

November 14, 2499; an undisclosed location

While waiting for the vidcomp to load another series of images, the acolyte stretches to relieve the tension in his lower back. His shift was almost up; he had been pulling two, eight hour shifts a day for nearly two weeks now. The Mistress set out a task so complex that twenty acolytes were required to review the vidcomp's more general findings and search for the specific answer the Mistress sought.

The acolyte began processing through the next set of images. This particular finding was a recorded broadcast of a popular culture show called 'The Star Report'. He had seen other recordings of the show and did not like it much. It was full of gossip and few facts. The host lacked depth. He chided himself for getting distracted by his personal analysis and began sifting through the vidcomp's flags.

The host beams a smile into the camera and says, "My friends, in this segment we have a SNS exclusive. Tanya Aster has obtained a list of the special events that will take place during the week leading up to and immediately following the opening ceremonies. Let's listen in."

The picture fades into scenic view overlooking the City of Bancredo Bay, in the distance the viewer can see the bay the city is named for. A female voice comes over the channel, "Absolutely beautiful isn't it? Most of what you see here was built in the last four years. The Sultan of Al Ackbar is actually ahead of schedule to complete the renovations to Bancredo Bay before the start of the 2500 Interstellar Olympics."

The camera pans to the left bringing the woman into the shot. She holds up a datapad in her right hand as she continues, "I have here the list of official state and corporate events that will take place right before and right after the opening ceremonies ..."

As the reporter begins reading off the lists and commenting on the potential attendees, the acolyte begins making a similar list on another screen. He instructs the vidcomp to cross reference the events, sites, and attendees with specific databases, looking for the connection the Mistress seeks. While the vidcomp processes the request, the acolyte scans through the rest of the report to see if additional information can be gleaned.

Several minutes later, the vidcomp comes back with its analysis. The acolyte catches his breath and rechecks the results manually; still a positive result. He transfers the data to a datapad, looks at his reflection in the display screen, and quickly walks over to the dais where the Mistress spends as much time as any acolyte in the room.

Holographic imagers built into the headpiece of the dais displays data on a revolving sphere in front of the dark robed Mistress. She feeds instructions to the imager through the smaller holographic sphere rotating around her gloved left hand. Quick finger gestures within the sphere changes the master display. The smooth, gray ceramic mask, completely devoid of openings or other surface features, conceals any response to the information displayed. Two guards in pristine black armor stand to the left and right behind the dais, weapons resting in their arms.

Careful not to read the characters in the displays, the acolyte pulls back his hood, revealing his bald head, and kneels near her gloved right hand. He bows his head just low enough to be polite, but allow him to observe her right hand for a sign of acknowledgement.

After a few moments, the right hand spirals in an upward direction. The acolyte raises his head and instructs the datapad to download its contents into the dais. Immediately, the images play alongside the acolyte's analysis.

"Mistress, I believe ..." begins the acolyte; just as soon as he says it; he realizes his error.

Her masked head turns to face him and a scolding female voice resonates from the mask, "The criteria did not include belief acolyte. Are you wasting my time with a corrupted analysis?"

The acolyte ponders his response quickly, rumors in the barracks said that the last person asked that question never returned. "No Mistress, it was a poor choice of words on my part. The analysis is not corrupted. It is devoid of belief and worth the time you spend reviewing it. It fulfills all of the criteria you set forth. I beg your understanding and forgiveness for my imprecise verbal communication," he responds.

The mask turns back to the sphere, her left hand making patterns in the sphere. A new series of characters appear in the sphere. The acolyte instinctively attempts to read the characters and a sharp pain fills his head. The pain subsides as soon as he looks away but he still feels a dull throb around his eyes.

The Mistress dismisses the spheres and stands from the dais. All of the other screens in the room go blank. Acolytes begin filing out a side door. She removes her right glove and places her pale white hand directly on the bald man's head. Her touch is cool and it tingles. She removes her hand and returns it to her glove. "Arise and attend me," she says.

The Acolyte rises from his kneeling position and pulls the hood up over his head.

The Mistress signals to a guard, who steps forward, "Assign a detail to my Attendant and see to it that he is properly dressed for his station. Then join us in the observation gallery." Without waiting for a response, she strides from the room, the other guard following behind her.

Once she leaves the room, the newly promoted Attendant exhales slowly, the stress of the past few minutes draining from him. He looks to the guard and says, "Lead on."