

A Fragile Void

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(Inktober Prompt, Day 20: Breakable)

Content warning: Extreme pain, blood, and implied death.

“For the last time, the answer is no.”

“But-”

The Terran captain scoffed at the interruption. “I don’t care how close to your birthday you are. You’re a kid, and you’re a liability at that. If you even want to try, you need to wait until certification age like everyone else, apply through the BioCouncil-approved 2V companies, and convince *them* that you’re not going to be a waste of resources.”

The small Gecko girl harrumphed as the Human walked off to the docking bridges, stomping her way over to the observation windows to gaze longingly towards his eventual destination. It was a beautiful ship, a Triterian hull design outfitted with the best technology the Decicree had to offer; it looked as if symmetrical droplets of water had been flung through zero gravity, a curvy ship of rounded modules that expressed just how free non-atmospheric craft design could be. She’d heard it had been modernized and adapted for its now primarily Terran crew, one of a fleet of eight cruisers the BioCouncil had auctioned to the 2V companies to accommodate the new influx of Terran applicants. Captain Mason Chiru, the first Human and fourth Terran to have been promoted to head a 2V crew, made Hoshi so mad. There was no breaking regulations under his eyes, no matter the exception.

As the station’s outer ring slowly turned around its axis, the nearby binary stars moved to catch the large pane of transparent reinforced metal at just the right angle, their light refracting and coaxing the windows’ nanites to tint and adjust to protect the eyes of those inside. As the window greyed, Hoshi was left with a reflection of herself...or, at least, she was left with a reflection of the suit she wore.

To anyone unfamiliar with the rare accessibility technology, she appeared ready for a space-walk. Entirely enclosed with no seams or joining points, the suit was a blue-grey sheen. On the suit’s right wrist, a small thin-display read out vitals and connected to a holographic projector to serve as a personal data and interface device. A long tail that tapered slowly to a point whipped behind her, a feature that suggested at her species but provided no other means of narrowing it down. A dark, multi-layered visor hid any sight of her eyes, and a large ventilation mask covered the entire area over her mouth, nose, and lower jaw. Her palms, fingertips, and the soles of her feet were rough and pliant compared to the rest of the suit which squeaked and resisted excessive movement.

Even with what was clearly a built-up suit, the girl was small. Hidden beneath an inch of solid sensory-deadening polymer, Hoshi's soft smooth green and yellow-green skin was lost to almost everyone. Her eyes narrowed, looking at the filtered version of her own reflection. She would've spit in frustration like many of the engineers she'd secretly learned from, but all it would do is cause her respirator to filter the fluid, distribute the moisture to her body, and shunt the "unhealthy" elements into a small organic battery.

"I hate myself," she muttered under her breath, the words failing to be rebroadcast through her respirator as a small notice popped up in front of her. "No intended recipient found. Use speech transmitter anyway?" Groaning, she slapped a finger on the holographic "no" button only her visor was attuned to see, eventually stomping her way down the station's outer concourse. Ferros and Teplians, Wolves and Decicree, the crowds of hundreds of sentient species that now existed in this shared expanse of the galaxy mingled and moved from place to place. The wide open areas, exotic trees, expanses of light-fed grass, and station's notice boards all were familiar sights to Hoshi, and so they failed to lift her spirits. You couldn't travel much when you were missing crucial layers of skin and had billions of extra sensory neurons in the exposed flesh.

The last time she'd attempted to remove her suit, she was tranquilized almost immediately by the station's security systems. Yet, in those long seconds, her screams had given a group of nearby children nightmares for weeks. The very brush of ventilated air had ripped across those extra sensory receptors, shooting lightning through her body to overwhelm her brain. With every emergency signal triggered at once and her friends helplessly cowering at the Gecko girl's cry of agony, all her mind could do was register every single smallest sensation as pain. The half of her suit peeling from her body like the tearing of her flesh from her body, every touch of skin against skin acting as if both expanses had been scalded with third-degree burns, and the puncture of that fired tranquilizer patch's hundreds of microscopic, normally painless pins like a brutal stabbing at the base of her neck, she reported kept screaming for six seconds after she'd fallen completely unconscious.

That had been four years ago at the behest of a fellow teen's bullying. The teen never bullied her after that. No one did. Occasionally, the hushed rumor came out from one of those that had been there saying Hoshi was gorgeous, all curves and no angles, skin glistening in the light and a definite beauty. However, no one asked her to prom on that fact alone; nobody wanted to hear the ghastly scream of hellish torture simply to behold a forbidden beauty. Obviously, Hoshi thought it was all hyperbole. She rarely saw herself, but, when she did in the most controlled of circumstances, on nerve-jammers in a medical specialist's isolation pod, the Gecko thought she was decently pretty. She appreciated the rumor, though.

A year before that, she'd begun to grow depressed. Through an isolation suit, she could feel literally nothing. Her ability to hold a stylus was nearly non-existent, forcing her to fumble

with basic school-work even while her oral performance was solid. Then, a Decicree scientist demonstrated an improved suit. As the only living creature with hyperneural dermal epaphy within weeks' travel, even using a state-of-the-art dark core slip-drive, Hoshi was chosen as the tester. "Negotiated sensory input," the deer-like alien had explained, pointing a hoof at the floor display he used as his lab workstation. "Essentially, the suit will act as a set of feeling skin, although most of its processing power will go to these control patches to aid with walking and motor control. Then, its inner layer will attempt to engineer a way to activate your skin's neurons in such a way that creates an equivalent expression in your own brain. The sensations will err on the side of caution, however, and extreme sensations will be blocked entirely. But it will allow you to feel on a day-to-day basis."

When she wore it, they gave her a stylus. The feeling of pressure between her fingertips as she reached to grab it made her gasp and drop it. Her fingers tingled with electricity, her brain responding to a gentle feeling it'd never been capable of before. Even the slightest pressure made her marvel and shiver. The world began to gain tactile depth. Rushing from one wall of the isolation pod, she grinned within the suit madly, mapping the entire area with her hands and feet, confidence and her sense of balance building until she was able to skip around and laugh.

The Gecko's foot had then caught the back of her own achilles, her world tumbling as she fell forward. Her body slammed against the ground. ...nothing. It was as if she'd been upright, even though her new suit-skin told her she'd changed orientation and rushed through the air. Hoshi felt invincible. They asked her to use tools in brief augmented reality trials; a spot welder, a bolt-driver, tweezers, and a plasma cutter. Hoshi finally understood why engineers did these things...to feel technology bend beneath their attentions, to make and repair things and *truly feel* their shape take form under their manipulation...it was a drug.

The high only ended after that early teenage dare. No matter what, Hoshi needed a suit to buffer the very existence of the world. She felt alone. But her hands...they could still work things, buffered as they were. The Gecko snuck out regularly, sneaking into engineering labs, shuttle bays, maintenance garages, and repair services. At first, she watched and matched the physical actions the mechanics and technicians did with the theory she learned in school. Eventually, she began to read more complex manuals and ask questions of the more receptive-looking individuals. While surprised at her presence, they would occasionally enough show her the precise tactile realities, give her tips on minor time-saving habits, and watch her precision work.

At 15, she built her first programmable interface chip. At 16, she'd created a holographic display. At 17, she falsified identity credentials, took, and aced the BioCouncil small-grade dark core certification. Three days ago, the Gecko had repeated her accomplishment of fooling the high security council public records in order to take the test and gain repair certification for craft-grade dark core technology. Hoshi thought it might be good enough to finally get out and

see the world. But the last thing Hoshi wanted to do was lie to a potential boss, even if age was increasingly proven as arbitrary a measure of gauging an individual's maturity.

So when asked how old she was and why she was asking a captain directly, she'd told the truth. *Stupid, stupid, stupid*, Hoshi thought. *But if I don't get off this station in a few days, there's a good chance the system is going to catch my records' discrepancies. I'll need to impress someone with security clearance enough that they will vouch for my early certification.*

Hoshi turned around, giving a small mental giggle of glee at the feeling of the floor spinning beneath her suit's heel, and began to walk with purpose. There was only one option left for her if she wanted to escape her protective parents and the boundaries her condition had previously set on her life. She wanted out. So...she was getting out.

Captain Chiru sighed to himself upon the bridge. He leaned over his shoulder to the tank of water that served as his first officer's bridge station. "This is, what, the fourth stellar skim we've been assigned to?"

The dolphin bobbed its head and let loose a series of squeaks and clicks within its capsule, the networked BioCouncil translator chips working near-instantaneously to translate. "Yup. Fourth time getting particle and material information on the binary flares. They're worried."

The Human raised an eyebrow. "Worried, Ama?"

"About the dark cores, Mason. There still isn't agreement that the cores are consistent; that the technology is somehow borrowing energy or consuming something on a deeper level. So, since the Federation's Ibikari Station is the most aggressive expansion and largest collection of dark cores to be brought online in a short period of time, they're measuring everything about the stars."

"Because the stars are the easiest measure of most major effects on a spacial level, right," the captain sighed.

"I really don't know why they bother," the rumble came from their helmsman. The hunched, armor-plated alien, being from the parent species of the Triterian systems, was uniquely qualified for the ship's navigational controls. His thick head didn't even turn to face the captain as his downwards-facing hands gradually adjusted the ship's control gloves and steered them in course for their first pass. "This debate has been going on for thousands of years, at least since we discovered dark core technology."

"Not everyone can be as long-lived and comfortable with the status quo as the Tephra, Rumen," the low rumble commented, the massive Elephant seated in his own large chamber. His spinal-grafted arms idly played across a keyboard. As Rumen snorted indignantly from the helm, the captain couldn't help but lean back and look at the Elephant's display. An old Terran game of pixel-based creatures. "...Space Invaders? Really, Mbwane?"

The requisitions and weapons officer grinned. “Hey, I didn’t make the game. And your species’ excuse was that it was from a more violent time and when you didn’t know aliens were real. So I don’t think you have a reason to complain, *Dad*.”

Mason laughed. “Wow, way to make this personal. If we knew some Elephants were going to have a sick sense of humor, we might not have uplifted you.”

“You liar. You uplifted Cats, too. Personality concerns did not stop you.”

That brought a ripple of laughter from most of the crew, even many of the non-Terran members having spent enough time to know some about the new council member’s culture.

Being a Voyager Vanguard crew—a 2V for short—meant the ship was under a generous contract to effectively be a general problem solving team. While they could select their contracts to some degree, Mason also knew that idle hands made for bad crews. He needed go-getters willing to do the mundane jobs just as much as the exciting adventures pioneering new discoveries, negotiating major altercations, or running rescues in major habitation hubs. But with a dearth of exciting missions, even he couldn’t help but feel a little wounded.

“Hey, captain?”

“Hm?” he hummed at the small voice, glancing over to see one of the engineering subordinates peeking his nose over the chair’s armrest. The Rodent looked more than a little concerned, small, nimble hands playing together. “Um, I think you should come down to engineering with us.”

“I know you’re short-staffed, Tim, but I’m not the best stand-in,” the captain sighed, massaging his temples. “I barely made it through those certifications. Why not try Mbwane?”

“It’s not an engineering problem, per se...it’s, uh...a stowaway? Is that the right wor-”

Mason groaned, rocking his head back. “Ffffuck. She’s in a thick rubber suit, isn’t she?”

The Rodent immediately sighed in relief. “Oh, good! She did say you knew her. But I don’t think it was rubber, it looked to be an initial layer of a morphic polye-”

The captain pushed himself up out of the chair, making for the bridge’s main doors. Mbwane raised his eyes to point his trunk at the titanic doors for his own chamber, but the captain waved off the non-verbal offer. “Ama, contact me if something happens beyond normal parameters. And, uh, Tim? Y’gotta get better on picking up the mood.”

“You’re kidding!”

“No, really. The converter’s miscalibrated. Put your hands on the console. Can’t you feel the pulse?”

“The instruments don’t read...”

"The instruments are broken too. Seriously, feel it. Hands on the floor. Count out the tertiary pulses. Feel how they're thrumming slightly further away from the secondary pulses than the secondary pulses are to the primary? It's off-beat."

"Huh...what do you know. Nice catch, miss."

"Thanks! So, it'll have to wait until you're docked again, but if you stabilize the dark core and clear the magnetic fields, it should be an easy fix. Just a little tightening around the-

"I don't recall stowaways being allowed in our engine room."

The Teplian jerked upright at the captain's approach, his fin ears closing in trepidation. "Well," he stammered, squirming in his own spandex one-piece, "I mean, she kinda started here. I mean, we found her under the holographic display, and she already had interfaced with the engine readouts..."

"Mhm." Captain Mason looked sternly at the suited Gecko. He couldn't see her expression, but he imagined it to either be a cocky grin or a sheepish smile. Either way, he wasn't pleased with her look. "So...she started in the most secure room in the ship...and directly siphoned off critical information to the most powerful piece of technology on the vessel."

The alien glanced to the suited girl, massaging the back of his head as he tried to look anywhere but his captain's face. "Uh, anyway, when we found her, she pointed out one of the emergency jettison seams was sticky. We were skeptical, but she pulled up her credentials. We checked manually, and sure enough she was right! So we sent Tim up to let you know and fixed that. When we get into port, she also pointed out the magnetic converter was misaligned slightly, so we can fix that and reduce our fuel consumption by almost 2%. She's..."

"A stowaway who snuck into the most crucial room on the ship, hijacked our systems, and then *instructed* my *trained engineers* on how to *adjust* the *very technology* people are worrying about as *destroying the damn fabric of reality*," the captain muttered, dark brown eyes piercing holes through the engineer. "Continue digging the hole, Ein. I'm curious to see how deep this goes."

Ein swallowed. He was often late to knowing when to shut up, but even he knew the point had now been passed. "Sorry, sir. I'll, uh...step over. To the console. Over there."

With the Teplian beating a hasty retreat, Hoshi was left looking up at the taller Terran, beginning to feel a little as her ancestors did when looking upon the scientists that had successfully begun uplifting them. "...hi."

"You know," the captain begun, crossing his arms, "most kids wait until their eighteenth birthday to begin breaking local laws, much less *the BioCouncil charter*."

"I have a certification! I'm not breaking anything!"

“Except into my ship and into the BioCouncil’s databases to alter your own age, **right?!** ” he shouted, Hoshi instantly drawing back. She could feel the pressure of his booming voice hit her face and chest. “What did you expect? That I’d *stroll* into a council hearing and say I’d approved you to try the tests? That the system just...*glitched* and messed up your age at the same time as missing my recommendation letter?”

“I...well...”

“The **ONLY** reason I have not reported you to a disciplinary officer on the station is because you told the truth to me! What do you expect me to do now?!”

“I...I expect you’ll turn me into a station security for a hearing.”

“I’m going to **HAVE** to turn yo-...”

The captain stopped shouting. It wasn’t very often that someone he was yelling had the sense to know exactly what was coming. He honestly didn’t know whether it was good sense or bad, but he didn’t have the luxury of looking at Hoshi’s face. The girl’s expression was hidden away behind the thick rubber-like material, complicated respirator, and dark visor. *Dammit, this is why I need to start bringing Ama or Thorald with me*, he thought. *Could use a mage or biomancer to read this girl.*

Hoshi stood up straight. Her head, even with one inch below the soles of her feet and one inch atop her head, barely allowed her eyes to reach Mason’s neck. She looked up. “I’m...prepared to accept the consequences. But I had to try. Don’t you understand? *I had to try.*”

The captain remained silent. This was the point where she would continue to excuse her own actions.

“It was my only shot. I’m too...broken. But I did it anyway because I had to have something to believe in. All the technology in the world, and all it does is keep me hidden away. I needed to find something to believe in. So...I broke the rules. It didn’t work. I’m not sorry for trying, but I am sorry that I inconvenienced you and this crew..”

The captain didn’t know what to say, staring at the faceless suit before him. That...was not an excuse so much as a motive. He watched her slump, fold her legs, and sit on the ground, the suited tail sweeping the floor behind her in front of the room’s center. “...but you should fix that converter,” she said, the Gecko’s voice warbling only slightly with her last word.

The captain stepped forward towards the sitting girl, a hand reaching out to grab her by the shoulder.

CRAK-GRRRRNNNNCH!

The sudden noise exploded around the engine room. The captain braced himself, his extensive training and experience funneling all panic in his body into a need for information. His eyes browsed the room as metal screamed. The entire engine room’s center buckled downwards and to his left, the ceiling crumpling inwards and a crater having crushed through

eight or nine layers of reinforced plating. Sparks were flying and popping, the flat strands that served as the ship's electrical cords having been sliced clean through.

The fact that they were still live meant emergency measures had somehow been catastrophically ruined. There were three emergency backup servers running contingency programs. Two of them had been in the direct path of...whatever this was. One of them was in the bridge. Why wasn't the bridge's server killing the necessary power pathways? Something was interfering with communications. Attack? Unlikely, unless they were terrible shots. If they had a weapon that could inflict this amount of damage to the most secure room on the ship, they would've hit the dark core, not orbited the shot around it.

"Captain! Failsafes are offline!"

He loved Ein to death sometimes, but this was not one of those times. Mason didn't even notice that the Gecko had stood up, tail raised in alarm as she looked around at the structure of the room. "Give me good news, Ein," he barked.

"None to give! Dark core's mass is misaligned! It won't shut down!"

Mason's heart dropped. For the first time in a long time, he was afraid.

They were above a star, aboard a living gravity nuke.

If anyone on Ibikari Station lived from the resulting shockwave and solar eruption they'd likely cause, it'd be a miracle. He and the crew, however, were already dead.

"Can we do *anything*, Ein?! Direct the blast, shut down the core, eject and warp it?! We are now in critical! 2V training, focus, leave the judgement calls to me!"

Ein registered the commands, but it was hard not to make judgement calls. He wouldn't have been in the second circle of officers on board, though, if he wasn't able to swallow his pride once in a while.

CRACK-GRRRRNNNN-pow!

The world seemed to buckle, as if a large ball had rolled through reality and stretched its surface. The room's roof crushed further inwards, the floors crater splintering through a live line of plasma deep below. The immediate tubes surrounding the line, however, spilled a fluid on the live line, instantly shooting steam from the hole in a geyser. One of the engineering auxiliaries screamed, super-heated gas erupting over the Human woman's hand before she jerked away. Mason didn't bother looking. Everyone on board was already dead. **"EIN!"**

Ein looked at his console, the holographic display flickering out. The plain readout flickered and died soon after. Just his knowledge to rely on. "Plasma exhaustion's a physical release. Could we..." he muttered. As the spray of gas vanished, he leaned over the side. Arcs of electricity burned through the air, the smell of singed oxygen making even Ein retch. There,

between the busted layers and above the killed plasma line, was one of the lower-deck access tubes. Nobody from the lower deck apparently had made the call to use it; Ein didn't blame them. He wouldn't have if he hadn't seen the full readouts.

"Manual release, sir!" the Teplian shouted. "If we can get someone down there and break one of the core cables, we might be able to trigger a core eject warp!"

The captain ran over, looking at the arcs of electricity. It was more than any species on board could handle. They had to cut the power to the various cables first, all...one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eig-

VRRRRRRRRRRRR-

"No, not already," Mason gasped, looking at the floor. There was no way to look at the core, but the sound was enough. That was the center of super-compressed mass shifting. The beginning of the end.

Something sped by him. The teplian engineer screamed a desperate "*No!*". He spun, and he caught a glimpse of something in the flashes of loose sparks and arcing lightning that was eerily smooth, a dark blue-grey figure.

Of course. The suit.

Hoshi's body fell through the electricity, the suit funneling it through to spill into the other side, and slammed against the side, arms clinging to the small opening Ein had pointed out. Dangling in the artificial gravity, she hoisted herself up, grunting. *Thank goodness for muscles*, she thought, a second brief spot for having walked and moved all her life in highly resistant and thick materials. Soon, she slid inside, Teplian and Human both losing sight of her in the dark, between-decks tunnel.

She crawled. Like the captain, she knew what failure meant. She knew exactly how it would happen, why it would happen, and every single one of the hundreds of failsafes that had collapsed in a cascade from the unusual anomaly. In fact, she even had a theory about what hit. But Hoshi pushed all those thoughts aside. All she needed to know was what the core looked like, what one of the fail-safe cables looked like, and how to get there. To her relief, all of her questions were shortly answered.

Five busted security doors, buckled and bent, allowed her to barely squeeze and wiggle through. There it was, wrapped in an opaque bubble of magnetically suspended metal. A fully-sized cruiser-class dark core, the miracle of modern technology. Suspend a super-compressed mass of unstable matter into a single point, force it to remain stable with a precise magnetic field, and let space-time buckle and generate seemingly more output than the input required. The only thing in the universe to definitively create energy from nothing. Of course, the sudden release of all that tension spelled disaster, a literal tear in space-time that

caused unthinkable, uncontrollable damage on the scale of a small moon. And they were skimming a sensitive star.

Hoshi's visor scanned the structure. The core stabilization substance had been released, its various primary and backup containers having been emptied. She wondered why it hadn't worked until she looked down. Splattered all across the chamber was a blue ooze that fizzled and popped. The containers inside the suspended chamber's outer shell hadn't been broken; space-time itself had buckled and cast enough of the fluid out of the injection tubes to make the stabilization reaction fail.

The core itself wasn't an option. She'd be torn apart. That left only one other thing she could control. Hoshi began to grip the handholds that arched upwards to one of the magnetic field generators, slipping out from the tunn-

CRACK-GRRRRNNNNKKK-CRUNCH

Another ball seemed to roll through reality. Hoshi felt her stomach twist in an uneasy sensation. It rolled around her, though, leaving her unharmed. However, when the Gecko tried to pull herself up another rung, she found herself unable to. Looking back, she groaned. The tip of her tail and the heel of her foot were caught in the crumpled metal that used to be the passage she crawled through, its warped doors now folded into jaws that hung into the rubber.

Hoshi spun her head up at the generator, its outer rim and cabling a mere few rungs out of reach. All she needed to do was break it. She couldn't reach. She had nothing to throw. Her foot and tail were trapped.

No. My foot and tail are fine. My suit is trapped.

The thought caused her to pause.

My suit is trapped. I...am not my suit.

But, in this uncontrolled air, moving to touch objects with exposed flesh...it would rip at her body until muscle was exposed, debilitate her with pain, and likely send her into shock. She'd fall and die, surely.

*I'll die anyway. I am **not** my suit.*

She breathed in, triggering her personal holographic display. "Release suit."

*I am **not** my suit.*

"Are you sure? Your current environment is not controlled, and your current medical condition requires use of this suit." She reached forward with her left hand, right hand still gripping the metal ladder rung, and pressed "Yes."

*I am **not** my **suit**.*

“Voice print authentication: ‘Release.’ Note: Unless you are capable of speaking your name, your current occupational status, and your planet and system of origin calmly and clearly into the suit’s display, an automatic distress signal will be sent within twenty seconds of your release. Voice print authentication: ‘Release.’”

I AM NOT MY SUIT.

“Release.”

The suit’s layers tore open, her visor falling forward and her respirator away from her face. As it did, she shoved away with her legs and released her hands from the rung. Her face met air. She screamed. The suit peeled away suddenly from her flesh, no time to dull the sensation of such adaptive layers filled with tiny nanites peeling from her skin. She screamed. Her momentum carried her upwards a mere foot, particles in the air peeling away at the soft green body. She screamed. Red lines tore across her face and her hand, the tender, nerve-filled flesh on fire as the fingers spread and arced towards the magnetic generator. She screamed. Her fingers caught on the chord’s side and gripped, the fingertips immediately scuffing off every layer of skin they had down to the muscle, particles of blood showering across the ceiling. She screamed.

The ship’s gravity pulled her down, but she did not let go; the chord tore away and the magnetic field shut down. Ten or twenty doors began to hinge open below, the dark core’s bubble falling down through each one. As it passed one, a red force-field sealed its retreat, Hoshi’s eyes opening to watch the core fall. The rushing air tore at her eyes, tears spilling out from their corners as she saw the bubble tumble out into space. The black void was banished by the nearby light of the two small stars, even their diminutive size and power radiating majesty. The core itself tumbled into space, and its final defense measure registered the free-fall. It seemed for a moment tempted to curl in its path and be drawn into the star itself, but then the fabric of reality buckled. The core vanished as the buckle carried it off, away to the nearest safety beacon where it could erupt without any harm.

She screamed, screamed, continued to scream, her body feeling pain like it never had before. Just before her naked body slammed onto the lower curve of the chamber below, she had time for a thought. She was glad she got to experience this...to do something and be somewhere new with new people and new feelings.

Hoshi’s body hit the metal with a sickening ***crunch***, and yet the scream would not stop until the last of the air pressed out from her spasming lungs.

“Captain Mason Chiru. You mean to tell us that you, after overseeing a private education and training regimen for the girl Hoshi Yourner, approved her taking of not one but *two* dark core certification exams years early and submitted your recommendation letter by file.”

“Yes, councilor.”

“And your claim, despite any proof to the contrary, is that the system must have simply...*glitched* and read her age information wrong by exactly the necessary number to pass the test’s minimum age requirement.”

“Yes, councilor.”

“And you claim that *simultaneously* the system must have lost *both* of your recommendation letters as a good-standing captain of a BioCouncil-approved 2V company, leaving her to earn two certifications which, under your personal authority, you used as justification to approve a private internship for the Terran Gecko aboard your personal ship two days later.”

“Three days, councilor.”

“*Three* days later. Is everything I have said your official statement?”

Captain Mason Chiru nodded. “Yes, councilor.”

A shaggy owl with five eyes sitting nearby the stern-looking deer burst into laughter, slapping the council table with mirth. This drew a stern gaze from the no-nonsense deer who had been speaking on behalf of the council before. A smile twitched at the corner of the Human council-member, one her hovering Dolphin colleague caught and nodded her head at in a silent Dolphin’s giggle. It wasn’t often that a nearly two-hundred-year-old woman strapped to a life-support chair expended so much energy.

“*Judge Woard*,” the Decicree sneered at the laughing alien. “Do you have anything to add on behalf of the Ojyek regarding this situation?”

“No no, continue,” the large creature chortled, wiping a tear from his bottom-left eye. He knew he could get away with it; the Decicree were his parent species, after all, and, despite their differences, they trusted each other more than the deer-like creatures trusted most.

“Right, then,” the Registrar sighed. “As...implausible as your story concerning her background is, and as irresponsible as your proposed actions were given the lack of consultation with her parents, teachers, or your own superiors is...the rest of your crew has independently backed up almost every other detail of your story regarding this tragedy. As all of them are in good-standing and as we do not have proof to the contrary, we...reluctantly believe this...*fanciful* narrative, and we judge that responsibility for Ms. Yourner in the catastrophic accident twenty-five days ago be placed on your record.”

“Yes, Registrar Own,” he said, some of the tension leaving his reddened cheeks. “Your decision is fair. I accept all responsibility for my crew’s injuries and the state of the cruiser. The crew members which requested to be exempt from trauma leave are working around the clock to pinpoint the exact source of the gravity distortion that began circling through our ship.”

“Captain.”

The voice, cold and robotic, was a homage to a scientist long past. The long-lived Human councilor's reputation, however, always preceded her, making it sound like the kind words of a grandmother.

"Dr. Malhotra," Captain Mason responded, looking to the frozen expression on the Terran Federation's parent species representative.

"How is she?"

Mason smiled. "In isolation, but recovering," he said. "Her skin is slow to grow back, but she should be back to her original condition three weeks from now. Dr. Ible, the same who engineered her suit, is working with her station physicians to—"

"I know Dr. Ible's work. He is a good Decicree, one of their best minds and hearts. How is the girl feeling, though? Her birthday is listed as two days from now. Will she be okay?"

"Well," he said, moved by how deeply his system's council member seemed to care about every living being, "I think she will. Girl's got a strong heart. And isolation it might be, but I'll be damned if my crew and I are going to not try and fill every inch of floor-space around her chamber with presents and friends. Doctors can go right off and fuck themselves on that day."

He paused in brief horror. "Uh, present company excluded, councilor."

The wrinkled woman's chest staggered, the closest thing to a laugh her tired and nearly useless lungs could manage. Her chair rushed to pump more oxygenated blood into her system. "No offense taken, Captain," she said, her hand budging ever-so-slightly to wave away the Dolphin's concern. "But a warning. Geckos, as you know, were one of our final uplifts as a people, and the biomancers and scientists charged with engineering their uplift under a strict system-wide ban only managed a small few compared to the large Squamata population they uplifted. They are a fragile population prone to dangerous conditions not often seen in BioCouncil space. If you plan to make Hoshi part of your team—with your company's approval this time, I should insist—please treat her with care. She is very special."

"Councilor, she'd be special even if she wasn't a Gecko." The captain caught the look of impatience on the Decicree council-member's face and stepped away from the hearing platform. However, he looked over his shoulder to make one final correction to the record.

"Besides, with all due respect, she's not as breakable as you'd think."