

---

*July 12, 2501 - 10:34 p.m.; Chinatown, New York City, North American Union, Earth;*

As the tropical depression continues to pour inches of rain on the greater metropolitan area, a thin, hooded figure enters the front door of the dry cleaning store. Neither customer nor employee takes notice as the person strides past the counter and walks deeper into the maze of mobile racks, piles of clothing, and equipment. At the back, the figure pushes open a door and descends a stairway.

At the bottom, two large, muscular Asian men stand guard on either side of a steel door. A gloved hand reaches up and lightly taps the door and a slot opens. Moments later, the door opens and the figure continues its journey. The room is full people drinking and gambling. Several men casually walk around the room; their oversized coats barely concealing the weapons they carry. But even they do not acknowledge the new arrival.

The figure continues to the back of the room and starts down a long hall. Beaded curtains try to conceal all manner of activities taking place in the dark recesses of the rooms they cover. Various odors as well as gasps of both pleasure and pain offer no interest to the figure. Instead the figure comes to a stop at the beaded curtain at the end of the hall.

After several moments, the figure pushes its way through the curtain and comes to a stop on the other side and waits. The figure silently observes the candlelit tableau before it. A large, hairy, overweight Caucasian male lays spread out in a small sofa at the back of the room. The robe he wears open and providing no cover of his nude body to anyone coming into the room. Three women, of different ethnic backgrounds and in various states of undress, engage in various acts with the man or with each other to the man's enjoyment. Bottles or other containers of various distilled spirits, mixers, and ice are discarded throughout the area.

The women are completely oblivious to the presence of the figure. However, the man, who says nothing when the figure enters, quietly watches the figure with coal black eyes.

The figure partially pulls back the hood revealing a face covered with a white, feminine porcelain mask, the kind worn during stage performances like dramas or operas. "Leave," the figure commands. The command has a feminine tone to it.

The three women suddenly realize the figure's presence. With anxious glances at the man, who only nods in the affirmative, they collect what clothing is within reach and flee the room. While they scatter, the man stands up and ties the robe around himself and walks over to a small bar. He puts ice in two glasses, and pours two drinks. He then returns to the couch, sits down, and offers the figure one of the glasses.

Once the beaded curtain stops moving, the figure pulls the hood completely back revealing a completely bald head. The figure then reaches up and removes the mask revealing a woman's face with flawless skin and Asian features. She takes a seat on the sofa next to the man and takes the offered drink.

After taking a sip of the drink, the woman looks at the curtain then back to the man. In English with a slight accent, she says, "Beli, you are a pig. You live like the animal and smell even worse."

The man bellows out a hearty laugh and replies with a thick Eastern European accent, "Izzy, you always know how to warm a heart. But you did not need to break up my party... you could have joined in. You would have found them... most enjoyable... energetic even." He reaches to caress the woman's face with the tips of his fingers.

The woman pushes her drink into his hand, stands back up, and straightens out her cloak. She looks down at the man on the couch and says, "Doubtful. Where you consume vast quantities of rotgut, I savor the finer vintages; rare vintages that must be carefully enjoyed."

The man chuckles and finishes off her drink before sitting the glass down, "As you know, I have been among these cattle for a very long time. Every time I think I have seen the limits of their depravity, they find new ways to amaze even me. Not only have they come up with activities with each other, they have found ways engage in them without even being there. Who am I to try and deny them their choices. And boy, the choices these cattle make."

The woman switches to the First tongue, "I am not here to discuss your investigation of the limits of free will. You ignored the summons. I was the unfortunate one chosen to find out why."

---

"I simply chose not to. There is no reason to come panting every time he gets an itch," the Beli replies in kind.

"Did you not sense Zephram's presense?" she asks.

"I noticed, but my association with him is not as close as yours. But even I can tell he is gone again; which means someone stuffed him back into his hole. So the issue is moot," he responds.

She gives him a dagger glare before continuing, "Then you should realize the importance. It means they are back among us again. We are hearing increased whispers among the ruling classes of the Chosen about events involving 'advanced technologies' and 'unusual presences'."

"And this from the very same 'Chosen' where some still report that Elvis is still around; OVER 500 OF THEIR YEARS AFTER HE DIED!" he shouts in English. After he composes himself he continues in the First tongue, "These are cattle, beasts of burden, nothing more. They have no ability to affect us. Do not threaten them directly and they pose no threat to us. To do anything else invites their curiosity and creativity. Then they could become a threat. Simply use them for your enjoyment before their too brief lives ends."

"What if the a'Dam or the Eve have returned?" she asks.

"They destroyed each other a long time ago. There is none of them to return," he replies.

She reaches into her pocket and tosses a small metal disk to him. He snatches it out of the air and studies it. It is slightly melted, but the flame wreathed globe imprinted on it is unmistakable. "Where did you get this?" he asks.

"One of my operatives bought it from a villager in a village market on the southern continent of the planet the Chosen call Cadorius. A while ago, a mountain there exploded; a mountain sacred to those living nearby. The ruling class told everyone it was geologic activity, but my operative believes otherwise," she says.

"Cadorius?" he says as he ponders, "Is not that the world where those that run GalatiComm live?"

"Yes," she replies.

"So some mountain blows up on a world where they once inhabited it and it had some old relics in it," he says tossing the disk back to her, "It is of no importance."

"Then explain this away then," she says as she walks over to the vidcomp terminal. After showing the empty glasses and bottles into the floor, she calls up a pakcast archive and plays it. "This was broadcast two days ago," she adds.

She fast forwards past the commentator's opening and stops just before the scene changes.

"... live to the press conference with Avis Hawdon at HBG headquarters in Saga City," the announcer says as the audio track syncs up with the video.

The image shifts to a podium with a flag hanging on the wall behind it. Six people are seated behind the podium as an attractive blond female in a business suit addresses the assembled crowd and media. As soon as the man sees the flame wreathed globe emblem on the flag, he sits up and pays rapt attention.

"Good morning everyone. Thank you for coming here today for this important announcement. I will try and keep the statements brief so we can get to your questions. But please hold your questions until the end," she says then gives the crowd a smile.

Instead of reading from her notes, she looks directly at the crowd and camera. "As you know, my world and several others were viciously attacked by pirates lead by Leviticus Babel. Only through extreme sacrifice and heroic efforts of a great many people, were the predations of Babel checked. By extension, the rest of known space suffered at the hands of these people when GalatiComm went offline for a short period of time.

Although the various governments in the Non-Affiliated sector coordinate with each other and the security services of the UPC and FPC, this was not enough to prevent the attacks on our persons and property.

I have been in discussions with various governments and experts on these matters for a while now. Based on their input and my own principles, I announce today the formation of a new organization that shall be called the Order of Stellar Light or OSL for short.

---

Membership in the OSL is open to any government wishing to give jurisdiction to the OSL for the purposes of investigating and prosecuting criminal activities that stretch beyond our individual borders. In exchange for this cooperation, each member will be given one representative and one vote on the OSL governing council. A new policing force will be assembled to pursue criminals as well as help in the defense of member worlds from predation by these criminals. Our goal is to centralize the fight against these criminals so that this type of tragedy will never happen again.

Aside from this world, five others have joined in this effort. We have held our first council meeting and elected our first Commanding Director. His role will be to implement the policies of the OSL and oversee the investigations. To provide security to this fledgling organization, the OSL will have the majority of its administrative offices here in Saga City. However, the OSL will be able to draw upon the resources of any of its member worlds for its operations. I am dedicating any and all available resources of the HBG to this endeavor.

Please allow me to introduce the new Commanding Director of the OSL, Douglas Burgoss. Welcome Director Burgoss and congratulations.”

A tall, red headed Caucasian man wearing a crispy tailored dark gray and black uniform steps up to the podium and shakes Avis’ hand. On his shoulder is a patch with the flame wreathed globe logo of the OSL; translucent stars adorn his collar. A polite applause erupts from the assembled crowd.

Avis returns to her seat as the man turns to the crowd and says, “Thanks you Madame President for that welcome and your support...”

“Mute!” the man says and the vidcomp terminal mutes the sound. He looks at the woman totally speechless.

“Now do you understand the urgency?” she says, “There is no way that this is sheer coincidence. There are things happening behind the scenes that we are not aware of. We should have been aware of this before it became public. If this group has access to the knowledge and technology of the real OSL, then your so called cattle are more than playthings would you think?”

“When is the next gathering?” the man asks.

“Two days from now. Can I tell him you will be there?” she replies.

“Yes,” is his only response.

The woman replaces the mask on her face and pulls the hood back up on her head. Without another look or word, the woman disappears back through the beaded curtain, leaving the man alone. Less than a minute later the cloaked figure fades into the darkness and pouring rain outside.

After several moments, the man says, “Vidcomp off” and leans back on the sofa then runs his hands over his face and hair.

“Tasha, Ying!” he bellows out in heavily accented English, “I am alone, cold, and thirsty in here. I’m going to tell Victor that the hospitality in the place he recommended positively sucks!”