Assessment

Splayed before her were flashcards. Useful little things, in a time before, but now they questioned her. What they questioned varied. The sum of it was her, herself, and the task that she had been given. Though she was no stranger to what she had been asked to do, the context within which the request had been made gave her pause.

It had been posed by the Circuit. External Affairs. Spyndl Academy. Administrative staff dressed the part, meeting her in her office with few words and the tiniest of spools. It had almost crashed her Slate when loaded – oh, no, it did, she had to take it to the public compute to borrow a larger system – just making past all the encryption Spyndl was fond of using. It did not surprise her much why, as it dealt with an Operator. *She* dealt with Operators, in the capacity of trying to understand them. Spyndl sought similar, understanding, and imagined she could give it to them.

Granted, she had indicated interest far earlier, in requesting some of the post-action review data from the Chrome’s Graveyard Incident. Of course she had been denied, as it would soon become clear to many that Spyndl was never prepared for what Mother Lisia would do to the Sil’khan. A card looked back at her as the word came to her forefront. Sil’khan. All those processions ago. Poured from the crucibles of weft, into molds shaped as a unity of many kin, the Sil’khan emerged. Nothing was as debated among the Fel-Arcad as the Sil’khan. Nothing was as studied, as worried about, as loved and lusted after, as the Sil’khan.

Another card, this one blotted out with white. But the word underneath was seared in her mind.

*Pitiable.*

She palmed a button on her Slate. Elsewhere, spidering across the glasswire roots of the net was her will, indicating that she was ready. With a swipe she collected all her cards, stashing them under her coat. It was not a particularly loved coat, the same being echoed throughout her entire outfit. It was dull, colorless, and deliberately so. She tucked a lock of grey hair behind a single sharp ear, thinking of how her semblemiss had mourned the loss of her floral blue. But the task demanded it. A click on the side of her Slate spat out a pen, the screen before her morphing into an interface to receive it.

She waited.

It ate at her.

A knock.

The room she had requested hadn’t existed. She had it built specifically for this purpose. More floorspace than she could ever hope to use surrounded her, tessellating tiles spawning the meterage, reaching vaulting walls that stretched high above, a ceiling that seemed to recede into the distance as she stared at it. Colossal. The Soleri declared it a waste. Spyndl offered to pay for it but little more was expected of them. Spyndl was clueless, not just of the intricacies of arcology design, but of why such a structure was needed. Operators cannot be understood in small spaces. She had learned this.

Another tap on the Slate disengaged the lock on the door, and she stood.

Ahead of her, at the far end of the pristine box she occupied, panels crumpled along predetermined folds and melded out of the way, revealing the figure that would be her study for however long it too to reach whatever it was she considered a state of completion. She made it a point not to look at them as they approached, waiting for their footsteps to become perceptible first. They never did. She made a note. Only then she looked up and met a face looking back at them. There were few faces whose owners she knew better. Briefly, the image of her desk at home crossed her eyes, littered with spools and paper records of what the subject before her had made of themselves in the time allotted to them. One folder remained empty however, but for a single paper detailing an absence from active duty, four seasons long: upwards of a year.

Among other things, she was to find out why.

He stretched out a hand. It hovered above the table. She took it in quickly. Calcified. Heavily. His original skin tone had begun to shine through at the fingertips, though breaking away into mere scattered dots before giving way to the dull, stilling white of those who wove chalk as a matter of necessity. Part of her – one she had to swallow swiftly – ached to reach past those fingers, past his wrist, just shy of the elbows, and feel the stone coldness of the Academy’s Operators. But she did not, acknowledging instead that the hand stretched towards her was both a contradiction of one thing, and an affirmation of something entirely different. She settled on an attack vector, not an ideal one, but she would leave the belaboring of such details to later review.

“Do you like to shake hands, Captain Ventura?”

Another problem had arisen, debated thoroughly across many of the cards resting snugly in her pocket. How to address the subject of her assessment. Adven Ventura. Strider Sojourner. Spyndl Operator. Sil’khan. Strider Captain. She knew the weight behind every one of those titles, but not if how she viewed that weight was equal to her subject. She chose then, familiarity, one he had heard perhaps the most in his time.

The hand wavered and she traced the limb back to his face. Operators, like everyone else, had faces as varied and unique as there were flowers in the arcadia, but she had concluded – though admittedly on a hunch – that some line connected all of them. That was another folder on another pile on the floor. Operators, she had concluded, were hungry. For something. To that question she had many answers. Ventura would give her another.

He stumbled visibly, the outstretched hand finding purchase under his chin, stroking the shorn grounds where a beard had once been. Not once had he made eye contact with her, not even an attempt, focused intensely instead on her Slate and the stray papers at her side of the table. In her time she had learned to read eyes, and in a moment, she saw that he had taken in the entire room. Operators were soldiers after all, and thus it was no surprise that even after months away from duty, Ventura could not help but imagine he was still, possibly, on a battlefield.

She made another note.

“It has come to be expected of me in this work.” He spoke.

Forty-seven previous subjects had been posed her question, of them, thirty-six gave similar responses. Familiar territory.

“You have indicated in the past a disinclination to being touched.”

Ventura’s eyes rescanned the entire room. This was typical of Operators. Both things were.

“I believe I’ve gotten over it over time.” He replied easily.

Thirty-six became twenty-four.

She stretched out her own hand. “That’s good to hear then. I am Evaluator Sybil Mikur.”

He raised his hand again, and hers morphed from the precursor to a handshake to splayed fingers, palm down, as if to push Ventura back. Confusion colored him.

“Beyond my name, I’d also prefer if you did only what you wish too in our time together. Act only how you wish to, say only what you want to, and leave should you feel it necessary.”

Pause.

“I am placing no requirements on you, Captain. Act only as you will.”

Her hand remained proffered. Ventura didn’t take it.

Twenty-four became twenty.

She sat and he mirrored her.

“Were you told why you are here, Captain?”

“It was vaguely alluded to.” He answered. He sat fairly easily in