

February 12, 2500; an undisclosed location.

A dark robed individual wearing a gray ceramic mask slowly removes bandages from the face of another dark robed person. A second mask lies on a table nearby.

As the masked person removes the last of the bandages, the person picks up a device from the table and runs it over the face of a woman. Her features unmarred except for a vertical scar on her left cheek. Her crystal blue eyes watches the device as it moves about her face, seeking any indication of what it is reporting.

The masked individual puts down the device and it powers itself off. After studying her face for a moment, a melodic male voice can be heard from behind the mask, "The healing process is complete; you should not wear the interface for another day to give your skin time to adjust. I still think you should have let me remove the scar."

"Another day!" she exclaims, "I need to get back to the task; there is much work to be done. As to the scar ... I'm keeping it for personal reasons." After a couple moments of reflection, she continues, "Thank you for your services Brother Healer."

"Very well, suit yourself," he says with an 'I'll-remind-you-of-this-decision-later' tone of voice. "Now that the process is complete, the scar is permanent. I cannot remove it without an involved procedure. But I highly recommend you take one more day to recover. Otherwise, it could affect your ability to use the interface, and that would slow you down anyway. My way avoids the additional stress your frustration with your interface would inflict upon you," he says with a tone that even sounds like it smiles.

The smirk on her face tells the man the point hit home. He bows slightly, gathers up all of the items from the table except for the mask, and departs the room without another word. The woman moves over to the one-way windows looking down onto an operating theater. A person lays motionless on the table, cables and tubes attached everywhere to the body. Five acolytes move about the room, monitoring the displays. The Healer enters the room and checks the sensor panel at the head of the bed.

The woman finds herself staring at her reflection on the window and she lightly touches her face. The tip of her finger traces along the edges of the still-sensitive scar. Her other hand reaches inside her robe just before the door swishes open behind her. Her anger spikes thinking that her guards would allow someone to intrude on her, but she realizes that there is only one person the guards would allow to do just that. She reaches down for the mask on the table.

A deep male voice echoes from the dark robed person standing at the door; a gray mask conceals his features, "That will not be necessary Sister." He holds a staff made from an opaque, crystal-like material in his right hand. Energy pulses randomly flicker and move within the staff.

"One should be properly attired, Brother Staffbearer," she responds.

"In this informal setting, I do not think either of us would be offended. Would we?" he asks.

"No," is her response.

He walks over and stands in front of her. He is easily a head taller than she. He cups her chin in his gloved hand and examines her face.

"The Healer did well. I see that you decided to keep the scar," he says.

"Brother did quite well. And yes, I kept the scar. Why does everyone keep asking about my appearance? It is a scar, nothing more." she says as she jerks her head from his touch and faces the window. She instinctively reaches for the mask and the protection it offers, but the Healer's words stay her hand.

He closes his hand and slowly lowers it to his side before responding, "If it was just a simple scar, it would no longer be there. Therefore it must have a deeper meaning. I am not concerned with the physical scar, but rather what it represents; the scar on your spirit. What is done is done Sister. You should put those events behind you and move forward."

“You would not be so cavalier about it if it was your plan that literally blew up in your face!” she snaps. She immediately regrets her tone and says, “Please forgive my outburst Brother Staffbearer.”

The mask cocks to one side as she responds, but after she stops, he says, “As I said earlier, this is an informal setting. I am not offended. But to address your statement, I indeed lack the emotional attachment you obviously still retain. That type of attachment will impede your future endeavors if you fail to deal with it. The Assembly cannot afford such things interfering with the master plan.”

“Assuming I still have a part in the master plan, you mean,” she replies.

The man grasps the staff the both hands and leans on it slightly as his responds, “Ah, you think I am here to chastise you for the results of your recent activities. As you know, your endeavor was a minor diversion from the master plan. Although it took years to cultivate and did not bear the results you promised the Assembly, it still bore fruit. We know a great deal more about the knowledge and capabilities of those who usurp our birthright. We know that our Adversaries are not influenced by the Order of Stellar Light, at least not openly. In fact, if any of our kind are around, they do not openly show themselves. Yes, you failed to provide the location of the Impresario. Yes, you allowed our technology to fall into their hands. That failure has given our Adversaries tangible proof of our existence, or at least the existence of someone more advanced and opposed to them. And yes, you nearly got you and your attendant killed.”

He moves beside her and looks down into the bay before continuing, “Although I doubt you can find anyone who will agree that that <indicating the body on the bed below> is still living. So I will not call this a total failure, but the results were not positive. And this ... setback ... did not significantly impact the master plan. So the Assembly can be forgiving in this instance. But from now on, you will play your role in the master plan. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Brother Staffbearer,” she replies.

“Very well, join with the Assembly tomorrow afternoon in the observation gallery and be prepared to continue on with the work. The Assembly’s work, not some personal vendetta,” he says as he turns and starts towards the door.

“Yes, Brother Staffbearer. But what about my request for my attendant?” she questions.

The man stop and walks back over to the window before answering, “Why not let nature take its course and let him return to the Maker? You can train another attendant. There are many of those that serve with us to choose from.”

She wraps her arms around herself before answering, “Because he is unique. His spirit is very strong; his desire to serve just as strong. To allow nature to take its course would be a waste. When we were in the translocation chamber and the weapon exploded, I saw his spirit selflessly condemn him to this state to protect those around him. At that moment the explosion took place, I watched him make the decision to return or stay. We formed a link that I still sense, even though he is unconscious. He wants to stay and continue the work, not be reclaimed by the Maker.” The last statement made with venom in her voice.

“Share this with me,” he says.

The woman closes her eyes and opens her mind to the Staffbearer. Within moments, they both relive the pain and loss of the event. He breaks the connection and stumbles back from her, using the staff to steady himself.

“I have never fully understood the method by which you selected your attendant. I still do not. But I sense the link as you claim. I will approve your request Sister, but on the condition that he be bound to help you with your role in the master plan, nothing more,” he says, quietly waiting for her response.

“Yes, Brother Staffbearer. Thank you,” she replies.

The Staffbearer's hand tightens briefly on the staff. Down in the medical bay, the Healer stops what he is doing, looks up at the observation gallery, and nods once. He instructs the acolytes in the room and they begin breaking down sealed pallets in the corner of the room. Satisfied with their performance, the Healer walks over to the bed and makes some adjustments to the displays. Without looking, his left hand reaches towards the table nearby and it silently rolls over to him. He picks up an instrument and begins a new procedure ...

The Staffbearer turns to the woman and says, "There, you have your wish. You are now responsible for his training and adaptation to the Avatar process. If he becomes a problem, you will address it yourself. If I or another member of the Assembly becomes involved to clean it up, you will both earn the same fate." Without waiting for a response, he leaves the room.

Once the door closes, the woman reaches into her robe, pulls out a foot-long ceramic knife, and holds it up to the light to examine it in minute detail, "Of course Brother Staffbearer," she smiles as she tells herself, "I would have it no other way."