I find Captain Moesia Salutis-Qita?”

I stopped. “Why?”

She shook her head. “Where can I find--”

“Lazuli, can you--”

“No,” said Joule, very quickly, eyes wide. “No Mozis. Can-- can you show me where she--”

I wanted to find Arcadio. I wanted to read more from Dactyl. But I saw her eyes, raw from spilled tears. I tightened my jaw.

“I'll take you to her rooms, if that's what you--”

She nodded vehemently.

“Okay then. Um-- follow me.”

I tried to ask her why she wanted to see Moesia, why she didn't want Lazuli involved, but she didn't acknowledge my inquiries. The elevator took us down one floor, and I noticed Joule, shivering, against one of the walls.

“Are you cold?”

She shook her head. Eyes closed, she said, “Thank-- thank you for taking me--”

“Not at all,” I said, keeping my grimace to myself.

She sneezed. I took a step back. “Are you-- are you--”

There was a hint of crimson to her nose. Mucus dripped from one nostril.
Naturally I hadn't been looking for symptoms but she seemed--

“I'm sick,” she whispered. “But don't--”

“You're sick?” I cried, voice rising. “You're-- you're--”

I was about to call for Lazuli, but she put a hand on my shoulder and I recoiled so forcefully that I slammed my back against the wall.

“It's nothing-- nothing you have to worry about,” she said, quietly. “It's not a new strain, I promise.”

“But--” My panic was choking away my words.

The elevator doors opened. She stumbled ahead of me, and I stared. Could it be possible that she hadn't been immunized? Earth was a port planet-- how could she be alive if she hadn't received a Boost Patch\(^\text{64}\)?

“No need to worry, Ferrolentius,” said Lazuli, in a bored tone. “She's harmless, I promise.”

Joule recoiled at Lazuli's voice, covering her ears and moaning. I had to take her by the hand-- which made the juices in my stomach congeal with disgust and fear-- to prevent her colliding with a wall. Would she make me sick? Could I get illness from her? But I trusted Lazuli, and so I led her towards Moesia's rooms.

The door was ajar, and I heard voices. I was about to knock when Arcadio's angry tone stopped my hand.

“You know I'm right-- you know it, and yet you pretend that--”

“This level of conceit and immaturity is staggering, Arcadio. Return to your

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\(^{64}\) Boost Patch: Slang for the mandatory injection provided in all systems with immunity from all infections in the galaxy. Large planetary communities like Earth especially rely on the immunization.
dormitory and--”

“And what? Put on false humility and continue to be a puppet to an old man's senile folly? He's done-- you need me.”

“Leave now. Say another word and I will have you disciplined.”

There was silence. Then I heard Arcadio's boots stamping toward the door. I took a step back, almost tripping over Joule's foot, and Arcadio stepped out into the corridor. He didn't notice me but strode toward the elevator. My pulse was racing.

The wall next to me glowed blue-- Lazuli's nonverbal cue to me and I knocked.

“Yes?”

Moesia's chambers had two attitudes. One wall displayed a muted Gaozian debate, being held in Ossium Province. Federal bulletins scrolled down the side. On the other side a vast array of childish handmade drawings fluttered like dirty feathers over her desk. I noticed five hard books and a stack of notebooks. There was also an elegant display containing literally dozens of beautiful pencils.

Moesia turned from the bulletin wall, arms folded. “Do you also have a complaint about your new Squad arrangements or about your Exark?”

“I-- no. It's actually Joule who wants to speak to you-- I was just walking with her.”

Moesia inclined her head to the trembling recruit. Joule was avoiding looking directly at Moesia's artificial eye. Moesia let out a long breath.

“I did not mean to snap, Ferro. Thank you for escorting your Squadmate. Please take a seat, Joule.”
She shut down the displays and pointed Joule to the corner of the bed. I felt I should go, but I was too curious.

“If-- if I may ask-- what did Arcadio want to talk to you about?”

Moesia's green eye dimmed slightly. “I was under the impression that you were becoming friends-- why not ask him yourself?”

“Because he won't want to tell me.”

“And I should divulge his secrets to you?”

“I-- I want what's best for him.”

Moesia inclined her head thoughtfully. “You might be the strongest Blue on the team, Ferro.”

“I am not--”

“Arcadio wanted me to promote him to Exark of Feralcanalia,” said Moesia. “He wanted me to demote Chalcedon.”

My mouth opened, but I quickly closed it.

“He did not accept the idea that he was not promoted,” said Moesia. “But you understand why that happened, don't you?”

“Why he wasn't promoted? I-- I don't. He's incredibly talented. Very ambitious.”

Moesia smiled. “You know what Penelope Dactyl said about ambition, don't you? It's a lens that gently warps your world into a narrow sliver of moral relativity.”

“How-- how did you know that--”

“I was going to reread it yesterday,” said Moesia. “And I was informed you had checked it out. I suppose you haven't reached that chapter yet.”
“I’m not that good with English,” I said. “I'm a little slow.”

“The fact that you read it at all is impressive,” said Moesia. “But we will talk later. I would like to speak with Joule by herself.”

I left the room, and headed slowly toward the elevator.

January 22 1069 TST

Current Balance: 2.2 Vamps

Arcadio is finally speaking to me again. This is pretty much the only good news I have to report. Windhoek Squad has the cohesion of raw oats and there's a concerning possibility that we might still be competing in a match in four days.

According to Silk, Joule has surpassed the emperor of notebooks-- me. I have never seen her without it-- whenever anyone tries to speak to her, she simply grabs her pencil and begins writing. When she saw my Manus III without its glove, she screamed. Windhoek must be the most dysfunctional Squad, not only in Blue, but in the entire Circuit.

For example, Razu called a Squad meeting today.

“So,” he said, twisting his hands behind his back. “Um. Hello! Ferro, Joule.”

Joule did not look up from her notebook. Razu looked poised to say something, but then closed his mouth and cleared his throat.

“So, we have a match in just four days! Can you believe it? I think we need to start some Squad based training. What do you two think?”
I raised an eyebrow, and Joule didn't look up. Razu was alternately putting more weight on his left foot, then shifting his weight to his right.

“Well,” he said, bracingly. “I've been using Slyder Pikes, and I know that Ferro is becoming an expert in Laxx knives, so this means we have an opening for a Zel Cannoneer!”

Joule kept writing. The false bravado fell from Razu's face. “Um-- Joule?”

She glanced up for the briefest moment, chewed her tongue then looked back down at her tight handwriting. Razu was silent for a moment, then he tried again.

“Joule, could you put the notebook down for just a moment? We need to talk.”

She reluctantly obeyed. She closed the cover but left her thumb on the page, pencil clenched in her fist.

“I-- I need you to begin your training-- I know you've been suffering illness, but you seem better now and--”

“I am not interested in training,” said Joule. “I do not wish to compete in the games.”

Razu looked at her, then at me, then back at Joule. “You have to compete, Joule.”

Joule shook her head. “I won't.”

Razu blinked, stunned by her denial. “Could-- could I at least train you to use Nitro Skates? No weapons yet, just--”

Joule stood up and left the room. Razu watched her go and collapsed on the corner of his bed. Since our Squad is so small, he's been sleeping with us for now.

“What am I supposed to do, Ferro?” he moaned. “Why isn't she-- I mean--”
“You should talk to Chalcedon,” I said. “We can't compete in the next match.”

“I've tried talking to him,” said Razu. “But-- I don't know. I'll try again. Could-- could you try to get Joule to open up a little?”

“I'll see what I can do,” I said.

As I stepped into the corridor, Lazuli informed me that Joule was heading for the meadow. I ignored him. I was too frustrated with my Squad to be persuasive, so I headed down to the training rooms. Naturally, both Feralcanalia rooms were occupied by Nairobi and Sapporo. Annoyed, I headed back upstairs, hoping I'd see Arcadio in the dining hall.

“Honestly, you need to let him calm down and return to his senses,” said Scythia.

Brasilia Squad was eating at one of the tables, and I took a seat next to the new Dectur. Scythia had braided her hair and wore the new badge on her shoulder with pride. She noticed my eyes darting around the room as I ordered carrot soup.

“I ran into him this morning, and he spat at me. He's angry that I haven't resigned my post and given it to him. He's achieved a whole new level of narcissism. Frankly, I'm glad he was passed over.”

“Really?” I said, stopping short of disrespecting my Dectur.

“Oh, without a doubt. I have no interest in even speaking with him until he apologizes.”

“Has he ever apologized before?”

Scythia considered. “He might surprise us.”

I headed to the meadow, tongue stinging from a mild burn. Jezba always makes
her soups unbearably hot. Slender stalks of green whistled as little breezes brushed against the hills. The lighting simulated the passage of clouds, glowing softer and brighter. Joule sat on a gentle rise, legs crossed and pencil rushing over the page. I approached, but then I saw Arcadio.

Dried fragments of grass stuck crookedly out of his hair. His team shirt was crinkled and he had a definite odor to him

“What are you doing here?”

Arcadio raised himself onto his elbows. “Oh, it's you.”

I didn't sense any anger. It was worse than that.

“Are-- are you okay?”

“If you're going to condescend to me,” said Arcadio, closing his eyes and sinking back into the grass. “Leave me alone. Or better yet-- kill yourself.”

I sat down next to him, but said nothing. I knew there was a good chance that he would ignore me, but I was pleasantly surprised.

“I didn't mean that,” he whispered, almost to himself. “Don't go.”

“Scythia's angry with you.”

Arcadio nodded without opening his eyes. He really had remarkable cheekbones.

“That sounds about right. I don't have many fans in the barracks at the moment.”

“You have me.”

The words slipped from me before I could stop them. Arcadio didn't answer for a long time.

“You should go, Ferro,” he said. “I need a little more time to myself.”
I didn't leave. I sat there, not saying anything, and Arcadio didn't repeat his dismissal. The simulated afternoon enfolded us. By the time I did stand up, Joule was already gone. I headed back to Razu, to fudge the truth and tell him that my attempt to speak with her had failed.

January 24 1069 TST
Current Balance: 4 Vamps

_The root cause of all human suffering is the evolutionary instinct to differentiate oneself from animals, from far away humans, from dissenting members of the tribe, and most crucially, from the dark elements within. No deity could have the patience to design such melodrama in our homunculus species._

--Penelope Dactyl

“The Austerity imposed on Constantinople in 1204 AD”

Chalcedon sat me and Razu down this morning, to explain some crucial realities. Joule was born and raised in Circle Of Gaia, Africa. I had never heard of the place, but Chacledon's description defies credulity. The small city belonged to the citizen Salvo Nutt-Pelstrum until his final death in 1068. Pelstrum started the community in 843 TST for context, and he had a simple goal. He wanted to cut all ties with the Federation.

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65 I'm still puzzling what Captain Salutis meant by calling Ferro possibly “the strongest Blue on the team” but there is something moving about his resilience. Even in his frailty, he is not weak.

66 1204 AD translates to -2389 TST. The title of the essay refers to the sack of the city by a municipal tribe known as the Venetians (among others) against the politically divided tribe known as the Romans.
Pelstrum used local vaccines, rather than galactic brands. He prohibited Mozis, Keplers and Webers, he limited sophisticated communication devices to three per household. He made the people till the earth and raise their own crops. No Omes. No nutrient fertilizers. He taught French and Sezva and Latin, and forced each villager to keep a diary.

Joulemi Bezbo-Lyzander was born in 1032 TST, to a tailor\(^{67}\) and a seed vendor. She met her husband, Yosoth Ormuz-Hevelon, in her father’s seed shop. He had inherited a small plot of land outside of town, and Joule started a rural existence with him. They grew beets from the earth and grazed two dozen cattle on the tufted slopes. Every month they would sell cheese and milk on the market. When she wasn't working in the fields, Joule was taking care of their two daughters and son. When she wasn't mothering, she would study languages and write in her diary\(^{68}\).

I don't fully understand the politics of that place, but Tetrokon Vespazi (848-868 TST) apparently had sponsored the City Of Gaia project to experimentally ascertain the ideal conditions for denizen satisfaction. But when the program officially ended, twenty five years ago, Pelstrum continued. That meant when he was trampled to death by a bull (he had long ago abandoned his augmentations) the Array did not bring him back. He was in violation of Cardinal ordinance.

The Circle Of Gaia population was no longer experimentally valuable to the Tetrokonity, therefore it was no longer protected. Caston's reforms dissolved the city

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\(^{67}\) Tailor: A non-automated creator of clothing and garments.

\(^{68}\) Some historians have pieced together the quaint life in Circle of Gaia from such accounts, but to date no one has uncovered Bezbo's diary.
council and enforced mandatory emigration. The dispersal separated Joule from her
husband and children. She ended up in Maxima, and was subsequently arrested for trying
to enter a Gold District home. No wonder someone isolated from civilization her whole
life would lose her mind when confronting machinery.

“That's sick!” said Razu, making a face. “How could Pelstrum do that? He made
a population that couldn't cope with the real world!”

Chalcedon sat back into his sofa. “I agree. It's horrible to do that-- but more
horrible to terminate the city.”

“Did Moesia know this when she bid on Joule?”

Chalcedon took a sip from his goblet. “I don't know. But Moesia has no interest
in selling Joule back to Axapada. Joule is here to stay.”

“How is she supposed to compete?” I asked. “How could she handle the
stimulation?”

Chalcedon closed his eyes. “Moesia spoke with her this morning. She is, in
principle, willing to participate. No doubt she will recoil at every step in the process.
But I think the three of us can help her.”

“She's a nervous wreck!”

“She's a farmer and a hunter. Her body is strong, and her survival instinct was
quite active in the Pit. If we get her accustomed, she will be a valuable member of
Windhoek.”

Even with a new sympathy for Joule, I wished Leto had been transferred out of
Moscow Squad, instead of me. Chalcedon wrote up an additional schedule for us. I
would introduce Joule to Nitro Skates at 19:00. I was far from thrilled.

Sonata met me for dinner. Her promotion to Dectur has stripped away all her free
time. I congratulated her on being the youngest circuiteering Dectur among the Blues.
She waved me off, and she spoke with annoyance about the upcoming match against
Green, how their Manticore Exark was delaying Sonata's vehicle augmentations by
questioning their legality.

“That's unfortunate.”

“That's the Greens,” agreed Sonata, “But at least our Ascenders are happy.”

“What about?”

“Apparently the Greens transferred one of their most dangerous Ascenders out
into Beast Fighting. Some sort of inner-Exarchate politics.”

“Ah,” I said, tearing a piece of bread off my loaf. Half my brain was considering
how to convince Joule not to fear the Nitro Skates.

“But even if Borax ends up in Feralcanalia, the confrontation in your matches--”

The corner of bread flattened between my fingers and palm. “Borax? Ollie
Nazomir-Borax?”

“Yes,” said Sonata, frowning. “How do you-- oh, Ferro, don't--”

I felt a tingling in the back of my mind. The possibility of revenge, for so long an
impossibility given the difference in events-- was invigorating.

The session with Joule return my energy to a low simmer. She waited for me on
Floor F, sitting in front of the Danube training room.
“Hello,” I said.

She stood up. “Exark Chalcedon has told you where I am from, yes?”

“He did. I'm-- um-- sorry to hear about your separation.”

Joule put a hand on her wrist, knuckles going white. “Thank you.”

“If-- if it makes you feel better-- I've been separated from my family too. That's-- that's the way it works around here.”

“I do not know where Yosoth and my children are, Ferro Barr-Valenz,” she said.

“They could be anywhere on the planet. They could have been shipped out of the system-- they could be dead.”

Throat constricted, I went to the armory, retrieved two pairs of Nitro Skates, and led the way into the Danube. Joule followed cautiously.

I forgot to warn her before activating the field, making Joule scream. I apologized but it took several minutes for her to regain composure.

“May I ask you a question?”

She looked at me, confused.

“Were-- were you not exposed to any knowledge of technology, or--”

“Of course we knew what lay beyond the Circle,” said Joule. “We know of your contraptions and your metallic hearts-- your--”

She broke off, turning away from my gauntleted Manus III. I put both hands behind my back, my face heating up with unexpected annoyance and shame.

“So you comprehend why--”

“Comprehend?” snapped Joule. “I don't comprehend any of your-- insanity!” I
took a step back and Joule lowered her head. “I'm sorry. I know you were raised differently-- that wasn't fair.”

“What are you talking about?”

She gave me a sad smile. “You lose your identity when you succumb to technology. The more you give up and allow automatons to do-- the less you manage. According to Hartmut Schreiner⁶⁹, you are what you accomplish. But you can't take credit for your Webers and Keplers.”

I held up my Manus and she flinched. “Because of my replacement hand, you mean?”

Joule's foot scratched at the floor.

“My hand was bitten off by a Squalorangutan. This replacement wasn't my choice-- it was a necessity.” Just thinking back to my Feralcanalian debut made me nauseous. “I'm still Ferrolentius Barr-Valenz. I'm still me.”

“You don't know who you are,” said Joule. “You have yet to live outside the confines and sensations of the Cardinal Federation.”

“Sure,” I said. “But let's focus on what we have to do now. Put on your skates.”

Joule picked one up, looking queasy, and my patience ran out.

“You want to see your family again?” I said, sharply. “Moesia and Axapada won't let you out of here until you've proven to be useful-- until your flight risk is low. You

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⁶⁹ Hartmut Schreiner (-1677 - -1594 TST): A leading cultural critic in the Neo Communist movement. He believed individuals deserved to perform their “blissful occupation” 75% of the time, and a “societally necessary occupation” 25% of the time, to ensure a happy society. He never enacted his visions, but he did inspire Penelope Dactyl in her early works. Pelstrum must have considered Schreiner one of Earth's great thinkers, if he is so well known by those denizens from Circle of Gaia.
have to compete.”

“I-- I know.”

“If you don't train before you compete, you might die-- or you might have something like this happen to you.”

I held up my Manus III again and Joule clenched her eyes closed. Her lips were trembling.

“You either interact with the technology, or you become a part of it. Understand?”

Tears were sliding down her eyelashes, but she nodded.

“Good,” I said. “Then we'll begin.”

After three hours Joule could navigate basic obstacles on Nitro Skates and I was satisfied. We headed back to the dormitory together, silent but not entirely uncomfortable. I've been reading more Dactyl-- hence the epigraph. I only have four essays left-- but Lazuli let me know that the library has a few soft copies of her other work-- but no other hard books.

Am I doing the right thing with Joule? Am I being a vicious monster? I don't know.

Arcadio is still avoiding the rest of the team. I'm worried he's mad at me. I wish he could just-- I suppose I shouldn't be thinking about it. I need to train Joule, I need to support Razu, I need to improve myself. Even with Windhoek skipping the next match, we are far from ready.

Last night my dreams repeated the horror of the pit for me-- my inability to reach Quill in time before Borax killed him. I can still hear that fiend laughing. And we now
play in the same category. I wonder what destiny has in store for me.

January 27 1069 TST
Current Balance: 10 Vamps

A prominent denizen came to visit our barracks today. Chalcedon instructed those of us training to avoid new strategies and work on regular drills.

“I don't think he is a spy for another Squad,” said Chalcedon. “But caution does not hurt. He is a friend of Axapada, so be polite.”

Razu had finally called for a Squad practice. The three of us skated through the Danube, avoiding the dynamic obstructive environment. Joule settled on Slyder Pikes, since they were similar to the spears from home. That meant Razu had use the Zel Cannon, apparently for the first time.

“Sorry!” he called to Joule. His blast missed the glowing airborne target by ten meters, almost knocking the new recruit off her feet.

Joule muttered something to herself in Greek or in Sezva. Razu's continued apologies were thankfully interrupted by the hall door opening, and a man in gray stepping in. We stopped our drills.

“Please, don't let me interrupt your session,” he said, oozing a smile beneath a fluttering mustache. “I blush at my rudeness.”

“I'm the Dectur of Windhoek-- Razu's what I go by.” Razu held out a hand, shook the stranger's, then pointed at us. “This is Joule, and this is Ferro.”
He gave Joule an inquisitive smile and me a knowing nod. “A pleasure. My name is Maloc Swevelom-Turbo. I am a great admirer of your team and your accomplishments. It is an honor.”

I couldn’t tell if he was being facetious or if our minor performances had actually impressed him.

“Thank you,” said Razu. “If you pardon my asking-- I can't place your accent. Are you from Atem Province?”

Turbo's smile dribbled forward again and he pointed to the small compass icon™️ glowing on his temple. “I've been all over the Federation, my friend. My longest stint was in Ossium, though. The Orbitals and planets in the Coma cluster are my second home.”

“Are-- are you a citizen?”

Turbo shook his head, laughing. “No, I'm afraid not, Dectur. But I've reached the rank of Majorion, in service of my people and my nation. Can there be more to desire?”

I was glad when Razu told us to resume our drill. With my mind still thinking Turbo's smug expressionk I collided hard with a rising pillar and slamming into the ground. I struggled back onto my feet, shoulder throbbing, and cleared my head. I tossed my knife through one of the glowing targets, then swung it back and lashed it against another one.

Turbo was gone by the time we finished. Razu showered us with praise, but Joule

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70 The imprint of the Cardinal Icon upon skin had not yet fallen out of practice. Officers of the Cardinal Fleet may elect to receive the icon, to show their permanent loyalty. Failing to renew the mark annually turns the mark into the icon of the traitor-- demonstrating the bearer's cowardice.
and I were not fooled. I hadn't expected to find Arcadio waiting for me outside the Danube. He even gave Razu a friendly nod, but then he turned his caramel eyes onto me.

“Hi,” I said, trying to sound neither surprised or ecstatic.

“Would you-- do me a favor?” he asked, not meeting my eye.

“What do you need?”

He gritted his teeth. “Would-- would you come with me to talk to Chalcedon?”

“Why do you need me to--”

“I don't need you,” snapped Arcadio, before regaining composure over his temper.

“I-- I just would like some company. I have to do something unpleasant.”

Was he about to leave the team? If he hadn't lied about MegaVamps, it was distinctly possible for him to buy his release. I tried not to let the anxiety show in my eyes.

“I-- you shouldn't do anything rash, Arcadio.”

“I'm not doing anything rash,” he said. “Will you come with me or not?”

I followed him to the elevator. Arcadio didn't even look at me after we stepped inside. My mouth was dry and after an agonizing spell we reached the dormitory floor and walked to Chalcedon's quarters. Arcadio closed his eyes before knocking.

“Yes?”

“May I come in?” asked Arcadio.

There was a pause, then the door opened. Chalcedon looked irritable, and I could see Turbo's polished boot from where he sat, sipping his tea. “Is this urgent?”

“No,” said Arcadio. “But it is important.”
“I didn't mean to keep you from your duties as Exark,” said Turbo, rising to his feet.

“Please, Majorion Turbo,” said Chalcedon. “I am sure my skirmishers are in no hurry. I do not wish to rush you out.”

“Oh, not at all,” said Turbo, stroking his mustache. “I have four more Exarks to meet with and I've kept you long enough. Best of luck, Exark Chalcedon.”

Chalcedon's mouth tightened as Turbo closed the door behind him, but he relaxed his expression and turned to us.

“Well, what is it?”

Arcadio entered, each step chosen carefully. I followed, still confused.

“My time is valuable, Arcadio.”

He nodded and cleared his throat. “I-- just wanted to--” he broke off, then looked up at Chalcedon. “I just wanted to apologize.”

I can't say if Chalcedon or I was more surprised. Neither of us said anything, but the Exark unfolded his arms and relaxed his posture.

“I should not have questioned your judgment. I shouldn't have gone behind your back to Moesia and-- and tried to undermine you. Please-- please allow me to return to team practice.”

I wanted to be anywhere else but I couldn't leave. Chalcedon sank slowly into an empty seat. “I wish I knew what to do with you, Arcadio. I really do. You're welcome to be a part of the Squad again. Let us move past this, and strive to be better in all regards.”

“Yes,” said Arcadio, very seriously.
Mori: The Mortal Gambit

I saw life flood back into his hollow cheeks, a mischievous glint returning to his eyes. Breath filled his lungs and chest, and he almost smiled. Chalcedon still looked sorrowful, but he extended his hand to Arcadio, who shook it.

“I've managed to buy a training Kepler for our purposes. Make sure you're punctual to practice tomorrow, nine o'clock.”

“Yes, sir.”

Arcadio turned to me, touched my shoulder, and left the room. I gave Chalcedon an uncomfortable smile, then left as well.

After closing the door, Arcadio let out a laugh, not his vindictive cackle, but a sound of joy. It spilled from his lips and into the hallways.

“Ferro!” he cried, fingers clasping my wrists and pulling me into a hug. “I'm so happy-- I'm thrilled!”

I babbled something, and thankfully Arcadio laughed again, letting me go.

“I've been such a fool, Ferro-- such a fool. Thank you for-- putting up with me.”

“No-- no problem,” I said.

“Come, let's go to the meadow-- I believe I owe you a story.”

Heart racing, I followed him. He was humming a melody to himself as we ascended the elevator and reached the grassy curls of the meadow. The air felt fresh and we tossed ourselves against the herbaceous tangle. It was strange to stare into an artificial sky and see freedom. Arcadio kicked off his boots and pushed his heels into the dirt.

“I made a mistake, Ferro,” he said. “I got ahead of myself. I don't have the right
to demand anything yet. But I will become the best. I will crush everyone who stands against me.”

He looked so peaceful. I chewed my lip. “Arcadio, I'm happy for you-- but--” I broke off before I said something stupid, but Arcadio wasn't having it.

“But what?”

“But-- but we all have limitations, don't we? I know I'll never be the best skirmisher of the Blues, let alone of all skirmishers. Won't-- won't your goal always disappoint you?”

“Any goal worth having is a hook, flung higher than your fingers can reach. If your goal is merely a trampoline, you'll fall right through the moment you jump high.”

I stiffened. “That-- that's one of Dactyl's expressions.”

Arcadio shrugged. “I was curious what was fascinating you so much, so I did some research on her work. The translations have a 94% approval, which I think is fairly satisfactory.”

“You-- read Dactyl because of me?”

Arcadio's lips twitched. “Seems that way doesn't it, gemstone?”

I didn't know what to say.

“Anyway,” said Arcadio, scratching his chin. “I was going to tell you about Gango Sevvu-Dandolaz, wasn't I?”

And so Arcadio told me the story of Tetrokon Sevvu's great-grandson, a citizen with no hopes of becoming Tetrokon. He had his own orbital in Hemu Province and became obsessed with Circuit matches, especially. He might have gone as far as
participating in a skirmish, had he not been spending all his time guzzling sizzlemeats and glitterfish.

Two years ago he invited various skirmishers from Maxima to his orbital while visiting Jupiter. He promised triple wages and threw a lavish banquet for the assembled Beast Fighters.

“You've left Earth,” I said.

Arcadio shrugged. “I knew I would, sooner or later.”

I pressed my envy into my lower lip with my front teeth. “I've never even left Maxima.”

“It's a ghastly traveling experience at first, but the view alone makes it worthwhile.”

After the dinner Dandolaz exhibited his collection of bizarre chimera-class Omes to the Beast Fighters. He had the skirmishers fight them while he ate dessert.

Arcadio decided to take a risk, and made a bet with Dandolaz that he could kill a chimera without holding a weapon. Of course, it was a trick, because Arcadio simply attached Laxx knives to his Nitro Skates, and after mounting the Herculocelot, kicked it in the weakpoints of its exoskeleton. Dandolaz was amused, and paid up 10 MegaVamps for the ingenuity.

Arcadio immediately used that sum to make another bet with Dandolaz. He wagered that if the Citizen entered the arena, blind folded and carrying nothing but a Slyder Pike, Dandolaz would kill a chimera before Arcadio or the Red Beast Fighter could-- provided he obeyed Arcadio's instructions. Intrigued, Dandolaz accepted. There
were no citizens who could witness the shame of entering the arena. He offered Arcadio 40:1 odds, if Arcadio wagered his life as well. He would become Dandolaz's lab experiment if he failed. Arcadio accepted.

Again, it was a trick. After the Red Beast Fighter shot out one of the chimera's legs, Arcadio whomped her in the back of the head, all but finished the beast off, then had Dandolaz skate forward and impale the creature for the final blow.

I shook my head, “You're evil, Arcadio.”

“I'm not evil! Just ambitious, that's all!”

But those 802 MegaVamps were nowhere near his desired 950 GigaVamps. “Wouldn't it be better to spend the money to enjoy life instead of making yourself miserable in pursuit of the impossible?”

“Scythia used to say that as well,” said Arcadio. “I don't find the argument convincing.”

“Were-- were you-- coupled?” I asked it before I could stop myself. The question that had been burning in the corner of my mind for months finally hung in the air.

Arcadio gazed upwards for several long seconds. “We tried, more than once. We figured out though that we worked better as teammates when we were friends-- and we were happier.”

“Oh,” I said, trying to sound calm. “Do-- do you think it's best for teammates to stay uncoupled?”

“Oh, that depends,” said Arcadio. “Silk and I fooled around for a bit, but he's exhaustingly emotional. But not every coupling has to be destructive, does it?”
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Had he moved a little closer to me? He was meeting my gaze and I was tempted to look away, but I didn't. My mouth felt like the cover of my diary.

“I suppose so,” I said. “I'm sure there would be multiple factors to be taken into account and—”

My voice faltered when he stroked my cheek with the back of his hand. His callouses brushed my ear, then he gently wrapped his fingers around the nape of my neck, and leaned in.

We kissed. I was so nervous I was mostly aware of the grass scratching my wrist. When we broke apart I was trembling, and Arcadio gave me a concerned look. “Are you feeling okay, Ferro?”

I nodded. Some rumbled through my body, through my very being. I think it was euphoria. But I can't be sure.

February 12, 1069 TST

Current Balance: 56 Vamps

I am sorry. Every evening I keep meaning to write, but Arcadio always interrupts and climbs into bed next to me. I've noticed something tighten in Razu's throat every time he sees us together, and Joule always leaves the dormitory when Arcadio enters, but I don't care. I feel incredibly fortunate to be me at the moment.

71 Sexual congress is forbidden in dormitories under all circumstances. There are private chambers intended for such activity. The fact that Arcadio and Ferro are spending time together in bed hints at a romantic connection, not merely a sexual one.
Let's be clear. Even in my bliss, I know this coupling isn't perfect. It has perturbed Chalcedon, for one thing. He called me into his rooms a few days ago.

“Lazuli informs me that you and Arcadio have become quite close,” he said, polishing a bland medal he won several years ago. “A romantic spark, he said.”

I gave a shrug. “It's too early to be sure but I think we're good for each other.”

Chalcedon's jaw almost slid open but he stopped himself. He put down his little trophy, and looked at me. “If I ask you a serious question, will you answer me honestly?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Are you pursuing coupling or simple congress with Arcadio?”

“I-- with all due respect-- is that relevant to you? Surely that's my business.”

“I do my utmost to only ask relevant questions, and I only inquire into the business of others with purpose.”

I chewed the corner of my mouth. “I would really like to pursue a coupling, but I don't know if that's what Arcadio's going to want-- not that we've engaged in any significant congress so far. I have hopes for our future, though.”

Chalcedon closed his eyes. “Don't do this, Ferro.”

“What?”

“You're opening yourself for a great deal of pain. The best case scenario involves Arcadio breaking your heart.”

I looked at Chalcedon, astonished. “You can't be serious.”

“I know Arcadio better than you do. I know this whole world better than you do. Trust me.”
I breathed in deeply. “Are you forbidding my further contact with Arcadio, sir?”

“Of course I'm not-- I don't have that power. But--”

“You are my Exark, and I respect you greatly-- but please let me conduct my own business when I'm not training or competing. Let me have some small control over my life.”

I stood up. There was no more to discuss. Chalcedon's disapproval stung-- I had been hoping for his congratulations.

“He will hurt you, Ferro,” said the Exark as I reached the door. “He will toss you aside.”

“You give him no credit,” I said. “Give him a chance.”

And I left the room.

I haven't been reading any Dactyl. I haven't seen Sonata since the last match. I've missed a couple of technology acclimation sessions for Joule.

But today I found a pair of new gauntlets on my bed. I didn't need the note to know who they came from. The acceleration panels were shifted inwards, making space for a slot on each gauntlet. They were launchers for my chained Laxx knives.

Chalcedon is wrong. Arcadio is spectacular. He might be prickly at first, but he cares about me enough to delay his dream of citizenship. I am blessed indeed.

March 3 1069 TST

Current Balance: 122 Vamps
The prospect of tomorrow makes me queasy. It's late-- Razu invited a host of other Beast Fighters into the dormitory to talk about today, and time slipped away. I'll keep this entry short. Everything will be different when we enter the Nucleus tomorrow.

There was a bulletin from Tetrokon Caston this morning. It merely said: *To appreciate what we have inherited is wise-- to clutch at tradition blindly is foolishness. Only by discarding the shackles of our inertia may we rise above what we are.*  

Chalcedon's voice barked out across the dining hall, ordering the Feralcanalia Squads to various chambers on Floor D. The harshness of his tone put me on edge. Arcadio reluctantly removed his fingers from my knee and got to his feet. “Sounds important.”

I pushed down a last mouthful of macadamia ice and stood up. “See you later?”

He gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. “Naturally.”

Joule and I arrived in Room 17 at the same time, finding Razu pacing up and down the terraced levels of the chamber. “This is crazy,” he said. “They can't do this.”

“What's going?” I asked.

Razu rubbed his thumb against his adam's apple. “We will have citizen participation in tomorrow's games.”

Joule looked surprised, but she could not fully grasp the madness. “That can't be true-- no citizen would ever participate.”

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72 According to some scholarly research, Caston is paraphrasing the words of a philosopher from the early Cardinal era who is not quite relevant enough to mention by name here. Her original quote is: “To venerate is to ascend. To worship is to stumble. Unbound hands will build the greatest monuments.”
“It's not quite so straightforward,” said Razu. The door opened before he could say more, and a woman entered.

She was the first citizen I had ever encountered in person and I was fairly disappointed. She stood a foot taller than the rest of us but seemed far too thin for someone whose internal system was carefully monitored and regulated. The glowing symbols of countless augmentations danced on her upturned collar.

“Yes, Madam Vanderspaar,” said Lazuli. “This is your team. This is the Dectur of the Squad, Razu Tsa-Covost. These are the other auxiliaries, Ferroentius Barr-Valenz and Joulemi Bezbo-Lyzander. Blues, this is Ibis Vanderspaar-Kau. Madam Vanderspaar, please verbalize your questions and comments, so that these auxiliaries can participate in the conversation too.”

A disdainful pupil examined each of us in turn, then the translucent eyelid closed over it73. “I was expecting a more competitive Squad, Lazuli.”

“Your Squad matches your investment, Madam Vanderspaar,” said Lazuli, smugly. “Therefore your Squad will be Windhoek. I recommend discussing a united strategy.”

“Why is she here?” I demanded. “What's this nonsense about citizen participation?”

Razu drew in breath and Joule's fingers covered her mouth, but Vanderspaar did not react. Maybe she hadn't heard me.

“Euditor Axapada, has amended the rules of competition in his Nucleus matches,”

73 Denizens unfamiliar with the peripheral ocular augmentations in the eyes of citizens often see disdain in a citizen's neutral expression. Ferro's preconceptions of a citizen's character is visible here.
said Lazuli. “From now on an active Squad will consist of two denizen contestants and one Draugur-class bioautomaton.”

“And what's a Draugur?”

Vanderspaar muttered something about ignorance, but I was listening to Lazuli.

“Draugurs are hybrid Keplers and Omes, controlled remotely by a connected mind. Madam Vanderspaar will operate the Draugur in your match. She will be the third member of Windhoek Squad in the Nucleus, and one of you will be a reserve.”

“You are entering the arena?” I asked.

She rolled her multicolored eyes up to the ceiling. “I am not a sullen criminal. My flesh and blood shall never enter into the Circuit Match. A Draugur will enter the Nucleus as my proxy.”

“Will the other team have a Draugur as well?”

“Naturally, Dectur Covost,” said Lazuli. “A new twist to the Feralcanalia metagame.”

“But we've been training for more than a month as a three person Squad!” I said.

“Why are we only learning about this now?”

“Premature gossip would have ruined tomorrow's spectacle. The Draugur Project is critical. It allows denizens and citizens to interact more directly. Tetrokon Caston hopes the Nucleus will serve a testing ground for this technology.”

“Can I leave yet?” asked Vanderspaar, lazily. “These monkeys know to stay out of my way. I work better on my own. I will easily crush the enemy.”

74 This is another area in Ferro's bias comes into play-- did this citizen really refer to the Blues as monkeys? I do not think so.
“We're not fighting the enemy,” I said. “We're fighting Omes and Keplers. Fighting the opponents is against the rules.”

She was already walking away.

“This is what Chalcedon has been hinting at for months,” said Razu that night, sitting on his bed. “This is what he petitioned Axapada to stop.”

As I mentioned, we all gathered in the Windhoek Dormitory.

“Who gets the credit for kills now?” demanded Arcadio. “Are Draugur kills scored differently. These citizens don't even know what it means to play in the Nucleus!”

There was a murmur of agreement.

“What if this is the future?” asked Isuria. “Are we becoming irrelevant, now that citizens can play this game themselves, without fear of contamination?”

“Can't you see what your Federation does to you?” asked Joule. “You are made to kill and die until you can be replaced by a mechanism.”

“It's not quite so dire,” said Leto, darkly. “They've tried matches with all citizens before-- but this is different. And not good for us.”

I was hoping Arcadio might stay a while to cuddle but he left to conduct some more research on these Draugurs. I hope he gets some rest.

We'll see how tomorrow goes.

March 4 1069 TST

Current Balance: 172 Vamps
Oh, Razu.

During breakfast, we decided that Joule would sit out another round. She had become comfortable with the skates and the Slyder Pike, but the thought of entering the Nucleus still gave her nervous fits. So it would be Razu, me, and that damned citizen.

“At least we have your launchers,” said Razu, encouragingly. “Think how effective you'll be!”

“I'm afraid to use them,” I said. “What if Vanderspaar runs into a chain and disables her Draugur?”

“What if you first get the other one, and trap it?” suggested Razu with a slight smile. “If we can take out their Draugur, Vanderspaar might be quite useful to us.”

I almost shared his optimism, until he jovially announced, “We're is up first. First event is Windhoek.”

“What?” I had been hoping to spectate a bit, to see these Draugurs in action. We did not have this luxury. Razu was taking it in stride. We discussed strategy as we walked to the elevator.

Would Vanderspaar operate from the planet surface or from an orbital? We stepped into the Circuit Zone, Webers bringing us our gear. I slid my new gauntlets onto my wrists. I flexed my Manus into a fist. Caston could make all the rules he wanted, I didn't care.

“Good luck,” said Arcadio, approaching with Leto's Data-Patch in his hands. He
glanced sideways then gave me a quick kiss. “I'll be watching.”

“Of course you will, you want to see the Draugurs in action.”

“Well, yes,” said Arcadio. “But I thought leaving that part out would make it sound sweeter.”

I strapped on my bandolier while Axapada and the commentators explained the new rules. Circuit spectators hate gameplay changes, but not all the voyeuristic energy was negative. Razu and I exchanged a look, then we ascended into the Nucleus.

A frantic wind was rubbing clouds against the distant sky. I saw crooked pines, ponds blushing algae and a system of grinding rails. The three blue starting spaces formed a triangle. At the tip stood the Draugur.

Thick blue veins twisted like vines along its metallic limbs, condensing around a throbbing torso and an insectoid head, which glowed with compound eyes. The feet already formed lethally sharp skates. Talons, instead of fingers, hung from the apelike arms. It was horrible, and it was our third teammate.

“Madam Vanderspaar, are you ready?” asked Razu, tentative.

He asked twice more before she answered. “Stay out of my way.”

“We're a team,” I said. “We'll do better if we work together.”

“You're here to support me,” said Vanderspaar. “That is our relationship.”

“That's not--”

Razu interrupted me. “Easy, Ferro. The two of us can work together. Let her do what she wants.”

I stared across at the Red skirmishers and their own crimson Draugur. I was
determined to demonstrate our capacity to Vanderspaar.

The first round started and everyone could tell how limited these Draugurs were. While Razu and I accelerated with a burst of speed, Vanderspaar's Draugur slipped on its first step, almost tumbling down, and earning several inferior jokes from the commentators. I loaded a Laxx knife, launched it at a pheasant, then whipped it back into the slot after the kill registered. I smiled to myself. Even in practice my accuracy for pheasants had been low.

I executed a perfect turn around one of the pine trees, avoiding the Kepler currently pulverizing the dead pheasant.

“Deal with the other Draugur,” said Razu, skating past me and attaching the E-Component to his cannon. “Contain it.”

The Reds had found a little of Paolisto's strategy, and were trying to target us, but I shot a chained knife low into a tree trunk and tripped one of them up. He skidded and almost tumbled into a pond.

“The addition of water is going to add a new level of intensity,” said Amadeus Mqomenzi-Piso. “Water will wreak havoc with a Draugur's nerve connections, and they'll disable any Nitro Skates for sixty seconds. If you take a splash, you might take a smash!”

I spend some nights thinking of painful ways in which to punish Piso for his pointless commentary. I boosted and approached the Red Draugur. Later I learned his name was Kharo.

Kharo, like Vanderspaar, wasn't a seasoned Draugur pilot. He was slowly hacking
his way through a cluster of pheasants, and didn't notice me until I shot my first chain across his path. Kharo turned, veins throbbing and mouth opening in a metallic snarl. I ducked his inaccurate lunge and shot another chain into a pillar. Before he could strike I twisted the chain around his Kepler-tech leg and released it. A sizzle and a sputtering burst from the Draugur's leg and he collapsed, autonomy lost in the limb. My visor flashed crimson, and I knew I had made a mistake.

“And it looks like a penalty for Crimson,” shouted Piso. “Valenz of Indigo intentionally sabotaging another player-- and oh, it seems like he wasn't paying attention to the double punitive for attacking a Draugur.”

The Red score increased by twenty points!

“That's ridiculous!” I shouted into our connection. “Double penalty for attacking a Draugur?”

“I didn't mean for you to attack directly-- just trap him,” said Razu.

“That's what I did!” But Razu was right. I had forgotten that the Draugur was a player-- it was too Kepler-like, and I took it down like a beast. Thankfully it was still early in the game, so the quadrupling of their points was not a death sentence.

With a sharp sound, a pack of Luponathanatos poured from the gates. Razu found the Z-Component of his weapon and we dispatched the wolves in top form. Perhaps our drills had paid off, because by the end of the second round we were at 108-99, and I was feeling confident.

That is, until Vanderspaar attacked the Keplers. Perhaps she had been annoyed with her inability to kill a Luponathanatos, so she used her gattling cannon on a Kepler. It
not only survived, but attacked with all its fellows.\footnote{Is it fair to blame someone who has never interacted with Keplers before, and therefore cannot know how resilient they are? I leave that question up to you.}

“ Retreat!” shouted Razu. “Buy me some time!”

I pulled my last two knives, making barriers as I went, then looping in the other direction. The Keplers pursued, glistening with determination to kill. Their empty faces opened to release rays of destructive energy. Their arms extended with ferocious blades. The crowd was cheering.

Razu blasted through its central console, giving us a fifty point bonus, but there were still five left. To make matters worse, a Carolingian and a Herculocelot had just entered the arena.

“I’ll need another twelve seconds,” said Razu.

“I don’t have any more knives!” I shot back. “Give me a second.”

“Don’t really have time to spare!”

Razu wove between lethal bursts of Kepler energy, thrusting himself onto the rail and taking the dangerous shortcut to the other edge of the field. The Reds, taking advantage of our distraction, were pushing the Carolingian into a corner with continual bursts of Zel power. I retrieved my knives-- I was helpless without them. A Kepler lunged at me but I ducked under a rail and escaped it.

That’s when everything went wrong. Razu screamed my name and I turned to see Kharo bearing down on my Dectur. The EMP had worn off and his attacks were furious. With the two Keplers still attacking and Razu's cannon recharging, he had to evade.

“Foul!” I screamed, but for some reason the vicious slashes from Kharo were not
raising any penalties. He wasn't trying to put Razu out of commission. Kharo was trying to kill him. Kharo thought Razu was me.

I rushed towards him, leaping over a fallen tree and hitting one of the Keplers in the central console with a Laxx knife. Using the automaton as an anchor I swung around, boosting and kicking the other Kepler in the visual input and making it wobble. But I was too late.

Kharo had knocked Razu off his feet with a powerful blow. In one gut shriveling moment of horror I watched the Draugur pick my Dectur, my friend up-- and with his talons-- decapitate him. I screamed, but Kharo was already dropping his victim to the ground, blood gushing across the tiles. Razu was dead. He was dead and it was my fault.

The crowd was in a frenzy. The commentators were berserk, and the game Mozi awarded us, too late, a penalty. Our score reached an almost unbeatable 488 points, but I didn't care about the score. I didn't care what it would mean for our Circuiteers. I rushed at Kharo, whose red Draugur still dripped with Razu's murder.

I didn't aim to stun. Stabbing my way up onto its back, I slashed the veins and ligaments of the arms, slowing the bioautomaton and releasing a flood of purple fluid over the grid. My helmet display was glowing red, warning me I had committed a penalty. I climbed up higher as the Draugur teetered and I stabbed the nape of the insectoid skull. The Laxx energy fried the Kepler system, eliminating the direct link between Kharo and the Draugur. I hoped the link was close enough for the citizen to feel pain.

There was no moment for sorrow or twisted triumph because the Keplers were
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still attacking. Vanderspaar, shockingly, came to my rescue by shooting the one I had stunned before it could blast me, but the other two had turned their attention on me. With only one knife left I dodged back, then threw myself to the ground to dodge an attack by the Herculocelot. Its translucent wings fluttered madly, the hard, snarling face showing sharp teeth.

Vanderspaar attacked it with a swiping talon but the Chimera knocked the Draugur down and pounced. I tried to help but a Kepler blocked my path. In the two minutes it took to dispatch it the Draugur's connection was destroyed. I was all alone.

I had to surrender the Prize Beast-- without a Zel Cannon or a Pike, I had no chance. The score ended with a victory for red, 732-694. Considering the gruesome conditions in the arena-- considering the only doubled score for Razu's death and the quadrupled score for Kharo's disconnection-- I would say it was respectable but nothing about that game was respectable.

Chalcedon sat me down and said things to me but I wasn't listening. Sonata and Joule tried the same thing. Arcadio didn't waste words, putting his arm around me, but even his presence was too much. I asked Chalcedon if I could go down to the meadow. Without a word to anyone else, I descended back to the barracks.

If I had experienced any profound thoughts, I'd share them with you. All I can report is that the false sunlight made the peonies in the field glow with vibrance.

I hate the price I'm paying to keep breathing. Quill is dead-- now Razu is dead. Both deaths are my fault. How do you justify this sort of anguish to yourself?

Arcadio stayed away, which was considerate, and it was Joule who eventually
joined me.

“Release your grip on that guilt a little.” she said, quietly.

“Please go away.”

“You couldn't know what the Draugur's pilot would do.”

I turned my frustration on her. “That doesn't mean I'm not responsible! My actions-- my recklessness-- it's my fault.”

Joule held her notebook against her knees. “I would have thought human hubris would have faded long ago, in a galaxy administered by intelligent automatons.”

“Please go.”

She stood up. “Forgive yourself. Don't lose sight of it.”

I didn't ask her what she meant. I just stared out across the meadow, trying to stop myself from trembling.

March 8 1069 TST

Current Balance: 1.1 KiloVamps.

Chalcedon made me a Dectur today. I am now in charge of Windhoek Squad. I suppose it makes sense. I've been here longer than Joule. But I can't think of a crueler punishment.

Arcadio has gotten very cold with me. He claims nothing is wrong, but spends more time training by himself. It was Seythia who informed Arcadio of my promotion. I think she's sabotaging our coupling. I told Arcadio that I wished he had been moved to
Windhoek and promoted, but Chalcedon refused.

“We have another recruiting day soon,” said Chalcedon. “I will make sure you have a new recruit, coming your way.”

How can I be the leader of a Squad when I'm unable to handle my own problems? How many Decturs are faking it? Every little thing I have achieved has cost me sweat and bruises and blood-- all that remains with me is despair. How does that qualify me to give instructions?

I forgot to mention last time that Brevity broke some record in Wyvern racing. The Tetrokon even acknowledged this personal victory of hers in his daily bulletin. I'm very proud of her-- but that pride can't wash away my guilt.

I don't have time to write anything else. I've returned the Penelope Dactyl book to the library, and have to start compiling stratagems for our coming matches. I wonder if Vanderspaar will be returning in our next match, or if we will have the pleasure of another citizen.

I don't really care.

Interlogue V: The March Demonstrations

In his self pity, Ferro fails to report the events at the University of Luna, happening at this time. Though it may come as a surprise, Luna has the highest concentration of citizens in the entire Federation-- perhaps it is the view of Earth that makes it so appealing. But these citizens, passionate Circuit spectators, were outraged by the change in rules-- and contradicting what Ferro says about
citizens, they thought the bloodshed perpetrated on the skirmishers was inhumane. Certainly there are many who enjoy the carnage of the games, but these citizens were not among them.

Twelve citizens, amply recorded by several Vicas, denounced not only Axapada, but Caston himself. The bulletins reported on these denunciations, which did not stop the citizens. On the contrary, denizens of Luna began to join in the protests, actually speaking out against Caston's funding cuts to the Gaozian Clubs-- his reduction of Swell Room privileges. These were not careful Gaozians, debating policy in the abstract. These were people of the Federation, angry at their Tetrokon.

By March 10, similar protests ignited in Wellington, in Kathmandu-- in Lagos. By the next day the bulletins reported public demonstrations against the Tetrokon as far away as Centauri and Rigel. Displeasure was palpable. Caston's efforts for efficiency-- his testing of the Draugur Project in the Nucleus-- had not gone unnoticed.

Keep these protests in mind as you ready what happens next.

March 12 1069 TST
Current Balance 1.21 KiloVamps

I should start with the big news, but I think you'll appreciate a chronological explanation of my experience. I should probably be more afraid, but I'm not.

Windhoek still hasn't received any new recruits. Sure, we only need Joule and myself to go with one Draugur-- but I'm still hoping Axapada repeals this game mode.
The approval numbers suggest otherwise.

I wish Arcadio would just speak with me. He's spending time with Silk and Pantoum, pretending I don't exist. Sonata's communications with me are brief, and always to the point, as though she's trying to assemble a bulletin on my recent activities. I suppose it's not her fault-- she has no time to spare, since she's putting her recruits through an intense training regimen. Unable to create a new stratagem, without anyone to confide in-- lacking any motivation to put words on the page-- I've turned to the Rhombus, and worked on chain techniques.

This morning Chalcedon entered the arena, unarmored, and watched me with folded arms.

“What?” I called, sliding down the slanted pipe with an ache in my shoulders and calves.

“I'd like to speak with you,” he said. He hadn't been shaving recently and his silver bristles heralded a beard.

“Can't it wait?”

“I don't want you to train today.”

“Is that a joke?”

“I want you to take the day off. I want you to go home.”

“I've had enough of the dormitory, if that's what--”

He held out a bronze card. “Visit your mother. See a bit of Maxima. Focus on something else. Relax your muscles and your mind.”

“You made me a Dectur,” I said, looking down. “I apologize, sir, if my desire to
Mori: The Mortal Gambit

improve disappoints you.”

Chalcedon sighed. “Please take it.”

I was reluctant, and I don't know why. “It lasts until when?”

“Return by 21:30,” said Chalcedon. “Contact me if there's an emergency and you need more time.”

“I'll be back,” I said, firmly.

I zoned out during Lazuli's recitation of restrictions and prohibitions during this free day. I put on an inconspicuous. I felt self-conscious about my Manus, but a glove would just look foolish so I just put both hands in my pockets.

My footsteps felt hollow along the service corridor to the garage. Webers clicked and shifted cargo. A personnel Weber with some emotional sensors chirped hopefully at me, making me smile, despite myself. I saw Seleuko, speaking with some Gold District denizens, and she gave me the briefest nod as I passed. I was indeed free to go— at least for a few hours.

The cherry smell of the vehicles had fermented in the months since I had felt the street beneath my shoes. The green moss clinging to the buildings seemed darker, richer. The hovering Maxports showed the many icons of our new Tetrokon. I signaled a dual-passenger vehicle to slow down and I climbed in, putting in the Franklin Tower as the destination.

We passed from the Hub District with its sleek, plant-integrating architecture to the modest obsidian tones of Gizmo District. Seeing so many people living normal lives was jarring. A man and woman were carrying a damaged domestic Weber through the
front door of a workshop, refusing help from the people and automatons around them.

Reaching the dusty trees and graying mosses of the Grid hit me with nostalgia. Many summers ago Quill and I would look for footholds on the apartment buildings and clamber up until we reached a curved tree trunk extending its shade over the road. We would sit up there, sometimes for hours, until the USKs came and forced us back home. I stared up at the branches, heart surprisingly heavy.

I walked up to the building, and learned that Lethe Barr-Alkol-- Mum-- no longer lived in Franklin Towers. I accessed the municipal network, which informed me that my arrest, and that of Quill and Brevity meant that my mother had received a new, smaller apartment. I swallowed, and asked for new directions.

If Brevity really gave Mum five KiloVamps, she didn't spend it yet. The apartment had no decoration, no excess of any kind. I half suspected Mum would be at work, but she allowed me to enter without being identified, and I saw her sitting at her window, staring out into the city.

“Mum?”

She had lost weight and her hair was a mess. My stomach twisted.

“Ferro?”

I suddenly wished I had brought a glove for my hand. I sat down next to her, and she placed her fingers on my knee. Her breathing was uneven. The hollowness in her cheeks alarmed me. Hadn't she been eating properly? A tear leaked from her eye.

“You've grown.”

“Not much.”
She stumbled to her feet and poured me a glass of pineapple juice, and I almost spilled it-- I've grown too used to Aquatacs. She looked away when she saw my hand, but didn't say anything. What had happened to my fierce mother, who had braved Grid work, year after year, to provide me and my siblings access to the occasional Swell Room. Where was the glint in her eye? I knew the answer, of course, but couldn't allow myself to accept it.

“Have-- have you been watching my matches?”

She didn't reply. Her cup of tea was growing lukewarm.

“Have you, mum?”

She shook her head. “I haven't.”

“Why not?”

She walked towards the deep drawer, hit J9 and brought up a few discounted sweet treats. Was she still receiving the Dole? I was afraid to ask.

“Have you at least been watching Brevity's races? She's been sponsored, you know.”

Mum didn't look up from her untouched tea. “You're changed, Ferro.”

“I'm still me.”

She said nothing.

“Are you still working on the Grid?”

There was emptiness in my mother's eyes. “They assessed my risk of irrationality as higher than preferred, and ended my employment. I haven't found anything new-- not yet.”
I swallowed. “But you have the money from Brev, don't you--”

Her expression fell but then she nodded. “Of course. I'm doing fine, Ferro.”

“Then why are you being so distant?”

“Because I'm trying to forget about you.”

The pineapple juice on my lips tasted bitter. “Is it working?”

She lifted up her cup and poured the tea onto the table. I watched the long liquid fingers rush to the edges and spill onto the tiles. Lethe Barr-Alkol put the cup back down, lips pressed together.

“What do you think, Ferro?”

Drops of tea fell onto my trousers seeping across the floor. Swallowing hard, I stood up and found a rag. After months of being looked after by custodial Webers, it almost felt good to get onto my knees and clean up the mess.

“You should go,” Mum said. “And-- and unless you break free of your contract and leave the Circuit-- you shouldn't come back.”

“I'm sorry,” I said. “Mum, I'm so sorry, I wish--”

I could see her shoulder blades through the back of her shirt, trembling. My hand reached towards her, but I thought better of it. I left, eyes burning.

The sunlight on the streets grew fainter as clouds drifted across the sky. I entered my identification digits and destination into a local terminal, but let several slowing Maxports just go by. I didn't want to step back into the Circuit just yet. I meandered along the city blocks.

That was when people started pointing at the parting clouds. I didn't stop until
someone shouted, “That's a Typhon!”

There were black specks in the blue sky, growing larger. I didn't need the whispers of the crowd to know that this was a Cardinal fleet-- complete with Typhon-Class destroyers and military orbitals. Why Caston would assemble such an excessive display of force? What was going on?

A Maxport pulled up next to me, a small screen flashing bright blue. I was surprised when Lazuli's voice burst out at me.

“Ferrolentius, get in quickly-- we need to return you to the barracks immediately!”

For a deluded moment I thought that this Cardinal fleet had surrounded the planet for my arrest. Then my common sense returned, and without questioning I let the Maxport take me home. I had barely entered the garage when a massive draining hum signaled a total power failure. I tumbled out of the Maxport and stood back up, breathing heavily. What had happened to the Grid? The darkness was suffocating.

“Valenz,” came the crisp bark of Seleuko, and the orange contingency lighting came alive around us. “Are you hurt?”

“No, Deputy Euditor.”

Seleuko nodded, beckoning me forward and turning away from me in the same motion. She addressed the Webers and Keplers in the large space, telling them to stand by for the time being. The automatons complied, humming and clicking. Looking grimmer than usual, Seleuko turned and started walking deeper into the Circuit.

“Should-- should I head back to my barracks?”
“The elevator won't function unless we have an emergency,” said Seleuko calmly.

“This isn't an emergency?”

“I don't recommend the stairs either. Your dormitories are about eight hundred meters below our feet. Come with me.”

Why was Seleuko, the passionless Deputy Euditor, inviting me to walk with her? Perhaps human company-- even that of a skirmisher-- is appreciated when the city's power has been subverted. Her boots clacked ahead of me and I hurried to keep up. I wondered if Arcadio was okay, if Brevity was. What if they had been training? The possible injuries and calamities from sudden darkness made my heart pound.

“What-- what's going on?” I asked. “I saw some fleet vessels in the atmosphere, and then--”

“The evidence suggests that we are the target of a military uprising,” said Seleuko.

“The military? A Bellitant?”

“Have you not been following the bulletins, boy?”

“I-- I haven't.”

Out of habit Seleuko activated her Data-Patch. When it failed to connect to the municipal network, she cursed.

“You are familiar with the Bellitant Zember Ratatosk-Mazonas, are you not?”

“He was another potential candidate for elevation to Tetrokon.”

“I assume you are not familiar with his most recent speeches against Caston?”

I shook my head. Seleuko pressed her lips together. “I would imagine these ships
belong to him. This is his bid for power-- in defiance of the Array's judgment.”

“But why here?” I asked. “Caston's capital is in the Rigel System-- New Atlantis.”

Seleuko didn't look at me. “The power will come back on soon, after Mazonas has cleared the systems of any virulent defensive programs. I would start walking to the elevator.”

“I don't understand. If he's trying to destroy--”

“He's not trying to destroy Earth. He wants it for himself. Now get going. No more pointless questions.”

March 13 1069 TST

Current Balance: 3.22 KiloVamps.

Bellitant Mazonas has secured the entire Helios System. Last night he landed a Silesian Turret on Luna. This morning he dispersed a mass protest on Mars. There is no resistance to such force.

No one in the Barracks was holding an open conversation last night. The Exarks joined Moesia in her quarters and didn't re-emerge. Arcadio and I found a space in the dark meadow and just listened to the frogs. The uncertainty made any words pointless. We fell asleep together in the grass.

At noon today Mazonas broadcast a statement across Maxima, on Earth, in Helios. The Blues gathered in the largest recreational chamber to watch the smiling usurper.
“Hello, people of Luna, people of Mars, people of Europa, Triton, Miranda--people of all the orbitals-- and of course, people of Earth. I apologize for arriving unannounced. I am Zember Ratatosk-Mazonas, Bellitant and loyal servant of the Federation. I enjoy violin music and fresh strawberries and I intend to serve as the Tetrokon of Atem Province.”

His face was lumpy, his left eyebrow was bushier than his right, and a scar arched across the bridge of his nose. But his eyes glittered with intelligence and there was no falseness to his smile. All around the room there were whispers.

“I can almost hear all the silence,” he said, assuming a serious demeanor. “And I understand. Say something bad against the invader and you will be punished by the invader. Praise him and be punished when the prior Tetrokon returns. I have no desire to stymie your thoughts and emotions. My friend Fulvio Caston scoffs at our Earthly and Heliotic free speech traditions, of course. He would punish you, but I won't let him have the chance. I stand for your integrity-- I stand for you.”

“A ploy, I'd imagine,” said Arcadio, folding his arms. “A way of easily rounding up all the Caston supporters with low intelligence. An ugly trick from an ugly man.”

Many drew in their breaths, but Leto and I rolled our eyes. Arcadio, as usual, was looking to see how firm the boundaries around him really were.

“You ask why I took such drastic measures,” said Mazonas, lifting a goblet of wine. “Breaking my oath of loyalty to Caston is a sign of my resolve. For the sake of the Federation I must correct the error of the Array-- I must give Earth the respect it deserves.”
Pylon snorted and Targaux gave a shout of derision, but most people stayed focused on his words. Chalcedon in particular looked absorbed by the speech.

“I don't want to waste your time with empty words. I am reversing the Xeno Corollary, I am taxing the largest private landholders to reduce admission prices to Gaozian Clubs and removing Draugurs from all Circuit matches, effective now.”

Those words brought a roaring cheer from the room. Even I was on my feet, clapping. There was confidence in Mazonas' smile, as if he knew exactly how we were reacting at this moment. Depending on which Mozis were informing him at the moment, and given his augmented brain, he might indeed have been aware.

“I have no right to your loyalty-- force is a poor substitute for fair governance. I will defend you against Caston's retaliation-- I will earn your favor. Until then I ask only you live your life, and be content. That is all.”

The broadcast ended, and all over the room Data Patches flashed. Circuiteers and skirmishers examined their displays and gave shouts of joy to discover the additions made to their accounts. Mazonas had bought the Draugurs from the teams and stipulated that two KiloVamps go to every member of the team.

Chalcedon stood up. “Beast Fighters, your attention-- all Squads are to enter a training room, immediately. No idle talk, we have a match in three days.’’

The forced training overseen by Lazuli's strident tones and Chalcedon's stern gaze-- gave Mazonas's message time to sink in, without the analysis of others affecting it. Joule and I would not be competing, so our Exark released us early. We both found corners of the dormitory and turned to our diaries, to put this madness into words.
“Listen up, all concerned,” Arcadio shouted at dinner. “I'm opening up a little faux-Gaozian Clublet in Chamber M, for anyone interested in discussing some philosophy, perhaps a little politics-- only people interested in *theory*-- no real life examples, got it? After dinner, let's say 21:00.”  

Smiling smugly he sat back down and dug his knife into his steak. I raised my eyebrows.

“Did you plan this just now?”

Arcadio dropped a piece of meat onto his tongue. “I might not have your fascination with hard books-- but I consider myself a genius, from time to time.”

Joule muttered something snarky, but Arcadio had been right on the money. By the time I arrived in Chamber M, the room was half packed with skirmishers, and even some circuiteers. Arcadio stood with one knee on the dais, proudly surveying the assembled people.

“I would like to ask you-- my compatriots and fellow denizens of this Cardinal Federation-- a simple question. Given a system where we have leaders and civilians-- how do we best determine who is a leader, and who is a civilian?”

“You really think Mazonas or Caston won't pierce this thinly veiled analogy?” called Tarilla.

“I said no names!” Arcadio shouted back. “Okay, someone else.”

Pantoum pushed his hair back and propped himself on his elbows. “Well, we have Rule of Superiority, don't we? The most intelligent, the strongest, the most capable from
all across the Federation-- they become our Tetrokons.”

There was some sarcastic muttering, and Arcadio's lip curled. “Don't be simple. We have only a few hundred thousand citizens in the four galactic Provinces-- and they're not allowed to serve in the same position for two hundred years between terms. Don't forget that Planetary Governorships are the sole prerogative of citizens too. Many citizens take themselves out of the election pool as they become bored-- so our rules don't allow for the greatest minds to rule. As time goes on, the scum bubbles up to the surface.”

“But that's what SuppliMentals are for,” called Shanzo. “To make sure a citizen is qualified!”

“What's the point? Why not just put the Mozis in charge, rather than rotate between our partially human Tetrokons?”

No one had anything to say to that.

“Have any of you considered democracy?” asked Joule.

There was some groaning, and some laughter, but defiance danced in her eyes.

“In the Circle of Gaia, we elected our own municipal government.”

“Pelstrum was in charge of--”

“He only acted as an observer. His death did not stop us from continuing our lives, did it?”

“But democracy is only worthwhile if the people can choose a candidate better than the Array.” said Silk. “No denizen-- no citizen can match the collective wisdom of the Array.”
“But why do we constantly change rulers then?” demanded Arcadio. “Why not simply find the greatest four citizens in the Federation and make them Tetrokons-in-Perpetuity? Why have the Shift?”

“I'm sure there's a reason,” said Silk, uncomfortably.

“There's something profoundly impressive about the Cardinal Federation,” said Arcadio. “We have license to question the system without fear of reprisal-- but no one actually wishes it removed or changed-- even when we are unhappy with our lives.”

“I think we can all agree on one thing,” said Leto. “No government should be formed through a coup d'etat76-- power cannot dictate behavior. It isn't a reliable manner to transfer authority.”

The entire experience reminded me of the old days where Moscow Squad would relax after a stressful day with wine and sweet treats, talking about extinct species, cultures submerged and the latest synchron series. Tonight had a different tone, of course. Part of me wondered what the repercussions might be-- but perhaps Skirmishers who risk their lives, time after time, are willing to speak their minds-- in their own way.

I walked back to Windhoek's dormitory on my own, to find Moesia just leaving it. She looked mildly surprised to see me.

“I assumed Arcadio would pontificate for longer,” said Moesia.

“He still is,” I said. “But I'm tired. What were you doing in my dormitory?”

Moesia smiled. “I thought you could use some bedtime reading, but if you're already tired, perhaps it was overkill. Ferro, I want you to serve as a reserve for Moscow

76 Coup d'etat: The French term for a military seizure of power in a government; the overthrow of the sitting regime by violent means.
Squad in our next match, in case-- well, you understand.”

“I would be happy to.”

The captain of the Blues nodded and walked away. I pushed the door open and saw a little leatherbound book sitting on my pillow. Silver letters spelled out the title: *Monuments and Mausoleums-- A Brief Examination of Mortal Terror*. Penelope Dactyl's name sat just below the title. I climbed into bed, and started writing this entry. I'll start reading the Dactyl book soon-- but not tonight.

Either Moesia knows me very well, or not at all. I can't say.

Interlogue VI: Zember Ratatosk-Mazonas

Mazonas was born in 77 TST, the grandson of a Cardinal Shareholder. His service in the Fleet was quite excellent-- he rose to Majorion, then to Bellitant, and thus earned citizenship by 112 TST. Why was he not on track to become a second century Tetrokon? He did not want to.

Hundreds of years pass in which Mazonas has no interest in the political world. He enjoyed the sensual pleasures of his position, traveled the four Provinces, and watched Circuit matches. He was a hedonist, and couldn't care less about politics.

But when the Cankerbees invaded Ossium in the 9th Century, Mazonas returned to duty, leading Kepler legions against infected populations, maintaining the Mantle Colonies. He stayed in service from that point forward, following the slow retreat of the parasite and keeping himself sharp through augmentation and through an almost Gaozian lifestyle. Mazonas never wrote academic work, but
records show him consuming thousands of documents during the 10\textsuperscript{th} Century. He did not directly absorb them through his SuppliMental System-- he read them all.

In 1048, Tetrokon Sevvu had him serve as her main Bellitant, and he stayed in Atem service when Caston succeeded Sevvu. Caston also served against the Cankerbees but not as long. His fame comes from battling the Seraphim.

It appears the March Demonstrations pushed his existing reservations about Caston's legitimacy into outright treason. Thus we find him on March 13\textsuperscript{th}, declaring himself the champion of Atem. Were his actions sincere, or merely a power grab? His biographers are still debating the issue. I think both must be true, to some extent.

Without Mazonas the March Demonstrations would have faded into the footnotes of chronicles. Instead, he changed Cardinal history forever.

March 16 1069 TST

Current Balance: 3.25 KiloVamps

Here are my three favorite lines from the first chapter of \textit{Monuments and Mausoleums}:

\begin{quote}
If you cannot grasp our evolutionary past, you cannot possibly understand the forces in our turbulent present (Page 2).

The pursuit of perfection is nothing more or less than our inherited fear of death (Page 5).
\end{quote}
We have long labored under the notion that greatness comes from accomplishments-- to die after achieving something is to have lived properly. But since our lives are always in progress, we should value how we strive to our goals, not whether we reach the end result. No one looks at the squirrel and says, “she was a good squirrel because she stored dozens of nuts.” (Page 7).

It's easy for a philosopher to speak of death and shrug her shoulders and I don't know if I agree entirely-- but I'm enjoying the reading.

Tension for today's match was very high. Arcadio was so busy training, he didn't even call another one of his meetings. I wondered what was happening beyond the barracks-- what Caston was doing to dislodge Mazonas. Many were wondering if Mazonas would attend the match.

“I want extreme professionalism during the match today,” said Moesia, as circuiteers and skirmishers selected their nutrient cubes for the day. “Do not show off, do not be reckless, be your best. Success will follow.”

“Twenty Vamps says that he doesn't have the nerve to sit in Caston's seat,” whispered Shanzo.

Tarilla snorted. “He's already broken his oath and captured the Helios System-- you think he won't sit in a chair?”

Tarilla was right. Next to a fidgeting Axapada sat Mazonas, fingertips drumming against the Tetrokon's chair. More shockingly, he was wearing a municipal shirt, not his Bellitant's uniform. He didn't stand up and greet the crowd. He calmly listened to the commentary, laughed at Piso's jokes and focused on the matches.
“He's quite savvy,” said Moesia, sitting down beside me. “Are you enjoying the book so far?”

“Yes.”

I've never been able to gauge Moesia's age-- sometimes she looks twenty, other times she could be twice that. Today she looked like her years had taken a toll. A strand of silver weaving its way through her hair.

“Despite taking a hazardous stand against Caston and the Array, he has political instinct. Don't comment on that. I don't want you to venture an opinion here.”

“I-- um-- I understand.” I didn't. What was she doing?

“I'm tired,” said Moesia. “I have never been so tired. Ferro, do you understand French?”

I laughed. “I can't even speak Mandarin! My basic English doesn't make me a linguist.”

“Then my First Enlightenment books will be of little interest to you. A pity.”

It was odd watching the matches with my captain sitting next to me. She took notes on her Data-Patch during each event. When Garver took a shot to the skull in an Alpha Death, she jumped to her feet.

“He should be all right,” she said, shakily. “He has cerebral plating-- but I hope--”

The stands hadn't been so full of spectators since the Inaugural Games. The commentators were careful in their discussion of Draugur prohibition. Listening to them you would never know that Helios had been usurped.

Blue performed well against Red, winning crucial skirmishes and pulling ahead in
races. Lomach almost wrecked his Manticore trying to take out Sonata. My stomach
was just beginning to settle when Maloc Swevelom-Turbo took a seat on the other side of
Moesia.

“Good afternoon, Captain Salutis,” said Turbo as his chair formed around him.
“Congratulations on an impressive display. You must be proud of your team.”

I stared, but Moesia remained calm. “So you were sincere when you sent that
message.”

“Why would I lie?” chuckled Turbo, gesturing at a passing Weber and grabbing an
Aquatac. “He has long admired your leadership of the team, and would like to meet with
you.”

“I have no intention of becoming a puppet,” said Moesia. “If he admired my
leadership, he would understand that.”

“Puppet is not the term I would use,” said Turbo, considering his beverage
between his fingers. “His term was-- philosophical overlap. But he only wants to talk--
just a conversation.”

“Who are you?” I asked. “I thought you were just some avid spectator and friend
of Axapada.”

Turbo gave me a smile that told me he had no memory of me. “And so I am-- a
dedicated supporter of the Blues-- as is my commanding officer.”

“Majorion Turbo serves Bellitant Mazonas,” said Moesia, calmly.

I felt my mouth grow dry. “You-- you are one of the--”

Turbo laughed. “Calmly, calmly-- we are all on the same side here.”
“Are we?”

“Valenz, is it? Do you not also favor respecting and protecting the people of Earth?”

Moesia's mechanical eye flared in warning, and I kept my mouth shut. Turbo turned his dripping smile back to my captain.

“Well, Salutis, can I schedule the meeting? A harmless chat with the master of the solar system.”

Moesia adjusted her gauntlets. “I will meet with Mazonas-- but he will come here-- I am not leaving.”

Turbo coughed politely. “With all due respect--”

“Mazonas needs me, rather than the reverse. He will meet with me and my Exarks, tomorrow.”

The usurper's lieutenant hoisted his smile again. “Let's see what our new Tetrokon has to say.”

We all glanced at the screen just in time to see Mazonas give a definitive nod to the Vica capturing his visual presence.

Turbo inclined his head. “Would tomorrow, at eight in the morning, be agreeable?”

He didn't wait for a reply, but stood up, bowed and left. Moesia clenched her jaw.

“I am making a mistake-- but I make it willingly.”

“What do you mean?”

Moesia sank into her chair. “Mazonas cannot reverse the tide that sweeps our
world forward. But he is not Caston.”

“Moesia, you shouldn't--”

“I will say what I want, Ferro. I have told you, I am tired.”

“I'm sorry--”

“Do not apologize. What I want from you is curiosity. Will you join me at the meeting, tomorrow morning?”

One of the screens showed an Ascendancy match. One of our Blues slid into the checkpoint, upgrading his round buckler into a rectangular shield and slamming it against the axe of his pursuer. Dust curled up around their melee. I tried for a savvy response.

“I'll come, Captain. If you order me.”

“Yes, I think that would be for the best. I'll expect you at my chambers at eight, promptly. And I see no reason that you spread this news quite yet. Understood?”

“Yes. I understand.”

Moesia left me, trying to figure out what was going on.

I'm almost done for tonight. Arcadio took down the Prize Beast today with a javelin toss of his Slyder Pike, straight in its eye. I'm glad he's so happy.

I just want to finish off with a quote I don't quite understand, from Dactyl. Maybe you can puzzle it out. I'm sure it will stay with me, penetrating my dreams:

_We are forever blurring the lines between ourselves and others, forming new families, new friendships, new alliances, new trade routes. It is the history of our history. The opposite is true too-- we tear our connections to shreds, when it suits us. We are the_


"beetles. We are our phones." We may ignore our kinship and relation-- but it persists.

Weird, right? I'm not sure what to do with it.

I should sleep. Tomorrow will be my second meeting with a citizen! Even if I knew what I felt-- I wouldn't write it down.

March 17 1069 TST

Current Balance: 3.26 KiloVamps

“I appreciate you taking the time, Captain Moesia.”

Zember Ratatosk-Mazonas wore pale magenta clothing and black sandals instead of boots. The leering scar across his face unsettled his peaceful demeanor. I sat next to Chalcedon with the other Exarks at the conference table, feeling out of place. Moesia and Mazonas were on their feet.

“It is our pleasure, Bellitant,” said Moesia. “Your service in Ossium Province saved the lives of many denizens. For that, we thank you.”

Mazonas inclined his head. “I'm not here to dabble in formalities. I am here to gamble.”

“Gambling seems to be a habit of yours,” said Vanir. “What are you wagering today, Bellitant?”

The usurper sighed. “Exark Vanir, I do not engage in risky behavior for the sake

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77 Phones: In the time of Dactyl's writing the predominant technological locus was not in automata or in augmentation, but in mobile "smart" telephones. These devices are the archaic forerunners of the Data-Patch, relying on private networks for their interconnectivity.
78 Rekvo Flanders-Vanir (1036 TST – 1069 TST): Exark of Ascension.
of risk. I would not be here, if it was not for Caston's administrative decisions.”

“You are here because the Array chose Caston, and overlooked you,” said Impala79. “You wanted power, and when you were denied, you took action.”

Mazonas' facade was crumbling a little, but he contained his frustration.

“Caston had no intention of protecting or preserving Earth. He was in the process of standardizing his Province, of making Earth just another planet.”

Moesia took a seat. “What are you proposing, Bellitant? I agree that Caston's programs must be stopped. As of now, your fleet is only a quarter of Caston's military allotment. If the other Tetrokons get involved-- it will be worse.”

“My reach extends into several nearby systems, but crucially, I have Helios absolutely secured. I have upgraded and reinforced the defenses laid by Aureliaz in 274 TST. It would take a long time for Caston to enter this zone. But you are correct, Captain Salutis. In confrontation I am likely to lose. My advantage lies in defense.”

“But you cannot last forever,” said Tertullio.

“He doesn't have to last forever,” said Chalcedon, slowly. “He only needs to last for twenty years.”

“Precisely,” said Mazonas. “The energy supplies here-- plus Jupiters' core as a last resort-- will last at least fifty at full capacity. And thanks to the laws protecting citizens, the Array cannot kill me. I am safe until a trial finds me guilty of the treachery I have committed. But long before that, Caston will bear the shame of his incomplete imperium. And honor is his last remaining human foible.”

“So you think he will make a deal with you,” said Palendo.

“Not exactly,” said Mazonas, taking a seat and putting his feet up on the table.

“He is a man of absolutes. I will lure him into a battlefield of my choosing.”

“I don't follow,” said Tertullio.

“He intends a Circuit match to decide the fate of a portion of the galaxy,” said Moesia.

Mazonas looked pleasantly surprised as several Exarks gasped. “Indeed, Captain. And since I favor your team, I wanted your help to bring Atem into sympathetic hands.”

“You want us to fight as your representatives against-- other circuiteers and skirmishers?” asked Impala. “Caston won't agree to that.”

“He may be unhappy with the situation, but he will accept the terms. There is precedent.”

“If we fail, we will be executed as traitors to the Cardinal Federation,” said Vanir.

“I am not claiming there will be no risk. You may die-- and I might die as well.”

“You are connected to the Array!” said Impala, jumping to her feet. “You can still be resurrected-- what if Caston offers you a favorable surrender? We suffer, but you resume your life as a citizen.”

Mazonas grimaced, as if having foreseen Impala's hypothetical. “I am prepared to make an additional wager-- to ensure Caston's participation. I am putting my citizenship on the line. The moment the match begins-- if we lose or surrender-- I will be demoted to a denizen.”

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Moesia exchanged a look with Chalcedon. “Are you sure, Bellitant? That's a high price to pay.”

Mazonas laughed. “It is the only way, Captain Salutis. I am committed to this cause. I want to make Earth the capital of the Federation once more-- no longer will we of Earth be people of the past. That is what I can promise.”

“If Caston agrees, we will be playing against Green, won't we?” said Chalcedon. An uneasy look went around the table.

“It seems likely,” said Mazonas. “I cannot guarantee anything-- but I know that you will be fighting for the liberation of Earth-- your opponents will be fighting for their continued enslavement. Motivation will be on your side.”

“We will discuss the matter, and decide on what we demand of you, Bellitant,” said Moesia. “But in principle, you may consider us willing.”

Mazonas rose to his feet. “I am glad to hear it. I will open negotiations with Caston promptly. I look forward to your demands.”

After the usurper left, we all sat around, unwilling to speak. Moesia told the Exarks to take ten minutes, then return to decide on terms. Only Moesia and I remained in the room.

“Did you know that this would happen?” I asked.

“There are few aspects of Earth that are strategic to a Bellitant. One is the political capital of Earth's history-- the other is the wild popularity of the Circuit. But no, I did not know.”

“Why did you invite me here? What was the point?”
Molesia grimaced. “Are you familiar with the Xeno Corollary to the Sustainable Sapiensis Decree81?”

I shook my head.

“Caston officially limited the Dole to families and parents with one child. Those with two lost benefits-- those with three had to pay planetary taxes. Once you have three children-- no matter their age-- the City Prefect enacts chemical castration.”

“But-- but denizens have rights, he can't just--” A cold lump of squishy panic sank into my stomach. “It's already happened, hasn't--”

I broke off. Moesia's expression said everything. I stood up and leaned against the table. “But why--”

“For the sake of the Federation,” said Moesia. “More efficient planets mean a more efficient nation. To protect many and to let them endure-- some must suffer. That is the justification.”

I swallowed. “Will Mazonas be any better?”

“I cannot say.”

“Do you trust him?”

“If he was not earnest about this, his gambit makes no sense. He was, most likely, Caston's successor in twenty years.”

“Perhaps he's bored.”

“Perhaps,” said Moesia.

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81 The Sustainable Sapiensis Decree: Passed in Hemu Province in 570 TST by Tetrokon Yustan and adopted in the other three provinces in 572 TST, the SSD regulates planetary welfare by incentivizing contraception and limiting benefits to families with more children.
“Why did you invite me here?” I asked again.

Moesia looked at me, surprised. “I thought a political upheaval-- the chance to participate more actively than denizens have been able to participate for the last millennium-- might appeal to you. Was I wrong?”

I shook my head. “Thank you, Moesia.”

Moesia's face betrayed a flicker of sorrow. “I intend to use our leverage to reform the Circuit-- to increase protections-- to allow volunteers to join-- to allow circuiteers and skirmishers to leave, if they so choose. I want players in the Circuit cleared officially of their crimes.”

My heart began to beat faster.

“And Mazonas will accept?”

“He has few alternatives,” said Moesia. “Go on, Ferro-- I'll let you know of any developments.”

I left, wondering what would come our way.

April 2, 1069 TST

Current Balance: 922 Vamps

I upgraded my Laxx knives. The blades are now stronger, sharper and serrated. After I explain the summit between Mazonas and Caston today, you'll understand why I spent more than 2000 Vamps in one purchase.

I don't know if the delay was due to Moesia's prolonged negotiations with our new
Tetrokon or the reluctance of Caston. Moesia appears satisfied with the terms, so I suppose I can't complain.

Caston materialized on Axapada's private Nepths Panel, after Mazonas gave his DNA signature clearance. The Tetrokon only showed up with one subordinate. They sat at one end of the Euditor's main banquet table. Mazonas and Turbo sat at the other end. In the middle, mediating, sat Axapada, flanked by Moesia on one side and Vark on the other.

I watched, along with all the other Blues in one of the recreation rooms. Vicas were capturing this face to face confrontation for all people of the Federation.

“I thank you both for coming today,” said Axapada, tripping over his words. His gold encrusted forehead shone with perspiration. “I am glad-- very glad that we might find a peaceful solution to this whole misunderstanding yet and--”

“There will be no peaceful solution, Euditor,” said Caston. He spoke calmly, but he wore a slim iron necklace. I could almost see the flashes of energy pulsing through his skull as his ingrained Mozis worked at maximum capacity. “I will reclaim what is rightfully mine and punish my Bellitant appropriately. Only immediate surrender and supplication will spare his citizenship. Otherwise, he will face my wrath.”

Mazonas poured himself a glass of milk. He drank it with great enjoyment, watching a nerve pulse in Caston's temple. He put it down, licking the moisture from his lips. “But if I had wanted that, Bellitant Caston, I wouldn't--”

82 Citizens from the Caston clan wear the iron necklace when they thirst for vengeance. They wear the necklace until they are satisfied. It's impressive that Ferro knows enough about the Tetrokon's history to make the observation.
“I am Tetrokon of Atem,” snarled Caston. “Despite your villainous action you will still refer to me by my proper title.”

Mazonas chuckled. “I believe a Tetrokon is supposed to control their entire Province-- by my most recent estimates you control only 86% of your Province. Perhaps I could call you Fulvio-- for old times' sake?”

“You must grow weary of your immortal privilege to cast it aside so carelessly, Mazonas.”

“Not at all,” said the usurper. “I simply see no reason for such anger. There is no point to living forever if you live so negatively. If your obsolete title means so much to you, I can keep using it.”

Caston rose to his feet. His deputy, who the Vica identified as Poux Hoburo-Kryzpas, looked nervously in his direction, but the Tetrokon only strode back and forth once, then took a seat again.

“Let us proceed, Mazonas. If you have an honest proposal, I wish to hear it.”

Mazonas smiled. “The matter stands thusly-- we both have claim to this Province. I have fortified this system beyond your ability to breach it. A long, costly battle could ensue. Your numbers versus my position might be interesting. However, given the Cankerbee influx in Ossium and the Seraphim breach in Carnuiz, it seems wasteful to grind our forces against each other.”

“You are no less an enemy of the Federation, than the Seraphim or the Cankerbees.”

“But unlike the Cankerbees, you can negotiate with me-- and unlike the Seraphim,
negotiating with me will not weaken the Cardinal Federation.”

“And so you propose we settle a military matter with a game,” sneered Caston.

“You disgust me, Mazonas.”

The Bellitant didn't look fazed. “You are by no means obligated to participate-- I am merely making an offer.”

“And what offer would that be?”

“We set up a match with five rounds-- one pure race-- one pure skirmish-- and three traditional. Each participant will receive a few KiloVamps to upgrade their equipment or vehicle. Before the match begins we transfer command sequences into the Array. The winner takes everything. We settle this matter without endangering our--”

“If you cared about the security of the Federation you would have never rebelled against my authority,” spat Caston. “You have an incredible depth of nerve.”

“Will you accept the general premise?” asked Mazonas, placidly.

Caston's lip curled. “The premise, perhaps, but not the conditions. You assume that my military might is equal to yours-- if we compete for the same quantity, then my loss would only part me with a third of my army. We will either compete multiple times-- or we must restructure the advantages in the games-- to better simulate the differences in our power.”

“The differences in our numbers are irrelevant,” said Mazonas. “You could have twice as many and still not break this stalemate. We play one match, and one match only.”

“Then I demand that each circuiteer representing me and the glory of the
Tetrokonity will receive one MegaVamp to prepare their vehicle. As for the auxiliaries-- I want them to pilot Draugurs, instead of entering the arena.”

An angry gasp rose among my comrades and I felt my hands ball into fists.

Mazonas leaned forward.

“You've never had an interest in a fair fight, have you, Tetrokon? If I thought I could settle this in a simple duel, I would-- but I know the cowardice that lurks inside you. And for that reason, I will accept your terms.”

Shock and alarm burst forth in the recreational room. Arcadio was on his feet, gesturing angrily. I could only stare at the continuing exchange.

“You see, Fulvio-- you have become so consumed with optimizing yourself that you have forgotten what power lurks within your human origins-- SuppliMentals are no replacement for substance. I would rather gamble on the honest lives of humans-- humans like us, Fulvio-- than entrust my destiny to the product of our labors.”

Caston stood up, a triumphant smile in place. “And that is why I am the Tetrokon of Atem-- and you are merely a former Bellitant. Let this be your last stand for nostalgia. Let this be your chance to die as a martyr. You won't have to know how quickly you'll be forgotten.”

“You're wrong,” said Mazonas, quietly. “Even the citizens across the Federation who have never visited this planet know that without Earth we are nothing. To give up on humanity is to give up on ourselves.”

“Speak what you wish. We will arrange the match-- and end this charade. Goodbye, Zember.”
The Vica cut to Axapada, who gave a brief closing remark, then the capture ended.

“I don't believe this,” muttered Arcadio. “There goes all hope. Our chances are-- dashed.”

“Why did he decide right there?” demanded Pantoum. “Why didn't he consult with Moesia?”

The anger bubbled up everywhere-- but I saw pockets of fear as well. Everyone knew how bad this would be. Before the rabble could become a riot, Lazuli's voice coughed crisply.

“Would the following circuiteers and auxiliaries report to their respective Exarks for an urgent assignment of position.”

At the end of the long list of names came Arcadio, Scythia, Pylon and-- me. Not saying a word, we stepped into the corridor and followed Pylon to Chalcedon's room.

“I know you are angry,” he said, opening the door, “but--”

“If the Draugurs don't kill us, then Caston will,” said Arcadio.

“There is an additional complication,” said the Exark, letting us in. “Mazonas and Caston are using Secular rules for this match. That means five a side in Feralcanalia-- not three.”

“But all of our stratagems are designed for trios,” said Scythia.

“We have two months,” said Chalcedon. “That will have to be enough-- for us to adapt our style to five skirmishers-- hopefully enough time for us to learn how to stop a Draugur.”
“These aren't the citizen fools we've dealt with before,” said Arcadio. “These are skirmishers from the Greens-- and Paolisto has the strongest Feralcanalian team in the Circuit.”

“Then we shouldn't waste any time lamenting,” said Chalcedon. “We should improve our odds, as best we can.”

I glanced at Arcadio and watched his defiance settle into determination.

“Do you have a plan, Chalcey?” he asked, finally.

“Yes,” he said. “I've-- well-- been preparing for this eventuality. I have weapon loadouts and equipment planned for everyone in our--”

“I'm not giving up the Pikes, Pylon,” growled Arcadio. “I've become excellent with them.”

Pylon gestured angrily.

“I used them before you did, and you know it,” said Arcadio. “What's wrong with Shellbangs? I've seen you use them!”

“You can't be serious, Arcadio,” said Scythia, arms folded. “Shellbangs? Against the arsenal of a Draugur?”

“They're no less effective than Laxx knives,” I said, fairly. “They've got stronger pulse measures, so they might--”

“That's right, Ferro-- take his side,” she spat at me. I winced.

Thrums—yes, I know—but we have time to practice. Finally, I'll be taking Mischief
Grenades. 83

“Chalcey, you can't—”

“Of course I can,” said Chalcedon. “Now, your training has supremacy over all
other Feralcanalia training. The next month and a half will only involve matches between
Red and White, so no one else has urgent need of the training space.”

“What's the stratagem?” asked Scythia, folding her arms.

Chalcedon grimaced. “I am not in favor of it myself, but our greatest chance to tip
the balance. Our strategy must be twofold—when the match starts we must attack the
Draugurs. The penalty is double for attacking a Draugur, but quadrupling pheasant
scores will be a pitance.”

“But—”

“Secondly—we must attack the Keplers. Without hesitation.”

“Why?”

Chalcedon closed his eyes. “So that when they retaliate— the penalty bonus might
push us into victory.”

We all exchanged a look. I felt a squeezing around my heart at the thought of
Razu.

“We have one advantage,” said the Exark. “We start with our weapons— they have

83 Mischief Grenades: Also known as “Clown Bombs”. Mischief Grenades operate on a chance
mechanic. Numerical digits flash across the each explosive. When the skirmisher pulls the pin, the
cycling slows down. When the device lands on a number it will beep three times and explode. A “1”
extlosion creates paper confetti. A “9” releases a shockwave across the arena. Their unpredictability
make them excellent diversions.
to collect their attachments.’’

“As do I,” said Scythia.

“Why caustic bolts?” asked Arcadio, reading from Pylon's Data-Patch.

“If a caustic bolt is aimed properly, it does not aggravate a Kepler,” said Chalcedon. “And while the chemical won't destroy a Kepler, it will make them almost harmless within minutes. I will then target the Keplers with my grenades. Scythia will assemble her Zel. Arcadio and Ferro will attack the Draugurs. By the time the Greens retaliate, enough Keplers will be downed, and our penalties will launch us into victory.”

We all exchanged a look.

“Our chances may be slim,” said our Exark. “But they exist. Let's train hard, and win.”

April 11 1069 TST

Current Balance: 200 Vamps

Along with several other concessions, Moesia convinced our residing Tetrokon to shut down many observational aspects of Maxima. Nothing will be captured, nothing will be recorded. Until the first of June, the city will loosen its grip on stability.

“How?” I asked, sitting in the library. “How did you convince him to do something so crazy?”

Moesia turned a page in Nicholas Tang's magnum opus, The Last Unwritten Poem, and gave a shrug. “I told him it would reassure our players if Caston didn't have
the evidence to convict us of treason. Additionally it will save 2.3 MegaVamps per day, which can go into the DoLe instead. That will cement his approval.”

I scrutinized the page from *Monuments and Mausoleums*, working my way through a convoluted sentence. “What does 'propinquity' mean?”

“Proximity, more or less,” said Moesia, not looking up. “In what context?”

“Dactyl says humans construct their identities around their propinquity to death.”

“Ah,” said Moesia. “Sounds Dactylian.”

“I don't fully understand it.”

“She would be disappointed if you did.”

“Do you understand it?”

Moesia put aside Tang's book. “My interpretation would be thus: human life exists as it is because it will end.”

“What about citizens?”

“There were no citizens in Dactyl's day-- or at least the term had a different connotation.”

She picked up her books and unintended words spilled out of my mouth.

“Do-- do we stand any chance?”

Moesia looked up. “Mazonas has staked everything on the power of our motivation.”

“That's not what I asked.”

“Yes,” she said. “Of course we have a chance.”
“The question for the evening is as follows,” said Arcadio. “What does it mean to be human?”

Arcadio surveyed the buzzing room from his seat, like a sovereign on a throne. He nipped at his Aquatac, pushing his knuckle against the bruise on his cheek from yesterday's practice.

“That's an empty question,” said Shanzo. “We know what it means to be human. Breath, blood, flesh and bone.”

“That's a creative answer,” muttered Leto and several people laughed.

Shanzo stared back defiantly. “It's the right answer, though-- we are the product of our DNA-- at least in great part. It's human to be made up of human form and function.”


The room filled with approving nods. Even Arcadio looked content with that answer. “Those are indeed things we pride ourselves in.”

“What if we discover a civilization with those things, beyond our galactic borders?” asked Phoboz. “Will that alien species be human? Clearly not the Cankerbees or Seraphim-- but some other being with those qualities.”

“You could say they exist in Mozis already,” said Ahza. “Not quite as robustly, but since their evolution is so fast it won't be long until they outpace us in all ways.”

“Then creativity and mercy cannot make us human,” said Arcadio, with a
dramatic slump of the shoulders. He often let his words slosh back and forth in these discussions, until he reached his final conclusion. Scythia described this conclusion as a self-aggrandizing synthesis of the best arguments, presented as his personal philosophy.

“To consider Mozis part of humanity is to forget about our dual surnames,” said Rulog. “Our heritage and our history matters in our identity.”

“Mozis are a part of that tradition though,” said Silk. “We created them-- they are a product of human determination and progress. Even if Mozis could self-maintain and replicate themselves, they are still a product of humanity.”

“These mechanical intelligences are not part of humanity,” shouted Joule. She was on her feet. “Technology changes people-- it divorces them from themselves. You are all very different to me-- but I am becoming like you. Technology does not make you more human, because you have more of it.”

“More human?” asked Isauria. “Surely you're either human or you're not.”

“In comparison to Cankerbees or Seraphim, perhaps,” said Rulog. “But it's an artificially absolute category. There's no dividing line between humans and our common ancestor with monkeys, with other mammals, with reptiles, with birds, with fish, with insects, with bacteria-- we all trace back with a large collection of genetic mutations to account for our diversity. Human is always the current phase of our evolutionary journey.”

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84 People resisted the establishment of two surnames as default nomenclature. Naming people by their biological parents can exclude minority family structures. But the vast majority considered this a fair price to pay-- not from heteronormative prejudice, but due to widespread suspicion of cloning. It was more important to prove oneself as directly descended from other humans than to create a family name. A family, as everyone knows, is not determined by a single name.
“So we are always human, then?” asked Shanzo, whose courage to speak had returned. “No matter how integrated we become with Mozis and SuppliMentals, we are still human?”

“No!” said Joule, adamantly. “When you rely more on objects than on people, you are eroding yourself.”

“An interesting point,” said Arcadio. “But we've been using tools for more than ten thousand years-- even the Circle of Gaia had tools-- surely you don't believe human means naked and unequipped.”

Joule opened and closed her mouth several times, then took a deep breath. “There is a point, Arcadio Leontius-Alwar-- a point where we are no longer what we want to be. The gradual nature of our development may blind us-- but if you think a Tetrokon and a fossilized Homo Habilis are the same kind of human-- then this world has consumed your reason.”

“Death,” I said, a whisper among the rising voices.

“What's that, gemstone?”

“Death,” I said, standing up. “That's the dividing point.”

Arcadio chuckled, “Okay, Ferro, relax. We know that corpses are no longer human.”

“Not dying, you idiot,” I said. “Death itself-- it's a fear of dying that drives us to explore and learn. You don't have to be an explorer or a scholar to be human-- but if we stop worrying about our mortality-- that's when we are no longer human.”

Arcadio sat up on his throne and put down his glass. He contemplated me.
“So you believe we are no longer human when we become citizens,” he said, slowly.

“I didn't say that,” I replied, quickly. “You can still be a citizen and think about death-- but--” I took a deep breath, hoping that Moesia really had shut down all observational systems. “But it's easier for citizens to become inhuman than denizens. There's a reason immortals from ancient mythologies have to be respected and feared-- because they are no longer like us-- not really.”

Arcadio watched me and only looked away when Isauria spoke. “You've been arguing with an implicit judgment already in place, and you know it. You're assuming it's inherently better to be human than-- non-human.”

“Rather than Cankerbees, or Seraphim, or sheep or Keplers?” asked Rulog. “Yeah, you're right. We think human is superior.”

A few scattered laughs, but some, like Tarilla and Pantoum had furrowed their brows.

“Humanity is a rhetorical weapon,” said Isauria. “You can use it to unite-- to draw attention to common cause, consequence and compassion-- but we've moved beyond a world where we can only use it for unity-- we're now using it to draw lines among ourselves.”

“And that's human, Isauria,” I said. “That's what we are. Categorizing beasts. It's how we make sense of a world beyond our proper comprehension.”

Arcadio rose to his feet. “It seems we won't find an answer, no matter how many words we spill on the question. We know humanity is an artificial category, but it is our
greatest asset-- it contains all our evil and clemency-- it contains potential. It's a fluid thing that spills into our creation and resides in our ancestors-- but it's the paradigm of self-consideration. Thank you all-- I adjourn this session. See you all tomorrow.”

I was just jotting down these last incidents of the meeting when I heard the gentle knock on my door, and watched Arcadio enter. Joule was already asleep, her soft snores sweeping the dormitory.

“You should be in bed,” I whispered. “We have a double training session tomorrow.”

He looked off balance. “May I join you, just for a while?”

I moved over and he climbed into bed next to me. I kissed him on the forehead, but he didn't seem to notice. “What's wrong?”

“Do-- do you despise me, Ferro?”

I saw pleading in his eyes and embraced him. “How can you think that? Of course I don't.”

“I'm not good to you, am I?”

“You-- you are, I promise!”

“Do you resent my desire to achieve citizenship?”

I tilted my head. “Is that what this is about? Because of what I said about citizens?”

“I don't want to surrender my humanity,” he said. “Scythia says I lost it a long time ago--”
“Don't listen to her,” I instructed. “Your desire is proof of your humanity.”

“I'm terrified of death,” he said. “My fear consumes me. Every moment in the Nucleus my mind is full of noise.”

“But you're so practical when you're fighting.”

“It's the only way I keep my mind in one piece, Ferro-- the only way I stay sane is by performing at my best. It's a perverse hope that excellence will reward me-- I know that's crazy.”

“I-- I don't know what to suggest,” I mumbled. “I don't think you can escape it--”

“Not unless I become a citizen--”

“I think you have to come to terms with this fear.”

Arcadio shivered. “I wish I was more like you, Ferro. How do you find your courage?”

I covered my mouth so that my laugh wouldn't wake Joule. “What courage?”

“You manage to face the Nucleus, time after time-- and you're not a fighter.”

“Aren't you complimentary tonight.”

“That's not a criticism. It's true. You're a scholar. You read hard books-- you talk with our captain about philosophical political questions! To be what you are not and excel-- that takes a strength I just don't have. I'm a fighter-- that's all I have and it will be my death.”

I hugged him close to me. “It won't.”

“It will,” said Arcadio, dully.

“Moesia will change the rules if we win and--”
“And I'll stay,” said Arcadio. “I'll keep going until I reach immortality. It's that simple.”

“But you'll live longer if you leave!”

“But I wouldn't live forever,” said Arcadio. “If I leave, time will erase my presence from this earth and I'll fade from memory. Death will make me moot-- and that deadens me, Ferro.”

We fell silent and after many minutes I felt him calming down and drift off to sleep. I crept out of the room, and went over to the Moscow dormitory to finish the entry.

“You're crazy, you know that?” said Leto, looking up from her Data-Patch, unsurprised at my bed switch. “To stay with a megalomaniac like him.”

My fingers are sore from writing all of this. One last question, to trouble my dreams tonight-- is there any way that I can save Arcadio from the human condition?

April 29, 1069 TST

Current Balance: 344 Vamps

Poux Hoburo-Kryzpas, Caston's senior Bellitant, has moved into the Green barracks. With just a month to go, he's here on his commander's orders. The reason I know this is because Kryzpas asked me for an interview today, in Axapada's quarters.

“Please take a seat, Valenz,” said Kryzpas, without looking up from his plate of biscuits.

I lowered myself onto the velvet cushion.
“You are here by invitation,” said Kryzpas, dabbing at the crumbs on his lower lip and turning his purple eyes to me. “But before your meeting, I have some questions and conditions. Then I can escort you into the Celadon Barracks.”

I felt I was being cordially invited into a trap, but Moesia had approved me to come, so it couldn't be too dangerous.

“Is this an invitation from my sister?” I asked.

“What is your relationship to Brevity Barr-Valenz?”

“I just told you, she's my sister.”

“Are you-- close?”

“It's complicated.”

One of Axapada's human servants85 entered with a selection of soups. Dabbing his lips, he chose the blue tomato soup, then turned back to me.

“Blame this rustic interview on your false Tetrokon,” muttered Kryzpas. “Shutting down observational systems-- what an aberration.”

“Why are you letting me in at all?” I asked. “If your secret stratagems are really in such jeopardy?”

Kryzpas grimaced. “It is not my decision, Valenz. Contact between the teams is a fool's errand in both directions. Mazonas thinks you can convince the Greens to give up or to throw the match-- Tetrokon Caston believes the same in reverse.”

I watched Kryzpas pour himself a glass of wine before returning to me. “May I

85 The tradition of human servants persists among citizens and denizens of Earth, so enamoured by the past that they overlook the superiority of Weber-tech assistants. I suppose it is a way for denizens like Axapada to disinguish themselves from their fellow denizens-- creating class where there should be none.
ask you what your thoughts are, in regards to this struggle?”

It was such a confusingly direct question. “Naturally I have no thoughts, sir.”

“A good attempt, but try again.”

I appreciated that he wasn't smiling. “I intend to win, Bellitant Kryzpas. I have no personal allegiance to Mazonas, but since I have been chosen, I must do everything I can. If I lose, I will likely find retribution from Tetrokon Caston, regardless of my thoughts.”

“I see,” said Kryzpas. He tasted a mouthful of the blue tomato soup, then stood up. “This way, then.”

It was an increasingly awkward walk to the Green Barracks. Before long we were descending an elevator, walking down a hall almost identical to the one I knew so well, and entering a chamber filled with blossoming shrubbery. Brevity sat cross legged at a low table, sipping at a steam coated Aquatac of tea. Captain Vark paced behind her.

“You cleared him as no risk?” asked Vark, mechanical fingers flexing.

Kryzpas shrugged. “He's clever enough not to snoop around, but will happily use any information he gathers against you.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Would you like anything to eat or drink?” demanded Vark.

“No.”

“Then close your mouth and let your sister talk.”

I sat down across from Brev, and noticed the medallion glittering on her circuiteer scarf, a reward for breaking a circuiteering record. I saw exhaustion in her face, the dulled drive in her eyes.
Her expression reminded me of breakfasts shared long ago, after she had spent the night tinkering rather than sleeping. Quill and I would take turns, trying to make her tell us what she was working on. But she always just shook her head, with a smile. She would tell us when she was done.

“I heard about your Dectur,” she said. “I'm-- I'm so sorry.”

I stiffened. “Why did you invite me here, Brev?”

“I don't want you to die.”

“Is that so?”

“Ferro--”

“I know why you brought me here-- just say it.”

Brevity's hand quivered on her Aquatac. “You can end this-- without losing your friends-- yourself-- or Arcadio.”

“You're under some illusion, Brev. I'm just a skirmisher-- and if I refuse to participate, someone will take my place.”

Brev chewed her lower lip, then turned to Vark and Kryzpas. “I'd like to talk to him privately.”

Kryzpas walked to the door. Vark looked at him in surprise.

“It might be time for you to trust your own circuiteers, captain. She isn't feeble of mind.”

“Of course she isn't,” said Vark. “I-- you're right.”

We didn't say anything for a while. A frog was croaking in a hidden pond. Insects buzzed, and a sweet nectar hung in the air.
“I know you have Moesia's ear,” said Brevity. “You could persuade her, if you wanted to.”

“What are you talking about, Brev?”

“I know that you're reading Penelope Dactyl-- that you and Arcadio host little political evenings, and--”

I rose to my feet. “Who have you been talking to?”

She wouldn't look at me. “I've-- just been trying to stay updated with your latest--”

“Who have you been talking to?”

“Sonata.”

My jaw tightened. “What's wrong with you, Brevity? Why don't you contact me if you want to hear about my life? Why are you such a freak?”

“Ferro, that's--”

“I haven't seen you in months, Brevity, and the only reason you invite me here is so you can manipulate me into betraying my team, my friends-- my cause? Do you realize how twisted that is?”

Her shoulders began to shake, but I didn't care.

“Do you know who you're fighting for, Brev? Fulvio Xanomel-Caston's decree forcibly sterilized Mum. Did you know that? She lives-- unemployed and miserable-- trying to forget us, Brev. That's what you're advocating. That's what Caston means.”

Brevity turned away from me, crying.

“How much are they paying you to corrupt me?”
“Stop. Please Ferro-- stop.”

“We're done here, Brev.”

“They wouldn't let me speak to you-- unless-- unless I tried to--”

“I'm not surprised that--”

“I wanted to talk to you Ferro. Please believe me-- I just-- I--”

I closed my eyes. “Yeah. I know.”

“Caston-- he-- he would protect those who declared their allegiance for him. If someone could get Moesia to forfeit, he would give them whatever they wanted. He promised GigaVamps. Ferro, if you do this-- you could become a Gaozian. N-no one would have to get hurt.”

“Brev--”

“I don't want to watch you in the Nucleus and-- and hope that you fail. I can't. Please.”

“You know I can't--”

“This isn't about winning or losing-- you can't face those Draugurs.” She swallowed. “I've watched Paolisto train in the gel, controlling the Draugurs. Living with a traitor's shame is better than not living at all.”

I rubbed my forehead against the palm of my hand. “If I die before we see each other--”

“Ferro, please--”

“I love you, Brev. Remember that.”

She pleaded that I cut some sort of deal to save myself, but I stepped out into the
hallway, nodded at Kryzpas, and followed him out of the barracks.

“You're not the first,” said Moesia, pacing from her bed to her desk. “And you won't be the last.”

“Is this how Caston intends to win?” I asked

Moesia glanced at me. “Would you mind not sitting with your feet on my bed?”

“Oh, sorry.”

I uncrossed my legs and scooted to the edge of the duvet.

“Even when Caston has the advantage he wants to improve his odds. Not surprising in a former Bellitant.” Moesia leaned against her desk. “Caston stipulated if enough players on a team forfeited, the whole match would be automatically forfeit. The Greens would prefer not to fight us with Draugurs-- they want to defeat us in fair combat, in equally funded races.”

“Then why can't we convince them--”

She took a deep breath. “Kryzpas put together binding contracts for all circuiteers and skirmishers who will compete-- contracts to grant funds and Draugurs, but also to outline the punishments for failure, or for forfeit.”

Moesia closed her eyes. “It's the reason we cannot let Caston win-- it's why our cause is righteous. He has had a special poison implanted in each circuiteer and skirmisher-- one that can activate in the moment between Caston's hypothetical loss and Mazonas's assumption of power. The poison does not kill quickly, but it cannot be reversed.”
Mori: The Mortal Gambit

My throat constricted.

“He will motivate them with mortal fear, and with the horror of causing the death of friends. He sickens me, Ferro.”

“But-- but we can't-- Brevity will--”

“You should see her again, and say goodbye,” said Moesia, quietly. “It is likely that you will never see each other again, after this match. One way or another.”

“Moesia, we can't-- we can't kill every member of the Greens just for the sake of--”

“Ferro, pull yourself together,” snapped Moesia. “Use your mind. If we don't win Caston will steer humanity towards extinction. His victory will not only cost us our lives-- but the lives of so many more. He will push the final breath out of earth's potential-- he will standardize, corporatize and restructure the purpose of humans within the Cardinal Federation. I cannot live, failing to defend the one citizen willing to stand up for us. I choose a death befitting my life.”

“I cannot kill my sister, Moesia!”

Moesia clenched her jaw. “What do you suggest, Ferro? Would you like me to surrender?”

I stared at the ground, eyes hot. “No.”

My captain stared at the notebook open on her desk. “Please leave me now. I have a meeting with Turbo, and need some time to refocus my thoughts.”

Training today was a disaster, and I knew it. Chalcedon dismissed me early and
Mori: The Mortal Gambit

I've just been writing. I've tried to deny it, but just the sight of a Lupothanatos is rekindling memories of the Pit-- of Quill's death. Each time the practice Draugur attacks I think of Razu, my limbs grow weak, and I feel nauseous.

What can I do? I cannot stand against a system crafted to gradually eliminate human agency. I have to accept this dark world around me-- live and die by sincerity, and hope my choices have positive influences-- even if they're already predetermined.

Being able to do nothing well, I will do everything poorly. I'm so afraid.

May 5, 1069 TST

Current Balance: -23 Vamps

“The most notorious tactic of the tyrant is making people ambivalent about their political agency. The tyrant who governs so effectively that no one feels the need to rise up in revolt is almost not a tyrant at all.”

--Penelope Dactyl, from The Tyrant's Frying Pan

I wish I knew what to do about my nightmares. Arcadio says push them down or better yet, use them to make myself stronger. My mind isn't built that way.

Chalcedon has procured a third Draugur for practice. Isuria, Silk and Leto are piloting them. I'm horrified to say that the three of them are more than a match for the five of us.

“Let's try again,” called Chalcedon, picking himself up and massaging his
shoulder. “Pylon, aim for the dominant arm on the Draugurs-- that'll be right for everyone except Borax-- he'll be left handed. Ferro, you need to block them from their weapon panels.”

Grimacing, I tightened my Nitro Skates and returned to my position. On Chalcedon's word we all launched ourselves forward. Silk immediately rushed at me, shoulder first. I evaded, drew a knife and stabbed it into the Draugur's calf. Silk whipped around and knocked me off my feet, but I kept a grip on my chain. I pulled myself up, attached the chain end into my launcher with another knife and shot it into the leg of Isauria's Draugur. The serrated edges in both directions held fast in the metallic flesh, sending out pulses with each tug.

“Good one, Ferro!” shouted Arcadio, skates kicking up sparks as he turned and slammed his pike through a Draugur's arm. Unfortunately Leto had dodged Pylon's bolts and picked up the gattling gun. In an instant, training bullets slammed into me, throwing me onto the ground again. Arcadio dodged the barrage only to be hit in the stomach by Silk's Draugur.

Chalcedon called a ceasefire, and started reminding Pylon about taking her shots slowly.

“She knows,” shouted Arcadio, suppressing a groan as he stood up. “Let's just get to it.”

We all knew that these bruises and cuts would be nothing in comparison to the damage we would sustain in the Nucleus. Our Squadmates were not aiming to kill.
“Do you have your questions prepared for tonight?” I asked Arcadio, walking back to the dormitories with him, after dinner.

“I’m not going tonight,” said Arcadio, stepping through the Moscow door and collapsing onto his bed. He had gone to Magari after training, to make sure Silk's attack hadn't left any damage. He still seemed subdued, despite the Stitcher's healthy verdict.

“Leto can host.”

“Arcadio--”

“I'm tired,” he muttered. A few strands of his hair fell across his cheekbones. I sat down next to him, slipping my fingers between his. I watched the cotton of his shirt rise and fall with his breathing.

“I wanted to ask about how humanity will end,” he said, eventually. “Should we mourn the eventuality that our system will make us obsolete-- and gently exterminate us over the passage of a few centuries? But I can't do it. Not tonight.”

“Why not?”

He opened his eyes, just a bit. “Because I still can't face a Draugur without it knocking me across the floor.”

“We'll figure out a way.”

“We're going to die, and there's no escape.”

He let go of my hand and stared up at the ceiling.

“You know what I think?” I asked.

“What?”

“Thinking about the purpose of humanity is wrong. That's a citizen's mindset.”
“Oh?” said Arcadio.

“Humanity is not an objective achieved by running the Cardinal Federation optimally. It's the means-- it's how we live. Perhaps we compromise by economizing welfare-- by structurally preventing the rise of local warlords-- but our intent should be to let human life grow without determining exactly what form it has to take.”

Arcadio sighed. “Is that Dactyl speaking again?”

“No,” I said, quietly. “That's just me.”

He turned onto his side. “Go explain it to Caston, convince him with your rhetoric.”

“It's moot,” I said. “Even if Mazonas takes the Tetrokonity-- it would last no more than twenty years-- and then we would return to the long slide into oblivion.”

“Unless we escape our mortality.”

“Arcadio-- we are mortal. We are going to die, and you have to accept that.”

Arcadio sat up and stared at me. “All your talk of compassion-- and you treat my deepest fear as a fanciful notion.”

“Arcadio--”

“Get out of here. You know I would do anything for you, but you won't even support me with your words. I don't want to see you right now.”

“Arcadio, please don't be--”

“Out!”

Trembling, I turned and walked out of the room.
I don't know how to articulate the thought tingling in the back of my mind. It's the smallest germ of an idea. I just wish Arcadio didn't hate me so much. I wish I was better for him. It's just-- I don't know. I'll think of something.

Just over three weeks until the match. Three weeks to meet with destiny. We'll see what tomorrow might bring.

May 16, 1069 TST

Today Mazonas invited us all into the City Prefect's residence to made a statement with every skirmisher and circuiteer competing for him present.

“We stand on the cusp of something grand,” said Mazonas. “In mere days the fate of Atem-- of Helios-- of Earth-- shall be given new words. We understand how vital Earth is to our very existence. Earth holds all the collected history that created the mighty Cardinal Federation. I intend to set a new precedent in which we honor our heritage and remember the humble roots that grew such magnificent canopies.”

Mazonas took a deep breath, then smiled. “The matter is simple: I am a Tetrokon for you-- I put my own life in the balance. If I die, I die for you. I shall revitalize Earth-- prepare it for greater commerce with the outer Provinces-- to open a Trebuchet Station86 in orbit around Venus. My faith in the potential of your planet has no boundaries. I hope to earn your trust-- and repay you for it. May fortune smile upon Earth-- upon Atem--

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86 Trebuchet Station: Unlike a Petrobulos-Class quantum teleportation unit, a Trebuchet Station permits multiple incoming and outgoing vessels simultaneously, without risk of cross-entanglement. Their cost so prohibitive that only twenty four exist even today.
upon the Federation. Thank you.”

The Vica closed down, reattaching itself to the wall and uploading its data.

Moesia stepped forward and tapped Mazonas on the shoulder. He recoiled angrily, then blinked and calmed himself.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I am not used to spontaneous bodily contact.”

“My apologies,” said Moesia. “I was just curious about this Trebuchet Station.

What is the boon to Helios if you--”

“Commerce,” said Mazonas, heartily. “Helios lies between several larger systems and if we redirect the Magellan Trebuchet, we will allow recharging ships to visit the solar system and increase trade. Earth will return to its rightful position in the crown of the Federation.”

Moesia grimaced. “I don't know if greater commerce will serve the interests of my fellow denizens, sir.”

“Certainly it will,” said Mazonas. “The increased tax revenue will extend the Dole and keep people contented. You'll feel the effects before my reign is over.”

“I see,” said our captain. “Well, we must return to our barracks-- we must prepare for--”

“I'd actually like to keep you all here for a moment,” said Mazonas, turning his attention to all of us. “There's a little treat I would like to offer you all-- a much abridged tour of that which you are protecting. Join me in my private carriage on the Tropic Rail.”

My mouth slid open. Many circuiteers were cheering, and Moesia didn't protest. Mazonas led us down onto the lower floors of the Prefect's residence where the walls
shifted between scenes of battle between the Bulgars and the Romans\textsuperscript{87}. The tiles smelled of peaches. A glowing line led straight to the open train carriage and we stepped inside.

“This is why you should want to be a citizen,” mumbled Arcadio.

Silken curtains fell gracefully across bay windows. Each seat boasted a plump, tasseled pillow. The gentle rug occasionally altered its pattern, creating an optical lure for the wandering eye. The hint of old fashioned spirits wafted throughout the carriage. Human servants walked among us, guiding us to seats and asking what we would like to drink.

“Definitely more luxurious than a Maxport,” grinned Sonata.

The sweet hiss of the engine pulled the train car through a dark tunnel, faster and faster. I wondered if Mazonas intended to impress us with his wealth. But in the next moment my thoughts rushed away as the rail curved up and took us through Maxima along the raised track.

Sunlight made the glossy curvatures of tall edifices shine. In every direction stretched the municipal panoply of metal and chlorophyll. The patchwork of cleangrass\textsuperscript{88} and solar panels wrapped around the neighborhoods and park districts. It was my home. Maxima was my cradle. I was leaving the city, for the first time.

The train shot along the rail, out above the ocean. The water rippled in waves over the submerged expanses of verdant algae farms, occasionally interrupted by ribs of pink coral. In mere minutes Maxima was out of sight and we were surrounded by the

\textsuperscript{87} These battles took place more than 3000 years ago, but artists in the 11\textsuperscript{th} Century TST read symbolism into the many battles between these two Iron Age tribes.

\textsuperscript{88} Cleangrass: Slang for plant based Omes used to absorb industrial gases and turn them into pure oxygen.
“I find it useful, sometimes,” said Mazonas with a smile. “To see the grandeur of our world-- and remember how small we are in comparison.”

The aquatic farms became fewer as Maxima grew further away. A small window panel opened just enough to let us smell the raw flavor of the ocean.

“Wow,” mumbled Scythia, her breath creating translucency on the glass.

The carriage veered left as the rail split, taking us towards the continent. We raced past cities, all humble compared with Maxima. Beyond the cities stretched fields of Ome crops-- a multicolored blur at our speed. Then the fields gave way to real forests. I’m not talking about park districts, but a wealth of foliage that rippled up and down the gentle slopes of the countryside.

We travelled deeper inland, the track racing up and cutting a path through the grandeur of the mountain range. Each mountain wore a cloak of brunellia trees with occasional jutting clumps of pure stone. Snow crusted upon the highest peaks. We only began to slow down once the landforms surrounded us completely.

There was food, but it was forgettable. Mazonas spoke words of inspiration, which I ignored. When the doors opened at the platform I was the first to step out into the pungent air. I wished Joule was here. She deserved it more than city scum like me. I walked out into the undulating stalks of grass and let the wind ruffle my hair.

“Are you okay, Ferro?”

I turned to Arcadio.

“It's amazing, isn't it?”
Arcadio nodded slowly. “I suppose so.”

“Perhaps it doesn't compare to orbiting around Jupiter, but this is so—”

“So… what?”

I shook my head. “I didn't know such places still existed.”

“Are you really that surprised? These mountains belong to the active Tetrokon. No one would dare disturb their tranquility.”

I can't explain what fascinated me so much-- why I wandered off and found a place to sit down in the grass and take in the landscape. It wasn't logical, in any way. Mazonas had partially accomplished his goal. He was showing me what I am fighting for.

The vista kindled a new desire in me-- not to simply find a Gaozian club to call home, but to travel-- to see the various corners of the earth with my own eyes, not a Vica's lens. It still doesn't make sense to me-- it was Quill who liked playing on the street and in the park district, not me. I had preferred the tranquility of the library. The placidity here was on a different scale.

“Ready to go?” Sonata asked me, a few hours later. The sun was touching the mountain ranges now, making the snowcaps shine.

“Have you ever seen-- something like this?” I asked, voice hoarse.

“I saw a desert once,” said Sonata, and I saw both sadness and happiness in her eyes. “My father won a second tier prize in the vacation lottery-- we went up to the Mojave Sands for a few days. They preserve the wildlife there-- I saw animal tracks in the sand.”
“Wild animals?”

“Wild evolutionaries,” said Sonata. “I imagine this ecosystem boasts many fantastic Ome herds-- Eusebio said he saw a chinchilla but that was probably just his faulty imagination.”

The mention of the circuiteer's name brought me back into my reality. “Have things improved with-- I'm sorry, I haven't checked in with you recently about--”

Sonata laughed. “I've moved on, Ferro.”

“That's great!”

“Mend and I have started some tentative coupling, and we'll see if something develops there.”

I blinked. “Mend? You're coupling with a Beast Fighter?”

“Do you have a problem with that, gemstone?”

“Funny,” I said. “He seems nice enough-- I haven't spent that much time with him.”

“Though I wasn't looking for your approval, I appreciate the feedback,” said Sonata, rubbing a grin from her cheeks. “But since I'm a better friend, I'll keep my thoughts about Arcadio to myself.”

“What thoughts about Arcadio?”

“That he's using you as an emotional outlet for his professional failures, that's all.”

I rolled my eyes. “Come, let's get back to the carriage.”

“That's the extent of your reaction?”

“You mean well, Sonata-- but you don't understand him the way I do.”
“He bullied you for months! He made you miserable!”

“He's made his amends-- people can change, and everyone is worthy of love.”

“You're absolutely insane,” said Sonata.

“How much is my sister paying you, by the way?”

Sonata froze. “She's not paying me. She's bringing me as a guest to the next sponsor dinner. I didn't think you'd mind.”

I shook my head. “I just thought you might tell me about it.”

“I didn't want you to get angry with your sister.”

Insects were chirping on the evening air. The smell of warm grass filled my nostrils, pushing its way into my brain.

“I'm not angry. Not anymore.”

“Come on,” said Sonata. “We don't want to keep our Tetrokon waiting.”

May 25, 1069 TST

I shouldn't write this down. Chances are that I will fail, or I will be discovered, or some other effect of misfortune-- but I have to be committed.

Moesia was sitting in the library, examining several blueprints of the Trebuchet project on an extended Data-Patch.

“Is everything all right, Moesia?”

She looked up, running her fingers through her hair. “I'm fine, Ferro. I want to make the case to Mazonas to backtrack on his proposal.”
“About making Helios a trade hub, you mean?”

“I fear it would change Earth profoundly-- I've seen the planets in Centauri systems-- the denizens don't thrive there-- trading vessels blot out the star as they recharge their quantum rotors. Distant investors snatch away private land, crowding the few property holding denizens out of event that, but--”

“But the Cardinal Federation cannot consider Earth a valuable, strategic asset if it remains an isolated backwater,” I said.

“Precisely,” replied Moesia. “It's paradoxical but I want Earth to be important enough to need no Trebuchet station-- which is, of course, ridiculous.”

I couldn't tell her that I had reached a similar conclusion. “I-- had a request for you, Moesia.” I cleared my throat. “May-- may I visit my sister-- one last time?”

Moesia closed her Data-Patch. “Are you sure?”

I swallowed. “It might upset me and distract me but-- I need to.”

Moesia nodded slowly. “I didn't intend to let anyone visit each other any more-- the stakes are too high now. But I trust your judgment, Ferro. If this is the right thing for you-- then go.”

“Thank you, Moesia,” I said. “I-- I won't be gone long, I promise.”

Lazuli hurled negative opinions of my decision at me while I ascended to Axapada's quarters. The smell of polished oak planks and cold porphyry tiles greeted me, as did a placid Kepler. I told it whom I was here to meet, and the Kepler led me to the dining room, to find Kryzpas.

He stood with his spine at an angle, examining a selection of cheeses. His green
robes billowed as he turned to face his visitor.

“Auxiliary Valenz,” he said, mildly surprised. “I do not recall an invitation from your sister.”

I wrapped my nervous hands around the back of one of the chairs. The observational systems had been muzzled. If I was going to speak, this was my chance. “I'm-- not here to speak with my sister. I would like to speak with Tetrokon Caston.”

Kryzpas almost smiled, but caught himself. “But why do you think he would want to speak with you?”

“But because-- because I can help him win his match on the first of June.”

Kryzpas lifted a stewed plum out of a small metal pot with chopsticks, placed it on the small mound of goat's cheese, then lifted the combination to his mouth. I could feel my pulse throbbing in my throat. Kryzpas swallowed, then looked at me with cold eyes.

“Your surrender is hardly a matter for the Tetrokon himself to deal with.”

“I don't intend to surrender,” I said. “I said-- I will help him win. I will sabotage my team-- and guarantee victory for the Greens in the Feralcanalia match.”

Kryzpas nodded slowly. “Very interesting. I've contacted our Tetrokon on the matter, but speaking with me will more than suffice, as his most trusted Bellitant, I--”

Kryzpas broke off. “It seems I was wrong. He is on his way.”

I stared at the blurred outline of my reflection in the glossy wood of the tabletop. My lip was bleeding a little from the imprint of my teeth-- I wiped it away with a napkin, tasting the iron.
Within minutes, Caston strode into the chamber, arriving from whatever room housed Axapada's Nepyth's Panel.

“Ferrolentius Barr-Valenz,” he said, approaching me in his black garments. He was almost two and a half meters tall—though of course all citizens are larger than the average denizen. “Brother of the great circuiteer. You know your sister petitioned me to forgive you, even if you did not surrender. Naturally that was out of the question— but she'll be glad you have come to your senses.”

“I'm not here to surrender, sir-- I am here to negotiate.” My mouth felt like paper. “I have a compromise in mind.”

I could see centuries in Caston's irises, and beyond the icy blue I saw his augmented presence. “Yes, Poux informed me that you were proposing sabotage. But do not speak to me as you would to that pretender. You are fortunate to live in this world, thanks to the tolerant stewardship of those like me. Speak with respect.”

I had to stay focused or my anxiety would betray me. “I will not grovel-- I am going to deal with you as an equal-- as a fellow resident of the Cardinal Federation.”

“I am speaking to you at all as a favor to your sister and you--”

“If we agree, you cannot tell her that we met.”

What do you want?” sneered Caston, folding his arms.

“I want independence,” I said.

“You want me to break your contract?”

“No,” I said. “I want you to authorize the secession of the planet Earth and the Helios System from the Cardinal Federation.”
Caston leaned back in his seat. “So you are the envoy Salutis sent. I predicted she might pursue this avenue-- but the odds were certainly against it. But why would she send you?”

“Moesia didn't send me, sir. I am here by myself.”

“How fascinating,” purred Caston. “You are a nobody-- an average auxiliary-- but perhaps a disciple of your Captain. You are here to bargain for Earth's future all by yourself.”

I cleared my throat, unable to meet his penetrating gaze. “The Cardinal Federation and Earth no longer share the same values. We don't want to exist as a reluctant cost to your objectives of expansion and colonization. Helios should be under no jurisdiction except its own.”

Caston laughed. “What about the many people who desire the continued importation of Keplers, Webers, Mozis and Omes? Do you realize how you will shatter the stability we have worked so hard to establish?”

“Yes. But until we throw off the Federation, we can't regain our humanity.”

“You deluded fool,” said Caston. “Don't you realize that the Federation protects humanity? That's why we fight the Cankerbees and the Seraphim-- that's why we outsource rudimentary tasks to our automata-- for the sake of humans like you. I already have my immortality. By optimizing the system, I am opening the gates of citizenship to more denizens. Humanity has always been and will always be preserved by advancement.”

Caston's very presence made it difficult to breathe. “Maybe that model works for
the Federation-- but not for us. I'd rather let Earth face its frailties than become an artifact to be preserved. In exchange for a guarantee of your Province-- you will give up one solitary solar system.”

Caston sighed. “To argue these points would be for your benefit, not mine. My intelligence has already debated the issue internally, and I know everything you are going to assert. You cannot convince me to ascribe to your philosophy. Your philosophy is wrong-- even in its best articulated form.”

“But I can--”

“Silence, Valenz. You are fortunate, because I am pragmatic. I do not care about Earth. The planet has little inherent value to the continuation of the Federation. Helios does not export much energy. My reputation might even rise if I remove the usurping tyrant Mazonas but give Helios its freedom. But while I know the Federation would excel if we were not constantly dragging the weight of our past-- I do not want to be the Tetrokon who fumbled his imperium and lost the home system-- I don't want a denizen to make a fool out of me.”

“But my sabotage can guarantee--”

“Ah yes-- the guarantee component. You see, my predictions place the likelihood of my victory at ninety one percent, entirely without your intervention. Your grandiose offer is almost worthless.”

My eyes felt warm around the edges. “I'm not offering you victory from scratch-- I'm just helping you close the gap. I'm offering to let you watch the match, unperturbed.”

“You are one auxiliary, in the fourth of five events-- you may never even impact
the outcome if my side wins the first three rounds.”

“But-- but I-- I know you won't win the fourth event-- we know how to stop your Draugurs.”

My bluff left Caston mildly amused. “Is that so? Then I will make a proposal to you, which will reflect our circumstances. If your event is relevant to the match-- if your team wins at least one of the first three events-- then we will have the beginning of a bargain.”

“I don't--”

“Furthermore-- you must prove to me that your side will win the event. In other words, you must be in an undeniable position to achieve a Blue victory-- and only then will I take your betrayal of your teammates as validation of your side of the contract.”

My lips became very dry. “But-- but that-- that's going to be--”

“Difficult, yes,” purred Caston. “But so is shrinking my territory. This way your promise is tangibly advantageous-- you will give me something worthwhile.”

“If I manage to prove that and then-- sabotage my team-- what will stop you from saying we would have lost either way?”

Caston smiled. “I will accept a consensus from the three commentators. No doubt the score and their remarks will make it obvious.”

I swallowed. “Then I'll tell you my demands-- in the event that I am successful.”

Caston sighed. “I will tell you your demands, because I can predict them better than you can speak them. One: protection for your teammates and other denizens of Earth from any reprisals. Two, you want me to promptly turn over supreme authority of
Helios to...shall we say Earth's secretary of planetary affairs? A good stopgap until you draft a system wide constitution and hold elections. Three, you want to protect all property in the system. Four, you want me to pay for repossessing the Array Signal Ring--"

"But--"

"Don't interrupt me, Valenz, I'm willing to pay a portion. You will need some money in the system's treasury-- my reputation can only be salvaged if your project succeeds. Sixth, you want me to promise not to interfere, including putting rules of immigration in the hands of your Helios government. And of course, you want me to abide by all rules in good faith, and not exploit loopholes, as you will abide by all rules in good faith as well."

Had his SuppliMentals really known exactly what I was going to ask? The thought of isolation to pre-Cardinal boundaries was unnerving. I reminded myself that it was what I wanted-- that the solar system was fully self-sufficient. It was only if we wanted to operate automatons and run full computing systems and maintain a fleet simultaneously that we would need outside assistance.

"Could your successor reclaim Helios?"

"Not legally-- we would have a treaty, so my successor will have no claim."

"Then there's one other thing I want."

Caston raised an eyebrow. "I came up with dozens of lower probability demands, so I am curious which one you will ask for."

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89 Secretary for Planetary Affairs: The highest title a denizen can hold.
“It's-- Mazonas.”

“No,” said Caston, coldly. “He is mine and will suffer for his treachery.”

“Please don't,” I said. “Please-- let him live on Earth as a mortal-- revoke his citizenship and-- and give it to someone else.”

A flicker of interest crossed the Tetrokon's face. “But citizenship will have no meaning in Helios, if your plan comes to fruition. Why would you wish to become immortal for the few days it will take to remove the Array Signal Ring?”

“It's-- not for me. It's for my-- my philoux.”

“You would have me give eternity to your lover? This is affection indeed.”

“I-- I would like to-- to be the one to give it to him myself,” I said, cheeks hot with embarrassment. “So that--”

“That can be arranged,” said Caston. “Then Mazonas will be my mortal prisoner-- disappointing but I will accept.”

I lowered my eyes.

“Anything else?”

“The Greens won't be harmed right?”

“If they win-- even if it is with your help, they will be safe.”

“Then there's nothing else.”

“Very well,” said Caston. “I will take the Nepthys Panel to Chiron and communicate our treaty to the Array. Wait here and Kryzpas will give you the proposition-- for you to confirm the terms and conditions. Once you approve it, you will

90 Philoux: A word with no single definition. It means lover, source of joy, greatest anxiety, companion, all in one.
return to your barracks.”

Without another word, Caston left. I sank into my chair. My body felt vastly empty.

I had to lie to Moesia about a falsified encounter with Brevity-- but my tears were real enough. It's not the first time I've cried for shame. I sat alone in the meadow, and hours went by before Arcadio nudged me.

“Chalcedon is furious that you've spent the whole day moping,” he said. “Come on, we can practice our stratagem together for another two hours before dinner.”

I stared up at the delicacy in his eyes. I knew I couldn't tell him, but I wanted to.

“Was-- was seeing your sister worthwhile?” he managed, massaging his neck.

“I'm sure it was very difficult, but was it at least--”

I nodded. “Arcadio-- I need you to spend all your money on equipment for the match.”

He blinked.

“Ferro, you know I can't--”

“You can, Arcadio. Please. I need to know that you will survive. If we win our match I can make you a citizen.”

He scoffed. “Is that so?”

“Trust me-- okay?”

“If you have a way, tell me now-- that will definitely motivate me.”

“But if I tell you-- the chance will evaporate-- understand?”
Arcadio took a deep breath. “How much do you want me to spend?”

“I don't care how much-- I just want you to have the best equipment you can,” I said.

He nodded. “Okay.”

I stood up and kissed him. My kiss was clumsy, and a little too fierce, but he wrapped his arms around me and asked no questions.

May 28, 1069 TST

Penelope Dactyl says revolutionary narratives are often lies. Governments formed on the overthrow of the previous regime always argue that their rebellion was singularly righteous. Successful rebels rarely continued chaos. We judge our revolutionaries by political results, which often overlooks the effects such actions have on the happiness of the people.

What I'm trying to say is: I can't sleep. Food has no flavor and I can't feel the bruises from practice. Have I been doubting my choice? Of course. But the only way the Earth will be a bastion for humanity is if humanity is not the treasure-- but the mode. Many don't want to see the Cardinal Federation go-- but it's the only way.

Arcadio's equipment almost rivals the arsenal of a Draugur-- almost. His five Slyder Pikes can shift between their spear shape and an electric Thorn Whip. With the Pikes and additional impact absorbing armor, Arcadio is a match for Silk and Leto-- almost a match for Isauria.
“This time I only want Ferro and Arcadio against the three of you,” said Chalcedon, stowing his Mischief Grenades. “I want the three Draugurs taken down.”

“You can't be serious,” said Arcadio, panting.

“Chances are we'll be outnumbered in this match,” said Chalcedon. “We need to practice for that scenario.”

I stretched my arms and waited for the Grid to activate. Arcadio had bought me a new helmet. The display would now notify me directly about score increases, condition of my teammates, and what armaments my opponents had picked up.

“Go!” shouted Chalcedon. The field came to life and we launched ourselves towards the Draugurs. They launched themselves at us. It was almost inevitable that the Greens would attack us directly, not waste precious seconds on additional weapons.

I loaded two knives as Silk rushed towards me. I aimed at his Draugur's leg, missed, but hit a pillar behind him and swung around, tripping both of us but stunning Silk's mechanisms. Leto came for me but Arcadio plunged his spear through her left arm and used a whip to pull the right arm back. Isauria circled in, going for me as the easier target. Detaching one chain, I fired the other one around the nearby rail and boosted myself out of the way, just in time to avoid a crushing talon. I slid across the floor without a shred of elegance, staggering upright.

“Arcadio, thunderbolt!”

I loaded another knife and shot it between the two standing Draugurs. Arcadio reacted to the signal and circled back around the pillar, with Isauria and Leto pursuing, momentarily divided. Pulling back my other knife I skated forward, ribs aching, but
determined. In those seconds I witnessed Arcadio find the Draugur's vulnerability we had been desperately trying to locate. It was both the most obvious and the most counterintuitive move.

Arcadio skated around Leto's back and using a whip to grab purchase, he pulled himself onto the Draugur's back. Leto swung back and forth, trying to claw him off, but the Draugur was limited to the actions Leto could perform in the gel-- and she could not bend her arms behind her back with enough force to knock Arcadio off. He expanded another pike into the back of the console and held on as Leto flailed. Isauria rushed forward and slammed Arcadio off the Draugur, but the damage was done.

“Enough,” called Chalcedon. “I think we found something here.”

Scythia pointed out a Draugur might throw themselves backwards in the event of a jockey.

“If they try, they'll impale themselves on a Pike,” countered Arcadio.

“Failing that,” said Chalcedon, “a grounded Draugur will still need valuable seconds to return to its feet-- seconds that give an opening for a Zel shot or a Caustic bolt. I think we stand a chance.”

“I still don't think this is going to save us, Chalcedon,” said Scythia.

“Of course not,” he said. “But that's why we are training. Let's get the Draugurs back to full condition, then I'll have some new drills.”

Arcadio and I ate our dinner in the meadow this evening. The seared salmon was embalmed in a thin film of lemon peel and I did my best to enjoy it. Arcadio looked at
me, massaging an ache in his shoulder.

“I know you don't want to talk about it-- but I wish you felt comfortable sharing your feelings with me.”

His earnest expression pushed a smile out of me.

“I'm glad we found each other, Arcadio,” I said. “You make me feel like I belong. You make me want to do great things. I'm very lucky.”

“You know that doesn't answer my question, right?”

I took a deep breath. “These might be our last days together-- and I want you to cherish them as much as I do.”

“I do cherish each moment!” cried Arcadio, indignantly.

“No you don't,” I said. “You're scared.”

His jaw tightened. “Of course I'm scared. If I could change that, I would.”

“I wish I could drive away the fear-- and make you genuinely happy.”

My philoux barked out a brief laugh. “Ferro-- don't you see? You've made it worse! Being with you has made me want to cling to life all the more. I want many more days in this meadow with you. Now I have to fear your death as well-- which is a terrifying burden.”

“Arcadio--”

He put his arm around me, fingers tightening on my bicep. “I'm working at it-- my fear is making me stronger and my strength is taking command of my fear. I never thought I could be so happy in love.”

_I'm doing this for you_, I almost said. It's me who should be scared. Caston is only
Mori: The Mortal Gambit

offering me this chance because it's so slim, as a contingency for his misfortunes. The worst part is the role I will have to play. How could I attack my teammates? They've been my family for a year now. But if I want to save Earth-- save Arcadio-- save my sister-- I have no choice.

June 8, 1069 TST

Days have gone by and still my nausea remains. If you're reading this, you already know what happened on the first of June. If you're still with me-- you want my perspective.

I woke from a nightmare. Quill was getting murdered, over and over again. I had to stare, paralyzed, the smell of blood filling my dream brain. In the darkness, gasping back to consciousness, I could still smell it. For a moment I thought my sweat was not sweat. I stood up and started walking back and forth.

“Ferro?”

Joule was sitting on her bed, legs folded.

“Joule? Did I wake you up?”

I could barely see her in the dark-- only the quivering silhouette. “I haven't been able to sleep much at all tonight.”

I tapped the wall and grimaced at the numerals 4:02. I wasn't going to sleep anymore, I knew. I pulled on some proper clothing. “You should try to relax-- you don't have to compete today.”
“That won't stop Caston,” whispered Joule. “He tore my family apart-- and now he will punish me for my allegiance to the Blues.”

“I won't let that happen,” I said, firmly. “I'll do everything I can.”

Joule's doubt was visible to me, even in the darkness.

“Ferrolentius,” said Lazuli, as I stepped outside. “Rest is a valuable commodity. Won't you try for a few hours more?”

“No, Lazuli,” I mumbled. “I'm fine. I'll go do some reading.”

“Moesia's in the library right now, if you care to join her.”

I didn't want to see Moesia. I was afraid her quiet gaze would force my confession from my lips. But I also didn't want to be alone.

She wasn't reading, but writing. Her Data-Patch glowed with each touch of her fingers, lighting up her facial features. I took a seat next to her and she set the device aside.

“Are you familiar with the philosophical works of Rotor91?”

I shook my head.

“She wrote-- a long time ago. Her philosophy, often used by tyrannical regimes to promote self-policing among the populace-- caught my attention, when I became Captain of the team.”

“Is her work like Dactyl's Principles of Radicalism92?”

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91 Rotor: I have done extensive research but find no other reference to a philosopher named Rotor. Is Moesia making this up? Is this philosopher merely a cover for her own philosophies?
92 Penelope Dactyl's Three Principles of Radicalism:
   1) Inequality is the product of moral complacency.
   2) Systems become self perpetuating, and therefore must be constantly unsettled to prevent institutionalizing inequality.
   3) It is better to die for what you believe in than to kill for what you believe in.
“No-- almost the opposite. In Rotorism the goal is to identify the various forces
acting on your life-- to know your limitations, and thereby know your capacity. With
your limitations come expectations. Society expects you will behave based on what you
are and where you are. Rotor rejects that premise. She argues you can reject
preconceptions about your destiny without rejecting your place in the fabric-- without
declaring a revolution. It most often takes the form of denying yourself your own self
interest.”

“A soft form of resistance, then?”

“A way to stand against society's corporatizing effect,” said Moesia. “It does not
preclude fighting against injustice-- it merely cautions against flailing. For Rotor it is
better to die in the oppression by a flawed system than to thrash ineffectually.”

“So you're wondering if you're thrashing, or expending yourself with purpose?”

“I'm not wondering that,” said Moesia. “I'm refining my last will and testament.”

I swallowed. “Are-- are you worried that--”

“Only a poor leader doesn't prepare for defeat. I would like the next Captain and
the Exarks to know my mind. I was thinking about promoting you to Exark, actually.
What do you think?”

“I-- what?”

Moesia smiled. “Chalcedon has agreed to replace me, if it comes to that. There
would be an opening-- and I can't think of a better candidate for--”

“This is a joke, right? I'm not the best Beast Fighter-- not by a long shot! And
Chalcedon, as Captain? Since when has a skirmisher--”
“There is precedent,” said Moesia, calmly.

“Why didn't you promote Gavel or Rulog to Dectur of Windhoek? Why me?”

“Perhaps I didn't explain Rotorism clearly enough,” said Moesia. “Skill in the arena does not always correlate with a knack for leadership. I believe it is those who resist authority who are usually the most capable.”

“But--”

“There is no rule that a good Exark or Dectur must be the best skirmisher or circuiteer. It is merely an expectation. Their duty is to guide recruits into this world-- to support and nurture them. The gifted sometimes struggle to find empathy.”

“So you think Arcadio doesn't--”

“Please do not reopen that matter.”

I fell silent for almost a minute. “I wouldn't want the Exarchate if we lose. I'm content with my current role.”

Moesia inclined her head. “Let us both hope that choice will be irrelevant. I've requested that Mazonas sponsor your admission to a Gaozian Club, in the wake of our victory. They will want a writing sample-- but I think you can handle that.”

Words caught in my throat as I thanked her. Guilt was making me tremble. Did she know? Could she know? What if the removal of observational technologies had been a lie-- was my treachery about to be revealed?

I wasn't. We sat in silence for a while before I made an excuse and walked slowly to the dining hall, to fill my quaking stomach.
Mori: The Mortal Gambit

Joule and Leto were not allowed to join us. Only the twenty five skirmishers and twenty four circuiteers competing were allowed into the Blue Circuit Zone today. We did not speak but examined our equipment and found our seats. There would be no ignoring the other events today. Every game would be vitally important.

“You know what today will look like,” called Moesia. “The first two events are pure-- number one: Capricorn; number two: Ascension. Event three will be Wyverns plus Pandemonium-- fourth will be Manticores and Feralcanalia. Last, of course, will be classic combination-- Capricorns and Alpha Deathmatch. Understood?”

She looked around slowly. Her Wyvern keypiece dangled from her wrist.

“You know the stakes,” she said. “You have trained to your utmost. We are not a legion of John Henrys. We may alter the inertia of history. I have confidence in all of you.”

Arcadio and I sat together at our seats, waiting for the final remarks from the Tetrokons, delivered on all screens. I expected megalomania, but neither seemed inclined to grandeur.

Mazonas stepped forward first, eyes gray and expression serious. “Today the world will change. The entire Federation will feel these shockwaves. We stand on a wavering precipice and have to choose what we want to live for. I am content to venture my life for the preservation of Helios. Thank you, everyone.”

Caston wore his Tetrokonic collar turned up and approached the Vica slowly. I

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93 John Henry: Originally a folklore character who tested his strength against a steam engine in the early Republican period of American History. It has come to mean a martyr, standing against the inevitability of progress.
had never realized how blue his lips were, even when sitting across from him. “People of the Federation: I will agree with my rival. You will witness history today. In keeping with the dignity of this planet, we are deciding this conflict through the Circuit's entertainers. We will preserve lives and resources. Let the Array witness this moment—and let justice guide the outcome.”

The first six circuiteers walked forward and left the chamber while the commentators shouted their thoughts at the packed stadium. We held our breath as the twelve Capricorns drifted into their positions on the track. The Green vehicles had additional jets and special weapon cylinders.

“Don't worry,” said Arcadio, firmly. “This race will be ours. Our circuiteers are talented enough to overcome their disadvantage.”

I nodded, muscles tensing. If we didn't win a single match I would never even have the chance to complete my impossible task. The commentators counted down and the Capricorn engines began charging up, ready to take the initial boost.

“And immediately we see those Green stipends really are paying dividends, don't you think Vadvu? The acceleration is beyond comparison.”

“Right you are, Amadeus,” said Vadvu Sueton-Ozarkas, her inflection even more exaggerated than Piso's. “Only Nestor of the Blues managed to reach the same precision for the boost and he is twelve meters behind the slowest Celadon.”

“But luckily for the Blues it is not a race of speed,” said Piso. “Will the increased handling in the Green Capricorns prove helpful against the obstacles, or will the terrain of the track be their undoing?”

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Each four kilometer lap brought new disaster for the Blues. Nestor pulled into third place briefly, only to be rammed from behind into a rising dirt pillar and spun out of control. Even that was unnecessary. Obstacles rose and fell, slowing Blue circuiteers while the Greens dodged easily. Without weapon bonuses from a skirmish, we couldn't catch up.

“I would say Indigo must be trembling at the moment,” called Sueton. “Everyone suspected the Draugurs would shake up the game. Instead it was the upgraded vehicles.”

“I had that suspicion all along, Vadvu,” said Piso. “Equipment defines a race. And Ryflin of the Greens finishes first! The rest of the team are following in quick succession. What an embarrassment for the Blues-- Bellitant Mazonas must be feeling a little uneasy now, don't you think?”

But the display of the usurper showed a calm man, watching with his chin in his palms. The great holographic display gave one point to the Greens, and a shining zero remained for the Blues. My treachery felt more and more theoretical. Arcadio was biting his nails next to me.

The second round was Ascension. The Exark, Vanir, was the only Ascender I knew by name so I watched him crouch in his position in the Nucleus, waiting for the event to begin. I focused on his determined expression, his Nitro Skates, his bare chest-- the stone knife in his hand.

Arcadio pointed to the six Draugurs curled on the other side of the Nucleus. “How can our Ascenders possibly hold the zones with knives against the hybrids?”

But the rules became apparent quickly. While Vanir and his skirmishers rushed
for the crucial upgrade stations the Draugurs moved with only twenty five percent of their usual velocity. Their gait was stiff and clumsy--their arms were only dead weight. At least at first.

Vanir stood under the glowing beacon, looking a little ridiculous with almost no clothes while wearing Nitro Skates. The color of the beacons faded from white to purple, and with the sound of a triumphant horn, a basic leather tunic spread over Vanir's chest and the knife extended into a bronze axe. The Blue Ascenders, axes in hand, followed Vanir straight to the nearest Draugur. It was moving at fifty percent of its maximum speed, flexing its left talon only.

The Draugur didn't stand much of a chance. It swung clumsily at the Exark. Vanir dodged and hit it in the veins with a well-aimed smack. Others went for the leg tendons and one skirmisher attacked the inactive arm. Their speed and precision left the bioautomaton effectively paralyzed. Vanir and another skirmisher still had time to lunge at the nearest beacons, but the others missed their chance to upgrade.

“The Blues have already improved their numerical advantage,” called Piso, “but will the cost of one round of upgrades damage them? Exark Vanir seems to be on the offensive again, only at the sword and helm level!”

Vanir skated around a Draugur and slammed his claymore against a leg tendon. He had to retreat quickly as a flashing talon swiped at his chest. Two bronze tier Ascenders raced up and took out one leg, but then a vicious swipe knocked one of them across the field. My stomach tightened. Unlike Beast Fighters, Ascenders didn't start with impact-armor. They had to earn it. The Ascender was either dead or injured beyond
returning to the game.

“They made a mistake,” mumbled Arcadio. “Attacking so soon means they're going to fall behind in upgrades. This is not good.”

And while two more bronze axe-wielders upgraded to iron swords and Vanir reached steel buckler and saber, the Draugurs were now at full speed and had unlocked their first weapon-- the slow cannon. Our team's small advantage was evaporating quickly.

Vanir dodged lob shots from the cannon-- his shield would do almost nothing against the impact. Since it was round five, the upgrade points were condensing in the middle of the map. Vanir had to fight valiantly to control his beacon against the bombardment from two opponents. He fled one beacon with five seconds to spare and made it to another just in time to cash in the upgrade.

He didn't make the switch to crossbow, but held a stronger, serrated blade and a far larger shield. One other Skirmisher upgraded to steel, another reached iron. Two remained bronze and one was out of the game. The four fully active Draugurs now had unlocked the hail turret in addition to the cannon. The injured Draugur had limped its way into the slow cannon upgrade.

I flinched as the two Bronze wielders were slammed with the volley of hail, then blasted with slow cannon shots. One was only hit by the impact, thrown off his feet and slammed into the ground. The other one took a direct hit to the chest, and died. The iron swordsman and the steel saber fighter both were on the run for the onslaught but not Vanir.
With his heavier shield he skated straight against the hailstorm, timed his dodge perfectly and sliced a cable out of the main console of the Draugur. It swiped at him but only hit and dented the shield. Vanir turned so sharply that sparks rose and he drove the sword's point straight into the console. Sparks flashing, he pulled out his sword and rolled aside just before another Draugur launched a slow cannon at him. The impact tumbled him into the nearby upgrade beacon and knocked the injured Draugur toppled onto its side, console sparking.

It was the last moment of success. Vanir upgraded to impact armor and a sparking halberd, but the three fully functional Draugurs now had the gattling gun, and dodging was not enough. First the iron swordsman went down in a flurry of bullets, then the steel tier skirmisher took a blow to the side, hit a pillar and was gunned in the chest. I flinched but I couldn't look away.

Vanir skated forward, his shield and armor taking the brunt of the bullets. With a precision shot he speared a Draugur through the bioautomaton head, then pulled back and dodged a slow cannon. He hid behind a pillar while two more Draugurs unleashed their bullets on him and didn't have time to cash the next upgrade.

He boosted forward, aiming to finish off the already injured Draugur when another one of the Greens slammed into him, lifting him in a talon and-- stabbing him through his stomach with the other. I couldn't see his face beneath his visor but the sword and halberd fell to the ground and he went limp. The match was over.

Sonata was crying when medical Webers brought the skirmishers back. There were only two survivors-- and both intensely injured. I felt sick. My sense of hope was
suffocating. I would never have a chance to fulfill my deal with Caston.

“It's not over,” said Moesia, putting on her circuiter scarf and helmet. “Despair is a mistake.”

Mazonas's calm had to be a facade. His life was hanging in the balance-- and everything rested on a Wyvern race and a Pandemonium skirmish.

After the wounded and the debris had been cleared from the Nucleus, it terraformed. A great volcano rose in the middle of the arena, brimming with splashing lava but not overflowing. Strange ridges and bulges ran down the volcano, all the way to the icy floor of the arena. The only safe tracks were narrow black roads. Around the volcanic peak floated a collection of huge golden rings for Wyvern event.

“Maybe we'll do better in a nonlinear race,” mumbled Arcadio.

Even if that was true, I didn't know if it would help. Pandemonium seemed like one of those skirmishes ideal for Draugurs and their lack of mortal panic. The stage would change with each death or yielding\textsuperscript{94}, but points were scored for collecting discs. Maybe it wouldn't be as brutal as my experiences in the Pit.

I recognized Exark Impala and Dectur Shimato among the Chaotics and only Moesia among the Wyvern Pilots. Then I remembered that Brevity would be piloting in this match. My stomach tightened. Hopefully nothing would go wrong.

“Could a civil war be decided here?” cried Piso. “In chaos and in the air?”

The countdown began. The twelve Wyvers on the track rumbled and the fourteen skirmishers crouched in their positions, waiting. All displays glowed purple and

\textsuperscript{94} Yielding: Skirmishers are allowed to disqualify themselves from a match. This is not popular with the spectators, but for those in mortal danger, it saves many lives.
the Wyverns took flight. The third event had begun.

It was impossible to watch both theaters simultaneously. My eyes darted between Moesia, swerving in front of a Green circuiteer and stealing a golden ring while Shimato dodged the rocks hurled at him by a Draugur. The commentators elaborated on the finesse and technique of the Wyvern Pilots but the mayhem below drew my attention more.

Chaotics wore only basic armor, which allowed for upgrades, but they had no skates and no weapons to start. So the conflict appeared slow at first, until the discs appeared. Every five minute round only contained twenty one discs and I grimaced at our massive disadvantage. Draugurs would be more effective at traversing terrain and at greater speeds.

I watched Impala sprint up the volcano, jumping from boulder to boulder. She snatched one disc, strapping it to her back, then kept climbing higher. The Draugurs were also scaling the curling trails around the volcano, skating at immense speeds and catching every disc in reach. The score quickly stood eight to three, and I feared this would go like the last two events. The time ticked down to three minutes, forty two seconds.

Then one of the Draugurs went down to get a disc from the ice. The disc hovered on the edge of the field, and two skirmishers raced for it as well. The Draugur was faster, but it was also heavier. It did not notice that the layer of ice was thin around the disc until it was too late. Reaching for the glowing circle, the Draugur's front leg sank through the ice and the water immediately began frying the console. Before it could salvage itself, Shimato ran up, jumped onto the leg of the Draugur and grabbed the disc.
The extra weight pushed the Draugur under water but Shimato thrust himself up and off, rolling heavily onto the ice.

A big green X appeared in the middle of the Wyvern race-- the first death in the Pandemonium, confirmed by the sound of sirens. Fire plumed from the volcano and it started bubbling up, spilling lava down the sides. One skirmisher burned herself, but escaped. The rest didn't even lose a beat. There were more discs to collect.

I glanced up and watched Moesia and Brevity competing for the same ring circuit. Moesia was running a little slower, which meant if Brev caught a purple ring Moesia would only get blue, if Brev got yellow, she would only get orange. But then Moesia skipped a ring to gain a territorial lead. She had passed by five valuable points by missing the yellow ring! She timed it perfectly to coincide with the skirmish below.

The round below ended 11 discs to 10, meaning the round bonus went Blue. I watched in awe as each ring Moesia passed through didn't change color down one point, but vanished entirely. Moesia collected the cumulative points from each ring she passed through and Brevity received none, since the rings were gone. I could sense Brevity's frustration as she accelerated forward, trying to catch up and only did a second after the ten second bonus had ended. Moesia was at the top of the scoreboard now with a powerful 293 points against Brevity's 259.

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95 Since Wyvern Scoring Rules during the 11th Century TST are crucial to understanding this little section, I offer a brief review, since the metagame has shifted in recent years. The goal is not to complete a certain amount of laps, but rather to score 1000 points by passing through multicolored rings. All rings start gold and passing through one earns ten points, but the ring will decrease in color and value. Silver rings only give nine points, and the pattern continues down through purple, blue, green, yellow, orange, gray and black, the final of which is worth only one point. When the rings vanish after black, a new ring will spawn somewhere in the field. For more information I recommend A Grand History of Racing, Volume XXIV by Zhu Qi-Swevelom.
Down below new discs appeared but Impala instead went for a weapon canister. Three Draugurs had also turned their attention to armory upgrades. Impala pulled out the chain of grenades from a cannister, causing a hole to burst in the side of the volcano, spewing lava over the ice in a wave of steam. The lava consumed a Draugur and a Blue skirmisher who had been fighting over a ring. With their deaths the arena shook again.

As more lava poured, iron bridges rose like leviathans from beneath the melting ice. They slithered over the terrain, creating access across the landscape of fire and water. Some bridges glowed red from the lava, others were slick with ice. Metallic insects scuttled across the bridges.

Impala rushed for a disc revolving over an arching iron bridge. I flinched as a Draugur leapt up from a lower bridge, ready to slash her. Impala lunged away, onto the ice. The Draugur clambered up to the bridge to get the disc, but it overlooked the grenade Impala had dropped. It screeched and exploded. The impact did not seriously damage the Draugur, but knocked the bioautomaton off the bridge and into the icy water below. Another X appeared and the metallic insects went crazy.

With the intensifying chaos the round ended again in our favor, 9-6. Our circuiteers received a permanent speed boost, making them competitive with the Greens. Moesia snatched a purple ring from the Dectur Florio and broke 500 points. Brevity trailed with 451.

The bugs below were proving vicious. One of our skirmishers screamed as their ferocity overran her. She tossed herself into the icy water, and the insects followed. She had to yield before they stopped their assault. The volcano registered her surrender by
splitting in half and spilling chunks of magma everywhere.

I watched Shimato wielding a Dread Baton against a Draugur. He dodged back and forth until a slash from the talon took off his left hand. But while my insides squirmed, Shimato took the opportunity to lunge forward, ram the Baton into the central console and activate it. The Draugur slowed, trying to grab and finish him off, but an increasingly pale Shimato dodged backward, cradling his injury and began running towards the nearest disc.

With the Draugur's defeat the metallic insects stopped pursuing but instead began glowing and screeching and suddenly exploded, detonating several important bridges. There were only three Draugurs left and five Blue skirmishers, counting the seriously injured Shimato. But it was enough to cash a third advantage and give the Blues a 1.5x ring point multiplier. Within the span of another round, Moesia had finished first and another Blue circuier confirmed second. The pandemonium below was still brutal and bloody, but thanks to them, we had won the third event.

The cheering in the Blue Circuit Zone was cathartic. We were fewer, but we now knew we stood a chance. I watched Brevity get third, and then saw her position pushed down to fourth, with the victory bonus for the Blue skirmishers.

“Now it's our turn,” said Arcadio. He was not afraid. He was aching for his chance.

I glanced at the screens and noticed Caston's intense gaze. My heart began pounding.

We suited up. Scythia kissed me on the cheek and squeezed my shoulder. Pylon
slipped me a folded piece of paper. It contained her favorite saying from Nicholas Tang:
“Fear nothing except yourself, for you are the terror of a thousand worlds.” I smiled and
tucked it into my pocket. Chalcedon stepped to my side, and clasped my hands.

“I have no right to be-- but I am proud of you, Ferro,” he said. “I am honored to
compete at your side.”

My cheeks grew warm and I mumbled my thanks. Arcadio put a hand on my
neck and kissed me ferociously, but briefly.

“More later,” he said, grinning. “After we crush these idiots.”

His new confidence was contagious. I picked up my bandolier of chained Laxx
knives and strapped them to my back. I slid my gauntlet over Manus, then put my helmet
on. This was it.

We assumed our positions and our platforms raised us up into a broad leafed
jungle clearing. The grid spread around us, but it gave way around several muddy pits of
water. Beyond the trees snaked a turbulent river, over which a broad bridge reached
towards the five crouching Draugurs. I glanced left, past Pylon to the closed beast gates
and then right, past Scythia to the dormant Kepler. Chalcedon was telling Pylon which
Kepler they would focus on, and telling us to pick a target among the Draugurs. I stared
across and caught their names on my visor. Paolisto, Venitor, Hejuma, Garbicon and
Borax.

“We're taking Borax,” I said to Arcadio, with ten seconds remaining.

“No chance,” said Arcadio. “Garbicon is more isolated, and further from the
Keplers. We take him out first. Understood?”
I grimaced, looking at the vine coated pillars submerged by the trees, and hoping they would make good holds for my knives. “Fine. I'll lead.”

The sharp trill sounded and we all boosted away from our starting positions. I drew two knives, pressing full on my boost, dodging a pillar and a pheasant. I jumped up onto the bridge's railing to grind across the river. Arcadio, just behind me, slashed a pheasant and spun his Pike into an attack position. I saw Garbicon attacking a small swarm of pheasants and knew it was time to act.

“How!

I launched my first knife at Garbicon which he parried with surprising swiftness, but my second knife hit him in the biomechanical thigh. My helmet flashed red, reminding me that I had just earned us a penalty.

I coiled back my first knife as outraged excitement rose from the crowd and Arcadio darted by me. He thrust his first Pike at Garbicon as a faint, not stopping but sliding beneath the slashing talons and ramming his second one into the Draugur's console. My helmet softened the screams of the crowd. I struck the Draugur with another knife and in the next moment an impact from another Draugur knocked me off my feet and high into the air.

“Ferro!”

Arcadio's scream hit me as I twisted in the air, seeing Borax now attacking my philoux. In that split second I evaluated myself. All my limbs were attached, my suit had taken the brunt of the force and dispersed it. I was okay, but I was heading straight for the river. If I fell in, the roaring current would rush me out of the match.
Without thinking I released the knife still in Garbicon's Draugur and shot my other one into the canopy of the nearest tree, praying I hit something solid. The moment it caught, I tugged and tightened myself on it, the two forces on me spinning my body like an orbiting moon away from the water and over the grid. I slammed hard into the ground, bounced and hit a tree, but thanks to my armor, I was only dazed, not disqualified.

“Move!” shouted Scythia.

Head spinning, I rolled forward as a Kepler pulverized the tree behind me. Stumbling on my skates I started moving, knife still imbedded in the tree and chain still stretching out from my wrist. The Kepler was pursuing. It was fully prepared to kill me. Pylon must have alerted them.

I drew a knife and executed a sharp turn, jumping over a pheasant and accelerating toward the Kepler. My chain extended in glittering menace from my launcher. The Kepler slowed down to meet me, spiked talon raised and cannon already primed. Scythia knocked it off balance with an EL blast from her half completed cannon, making its shot go wide and allowing me to circle its legs and trap it in place before it could swipe at me. I thrust my other knife into its facial console and used its pursuing momentum and loss of control to pull it to the ground.

Loosening my knives and skating back towards the bridge, I had a chance to glance at the score. I had never seen it so high in the first round. We led with 305 to 129⁹⁶.

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³⁰⁵ to 129: The score rose so fast thusly:
GREEN (2 Pheasants [2]) x4 [foul against Garbicon] x4 [foul against Garbicon] x4 [foul against
and the game was only intensifying.

“Fall back, Arcadio,” called Chalcedon. “We need to eliminate these Keplers.”

“Returning,” replied Arcadio. “Garbicon is out, but Borax is still rampaging.”

The Greens were also targeting the Keplers and by the second round trill, the score stood 357 to 331. The gates opened and the Ome wolves began sneaking out-- not merely ten-- but almost twenty five.

“We play defensively now,” said Chalcedon. “If you foul our opponents they will win by the sheer impossibility of matching them. Only attack them if they attack us. Otherwise---”

Palisto rammed into Chalcedon, his spiked arm swiping the Exark aside as the Green skirmisher sliced a Lupothantos into pieces. Chalcedon tumbled, uniform torn and bleeding, into the water of the river, and the current washed him away. Scythia screamed but Chalcedon had hit *yield* which meant he hadn't died yet-- but he was out of the match.

The system didn't register the foul. The commentators gasped at the referee's declaration of “Accidental Injury during the Pursuit of Objective”, and we received no points. Our Exark was gone-- possibly dead.

“Don't do it!” screamed Scythia, picking up her Z-Component and dodging a Lupothanatos. “Arcadio if you attack him, we lose the match!”

“He's a rat!” howled Arcadio. “If that wasn't intentional, just imagine what I can do to him.”

“No, Arcadio,” I shouted. “Fight with me. Don't sacrifice it all now!”

---

He was fuming, but he condensed his pike and followed me into a clearing with three wolves. We had run this scenario so many times that it was nothing. I darted between the beasts a knife flashing here and there but never striking deep enough that could put me in danger. With me as bait Arcadio went to work, stabbing with a ferocity that brought us forty five more points.

“Arcadio,” I said. “I'll get our revenge-- but I need you to cover me.”

“Ferro--”

“If I'm precise, I won't strike them directly. Or should we wait until the chimeras appear?”

He didn't hesitate. “Let's go. Pylon, cover Scythia for now!”

We crossed the bridge again, the score at 411-472, with four competitors on either side. I had to be careful. I had to draw their attention and aggression, so that my retaliation would be justified, and not fined. I had to even the odds, somehow.

Venitor and Hejuma were rounding up a group of wolves, but turned when we approached. They assumed defensive positions but didn't strike. I skated right past them and stabbed a retreating wolf between the ears, gaining a quick fifteen points. Unwilling to see us rob them of their prey Venitor lunged toward a nearby wolf with his buzzblade whirring.

I shot my Laxx knife at a pillar, right in front of the Draugur's legs. Venitor noticed, but his momentum was too great and he tripped over the EMP chain. I was dragged along the ground, but the Greens were not skyrocketed into quadruple digits, and Hejuma was enraged enough to strike at me.
I felt the metallic impact break one of my ribs as I was clambering to my feet. The force threw me to the other side of Venitor's out-of-order bioautomaton, and I released the chain. The pain in my ribs was making my eyes water, but I had to focus.

Hejuma, about to strike again, recoiled, probably being reprimanded severely. Our points climbed to an incredible 852. It wasn't over, though. With four chimeras and a prize beast of two hundred and fifty points, the Greens could still snatch the victory.

My goal was now clear. I had to help my team score enough that our circuiteers--who were only losing by about seven seconds on average--would win by a large margin. Then I had to make obvious, direct fouls, and reverse those fortunes.

“Are you okay?” asked Arcadio, skating up behind me during the third round trill.

I nodded as four massive Omes entered the arena. I recognized them all: Ursomar, Arachnodon, Hercuocelot, Falcoleonic.

“We're squashing the Arachnodon first,” called Scythia. “Ferro and Pylon weaken it, Arcadio--expose a weakpoint and I'll finish it off.

It was a race now for who would kill their prey first. I saw Borax with a Zel attachment attacking the Hercuocelot by himself while the other three Draugurs targeted the Ursomar. The Falcoleonic took flight, screeching and roaring as it searched for prey. We had to be quick.

I circled around the many legs of the Arachnodon, its reptilian head howling and its eight eyes bright with fury. Most of my shots missed the key points and bounced off the exoskeleton. Pylon was having more luck, launching her bolts into the fleshy underside of the Arachnodon's throat. The poison from the caustic bolts was making the
beast wobble.

"Arcadio, now!"

He rushed forward, stabbing his Slyder Pike into an exposed leg, jumping up it and climbing onto its back. Whip poised, Arcadio lashed the beast across the exoskeleton layer of the skull. The beast reared, exposing its red throat and Scythia blasted it, just as Arcadio threw himself to the ground. The many-eyed head tumbled to the ground and our score rose. At the same time so did the score for our opponents. The Ursomar and the Hercuocelot lay dead. The score stood 929 to 612.

"Where is the--"

With a flurry of feathers and fur, the Falcoleonic swooped down and grabbed Pylon in its jaws, wrenching her up into the air. Pylon let out a scream as she fought to get free. She shot a bolt through its muzzle, and the chimera dropped her. She tumbled and landed hard on the grid's surface, and didn't move.

"No," whispered Scythia, horrified. "She can't--"

"The beast's injured," shouted Arcadio. "Focus Scythia!"

The Falcoleonic circled again, swooping down for Arcadio but I shot a knife into its flank and Paolisto hit it with an exploding barbax. The beast screeched and tumbled to the ground, one wing in tatters, its mane full of blood. But Scythia had the final shot, hitting it in the chest and killing it. We stood, with three skirmishers remaining, at 1004 points.

"We've done it," shouted Arcadio. "Even if they get the Prize Beast, we've won!"

But our racers were falling behind. My display told me that if we let the Greens
cash the Prize Beast, we wouldn't shave off sufficient time for our circuiteers.

The river frothed up and the bridge broke into pieces as the two headed turtle rose from the earth. It stood at least ten meters tall and fifty meters wide, its skin leathery and gray, the heads on both sides glaring with yellow eyes. The shell resembled volcanic rock. It was so heavy that it took six legs to support it.

“Strategy?” I asked.

“Duotartauga are a labor of love,” said Scythia, grimly. “We need to blast it from below-- or we need to remove both heads.”

“It's going to have to be the latter,” said Arcadio. “Without Mischief Grenades there's no way we will reveal that fleshy undercarriage. Hungry Execution it is.”

It was a drill we had performed before as Moscow Squad. I would serve as the distraction, while Arcadio and Scythia saw most of the action. The Greens had the similar plan.

We approached the Duotartauga, Arcadio off to the side and Scythia blasting it in the neck with fully charged Zel bursts. Its skin was too thick, but it drew attention. I darted between the front legs, unnoticed and loaded two knives. I had to be very careful now. I could see daylight in all directions, but the dark, heaving surface above the massive six legs made me feel like I was skating through a disintegrating ruin.

I launched both knives up into the center of the stomach and immediately disengaged them. I boosted as the prize beast descended on me, sitting down to crush the pest under its gigagrams. I slid out just in time. Arcadio used the lowered height to climb up onto the surface of the shell. Paolisto and Borax were attacking the prize beast
as well, with Hejuma and Venitor already making their way up to the other neck.

Arcadio dodged the venomous snakes in the rocky shell and climbed up the scaly neck. I watched Hejuma climb onto the head and drill a spike through the skull of the beast. It shook and stamped to remove the Draugur, but a little drilling wouldn't kill it. Hejuma was just priming the beast. Borax was ready with his Zel, waiting for Scythia to kill her side of the beast so that they could cash the final kill. It was a stalemate, unless I interfered.

“Wait for my signal,” I told Arcadio.

I skated between Borax and Paolisto and shot a knife into the lower jaw of the Duotartauga. Satisfied with my grip, I shot another knife, lower into the thick flesh of its throat and swung myself up, almost hitting Venitor. I climbed up to the skull with my knives, ribs burning. I was careful not to touch Hejuma but sat in front of the Draugur, tempting her to hit me off. I could possibly suffer a fatal impact, but she knew it would cost her the match.

“Ready, Arcadio?” I called.

“Shall I?”

“After you shoot, Scythia, get over here, okay?”

“Ferro, we should wait for them to--”

I slid down the scaly face, past those wickedly yellow eyes, until I sat just above the enormous nostrils. “Do it now!”

Arcadio pressed his pike into the sensitive flesh above the skull and as it opened its mouth to scream in pain Scythia blasted it in its vulnerable throat. The shot tore the
head off and in that moment of destruction I slid down, across the overbite, digging in my knives.

Hejuma reacted to the blast by stabbing down and opening the beast's mouth-- but now I hung like a sacrifice in front of the gaping jowls. If Borax hit me, we would set new records with our victory over them. I closed my eyes and hoped Paolistio would stop Borax.

The Duotartauga's breath was hot and I felt its slimy tongue press up against me. It didn't want to eat me, but it was hurting. I grimaced, arms trembling from holding on. If I lost my grip, I would have ruined the game.

“On my way, Ferro,” called Scythia. “Hold on a few more seconds.”

“There are any Lupothanatos left? Any pheasants?” I screamed.

They must have thought I was asking to distract myself from the exertion.

“Somewhere, sure, but not right here,” called Arcadio.

As long as any beast remained alive, the match wouldn't end. That was my only chance.

“Ready in three seconds,” said Scythia. “Drop in three, two, one--”

I threw myself down, my chains slowing my descent and two blasts of Zel hit the Duotartauga almost simultaneously. It was only after the impact of the ground killed all the protective energies in my suit-- only after I pulled my knives back into my launchers-- that I looked up at the score. We had 1204 points. We were giving our circuiteers sixty seconds of an advantage. Blue was going to win-- no doubt about it.

“I'm ending this,” shouted Arcadio. “I'll take that pheasant, Scythia, you kill the
wolf.”

“No!” I yelled, jumping up and skating towards them.

“Ferro, don't be idiotic, we've won, let's just make it official.”

Scythia aimed and charged a 70% shot to hit the wounded Lupothanatos but I acted without thinking. I hit her to the ground. Arcadio turned and I whipped a knife in front of his skates and pulled him down as well.

“Ferro, what the--”

I then turned, no longer hearing anything, and gazed up at the empty face of Borax's Draugur. I aimed my Laxx knife and shot the Draugur in the console. Beyond the scope of my observation, the crowd roared as Mazonas's uprising came to a close.

The following vitriolic minutes in the Blue Circuit Zone, were worse than any pain I had felt so far. I cried without pride, letting everything pour from me. If Moesia hadn't ordered me not to be touched, my friends and teammates would have killed me right there. I might not have cared. When Caston entered the Circuit Zone I heard the gasps but didn't look up.

“Calm yourselves,” said the Tetrokon, lazily. “You have nothing to fear from me-- you are all under the protection of my oath to the Array-- thanks to this little traitor of yours.”

“What did you do, Caston? How did you turn him to your cause?”

“He came to me, Salutis-- I simply agreed to his terms. Release him-- he's coming with me.”
The wrist restraints disconnected, but I still didn't look up.

“Valenz, I am the Tetrokon of Atem. I will not be kept waiting. You might also want to come, Alwar-- I believe you will be interested in accompanying Valenz.”

Arcadio's hatred was palpable. “The Ferro I knew would never act this way.”

But Arcadio knew better than to refuse the Tetrokon's invitation. We stepped into the elevator, which carried us towards the Green Circuit Zone.

“There's no need for that scowl, Alwar. You should be proud of your philoux. His betrayal was not cheap. He's made me promise to give Helios its autonomy and self determination. In three days time Helios will be severed from the Cardinal Federation.”

“I never doubted that,” said Arcadio. “He wouldn't betray us for anything less than his philosophy and politics.”

Caston laughed. “He's also managed to get you something special.”

I still didn't have the emotional stamina to look up at Arcadio.

“What's he talking about, Ferro?”

For a long time I just listened to the hum of the elevator. “You're going to be a citizen, Arcadio. I've arranged it all. You're going to be immortal.”

He said nothing. Caston chuckled at my anguish, but I wasn't prepared for his sadism.

We stepped out into the medical bay of the Green Circuit Zone. Webers were patching up several circuities, but my eyes were drawn to the people squirming and writhing in an array of beds. Among them was Brevity. My malaise evaporated and I ran to her side.
“Brev! Brev, what's wrong?”

She shuddered. Her skin was so pale. Dry spittle coated her lips and she didn't manage any words. I knew all these spasming faces from profiles-- all Wyvern Pilots and Chaotics.

“I thought you would want to say goodbye to your sister,” said Caston, casually, straightening his collar and examining each pain struck face.

“What-- what happened to--”

“Haven't you put the pieces together?”

Blood trickled from Brevity's mouth, and my horror crystalized. “But-- but you promised you wouldn't poison them if they win! The Greens won-- how can you--”

“The team did indeed win,” agreed Caston. “But I'm afraid these woeful excuses lost their event-- making it necessary that I deal with you, Valenz. You performed exceptionally, by the way-- I feel almost no resentment for the shame you cause me. Since I can't touch you, here's a little showing of what I would have done, had I the chance.”

Brevity's eyes were glazing. The blood ran down her chin, across her throat.

“You are not human,” I said, quietly. “No human could feel so much cruelty.”

“On the contrary,” grinned Caston. “This is a notable vestige of my humanity-- my capacity to feel joy at pain.”

I closed my eyes again and started shaking. But I had no choice. I had no choice.

“I officially request that you transfer the citizenship of Zember Ratatosk-Mazonas to Brevity Barr-Valenz. Please-- before she--”
“With pleasure,” said Caston, smiling.

Brevity shuddered again then went still, eyes staring up at the ceiling. I screamed and ran forward, clutching her shoulders as her pulse faded. The poison had done its work.

“No!”

I turned to Caston, tears blazing, but he waved a dismissive hand. “She's fine--she'll regenerate at the nearest Nepthys Panel in a few hours. This body, of course, is now a corpse.”

I sank to my knees, crying with relief. Around me the medical beds gave last gasps of life, and Greens died of the poison. Arcadio spoke into the silence that followed.

“You saved her.”

“Arcadio.”

His voice was so calm. “You gave her immortality that she didn't ask for. You gave it to the sister who abandoned you, over and over again. Now you give me death, so that she can abandon you again.”

I wanted him to kick me, to stamp me into the floor. I wanted to feel the passion of his rage. This was so much worse.

“You are pathetic, Valenz. Go join your sister in Centauri or in Ossium--go get eaten by Cankerbees for all I care. You're better dead to me.”

My voice was no where and I needed it. Arcadio turned and Caston gave him the elevator access to return to his team. I was no longer one of the Blues. I was nothing.

“No victory comes without a price,” said Caston, sweetly. “That's my lesson too.”

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A system for a province. Let us go our separate ways, Valenz. Let us never encounter each other again.”

I swallowed. “The mountains that you hold on Earth-- a few hours away from Maxima--”

“Oh, I haven't forgotten,” said Caston. “They're yours-- or at least some of the land is. As we agreed. As are the two hundred KiloVamps.”

“Could you transfer most of those directly to my mother,” I asked, hoarsely. “I-- I only need one KiloVamp myself.”

“Already done,” said Caston. “But enough now-- and thank you-- I appreciate you giving me back my breath.”

He left me then, to my new, fresh, tortured life.

June 11, 1069 TST

Mum arrived today. She walked the three miles from the impromptu train station, through the trees, and to my little cottage. We didn't look each other in the eyes, but she hugged me for minutes, perhaps even an hour. I didn't realize until then how much I missed feeling her love.

I led her inside and showed her the disastrous effects of my non-automated cooking experiments. Eggshells and raw driblets of Ome were stuck to the walls and counters-- goats milk had soaked into one of my hard books. I gave Mum the chair and sank onto the stool.
“There are riots in Maxima,” she said, eventually. “Thousands of denizens-- or I suppose not denizens anymore-- thousands of people are protesting the regent. There are rumors the Dole will end, that Earth won't have enough food without intersystemic trade.”

I said nothing.

“People don't want direct human governance. They're afraid. The residents of Miranda are defying the regency and putting Mozis in charge.”

She looked healthier, I thought. Perhaps it was just my imagination.

“Have-- have you heard from-- from Brevity?” I asked, voice snapping like twigs.

“She established contact, a few hours before all communication ceased,” said Mum. “She wanted to come back but I convinced her to go. She is joining the fleet in Carnioz, I think97. She wanted to talk to you but--”

I thought I was done crying, but I was wrong. “I'm so sorry, Mum, I've--”

She put her fingers in mine and squeezed. “Ferro, I don't know if your actions will be good for Helios or lead to more strife. There are some in Maxima who use your name as a curse, who are afraid of the box you have opened.”

She ran her fingers through my hair.

“But many see the opportunity you have given them. The Greens and the Blues are working together, distributing the Dole and trying to restore order. Elections for the

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97 The lives and deaths of Brevity Barr-Valenz warrant a history to themselves. She participated in Operation Lucifer, pushing the Seraphim out of Ossium, and achieved the rank of Bellitant. She settled in Carnioz, on Speranza in the Quintica System, and bought the local Circuit. As Euditor she reformed the ways in which skirmishers and circuiters are treated, reforms that are spreading across Carnioz as I write these words. Some consider Barr a candidate for the Tetrokonity of Carnioz in the next Shift.
parliament and the planetary governments are coming up soon...there have been many
calls that you stand for election. There are many who call you a savior.”

“I won't stand for election, Mum. I-- I can't.”

She nodded. “I know. You've done your part, Ferro. Your life is all yours, and
you need to decide what you're going to do with it.”

Mum only stayed for a few days. She's been asked to join a Maxima council on
new Grid regulations, and I can't stop her from helping save future lives. She told me my
sacrifice motivated her to give something back-- and that at least gives me cause for
occasional moments of happiness.

I think she knows I'm still not ready to be around others. I'm relieved at least one
person isn't using my name as a curse.

I sometimes eat, I sometimes sleep. I am surrounded by nothing but desolate
nature. I sit in my bed for hours. I pull myself into the dawn that splits like a cracked
egg over the world and I cry. There aren't a lot of tears left in me, so mostly I just
shudder and shake.

I don't know if I regret what I did.

I'm alive. I live on a planet governed only by itself and a system parliament. This
is what I was hoping for. Right?

To be human is not a condition of flesh, or death. It's nothing more and nothing
less than the ability to do great harm in the belief that one does the right thing. I am not
trying to define humanity around myself-- it's merely the last thread I can hold onto.
Without it, I cannot find anything redeemable within me.

For now I am hoping that my fellow humans work together and build a better world. I pray for peace. I want my nightmares to go away. Perhaps I'll send a bulletin to Joule, and ask her how to raise crops from the soil. I'll stay here, at least for a while.

I'm done writing, though-- at least in this notebook. I have captured my memories and my identity as a skirmisher in these pages. Now I'm no longer a skirmisher. I should try to move on. No memory will leave me, of course, but this is where I must deviate.

I know I didn't ensure the happiness of Earth-- most likely I undermined it. Many would have happily traded the right to procreate for stability and sustenance. But now the people of Earth will get to make mistakes-- they will have influence in their lives. And I think that is something.

I'm going to go for a walk now. I'm going to find a place in the sun and lie down, and just breathe in the various aromas in the air. Goodbye, faithful friend. Thank you.

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An Open Letter from Moesia Salutis-Qita, Prefect of Maxima to Ferroentius Barr-Valenz, Savior:

October 3, 1074 TST

Since I do not know where you are, I cannot address my thoughts and sentiments directly to you. I hope therefore that these words,
distributed across the networks and bulletins, somehow, find their way to you.

Years have passed since you made your gambit, since you changed the world. We have had elections, and re-elections. The Parliament of Helios is recognized by all, excluding a few rogue orbitals. The riots have ended. The Dole is well funded, and many are entering the work force, eager to help acclimate our less-advanced automata to our necessities. Watching so many work ten, even twenty hours a week gives me hope that we do not need the help of the Federation to survive.

My hope is that you know this already. I imagine you're somewhere in Helios, watching your endeavor unfold. Not everything has been easy, of course. The virus on Europa almost drove us to ask the Federation for assistance, but we found a cure. People are acclimating to this transformation. We will never have the productivity and energy exports we saw under the Tetrokonity, but we will have enough to sustain ourselves.

How do you feel about my reinstitution of the Urban Security Network? I know it's this very biochemical equipment that brought you to the Circuit in the first place, but I intend to use it with leniency. If we stop crimes, we can then diffuse them, and stop people from fearing each other. I hope you'll agree with my decision.

You have accomplished something incredible, Ferro. I know it cost
you a great deal-- but I speak for millions when I thank you. Your desire for anonymity is understandable, but remember: you are not alone. My door is always open if you are looking for a friend.

Until we meet again, Ferro,
Moesia.

Epilogue

What did happen to Ferrolentius? Did he stay in the cottage until his death? Did he move back to Maxima? Did he join the University of Wellington? Gaozians still disagree. It is infuriating to say, but we simply don't know.

Ferrolentius is not remarkable simply for altering the fate of Earth, but because of who he was. To hold this same diary-- though it is quite aged now-- it feels like I have access to his fingertips-- to his emotions-- to his sorrow. I hope that came through in my transcription. If you were not moved by Caston's cruel treatment, then I encourage you to read again.

The greatest sorrow, of course, is the nullification of his sacrifice. In 1089 TST Tetrokon Nepoz found a loophole in Caston's agreement with the Array and reclaimed Earth for the Federation. Earth has reverted to the state for most planets in the Federation. The circuit continues to provide entertainment for those like me, watching from afar.

We progress upon Caston's vision for humanity, not Ferro's. I pass no judgement on this matter-- a historian's duty is to report the truth as we can best
understand it, without moralizing anything. But if change from this course were desirable, it would have to come from you-- the citizen.

I have my own theory about where Ferro might have ended up. There is a piece in the University of Luna in Moon City, dated to 1083 TST that caught my attention. It is anonymous and I will let you judge whether or not these are the words of our little hero.

Let Ferro-- or whoever wrote the following, have the last word. Until then, I am your faithful servant, Ibis Vanderspaar-Kau.

I have spent years up years trying to reconcile contradiction. For a long time I tried to reconcile my fear of death and my desire for suicide. I would be lying if I said I had a good answer for you even today. But I don't think most humans can be reduced to a simple position or an unchanging image. It suits our evolutionary minds to see people and ideologies as black and white-- or blue and green, in the case of Circuit spectators. But when you try to reduce people by eliminating their contradictions, you eliminate their humanity.

Are we better off now than before independence? Both yes and no. Is the net impact positive? For some people yes, for some people no. Is life better for me? Perhaps the hardest question of all. I can simply say I have given up on reconciling my contradiction. Perhaps because my fear of death and my desire for suicide have both slackened.
I still carry fear like a gem in my heart-- the fear that I am full of error. But it has grown warm over the years and I draw contentment from this fear. It sits within me, and reminds me who I am.

Anonymous

From *The Luna Anthology of Memories, from when the Earth was Free, Volume IV*
Mori: The Mortal Gambit

Thesis Reflection: The Mortal Gambit

The Mortal Gambit is not the first novel-length manuscript I have written, but the experience was both more grueling and more rewarding. Up until last spring I wrote novels for fun, to create the stories I wished I was reading in the world. However none were as ambitious as this text, and none were going to be evaluated and graded. Both in terms of the process and the philosophical themes, I feel my writing has matured, which has been the most rewarding part of this experience.

I’ve become better about outlining my work before starting a project, just so that I hit all the important points of plot and character development, but writing MG was a different caliber, since I was writing to a proposal. I promised to deliver certain features, and therefore I had no choice in the matter. I could not abandon the project because it was no longer holding my interest. Writing creatively in an academic setting felt very different. I had done so in the past with shorter works but short stories and poems can be completed in one or two sittings, if necessary. A novel cannot.

I set myself a daily writing goal, because I knew it would be easy to forget to do this long term project when I had essays due every other week. This helped, but it was surprisingly difficult at times. Often my creative brain wasn't fully awake, but I had to press on anyway. The first draft came in around 85,000 words.

But the first draft is only the first step. The real difficulty is paring it down. It was disheartening when many people I showed the draft too were too bored by the historian's introduction to get into the main story. Several people found the footnotes
distracting, where I was hoping they would serve as a highly useful asset to the reader. And so I made a concerted effort to make the historian briefer and more interesting. This wasn't always easy. It often meant I had to simplify some of the world building explanations, but I realized with time that the reader didn't have to know everything. They just needed enough to understand the story.

One of the realizations of the process was not being able to fully develop all parts of the world, and this was both a positive and a negative. Most good speculative fiction works make me ask for more, want to know what has happened in this world apart from the main story. I hope at times I achieve this. I think the Seraphim and the Cankerbees offer an enemy worthy of more consideration, as do the many other worlds I mention. That, in my opinion has value. It was a delicate balance however, trying to figure out how best to manage these expectations.

When cutting down the rest of the document by almost 14,000 words, choices were made for clarity and efficiency, but also for genre. The story is a diary, and therefore must be plausibly presented as a diary. Extended dialogue is not credible. This was a challenge, as I love writing dialogue and push plot forward with talking almost always. I had to learn good techniques to summarize conversations, and especially in the reunion with Brevity I worked on this. Between this pruning and the addition of more emotion in the ending, I was working hard to increase the reader's sympathy in this strange, otherworldly Earth.

Turning to the themes of my thesis, I must confess I write a story to grapple with an idea, though I rarely resolve it. Previous to Mortal Gambit I wrote Botany, set in a
fictional California coastal town where people's emotions can be tinkered with by botanists, who enter their emotional “gardens”. This was my way of dealing with emotional dissociation and infatuation, though without any one resolution. Before that I wrote Steamed Milk, which tried to understand the fuzzy similarities between dreams, memory and history.

And so I came to the proposal and the work of Mortal Gambit with several large questions in mind. What does it mean to be human? At what point do we stop being human and become animal or machine? What is the meaning of humanity when humans become obsolete? Is it better to be controlled by a benign superintelligent dictatorship or have a flawed, inefficient democracy? Can ordinary people change the world politically?

To tackle the first question I introduced the Citizens, humans fused with advanced biocomputers; immortal, powerful, intelligent. The denizens see them as foreign beings, but more human than the Seraphin and the Cankerbees, while characters like Joule fear the denizens too, with their bodily augmentations. This spectrum allows for an examination of these boundaries.

Obsolesce interested me of course, and I imagined a world humans don't do much anymore. They're taken care of, but apart from working the electric grid and being forced to compete in Circuit Matches, they don't do much at all. I feel I could have delved deeper into this conundrum, but I attacked this briefly with the philosophical moments and Ferro's readings, and perhaps I reach a conclusion; humanity isn't the means to an end-- humanity is the end. We don't have to justify our existence.

On the question of dictatorship versus democracy, I feel the story hints at both
simultaneously. I make no claims that a human run government will be better than one run by Mozis and citizens, but again I'm trying not to think in terms of efficiency and output. Sometimes it's better to fail, and therefore having the chance to fail.

For the last question, I have my doubts. Can people change the world? Of course, politically, there can be movement, but as government becomes more and more distant from the populace, as technology grants nations greater abilities to enforce decorum, will that remain true? It makes me nervous, which is partially why I didn't want Ferro's revolution to be conclusive. In that way this project is a cautionary tale. We may be able to change the world now, but how long will we be able to do so? If my piece is successful, it will raise these concerns, or at least make people question the world they see right now.

While not necessarily marketable, this project accomplishes something important for me; a philosophical discussion with nuance AND action. I can't say whether or not I succeeded in my goal of walking the line between speculative and literary fiction, but I certainly tried. I hope the work will appeal to readers of all inclinations. I believe there is at least something for everyone. It's been an amazing journey putting this humble story together.