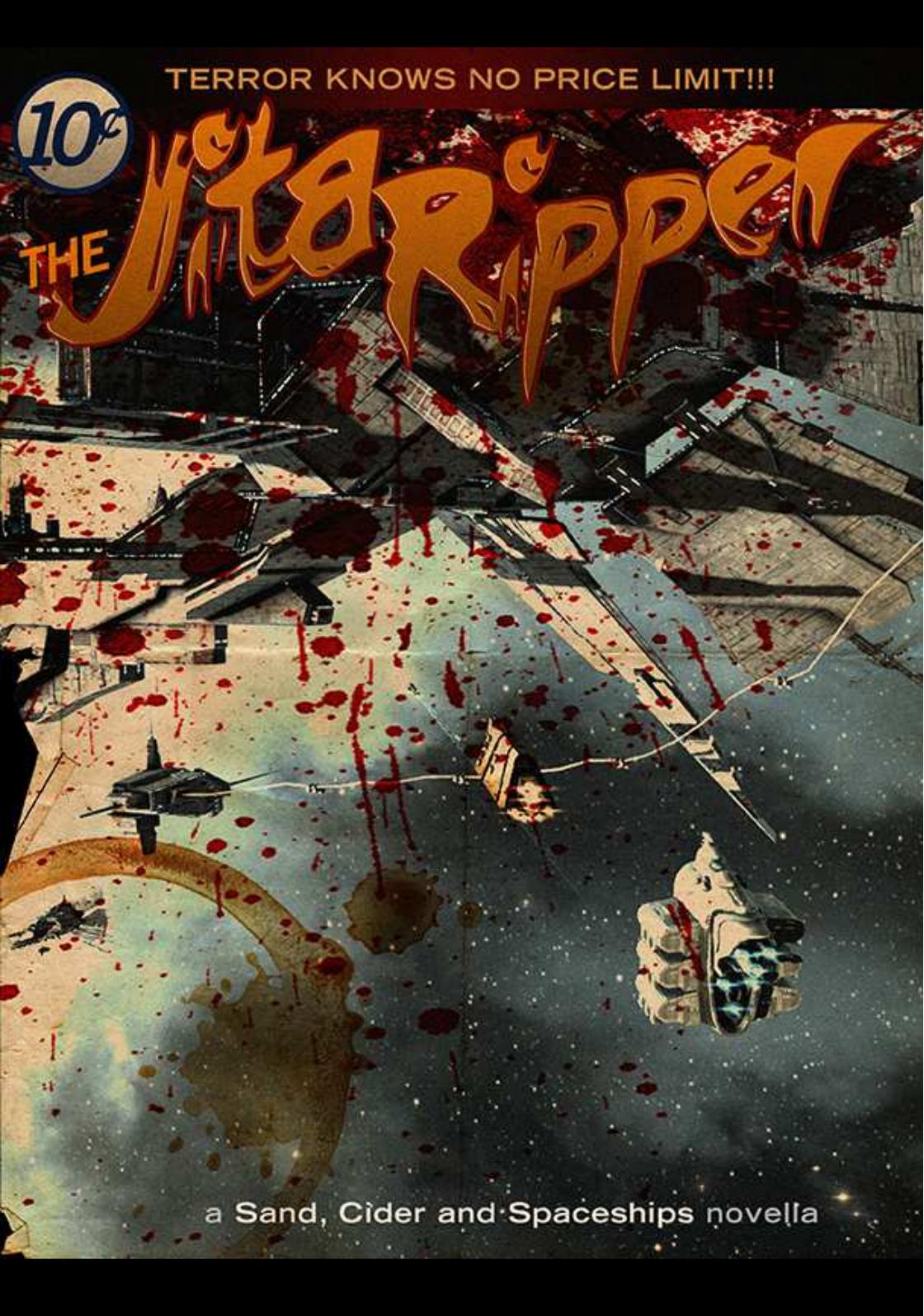


TERROR KNOWS NO PRICE LIMIT!!!

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THE

# Star Ripper



a Sand, Cider and Spaceships novella

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## Foreword

This novella started originally as an unrelated short story. I'd visited one of the major cities of the world, one synonymous with extreme wealth. Whilst walking through one of the biggest shopping malls on the planet, stuffed full of hideously expensive designer shops I noticed something. Forget Paris, this was the city of true love in our big wide world. All around us we saw old, overweight, balding and pretty unattractive men with younger, beautiful women. It was heart-warming to see that these gorgeous women could see past the physical that most of the world judge you on (some of these guys really looked like Shrek's dad) and could be with someone for deeper, emotional reasons than mere physical attraction.

Like I do often in these circumstances I thought to New Eden. Capsuleers have the vast wealth and power. Do they take advantage in the same way? Wait, I was assuming the guys were taking advantage here. Then I thought about it, who is really taking advantage of who here?

I wrote a short story on a factory worker doing just that. Two people taking advantage of each other.

This then led onto the Ripper series. I assume I had been reading an Edward Lee novel around the time or watched some horror movie on TV.

I need to give a shout out to Matt Westhorpe aka Seismic Stan who I met at Fanfest that year and we had a good chat about my ideas and he gave me some great advice.

Recently a few people have said that this series was one of their favourites of all my stories. I re-looked at it and noted it was missing a bit. The story jumps and doesn't cover the actual events that unfolded at the in-game event. I think I did those as a normal blog post so going back and just reading the story links misses a lot.

I decided this would be a good one to turn into a PDF and write that extra chapter of the actual showdown that occurred in-game. Along with that I've given it a bit more of a fleshing out in some areas. This was written at a time when I did 1000 words per week compared to the 2,500 I now aim for as a Friday Fiction post.

So here it is. A couple of years after I did the original series on the blog, its V2 of the Jita Ripper...

## Prologue

As she entered the bar several patrons looked her way, the clicking of her heels on the metallic floor announcing her arrival. A number of hopeful men smiled at her, hoping to try and attract her their way, but she tried not to make eye contact. She was looking for new faces, men she hadn't seen before. She started to approach the bar, carefully studying each person sat there.

She had done this a dozen times. She had yet to find what she was looking for, but she would keep trying. This was the most exclusive bar she had access to on the station, but it was rare to find what she was after this low down on the station in terms of decks. But she knew there was always a chance.

The bar itself was hideously expensive. The first clue was the use of wood. On a space station wood was a luxury item. Tritanium and plastics were the usual construction materials. Cheap, easy to move and easy to build with. Where you saw wood you knew there was money there. The bar catered for the up and coming crowd. Those mega-corp executives and minor celebrities who hadn't quite made the big time. Anything above deck 13 was reserved for the elite of society and those decks were securely closed to anyone else. Here on deck 13 of the Caldari Navy Assembly plant space station in orbit around the fourth moon of the fourth planet of Jita, known simply as Jita 4-4, there was money. She had been approached by B-list celebrities and rich corporation executives in the past. They were small time as far as she considered. She was looking for the big time.

Suddenly she caught a glimpse of what she was looking for, a slight glimmer of metal on the back of one man's neck. Half hidden by his hair and jacket collar, to see it you had to be carefully looking for it, and she was looking for it.

She caught her breath. This was it! After months and months of looking she might have actually found what she had been searching for. The pressure was huge, if she didn't snag this one she might not see another for a long time. This was her opportunity and she was going to grab it with both hands.

She slipped onto an empty stool next to him. He glanced around to see what the movement was and went back to his drink.

Now, any other woman dressed as she was would have been quite upset that the man didn't even take a second look at her. She had spent hours getting ready. The shoes

were finest Gallente designer heels; the short red dress was made from Amarian silk, although no Amarian dressmaker would ever make one that short. The makeup and hair had been styled just so. Along with her finest jewellery she looked amazing. She knew could have had any man in that bar within minutes if she wanted to, but the guy she had sat next to was blanking her. However she didn't get upset. She knew what he was, and expected nothing less. None of these men were apparently ever easy to engage. They were aloof, uncaring, complex, superior. But she had done her research, she knew what to expect.

She nodded to the barman and then indicated to the guy next to her. The barman nodded back, acknowledging the pre-arranged signal. She had flirted with the bartender previously and ensured they understood each other. She didn't want to explain things in the presence of one of these men should she find one. He prepared the two drinks and brought them over, sliding one in front of the man. The guy looked down at the drink and then back up at the barman wondering why he'd given him the drink. The barman simply nodded to the woman and retreated.

The man shifted around in his seat to face her. He look at her, appraising her carefully up and down.

"Thank you....."

"Carmen" she replied "Please to meet you". She held out her hand.

The man smiled and gently shook her hand. His skin was very soft, another good sign. It wasn't the baby-soft skin she was expecting but it was softer than any mans she'd ever felt.

"So, do you go around buying strange men drinks all the time?" he asked with a smile.

"No" she replied "You just caught my eye. You haven't told me your name yet"

The man paused. That was a good sign.

"Michal" he said.

Now Carmen was almost certain. The glimmer of metal on the back of his neck, the way he'd not been interested when she sat down initially, the soft skin, the pause as he tried to think of a false name.

"Well Michal, I've not seen you here before. First time here?" Carmen started to flirt outrageously twisting a strand of her golden hair between two fingers.

"Yes actually, it is the first time I've been in this bar"

"So just visiting?"

"You could say I'm just flying through."

Carmen crossed her legs so her dress rode up and pushed out her chest. This was going to be easy.

"Ah, a well-travelled man. So what do you do for fun?" she purred.

-oOo-

Two hours later they were back in her quarters on the station. The last hour and a half had been spent in the bed. Carmen lay on her back smiling and exhausted. A thin film of perspiration covered her body. She had been working very hard for the last ninety minutes. She hoped her performance had sealed the deal. She'd got one, she'd finally snagged herself a capsuleer, an Emyrean. The final confirmation was when she had slowly stripped him and seen the sockets in his neck and down his spinal column. She could now milk him for everything she ever wanted. Even if he didn't want a proper relationship, she'd surely be able to get some ISK out of him whilst he was on station. A pittance to a capsuleer was vast riches to a normal person.

She gazed at his naked form as he stood at her small apartment kitchenette making them some more drinks. She noted his skin wasn't what she expected. The immortal captains of New Eden used clones to escape death. This supposedly gave them youthful skin. He hadn't said what he did. May be he was one of these industrialists? May be he'd never been 'podded', the name given to the act of a capsuleer dying when his hydrostatic capsule is breached in combat. However his hands were so soft. She was unsure. Then she thought about the stories of the capsuleer industrialists. They were supposed to be richer than most capsuleers, and capsuleers were all very rich.

He returned to the bed and handed her a drink as he slipped in beside her. She downed the drink in one and climbed on top of him after placing the empty glass on the nightstand.

"Now Mitchal, time for round two." she purred, "This time I'm going to make you....." she blinked twice, looking confused. Something wasn't right. He head felt fuzzy. She was confused. The room started to spin very fast.

"I... I... " she stammered and with that she slumped forward onto his naked torso, unconscious.

-oOo-

Several hours later Carmen woke with a start. She was still in bed and had a splitting headache. She looked around but there was no sign of Michal. Her place had been turned upside down. Draws and cupboards had their contents hanging out or were scattered around the floor. She stood and wobbled slightly. She didn't get that drunk did she? She gingerly walked over to the dresser and saw her jewellery box was missing. Her hand reached up to her ears and then her neck. Even her best jewellery that she had been wearing had gone. She retrieved her data-pad from the floor. The financial transaction window was open. A transfer of 24,000 credits, most of her cash, had been authorised in her name, complete with her thumb print authorisation.

She felt unsteady so she sat on the bed trying to piece together what had happened. Why would a capsuleer rob her? The 24,000 local Caldari State Credits were worth nothing in ISK, the currency of the Capsuleers. The jewellery that he had taken was worth a lot less than what a capsuleer could make in ten minutes collecting pirate bounties even in hi-sec space. It didn't make any sense at all. The things he took were less than worthless to a capsuleer. Carmen placed her head it her hands.

"Think this through you silly girl! There must be a logical explanation! There is no reason a capsuleer would rip you off!" she muttered to herself.

She felt something cold pressing against her leg. She looked down and saw a small unfamiliar metal disk laying on the bed. She picked it up, but found a sticky substance was holding it to the white sheet. She pulled it free. What was it? Her heart missed a beat. One side looked like a capsuleer implant socket. However there was some sort of organic glue on the smooth, featureless back.

-oOo-

"Line four is nearly finished. Nanite paste will be complete in 20 seconds. The robotic parts are next, are we ready to fire up line five?"

Marcus was sat back in his chair daydreaming. Gren threw a pen at him which glanced his shoulder.

"Hey! What was that for you asshat!"

"Is. Line. Five. Ready. For. Start. Up. You. Utter. Gimboid?"

"Yeah, yeah. Ready to rock and roll!"

The two men were sat in the small control booth which extended out from high upon the vast wall overlooking the vast factory floor. Robotic arms and laser-nanite assemblers rotated around the long rolling production lines. The factory was located on the surface of the forth moon of the forth planet in the Jita solar system. There was no atmosphere and no plans to ever terraform it. The workers lived in sealed factory complexes on the moon. The complexes had basic leisure facilities. Sports facilities, shops and bars but it wasn't like living on a proper station or outpost. Every three weeks they got four days leave and many took the free shuttle up to the busy station in orbit above. Marcus had just returned from his four-day shore-leave.

"So I assume you had a fun weekend then up on the station. Your mind is most certainly not here." Gren laughed.

Marcus smile. "Oh yes! It was most fun!"

"Don't tell me you suckered another poor woman?" Gren groaned.

"Hell yes. Blonde, fit as anything and was amazing in bed. These women pull out all the stops when they think you're a pod pilot. Inhibitions go straight out the airlock and they turn the filth up to eleven. The ISK signs in front of their eyes blink so brightly they act like some drug-addicted Dodixie adult film star desperate for their next hit. You know you should try it one day."

Gren shook his head.

"Ever thought that I might prefer my women to come to bed with me because they like me for who I am, not because they incorrectly believe I'm an egger and they are going to get rich if they take me to bed and perform?"

Marcus laughed and pulled out his datapad, he wirelessly transmitted a picture from his pad to the huge main screen in the control booth. It showed a naked Carmen

sprawled out on her bed. She looked like she was sleeping but he'd taken it after the drugs had kicked in.

"After I'd worn her out." He announced.

"You jammy bastard! She is fit as! No way you did that! How do you leave them? Say you'll give them a call from your huge spaceship sometime?" Gren laughed.

"Dude, every single one has been fast asleep when I left. No woman has the stamina to take what I can give them and not be exhausted!" he boasted. He left out as usual the bit about him drugging them and robbing them. All his colleague knew was that he seduced these women pretending to be an immortal starship captain.

"Yeah. More like they fall asleep bored!" Gren laughed. "Seriously though, you sneak out whilst they are asleep. That's pretty low dude. Then again if any of them want to see your spaceship they are going to be even more disappointed than when you first dropped your pants!"

Marcus smiled at his joking colleague and lent back in his chair as he walked a small, round, metallic disk over his knuckles. The disk looked just like a capsuleers implant socket on one side and was smooth on the other. He paused for a second to admiring the new expensive watch he'd just bought. He then picked up the expensive tin of hand cream he kept both at work and at home. He rubbed the cream into both hands before he went back to idly fiddling with the fake socket.

## Chapter One

Deena shifted nervously in her seat. She checked the time, 5 minutes past. Only 5 minutes late, what was 5 minutes, especially to men like him?

She took a small mirror from her bag and checked her makeup. Perfect. The red lipstick was much brighter than what she usually wore and the deep eye shadow made her look like some sultry femme-fatale from a dark Gallente noir-thriller holo-movie.

"Calm down. It's just a man you're meeting. You've met them before. No need for nerves." she told herself.

"But you've never had a date with a man like this before. Play this right and your wildest dreams will come true. You may never need to do a day's work in your life again." the voice in her head had been telling her that all evening.

Deena had not had the greatest start in life but she was a fighter. She'd arrived in Jita a year ago and had been fighting back ever since. She'd used her looks and her body to get a better job and sleep her way up the company. She had been surprised how far they had got her in a short space of time. However she was now as far as she could go in the company that she worked for. To advance she'd need to move. Deena decided that she'd skip the gradual climbing to the top. This time she wanted to go for the big time in one go.

She'd spent hours getting ready. That morning she went out and spent nearly an entire months' salary on the outfit she was wearing. Very classy, very seductive. The expensive Gallente underwear cost as much as the dress and shoes. This afternoon she spent the rest of her savings at the spa getting treatments and hair styling. She had done everything she could possibly do to make herself look desirable. Now it was down to her to seal the deal. She was in the most expensive bar in the station that was open to the general public. If he didn't come, and pay the bill, she was in big trouble.

A smartly dressed man approached her table and asked if he could buy her a drink. She politely declined. She didn't find the older man attractive but he might be a necessity if her date didn't show up. She told him she was waiting for someone but if he didn't turn up she'd accept that drink later. The suit had nodded and said he hoped to see her later. Deena smiled but hoped she didn't need to. However she needed someone to pay her bar bill.

A couple of minutes later she saw him enter. He looked her way and smiled. Her heart fluttered. He approached the table and she stood to greet him.

"Wow! You look amazing!" he said as he kissed her on the cheek.

"Thanks, you're not looking too bad yourself" she replied smiling. They sat opposite each other and a waiter took their drinks order. After he left to get the drinks Deena leaned forward.

"I hope you don't think I was too forward asking you for this date last night. I mean life's too short to wait don't you think?"

"Well yes, it can be." the man replied smiling

Deena returned the smile. She was analysing everything he said. The 'it can be' is something she'd expect a man like him to say. It was looking like she'd been right.

"And I didn't know if I'd see you again. After all this station is so big, and not many people stay long. Especially, people like you."

"People like me?" the man asked quizzically raising an eyebrow.

Deena looked embarrassed.

"I didn't mean that as a slight. I mean you look like a starship captain, am I right?"

Deena was being careful, she knew what he was but didn't want to play her hand too soon.

"Very perceptive. What gave me away?" he asked with a smile.

She wanted to say "Those implants on the back of your neck which you try to hide but I saw." but she knew she shouldn't.

"You have an air of command about you. I knew that when we met last night at the bar."

The man smiled as the waiter returned with the drinks.

"You have amazing perception." He said after the waiter left.

"Wait until you see the rest of me." Deena said with a seductive smile.

-oOo-

Two hours later Deena couldn't believe how well things were going. They were really getting on well. He hadn't told her he was a capsuleer and she thought she'd better wait for him to mention it. Currently he thought she didn't know and that was the best way, she didn't want him thinking she was coming onto him just because of that, even if it was the truth. However, this station was a trade-hub, the majority of capsuleers came and left within a short time. She had to seal the deal. If she didn't hook him tonight, she might not see him ever again.

They had touched hands across the table. His skin was silky soft, like what she had heard on the documentaries. He was one, she was sure now. It was time to move things along.

"I've got to say I'm having a great time. I was really nervous before you arrived."

"Really? Why?" he asked.

"Well the fact that I asked you out on a date. You know, a lot of you guys prefer to chase. If the woman is forward, it puts them off."

The man laughed.

"Don't be silly. Maybe that's what some guys are like, but as far as I am concerned it is impossible for a woman to be too forward. As you said earlier, life can be too short. Also you Matari women are not known to be shrinking violets. If you want something take it. That's the motto I live by."

"Really? Impossible to be too forward? I never thought I'd hear a guy say that. You guys are too much macho-hunter-gathers to believe that surely?"

"Yes, I really mean that. I actually prefer my women forward, those that make sure they get what they want. All that coyness and teasing is such a waste of time. As I said, if you want something, take it! Time is short."

Deena smiled and discretely raised her foot up under the table. She reached down and unhooked the strappy clasp of the shoe's strap and slowly lowered it to the floor with her foot. She slipped her foot out of the shoe and ran her foot over the inside of the man's leg under the table. As soon as she touched him he smiled.

"A woman after my own heart. I've always said Minmatar are the best." he said as her stocking-clad foot slowly worked its way higher, sliding upwards over his inner thigh.

“Mmmmmm. Well it feels like someone is ready to move on.” She purred as she massaged him with her foot. “Do you have quarters here?”

He hesitated. Deena knew this was a good sign. She’d heard the capsuleers who docked had their own private hanger and quarters near the top of the station. If they went back to his he’d be revealing what he was.

“My quarters are not really suitable for entertaining currently.” He replied without giving details.

“So back to mine?” she said with a smile, her foot working its magic.

The man opposite nodded with a smile and signalled the waiter for the check.

-oOo-

Deena slowly woke. She could hear sounds. Crashing and banging. She kept still. She was scared, she knew something was wrong. What had happened? Her mind was foggy. She had met the capsuleer Marcsal in the bar, the date had been going great. She had even started to play footsie with him in the bar.

He had responded. He didn't want to go back to his quarters, probably still didn't want to reveal he was a capsuleer, so they had gone back to hers. They had spent a while in bed, then he'd made her a drink, then, nothing, she must have passed out. She knew she had not been that drunk. Drugged? More crashing sounds, she chanced opening her eyes slightly. She was laying on her front with her head to the side. Marcsal was naked and searching her apartment. He'd already tossed half of it. The few remaining "implants" she'd seen on his back earlier were hanging off, attached by some sort of glue. Fakes! The bastard was a con-artist pretending to be a capsuleer. A petty thief masquerading as one of New Eden's elite.

Deena was furious. She slowly rose picking up a small table lamp to use as a club. She started to slowly approach him from behind as he continued to search through her draws. Suddenly she tripped over her shoes that had been discarded in the middle of the floor. Marcsal's head snapped around as she desperately scrambled to her feet and charged at him. He slowly started to turn his body, his expression appeared to be one of shock. Probably that she was awake. The charging Matari woman's visage of rage turned to horror as the con-artist finally turned his body to face her fully and she saw he was holding one of the ceremonial Matari daggers from her collection. They had been in a box in the draw he'd been searching. Her momentum was too great to stop. She couldn't stop herself crashing into him. Deena opened her mouth in a silent

scream as she felt the cold razor-sharp steel slip deep into her stomach. She staggered backwards and glanced down. The dagger was buried to the hilt in her midriff. A thin line of almost black blood leaked from the bottom of the wound. She looked at the fake capsuleer who was staring at the knife sticking out of her in horror. His face showing he didn't intend to do that.

"I.... I.... I didn't...." he stammered. "No.... I....".

"Pussy!" was the last thing Deena hissed in pain as she fell backwards. Then nothing.

-oOo-

Inspector Avi entered the medical bay. Chief Medical Examiner Boras was washing his hands in a metal sink. He wore his usual green scrubs with plastic apron.

The Inspector was a veteran of the Caldari Navy Police force. 25 years of service starting at the bottom. His first years were spent breaking up bar fights in asteroid miner's bars on remote outposts. Slowly he worked his way up the ranks showing a keen aptitude for investigation. He spent several years as a detective working on New Caldari and the surrounding stations and systems. Three years ago he'd been transferred to Jita 4-4. Perhaps the most prestigious posting within the CNP. Jita 4-4 was the busiest space-station in all of New Eden. It was the centre for capsuleer commerce and was by far the station where most money in the Cluster flowed daily. It was a space-station filled with societies elite and wealthy. The tax revenue from this station were in the trillions of Interstellar Credits per day. Where there was wealth there was also crime and usually lots of it. This latest case had been assigned to him just this evening. A murder with possible connections to a string of other crimes was all he knew arriving at the morgue on deck 23.

"Evening Chief." The Inspector greeted Boras as he approached.

"Inspector Avi! Good to see you again. I assume you are here for a debrief about our victim over there?" Boras nodded to the body laying on a slab, covered by a white sheet to her neck.

"Yes. What can you tell me?" Avi asked as both men approached the slab. The Chief Medical Examiner pulled the sheet away. Deena lay there, her body was covered in wounds and her arms and legs had been hacked off.

"Well it's been a hard one to puzzle out but I think we're almost there. Minmatar female, 26, details are in the file we already sent. That was the easy bit as she was a

station resident and was found in her quarters. Well, not exactly in her quarters. The perp cut off her arms and legs and shoved her into the garbage chute to hide her body which of course became jammed. Those maintenance janitors who went to clear the blockage and found her won't be sleeping well for a few weeks I'd guess!" the examiner chuckled. "The rest was much more difficult. We think there are three distinct events. Firstly she was a willing participant in the bedroom. Blood-chemical analysis indicates she made love several times in the hours before he death. No evidence of a struggle or wounds at that time. We think she was there voluntary and willing."

"Are you kidding? Willing?" Inspector Avi said in surprise. "Look at her! It's like some wild animal has been at her!"

"Inspector, we can give you an exact time of death. We can also time-stamp all her blood-work and injuries back from that point. None of these injuries were sustained in the period up to 30 minutes after she'd finished her, shall we say 'coupling'. Our blood-chem-analysis is very accurate."

"So she was either with the person who killed her, or someone else 30 minutes before she died?"

"No, that was an hour before she died. The first wound was 30 minutes after she, well you know. Her death was another 30 minutes after that. The individual wounds were received over a long period. This was not a frenzied attack even though it looks like one."

"Sorry, you're confusing me" the Inspector took out his datapad to make notes. "Perhaps you can run through this for me slowly."

This place always creeped the Inspector out. The room where the dead were sliced open again to reveal their secrets. The complex timeline was just adding to everything else. He decided next time he'd meet the examiner in his office rather than in the autopsy room surrounded by medical saws, knives and various body parts.

"The victim was making love to a person unknown. There was then a 30 minute gap, I will explain this shortly. She then took a deep stab wound, here, to the abdomen. We believe it was a larger bladed weapon, perhaps a serrated dagger. As she is Minmatar it is possible she had bladed weapons in her quarters or the attacker brought it with them. We are thinking combat knife as opposed to kitchen blade. We also think she was standing when she was stabbed, a wound on the back of her head and a scan of

her brain shows its likely that she fell backwards, struck her head on the floor and was rendered unconscious after the initial stab. The knife was left in her when she fell and remained there. It may be that the attacker thought she was dead at that point. Twenty to thirty minutes later she started to sustain the other injuries in a prolonged attack that lasted approximately twenty more minutes which finally killed her."

Inspector Avi pondered this for a moment, making notes on his datapad.

"You said you could explain the 30 minute gap?"

"Ah yes. When we tested her blood we found alcohol and two unusual chemical traces. She'd been drinking but we estimate only three or four. Not enough to get her drunk, especially a Matari. The two other chemicals we found explain the situation better. The first is Lanzazine. This is a powerful tranquiliser used by the Amarrians in their tranq-darts for capturing escaping slaves alive. One hit and you are out like a light for hours. The second chemical is Insorum, which as you will know is the cure for Vitoxin. Our victim here is a rescued slave. The interesting thing is that the Insorum not only counters the mutating virus aspect of Vitoxin resulting in the person no longer requiring daily Vitoc doses, it also blocks the receptors in the brain that lead to the addiction to Vitoc. The blocking of those receptors would also greatly reduce the effects of the Lanzazine. A dose that would have knocked her out for several hours would have only worked for a short period of time."

"Right. Anything else?"

"Two things. Firstly the wounds. The first appears to have been in defence. It's possible the attacker was surprised by her waking up early and she may have attacked him. She's Minmatar so quite likely she went for him if he drugged her and was still there when she woke. It is a deep penetrating wound, but it did miss her vital organs and we think the blade was left in-situ so could have been accidental. At that point she fell and knocked her head and became unconscious. He probably thought she was dead. When she came around she would have been in no state to defend herself due to the initial stab wound. But it took him ten minutes to kill her and over 100 separate wounds."

"He took his time?"

"Very much so. The wounds she suffered are generally shallow and carefully targeted. You can see where he targeted her. He concentrated on several areas which are, well, sensitive. This was an extremely sadistic attack performed by a sick individual. I

believe this man didn't intend to kill the victim at first. The original wound was probably self-defence when she woke up too soon. However, it would appear once he got a taste for it, he started to enjoy himself. "

"And what was the second thing?" Avi asked noting the details onto his datapad.

"We found traces of organic glue on her. We couldn't work out why, so we sent them for analysis. It's a type of skin-bonding glue popular with theatre and movie make-up artists. It can pretty much stick anything to human skin and is easily removed. The forensic lab gave me us a chem-match of the specific glue to two previous recent unsolved crimes that are on the database. They were robberies where the perpetrator pretended to be a capsuleer, drugged the women he seduced and then robbed them." the Examiner took his glasses off.

"Inspector, I fear your pretend capsuleer con-artist accidently stabbed this poor woman and found in the process of trying to finish her off that he is a a very sick individual."

## Chapter Two

Marcus checked the factory control panel. Everything was ready. He saw Gren checking the lines below through the observation windows. A few more minutes and it would be over. He typed the over-ride codes and lent back in his chair.

He let his mind drift back to the weekend. It was going fine, just like it had a dozen times before. The girl had been wild. The Matari ones always were. Not as open-minded as the Gallente women but more aggressive in the sack. He'd drugged her and had started looting her apartment as normal. There had been a case of expensive looking antique Minmatar ceremonial daggers. He was just looking at one when he heard a noise behind him. She'd woken up. Even with enough drugs to fell a Brutor Commando she'd come round in less than half an hour. She had charged at him like a mad woman. He didn't react, he was too stunned. He'd turned and froze as she charged at him. She ran into him and the knife he was holding had just slid into her. He didn't mean to stab her, it was an accident. She'd staggered backwards and fallen over. He'd assumed dead.

A flashing red light on the console in front of him indicated that the smelter was up to temperature, the tritanium was now molten.

He had stood over her body. He'd never seen a dead body before. She still looked beautiful naked even and with a knife sticking from her abdomen and the trickle of blood. He'd gone back to looting the room, surprised how little the event had actually unsettled him. He'd just killed another human being but didn't feel bad or remorseful. After about twenty minutes she had come round. She hadn't died, but she was badly hurt. She started pleading for him to save her, that she'd not tell the police, she'd not rat him out just as long as she got medical attention. He'd gone over and knelt by her. She was in pain, she was in terror, and it had excited him. When he pulled the knife out and she'd screamed in pain and he felt something inside him spark. The way the blood pumped out of the wound after the knife was removed mesmerised him. He had known he couldn't let her live. No matter what she said at the time she'd tell the police everything. No, he had to kill her. When he raised the knife to finish her she'd put her hand up to protect herself. As the knife plunged through her outstretched hand and she screamed again, that spark he had felt turned to a rush, a feeling that had spread over him. He had sat on top of her, pinning her arms under his knees. He's started pricking her with the tip of his knife. The way she cried was ecstasy to him. He tried some shallow cuts and her screams had thrilled him. He had then taken his time

from that point. He'd never felt more alive, never as powerful as that moment. Every whimper, every plea had been music to his ears. Her gasps and screams as he'd slashed her with the knife had made him hard. It was even better than sex with her.

"Check! Check! Is the smelter offline?" Gren's voice broke Marcus' concentration.

"Yeah, all safe. Get your ass in there and sort it."

Marcus watched Gren enter the mould on the factory floor. The forge-line start-up scan had reported a foreign object in the mould and it would have to be removed before the line could start. Gren had gone down to the floor to check. He'd find a deactivated cleaner bot in there. Marcus knew as he was the one who put it in there knowing the scan would report it.

Marcus hit the dump command and several tons of molten refined veldspar fell into the mould below. The safety systems previous disabled and over-ridden.

Marcus was slightly disappointed as he never heard anything from Gren, just the hiss of the hot metal as it vaporised his co-worker and the spider bot. The only person who knew about his activities of impersonating a capsuleer on the station in orbit above had just been vaporised. Nobody to make the connection if the police went public with the murder. He was safe, for now.

-oOo-

*One week later.*

Inspector Avi entered Chief Inspector Chan's Office.

"Avi, what have you found?"

"Well sir, he struck again this weekend. A 24 year-old Caldari woman. He's..... well sir, he's evolving."

"Go on." The Chief Inspector said gesturing for Avi to sit. The Inspector sat in the armchair opposite his boss and pulled out his datapad.

"The initial MO appears the same. She picked him up in a bar, took him back to her quarters. They made love, he drugged her. That's where the similarities end."

Inspector Avi placed a small holoprojector on Chan's desk. It sprung into life. It showed a hologram of a woman tied spread eagle to a bed.

"My god!" the Chief Inspector exclaimed. "What the hell did he do to her. Where are her....."

"He cut them off sir and we have been unable to find them. We assume that he took them with him. We also think he kept the dagger from his first murder, the wound profiles match. The medical examiner say that they think he took two hours to kill her. There are over 150 separate wounds. She was covered in cuts. From the top of her scalp to the soles of her feet. He worked her over completely and then finished off by robbing her quarters."

The Chief Inspector reached over and turned the holoprojector off.

"Thanks for showing me that Avi. That will give me nightmares for a week. You know I have a daughter in this sicko's age profile!"

"Sir, we need to warn people. We need to get the message out there."

"What? That we've got a nutter who loves seducing women before slicing them up slowly? A psychopath who gets off listening to women scream in pain? The CEO has said we must keep this under wraps, we cannot have any negative press. The Goonswarm attack on the local traders has left people wondering if Jita is still the best place to do business in the cluster. Something like this could drive people to Dodixie or Amarr. Shit they might be so scared they might even consider that Matari shit-hole Rens. You need to find this guy before he strikes again." The Chief Inspector didn't sound convinced himself.

"You're kidding? We bury the truth from the public because it might affect profits?"

"It's not that simple. Our stock isn't doing too well and neither is the war against the Gallente. The last thing the Caldari Navy needs is people associating our name and this station with some lunatic immediately following that Goonswarm attack. First 'Burn Jita' then a serial killer on the loose? We can issue warnings for women to be on guard. We don't bury the truth, we just don't tell them everything."

Inspector Avi shook his head.

"So we post warnings about a con-artist but don't tell the women of this station that his new favourite hobby is slowly slicing them up whilst keeping them alive and then finally and hacking off their..."

"Look!" the Chief Inspector cut him off "I don't like it any more than you. But those are our orders. I've got enough on my plate trying to control the flow of information. That pirate news network, Tech4News, has already run with the first victim's story. If they get hold of news of this latest victim, who knows what shit-storm will be caused. On top of that, the board has allegedly hired a private investigator to do his own parallel investigation."

"Oh fantastic" Avi exclaimed "That's all we need, some private dick on the case too getting in the way!"

"Well that's the situation we have to live with, just find this guy Avi, before he strikes again."

## Chapter Three

The quarters on this Gallente Federation station were much larger and luxurious than those on Jita 4-4. Marcus walked over to the kitchen area and poured a drink. He sipped the ice cold Gallente vodka slowly, savouring its taste. Yes, these executive quarters were worth the extra money. The last kill was a good one, just before he left Jita he did it one last time. He knew the authorities were closing in on him but he needed the money for his escape. The Caldari woman he'd tricked had been loaded. He'd made more from her than all his previous victims combined. Money was no longer a problem to him. He walked over to his case and opened it. A hiss escaped from the preserved air inside. He looked at the rows of jars containing flesh suspended in a clear preservative. He picked one full one and one empty one out and walked over to the bed. He placed them on the bedside table, a Gallente woman was tied spread eagle to the four corners of the bed, a gag in her mouth silencing her screams. Her hands and feet were almost purple, the tight bonds cutting off her circulation.

"See this, I took this from a lovely Caldari brunette." he pointed to the jar. The woman turned her head trying to see what was inside but the liquid was cloudy. She looked confused. He opened the jar and with a pair of tongs lifted the item from the jar and dangled it in front of the woman's face. Her eyes went wide with terror as she realised what he was waving in front of her face was a human tongue. She screamed through her gag as he ran the cold, rough severed tongue over her cheek. He laughed as he ran the severed tongue over the woman's lips. She snapped her head from side to side trying to escape its touch. She only succeeded in rubbing the severed tongue over her face.

"What do you think I should collect from you?" Marcus asked putting the tongue back into the jar and he pulling the razor-sharp antique Minmatar dagger out. He swapped the severed tongue for the cold steel blade against her cheek. She whimpered.

"Something from your head?" he ran the blade down over her face and traced around her lips. "I did enjoy kissing this lips earlier. Perhaps I could take them?"

He ran the knife down further and down her throat. He was doing it lightly but as she jerked in her bonds the knife drew blood.

"May be something more interesting?" the blade continued downwards over her chest. "I did enjoy playing with these and you certainly enjoyed it too. Can you remember what you asked me to do? No? You asked me to bite harder as I recall. Do you think

the knife will feel very different to my teeth? I think you'll make very different noises!"

She was screaming into the gag as the knife went lower and nicked her near the navel. It traced over her hips and scratched her inner thigh.

"Or may be something more easily removed?" he traced the blade all the way down her leg and finally let it rest between her toes. The knife nicked the thin skin a small trickle of blood ran down her sole.

The woman was hysterical by this point. Marcus smile as he gripped her little toe of her left foot.

"What do you think? All off one foot or every other one off both feet?"

The muffled scream didn't sound like an answer to his question. Marcus began to whistle to himself as he started to saw through the base of her little toe as she screamed in agony through the gag.

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Inspector Avi entered the room in Jita 4-4 station. A scent of blood and death hung in the air. A number of crime scene technicians were working in the room. One of them noticed the Inspectors arrival.

"Morning Inspector" he said chirpily.

Avi knew these guys dealt with the worst cases and always put the actual victim out of their minds when doing their job. If you thought about the victim at each of these crimes you'd soon lose it. It was a standing joke that the dreaded Jovian Disease, a genetic condition that caused a depression so great the person literally would lose the will to live, could infect both the Jove race and any CSI Techs who took the job too seriously. Even so it always caught him off-guard to deal with someone so happy doing their job amongst the most brutal and vicious crime scenes.

"Was it him?"

"We'll not be sure until we get the lab results back. But, yes, I'd say with 90% certainty that it's him."

"90%? That's pretty high. Why are you that sure?" asked the inspector.

"Well. She's bound like the last victim. Knots are the same so unlikely to be a copycat. Multiple lacerations doesn't quite sum up what happened to her" the CSI tech led the inspector over to the bed. "As you can see the cuts are again shallow, numerous and targeted. Their purpose was to inflict pain and terror, not to kill. They also show the same profile as the knife used in the previous two murders, a razor sharp serrated blade. Probably Minmatar."

"Mmmm. But she appears to be, how can I say it diplomatically.... intact? Our boy has evolved into a collector." the Inspector looked upon the body in disgust. How can any man inflict that on another human.

"Well inspector, if you look carefully...." the tech leaned over the body and carefully opened her mouth wide. A short bloody stump is all that remained of her tongue.

"Hell! He's crazy!"

"Well he is the Jita Ripper!" said another one of the techs casually.

"What did you call him?" Inspector Avi snapped.

"Erm.... That's the they are calling him on the news sir. The Jita Ripper!" the tech sheepishly replied.

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Macrus dropped another toe into the jar on the bed-side table next to the jar containing the severed tongue. His latest victim had passed out again. He looked at her feet which now had every other toe missing. He reached into his bag and pulled a stim-stick out. The white pen shaped devices were used extensively on combat ships. They contained a cocktail of drugs that would bring someone around in an emergency and keep them going. He stuck it into her upper arm and she suddenly came around, screaming into the gag. She lifted her head and looked down at the bloody remains of her toes and started screaming and shaking even more.

"I don't know why you're screaming like that! I'm just warming up!" Marcus sneered as he climbed on top of her so he was sitting on her stomach. He took the blade in his hand and leaned forward, smiling. He looked at his watch.

"How long do you think you'll last honey? When we got back here you said you could go all night. Now I know this is not what you had in mind, but it's what I've had on my mind since I saw you."

The woman had stopped screaming now and was sobbing.

“OK, nearly 23:00 hours station time. Remember, I’m timing you to see how long you last!” he said cheerfully “Five, four, three, two, one... go!”

She arched her back and screamed into the gag as he stabbed just the tip knife into her flesh and brutally twisted it.

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By the time Inspector Avi returned to his office the lab results had been sent over. They confirmed the same drugs had been used as well as traces of the same organic glue. It was "Him" again.

A large holo-board glowed in the corner of his office. With a few flicks of the wrist Avi transferred the details of the latest file from his datapad to the larger holo-board. Victim number three was placed alongside the other two. Avi opened his desk draw and pulled out a glass and a bottle of Minmatar Fire Whisky. He poured himself a substantial glass and leaned back in his chair looking at the holo-board.

"I'm going to get you, you bastard. I'm going to get you." The Inspector muttered.

## Chapter Four

The Hawk class Assault Frigate bumped as the space-station's tractor beams locked onto it as it approached the station and pulled it into the hanger. Inspector Avi looked at the golden interior of the massive docking bay. He was somewhat pleased that it was an Amarrian station. The last one had been Gallente and he'd received a rather cold reception. May be arriving in a Assault Frigate wasn't the best way, but with the Emyrean Wars still raging, ranking Caldari Navy staff always travelled in a resilient war ship these days.

Co-operation between the four main empires was at an all-time low. Even though a cross-empire agreement existed to allow law enforcement personnel to assist each other in solving connected crimes, the war still meant people were hostile to each other.

On that Gallente station he'd learnt a few new things. Firstly the perp was going higher class. He'd rented some quarters under a false ID and taken his victim back there. Usually he got them to take him back to their own quarters. He'd also removed half of her toes. It was clear now he had no preference to what he removed from his victims, just that he wanted something as a souvenir. However, all the detailed investigations had been kept from him simply because he was Caldari. And currently the Gallente and Caldari didn't like each other much.

"Inspector Avi?" he'd only just cleared the walkway and an Amarrian delegation was already there to meet him. A bald-headed man in elegant robes bowed before him.

"On behalf of her holiness, Empress Jaml, we welcome you to our humble station. My name is Balashi and I am here to serve in the name of the glorious Amarr Empire."

Avi thanked the man for his warm greeting. That greeting was a much warmer welcome than what he received at the Gallente station. The Gallente had sent a wet-behind-the-ears recruit to meet him and bring him to the police offices where they'd kept him waiting for three hours. Truth be told he was worried what reception he'd receive from the Amarr. The incident on Pike's Landing in Amamake was still fresh in people's minds. The mega-corp Ishukone, part of the Caldari State, had attacked Amarr forces alongside the Gallente Federation Navy and Modu's Legion. The fact this was in response to the Amarr developing immortal soldier technology in breach of CONCORD laws was the only thing that stopped the whole thing dissolving the

alliance between the Amarr and the Caldari. The Amarr knew they had done wrong and couldn't really say much against the impromptu coalition that formed to stop them.

He was quickly escorted to the stations morgue. The victim was laid out on a slab, uncovered. Before he got near he could tell it was the work of "him".

"The Lord surely tests us at this time. How such a..... demon..... can be allowed to exist amongst us god-fearing children is beyond me."

The Inspector looked carefully over the body.

"Well I'm pretty certain this is the same perp. When was the body found?"

"Two days ago. The lady didn't show up for a family meal so her relatives contacted security. However she wasn't found until service-bots went to clean a rented quarters on deck 14."

Avi moved her blond hair checking around her head. Her left ear was missing. The Amarrian turned white.

"Our medical examiner says she was still alive when he did that. This is indeed a test of faith for us all."

The Inspector wanted to scream at the man. This was done by no demon and it was not a test. It was done by one sicko who needed to be stopped before he struck again. However, he couldn't afford upsetting the Amarrians. He'd got so little information from the Gallente on victim number four that the whole visit was almost pointless. The only real details he got was that the perp had stopped there, killed a woman and took some of her toes with her. He needed the Amarrians help here to give him the boost to catch up with the perp.

"I'd like to speak to the investigating officers now please." Avi asked.

"Of course, they have already been told to fully co-operate and to release any files, evidence or test results to you direct."

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The Interbus Shuttle approached the gate. The "brace for jump" alarm sounded. There was a flash of brilliant light as the large shuttle vanished, landing several light years

away in a different solar system. The shuttle aligned and warped off in the direction of the next stargate.

Marcus sat back in his spacious chair sipping fine Gallente champagne. His first class ticket meant he could drink himself silly if he wanted. However he was being careful, the case he carried would be an automatic death sentence in any of the four Empires if he was caught after accidentally leaving it somewhere and someone else opened it.

He closed his eyes and thought back to the previous station. He'd thought finding a willing Amarrian woman would be a challenge. In the end it wasn't in the slightest, they are all the same, all looking for the bigger, better deal. All seeing a free meal ticket in him. She'd not screamed or struggled as much as the previous women which disappointed him. She seemed to accept her fate all too readily. Next he'd need to find a nice Minmatar or Gallente lady. He'd enjoyed those best so far. The Caldari were slighter of build and couldn't take as much punishment.

An attractive stewardess approached and offered to top up his glass which he accepted. For a moment he considered her as a possibility until he thought she might find it suspicious for a "capsuleer" to be taking an Interbus transport, even first class. As she walked away he turned on the vid screen to see if any of his "work" had made the local network.

As usual there was nothing on the major networks. So he just lay back in his seat, closed his eyes and simply daydreamed what he could have done to the hostess.

## Chapter Five

The space station's corridors were brightly lit. In a world where there was no night or day, the intensity of the lighting in the corridors gave residents an indication of time. In a few hours they would be dimmer, indicating it was evening.

"Do you really think this will work Inspector?" the head of station security asked. "I mean no disrespect, but, well, the police force isn't known for its beautiful women. Surely hiring some models or, ahem, more professional ladies, would be a better idea. I mean they would work better as bait surely?"

Avi was getting another headache and they still had four residential quarters to visit plus all the paperwork to fill out. So much paperwork. He knew they were still behind the killer, but so far no reported missing persons or victims had turned up here. Maybe they were in time to stop him? There were four bars on this station that fit the profile and he needed them all staked out. The trail had led him here to this station, he was sure this is where the perp would strike next.

"This man likes to take his time and kill women in some of the most horrific ways I've seen in my 35 years on the force. If you think I'm setting any woman up as bait who isn't licenced to carry, and knows how to handle a piece, then you are very much mistaken!" Avi said.

They arrived at a door and he pressed the call button.

"Yes, but it's all going to be pointless if he's not interested in them. This man goes for beautiful and provocatively dressed gold-diggers. Hairy, butch women like we see on the forces aren't his thing! No disrespect of course to the fine women of the Caldari Navy Police." He quickly added.

Avi was sick of the guys whining, but he needed him with him currently. The case the man carried was the reason why he was there. In it were four H-Type Caldari Navy Issue blaster pistols. These weapons were strictly controlled. As well as being small and easy to conceal, they were made of special alloys and components that hid them from even the most advanced weapons sensors. Not even the Police were allowed to carry them under normal circumstances. Each weapon had to be handed to the officer directly and thumb-print authorisation obtained by the head of station security. Avi needed them issuing to his "bait" officers. Weapon alarms going off every five minutes might give the killer a hint something was amiss with his potential victim.

"Hello" a female voice sounded through the intercom.

"Hello Detective Mila, it's Inspector Avi. I'm here with your new temporary side-arm and a guy who thinks we're wasting our time as all female CNP officers look like the back ends of Slaver Hounds!"

The face of the head of station security dropped in shock, his cheeks turning crimson.

Mila giggled and the door buzzed, signifying it was unlocked. Avi hit the open button and stepped inside followed by the red-faced head of station security.

Inspector Avi moved to one side and the other man saw Mila standing in front of him, dressed ready to head up to the higher deck bars.

"So..... still think this won't work?"

The head of security was speechless. The woman in front of him could have been a model. Mila was stunningly beautiful. High cheek-bones and glossy black hair that cascaded over her white shoulders. Her full bright red lips ached to be kiss. She wore a clinging red dress that clung to her impressive curves. The neck was scooped low and offered a hint of her impressive cleavage. The slit in the leg was just high enough to make out the tops of her black stockings. The most faithful husband in the cluster would contemplate cheating if she stood before him right now.

"Looking good Mila. Now get tooled up and head to Bar Morphite. Make sure that blaster is accessible. You know what this guy is capable of. Here is your communications package, ensure you keep an open comm line continuously. I need you up there in 20 minutes." Avi knew time was not on their side.

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Marcus looked up at the immense blue-grey battlecruiser hanging there. Powerful tractor beams held the starship floating in the middle of the vast hanger. He gave the feminine hand he was holding a gentle squeeze. The woman looked at him and smiled. The hover-platform jerked as it freed itself from the deck-dock and started to ferry them over to the Drake.

"I've added you as a guest to the manifest using a false name" said the woman affixing a visitor badge to his jacket. "Nobody should bother you. Just wait in the reception room for ten minutes and then take the lift to deck 34. Go to corridor 18 and room 1825, that's my quarters. Don't let anyone see you enter. If there is anyone in the

corridor, just walk past and double back. Most are on shore-leave so it's likely to be empty."

Marcus thought of the dangers. The women he usually picked up had quarters on the station. His current fake ID was blown. He'd used it to kill the Amarrian woman so couldn't risk using it again. He couldn't rent any quarters himself. This time he'd got someone on shore-leave who crewed on a battlecruiser. He had thought about skipping, but then he thought that a battlecruisers crew quarters weren't probably much different to a stations. Probably not as well sound insulated, he'd just have to gag her better.

He had worried that she might wonder why a capsuleer would come back to her ship and not take her to his. He skirted around her questions trying to be mysterious. As normal it worked. She obviously thought he didn't want to reveal what he was until they got to know each other better.

He smiled at his future victim and she smiled back as the small platform ferried them to the huge warship.

-oOo-

"Inspector, this is control, I think we need to stand down for the night. He's not coming."

"Damn it, one more hour, tell the others I'll personally authorise the overtime. He'll be here!"

The Inspector looked at his datapad showing split screens of the security feed from all the bars. The security cameras ignored the other patrons and exclusively tracked each of his officers. Plenty of men had approached but no signs of the fake capsuleer. He went back to the starmap. The scene of each of the crimes were highlighted.

"It has to be this station. It has to be. So where is he?" Avi whispered to himself.

-oOo-

Marcus looked around the room. There was nowhere to hide the body. He'd placed his souvenirs into his case and was ready to leave, but leaving the quarters like this meant the first person to enter would raise the alarm. His shuttle wasn't leaving until late in the afternoon. He needed time. If they locked down the station he'd be dead.

The girl's body was still on the bed, her wrists and ankles bound together making her into one big loop. Her body was a patchwork of cuts from the serrated Minmatar blade. She'd lasted nearly 90 minutes, which Marcus was impressed with given her small frame. He'd expected her to last less than that. There were also new marks on her, ones he'd not made before. Upon searching her quarters after drugging her he'd discovered she was a maintenance technician. Her tool belt hung near the door. It contained a range of tools he'd taken his time to experiment with. The pliers were fun and the snips were a lot less work than using the knife. However his favourite had been the micro blowtorch. When he'd used that on her she'd bucked so hard he was worried she'd break free. He'd worked from her head down with the blue flame. When he'd reach the tops of her legs, what he did with the blowtorch made her buck so hard in agony there had been a loud popping noise. She had dislocated her shoulder. Even with the damage he'd already caused to her he had to have her one last time after that. He'd never done that before what he'd done to her had turned him on so much he needed round two.

In the end he realised he had no choice. There was simply nowhere to hide the body. He left the room and secured the door with her own personal passcode which he'd already extracted from her to ensure his escape from the Drake. He added a "Do not disturb" command to the door lock. He easily retraced his steps and soon was back on the hover platform heading back to the hanger dockside. He could see two men waiting at the platform landing bay. He became worried, until he noticed they were crew, probably coming back to the ship after a night of partying. Even from this distance, he could see they were drunk. That would work in his favour in case anyone asked them if they'd seen a strange face that day.

"Alright mate!" one of the drunks greeted him with a smile as the hover platform docked. Marcus just smiled and nodded as he walked past. Suddenly a blinding pain hit him in the back and he blacked out.

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"Inspector, its 4am station time"

Avi checked his watch. Shaking his head in disappointment.

"OK, OK. Everyone can stand down. Get some sleep people, we start again at 7pm tonight!"

-o0o-

Marcus woke in a dimly lit room. He was cuffed to a metal chair. The subtle hum indicated he was back on the ship. He looked around, the room was bare. There was a strange light and slowly a hologram appeared in front of him. It was a man who Marcus didn't recognise. He appeared to be smartly dressed and looked very confident.

"Hello Marcus. Do you know why you are here?"

Marcus swallowed hard. He tried to think of something to say.

"Well, let me show you this..." the hologram of the man melted away and was replaced by the scene of Marcus in the woman's quarters. A high-definition holographic projection showed him slowly and methodically working on the woman.

"That..... that's..... that's not me!" Marcus stammered. The image morphed back into that of the man who started laughing.

"Is that the best you can come up with? That holo-recording could be used in any court of the four Empires. In fact, I could ask anyone one of the multiple Caldari Navy Police officers who are currently sat in every bar on Deck 13 of this station. I assume they are here looking for you. This whole station is staked out. The fact you met your victim in the afternoon is the only thing that saved you."

Marcus began to sob, he knew he'd been caught red-handed.

"Oh man up! For a sadistic serial killer, you are a whiney little thing aren't you? You'd make a good hi-sec carebear if you was a Capsuleer!"

Marcus looked up at the hologram with tears in his eyes.

"Who are you?"

"I'm the Capsuleer of this ship. To be honest with you, you got very unlucky. I was testing some fits and was in my capsule as you were working on one of my crew. We Capsuleers know everything that's happening in our ships when we are hooked up. I could feel her struggling against the hull."

Marcus suddenly started to wonder. If he was watching, why didn't he try and stop him? Why didn't he send security straight to his location? Why the underhand take-down at the hover platform so long after the event? Marcus had worked that woman

for a long time. The longest he'd ever taken given he'd wanted her again mid-way through. Something didn't add up.

"So, what now?" Marcus asked.

"Well that is up to you. I have the room number of an Inspector Avi of the Caldari Navy Police Force who is here in this station and is heading up the operation to capture you. I could just hand you in. I'm sure my standings with the Caldari Navy would improve with that."

"You said it's up to me. Therefore I assume there is another option?"

"Well yes in fact there is. I could send maintenance drones to Steffi's quarters to scrub it clean and remove the body. Then I could flag her as a deserter and assign some executive quarters to you as a guest on the ship"

Marcus was speechless. He just gapped at the hologram.

"Why would you do that?"

"I have my reasons. You'd get access to random and remote stations to continue your, shall we say 'hobby', with your quarters specially equipped for 'entertaining'. You'll have better opportunities and a lot more protection. The Police almost have you; you should know that by now. They are tracking you effectively. On this ship, they won't be able to anymore"

"What do you want in return" Marcus asked?

"To do what I did last time. To watch from afar." was the Capsuleer's answer.

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It was the early hours of the next morning as Inspector Avi stared out of the bar's viewport. He'd been nursing the same drink for over an hour keeping an eye on Mila sat in the opposite corner. Another man approached her and Avi tensed. Mila smiled at the new potential suitor. He saw her put her hand on his neck and pull him in close to whisper something in his ear. After she let go the man nodded said something and left her alone. Avi relaxed, it was not him. Mila was using that technique to feel for the fake implant sockets. She pretended she wanted to whisper something to them. If she felt no socket she'd say her large Matari boyfriend could turn up at any time and he

was very jealous. If she did feel a socket then she'd say she was in the bar to party. So far no hits.

A Drake class battlecruiser caught his eye as it undocked, a welcome distraction from the boring haulers and freighters he kept seeing out in space. He admired the enormous Caldari-made warship bristling with heavy missile launchers as it aligned and slipped into warp, vanishing into the blackness of space with a flash of light.

With the brief distraction gone, Inspector Avi went back to scanning the room, looking for his suspect.

## Chapter Six

Inspector Avi was pondering over the star maps. He'd come so close. He had picked the right station last time, he'd just been too late. Whilst he was sat in the bar looking for the perp, a poor woman had probably been begging for her life as that sicko cut her to ribbons. This one had also been tortured with a blowtorch. The sick bastard had obviously bought some new toys. Just 24 hours, if he'd been 24 hours earlier they'd have caught him and she needn't have died.

The perp was clearly using the Interbus shuttle network. There were three stations he might strike at next and the Inspector had officers in every bar matching the profile. This time they'd gotten ahead of him. This time they'd get him. He'd seconded attractive female officers from anywhere he could. Even from other forces. They were dressed to impress and told to work on anyone who looked like a capsuleer. Each bar had a SWAT team assigned to it. They would take him down before the officer was in any real danger.

Only one thing bothered him. The last victim was found in the garbage hold of the starship hanger where the ships dumped their trash. All the previous victims had been found in residential quarters. Either their own or one rented by the perp. Why did he dump the last body in that fashion?

Inspector Avi went back to the lab results from the last victim that he was so close to saving. Her actual details were unknown. Facial scans had been sent to the various empires, but with trillions of people it could take a while to get an ID. Something caught his eye. The blood-work showed elevated O2 content. He hit the comm channel for the crime lab. It buzzed for a few seconds before the screen showed a lab technicians face in the small monitor.

"Hi Mike, this is Avi, got a sec"

"Sure Inspector. What do you need."

"The last victim. Her blood O2 level was up around 23%. That's not normal is it?"

"Well depends. Medical workers commonly have that after a day's work if they have been working in O2 rich environments, however it usually drops after an hour or two. Also some starship crews will be up there. Oh and also welding crews using...."

"Sorry Mike, can I stop you there. You said some starship crews?" Avi thinking back to where the body was found.

"Yeah. Not your average industrial as they are usually lower O2 content than regular air. High performance ships have a higher O2 content with a slight reduction in atmospheric pressure. That gives the crew the boost of enriched air without the problems with O2 poisoning over a long period."

"O2 poisoning?"

"Yes, it's not a common known fact but oxygen can be poisonous to humans. If you breathe too high an O2 content for too long at too high a partial pressure then it can poison your central nervous system. The high-end ships that need crews on peak performance drop the atmospheric pressure and increase the O2 content. That stops any problems with CNS poisoning but still gives the crews the boost of enriched air"

"You said only on high-end ships?"

"Yeah, you only get that sort of atmosphere processing and control on top flight Navy ships..... oh and the larger capsuleer vessels such as battlecruisers and battleships."

Avi was suddenly distracted, an alarm had gone off at his workstation. The alarm could only signify one thing. One of the bait officers had made contact.

"Sorry Mike, got to go" Avi aborted the call and rushed to his desk.

-o0o-

Marcus smiled as he sipped his drink in the crowded bar. This was going to be a good one. Given the situation he had let it slip we was a 'capsuleer'. No need for the man of mystery routine this time. He had a feeling it would work as just as good this time without it.

"So what do you say we ditch this bar and head back to my vessel to really start the party? Would you like to see my enormous warship?" he joked.

The reply was just a very girly giggle.

Marcus signalled the waiter for the bill and prepared to leave the bar.

-o0o-

Inspector Avi sat transfixed at the comm station in his office. Given that there were multiple possible target stations he had stayed back at base in case he was at the wrong one. One of the bait officers had just pressed the warning button that was hidden in her purse. It signalled that she'd made contact and was leaving the bar with a suspect.

"Tac Team 4 get in position. She's leaving the bar now with him. Security feed has eyes. They are heading your way Tac Team 4. Stand by." Avi watched the schematic of the station and tracked the blinking red light that signified the officers location beacon.

They'd got him!

"They are heading for the elevator. We need this guy alive Tac Team 4. Don't make this personal. Remember he has a friendly with him. 50m from the corner. 25m, get ready, 5m!"

Officer Constance rounded the corridor corner arm in arm with the man from the bar. As they turned she hiked up her cocktail dress to free her legs and dived to the side. The man stood there gobsmacked as five SWAT officers in intimidating tactical masks yelled at him to lay face down on the floor as the green laser-sights from their carbine-blasters danced across his chest.

The man dropped to his knees, a look of sheer terror on his face. One of the Caldari SWAT team approached and pressed him face down onto the cold space station floor.

"This is Tac Team 4. Suspect apprehended!"

-oOo-

Elena started to come around. Her head was fuzzy and it felt like the room was spinning. She dare not open her eyes as she thought she might throw up. She thought back to the previous night. She'd been drinking, but not this much. Her and her friend had met a man, a capsuleer. He'd invited them both for drinks on-board his starship! They'd been so excited. They'd partied the night through in that ship. "Oh god" she thought as she remembered what had happened. "How am I going to face Yammi again after last night"? She recalled putting on a show for the capsuleer, her and her best friend together. They had justified it at the time by the fact he was a capsuleer. Rich, powerful and handsome. Putting on a show for him seemed a great idea at the time after all those cocktails. She wondered if their friendship would ever be the same again after what they'd done to each other as the capsuleer watched from his chair.

Her body felt numb but there was an ache in her arms. She tried to move them but she couldn't. Suddenly she felt a stabbing pain in her arm and sensations and feeling flooded back as a stim-stick was injected into her. She suddenly realised she was hanging by her wrists. She opened her eyes and saw Yammi, also hanging by her wrists, staring back at her in sheer terror.

The 'capsuleer' suddenly appeared between them, naked. He held a long serrated knife in his hand. He looked at both girls.

"Shall we REALLY get the party started ladies?"

The two women started to scream together as he picked a small blowtorch from the side and lit it.

-oOo-

"He's a wanna-be sir. A fake."

"Are you sure?" asked Inspector Avi

"100%" replied Officer Constance over the vid-call, she was still wearing the cocktail dress. "The imitation implants are of a very low quality, the glue doesn't match our samples from previous victims and he's got a rock solid alibi for the previous murders. He's a 'roid miner and his company has provided us movement tracking for him for the last two months at the colony he works. As he's a rock-jockey he's surgically implanted with a locator-beacon in case of an accident or cave in so they can find him."

"Shit!" exclaimed Avi "What the frack was he doing?"

"Apparently he'd heard parts of the story on a pirate news station. He thought he could get some classy action above his station by pretending to be a capsuleer too. I doubt murder was on his mind, just bedding some hot woman who thought he was a pod jockey."

"You know, that's the third this week" Avi sighed "Book him for wasting Police time and let's move on"

-oOo-

Macrus lifted the lifeless head of Yammi by the chin so she was facing Elena.

"You know what? I think she's had too much fun for one night!" Marcus laughed.

Elena was screaming, she'd been screaming for an hour straight as she'd been forced to watch him slowly mutilate her best friend. He'd spared her face, but her body was a mess. The only thing he had done to her head was to gouge out one of her eyeballs so she could "have a better view of what was happening down below". The eye hung there on her cheek suspended by the optic nerve.

Marcus retrieved a jar with preservative and held it against the dead woman's cheek, just under the eye as he cut the optic nerve with the knife. The eyeball fell into the jar with a plop. Elena threw up again.

"Right I think she's finished with." He said prodding the knife into her chest. The tip sunk in a few centimetres but the girl didn't react. He twisted the knife, still no reaction. Finally he pressed against it with all his weight sinking the blade deep. He wiggled the handle.

"Yup. Dead! One down, one to go!" he said cheerily "So what should I take from you? May be an eye too? Oh don't worry, I don't have to decide now. We've got hours of fun together before I need to choose!"

Elena screamed at the top of her lungs as Marcus approached her with his bloodied knife held in front of him.

## Chapter Seven

Director Ogushi was working late. The Empyrean War was good for business, warship sales were up, but it had been putting a strain on him. His factory produced mostly the tech-one standard small hulls. Kestrel and Merlin class frigates, Cormorant class destroyers and the odd Moa class cruiser when a good client requested on. Ogushi preferred orders for the frigates. They tended to be seen as more disposable than the cruisers so whilst cheaper and less profit individually, there was much greater demand.

He was going through the monthly sales reports when his secretary buzzed him.

"Sir, there are two men from Internal Security here to see you."

The Caldari State didn't have a police force as such. Each mega-corp provided security services to their region.

"Tell them to come back in the morning. I'm busy."

"Sir, they say it's an emergency."

"OK, send them in." he sighed.

Ogushi leaned back in his chair, this was the last thing he needed. He rubbed his tired eyes as the two men entered and approach his desk.

"Sorry to disturb you at this hour Sir. I'm afraid there has been an incident... involving your daughter"

Ogushi groaned. "Not again!" he thought. In the last two years his daughter had gone from a well behaved 16 year-old into some rebellious terror. He'd lost count of the number of times he'd had to bail her out of jail or call in favours to stop charges being pressed. As the daughter of a mega-corp director she had everything she could ask for, but she always wanted something else. What was it this time? The last incident required him to hire a Capsuleer to rescue her from a notorious criminal's pleasure garden. As well as the millions of ISK he had to pay from his own pocket to the agent, the criminal gang had tried to protect the facility with a fleet of battleships and cruisers. He'd heard the death toll was in the tens of thousands. They may have all been criminal scum, but it was still a huge loss of life due to his daughters indiscretions. All because his little angel had tried to score and got herself in a sticky

situation. He retrieved his datapad thinking whatever it was, it was going to cost him. Fines, compensation or bribes, she always cost him when she had an “incident”.

"What's she done this time?" he asked in a resigned tone.

"I'm afraid it's bad news sir." said one of the officers pausing. "She is dead!"

-o0o-

Inspector Avi was consulting the star charts when the report came in. Two victims with the normal MO at another location that meant the perp was no longer using the Interbus shuttle network. There is no way he could commit those crimes on those separate stations without having access to his own ship or chartering a ship. Avi surmised that because he started as a petty thief owning a ship was out, he'd not made enough to buy one. Chartering a ship was very expensive too, so unlikely and needed extensive background checks which he'd want to avoid. The last possible explanation was that he was crewing or stowing away on a ship. That would explain how he was being able to move about so freely. He'd also killed two women in a single night which was the first time he'd done that. He was upping his game. The Inspector hit the comm channel for the security datacentre.

"This is Inspector Avi. I'm sending you a list of stations and dates. I want all ship docking registers for those stations and crew manifests. See if any individuals are showing up at each of those locations."

"Yes sir. Do you want just the main hanger logs or shall I request the egger hanger logs too? That would require a class 2A authorisation."

Inspector Avi thought about it. It would take too long to get that level of authorisation and it was highly unlikely the guy was crewing on a capsuleer ship. No crew member for a pod jockey needed to conduct petty theft as this guy had been doing, they were too well paid due to the immense risks they faced.

"No, just the standard hangers. No need for the Capsuleers."

Avi then thought about the victim before the last two. She had elevated O2 levels as you would find in someone who lived on a larger capsuleer or navy ship.

"Wait. Actually yes, include the Capsuleers, I'll wake the Chief and get you the authorisation."

Avi went back to the star charts. Capsuleer crews tended to be the best of the best. It was unlikely this guy could be crewing for an egger.

“May be not crew, may be something else?” he thought.

-o0o-

Director Ogushi stood in the morgue. In front of him was a slab covered by a white sheet.

"Sir, I would strongly advise against this. We can confirm identity with DNA. You do not want to see your daughter..... like this" one of the medical staff said.

Ogushi shot him a look that immediately silenced him. The officer carefully folded the sheet down to expose the girls face.

The normally controlled director let a sob escape his lips as he gazed at his daughters face. It was covered in lacerations and black burns. Her lips had been removed and her exposed teeth made her look monstrous. Like some snarling beast. He grabbed the sheet and pulled it off her body entirely. After glancing at what had been done to the rest of her body he spun around and vomited in a nearby sink.

"Who did this? Who..... mutilated my little girl?" he growled after he had recovered. He was still leaning over the sink, his arms bracing his body were trembling in rage.

"We are still investigating." one of the security officers replied "It would appear she met a man in a bar last night and left with him according to some witnesses. However, our report has been flagged by the Caldari Navy Police and they are sending an Inspector here."

"The CN Police? Way out here? Why are they getting involved?"

"We understand that there may be connection with other deaths in the sector sir. Some connection to other murders."

"Lock-down the station down now! All undocking requests are to be denied. I want this sick fuck found!" the Director growled. "I mean ALL docking requests, even those fracking Emphyreans. Nobody is to leave until I say so!"

-o0o-

Inspector Avi was reading the local news on his datapad as his ship entered the system. The top local story was about Director Ogushi's daughter. Whilst they had tried to keep the story quiet, details had leaked quickly. Refusing undock permission to starship captains was a sure way to get the news spread. The article made for some quite disturbing reading. There was obviously a leak in the local police which was usual at this backwater stations. Towards the end of the article Avi stopped dead and muttered "No!" and shook his head. His job had just got infinitely more difficult.

"Director Ogushi's office decline to offer any official comments on the hideous death of his daughter other than to say a reward of five hundred million ISK was being offered for information that leads to the capture and conviction of the killer. The bounty is to be doubled if he is delivered alive to any of the mega corps security teams for trial."

"First a private dic, now I'm going to have every wanna-be bounty hunter getting in the way" Avi grumbled to himself.

-o0o-

Marcus watched the small drones cleaning his quarters as he sharpened his blade. Each blood splatter on the walls and floor were removed by the insect like robots. The pool below where his last victim hung was more substantial and was taking some time to clear.

The "Brace for jump" alarm sounded throughout the ship. He placed the knife on the table between the three jars, two holding a different coloured eyeball and a third holding a pair of lips, and braced himself for the unpleasant sensation of interstellar gate travel.

## Chapter Eight

"So.... do you have a place we can go where it's a little more private" the woman purred.

Marcus smiled. He would enjoy this one. She was smoking hot and had an amazing body. He was sure the capsuleer would appreciate this one too. She looked fit and strong too, she should be able to last a while too.

"My ship is docked here and my quarters are rather spacious."

"A shuttle or a frigate" she asked, clearly testing him. As always, this one must have seen the interface socket on his neck but had not mentioned that she thought she knew that he was a capsuleer.

"Slightly larger. Trust me, you won't be disappointed. I have a rather large one." He joked.

"I don't know, I don't like small ships. I get claustrophobic."

Marcus smiled again and brought out his datapad. He keyed a passcode into his datapad and brought up the security feed capsuleers could access to view their hanger remotely. He showed the image to the woman.

"So, is that big enough for you?"

The woman smiled and nodded.

Marcus paid the bar bill and took her by the hand leading her to the lift. He keyed in the pass code for the capsuleer deck and they walked in and the door slid closed.

"I've got something for you." She purred seductively as she leant back against the rear of the lift facing him. Her hands dropped to her skirt and she started to slowly lift it. Agonisingly slowly she exposed more of her slender, long legs. As her lace stocking tops came into view, Marcus saw something bulging in the top of them. She quickly reached into the top of her stocking and pulled out a mini-blaster and pointed it at his face.

"Freeze! Navy Police!"

Marcus indeed froze, his hands going up instinctively as he stared down the barrel of the gun. At the same moment the lift stopped and the doors opened, the controls being over-ridden by security. Suddenly there were screams of voices telling him to lay on the floor. He slowly turned to see half a dozen SWAT troopers pointing carbine-blasters at him, the laser sights dancing over his torso. He was frozen in fear. A wet patch formed on the front of his trousers.

-o0o-

"Inspector Avi. We have him."

Avi almost spilt his coffee as he rushed to the comms panel in his office.

"Are you sure? It's not another copy cat?"

"No sir, that's the first thing we checked. The glue on his fake sockets is a 100% chem-match to traces found on the previous victims. DNA profiling has matched him to a worker on Jita planet 4, moon 4 who apparently committed suicide after the third murder. We've also checked his datapad and it shows logs to unnamed, numbered bank accounts where he transferred the money from his victims. Seriously sir, we have him banged to rights, we couldn't possible have more incriminating evidence. Congratulations need to be given to you sir. You identified the three possible stations on his route, you said it would be a larger pod vessel like a battlecruiser or battleship and you suggested the bait. It worked exactly how you said it would"

Avi smiled for the first time in weeks.

"Have you got the murder weapons? What about his trophies?" Avi's mind was racing 99 AU's a minute.

"No sir. We intercepted him before he got to where he was going. But you were right sir, he was heading for the capsuleer hangers. We think he was on a Drake, we're trying to prevent any more from undocking but several of them have already left. Also we don't have the legal powers to conduct a search of a capsuleer vessel, we're trying to find which one and get a warrant for the local judge."

"Never mind, we have him and he's the one that matters. We are not even sure the Capsuleer knew what he was up to. Please keep him secured in holding on the station until a task force arrives to take custody."

"Sir..... I'm....."

"What?" Avi snapped his heart dropping. Something was wrong.

"He's already left sir. The decision was taken to get him the three jumps to a hi-sec station. We placed him in an unmarked transport as not to attract attention. He was deemed too high a risk for our security services to hold. Also with the bounty on his head, this station isn't equipped to handle high-value prisoners. We need a station covered by CONCORD which means high-sec."

"You transferred a high value suspect, who has a huge bounty on his head, and MAY in fact be working with a capsuleer, on a transport with no escort?"

"Er..... well yes sir."

"Put me through to the captain of that transport NOW! He needs to dock up in the nearest station before it's too late"

"Yes sir! Putting you through now sir... Sir... I'm not getting a signal from the ship."

-oOo-

The small escape pod rocked as the powerful tractor beam pulled it towards the battlecruiser. The two guards inside had their guns drawn but looked panicky. As the pod spun Marcus saw the burning wreck of the transport out of one of the view ports.

It had all happened so suddenly. He'd been arrested and placed in a cell for ten minutes. Then he'd been dragged down and placed on a transport. He'd felt the stargate jump a few minutes later. Then there were alarms and smoke. They'd dragged him down a corridor. Explosions resonated against the hull as they ran. He'd been shoved into an escape capsule with two guards and jettisoned just in time to see the ship he had been on blown to pieces.

Suddenly the escape pod stopped moving and there was a metallic crash. Instead of darkness outside, there were now bright lights shining through the small view ports. They were inside the cargo bay of the battlecruiser. The two guards exchanged worried glances. The comm panel lit up showing an incoming communication. One of the guards pressed the accept button.

"Let me make this quick. Open the door, let your prisoner out and close the door. The escape pod will be jettisoned back into space. They'll never even know there was a third person in the pod. Nobody needs to know you gave up the prisoner without a fight. Of course, you can resist. I've killed about 50 or so of your corporation

colleagues so far today in that transport. Another two won't make any difference to me."

The escape pod door was opened and Marcus was pushed out, with the door being closed behind him very quickly.

The Capsuleer told the truth about jettisoning them back into space, and technically he didn't lie about the salvo of missiles he fired at the pod as soon as it cleared the ship, he just hadn't mentioned it before.

-oOo-

Inspector Avi entered the Chief Inspectors office.

"So quite the fail over in low-sec" the Chief Inspector remarked looking up from his datapad.

"Yes sir. But now we know who he is. The perp's name is Marcus Kerjin. He was working on a factory on Jita 4-4 moon-side. After his third kill he was reported as committing suicide. A note was found. We now know he started taking Interbus shuttles to various stations to try and avoid detection whilst continuing the killing. It was in one of these where he met a capsuleer, who has been aiding him and ultimately rescued him from the prisoner transport resulting in the deaths of 47 crew members."

"So, what do we do?"

"The capsuleer is easy. As soon as we retrieve the flight recorder from the transport wreckage we'll know who he is. All we know right now is that it was a capsuleer piloted Drake class battlecruiser. But we'll have his name soon enough. Then we can posts guards at his clone revival units. We simply need another capsuleer, or capsuleers, to take him down and he'll re-clone straight into custody. This Marcus is a different matter. The only way we're likely to get him is by destroying that Drake. We think there is around a 30% chance of him escaping the destruction of the ship if and when it finally goes down. That's standard survival rate for such a ship."

"So we're 100% sure we'll get the capsuleer alive for trial and it's a 70/30 split on the main perp whether we take him dead or alive?"

"That's pretty much it sir. The official bounty on the capsuleer is now at 50 million ISK. Best we could get for aiding-and-abetting. Rewards for the capture of the perp have risen to 250m ISK following the last murders. We just need to feed the media

reports on his location when we have it and wait for the eggheads to do their thing. There is just one fly in the ointment."

"Ogushi?"

"Yes, my sources say the bounty for live capture of the perp and discreet delivery to the Director is now at a billion ISK."

"You know the Navy cannot and will not match that. You have no idea how much trouble it was to get 250m. That's all we're going to get you know with this war on."

"Yes, well lets hope the capsuleer who captures him does the right thing. Hands him over for a legal trial and doesn't take the money offered by the Director."

As soon as Avi had said the words, he knew it was far from certain.

## Chapter Nine

"So we're stuck here?" Marcus whined. The hologram gave him a look to silence any further protests.

"No, you are not stuck anywhere. I am stuck in this damn capsule. We cannot dock the Drake as our presence will be immediately flagged to the authorities." the capsuleer sound more than a little annoyed.

"What! You're stuck in that thing forever?"

The holographic projection of the capsuleer rolled it's eye's.

"I have a, well shall we say a 'friend', who is working on getting a new identity and NeoCom entry for me and the ship. When that is done we'll be fine to dock and go anywhere we please. However, that will take a few days. Until then it's either take the supply shuttle to one of the local stations or stay here on-board. However, touch one of my crew again and I'll flush you into space."

"OK, OK, I'll take the shuttle!" Marcus turned to the door.

"You'll need to wait a while until this battleship is destroyed. Give me a few minutes."

"WHAT BATTLESHIP?" Marcus' eye's went wide as he spun back around to face the hologram.

"The Guristas pirate battleship that is attacking us. You know asteroid belts aren't generally very safe and even less so in low-sec."

The hologram of the capsuleer nodded towards the screen in Marcus' quarters and a view of the Drake appeared. Heavy missiles were streaking from the launchers.

"Shouldn't you be doing something rather than talking to me?" Marcus' voice sounded worried. He had no real idea of the abilities of a capsuleer. Wet-wired into the ships systems they could easily handle a fight with a pirate battleship whilst holding a conversation and doing a multiple of other tasks simultaneously.

"I am, I'm destroying it. Give me two more minutes and the shuttle will be ready free to launch."

-o0o-

Inspector Avi was in his office on the comm link to the forensic investigation team who had been decoding the flight recorder of the downed transport ship.

"Petyr Ervert?"

"Yes Inspector. That is the capsuleer who destroyed the transport. However, there is a discrepancy, his NeoCom entry is too new. Given his qualification date, well he wasn't even supposed to be a capsuleer when he first showed up on our radar. The entry must be a fake."

"That can be done? The CONCORD capsuleer database is not secure?" asked the Inspector incuriously.

"Sir, there is no such thing as a secure database. Yes the CONCORD capsuleer database is one of the most secure in the cluster, but it's not one hundred percent secure. However, as we now know this is a fake entry, maybe we can trace who did it. Also it cannot be easily discarded. He's stuck with that ID until he can arrange to change it again."

"So all he needs to do is give himself a new ID and we're back to square one?"

"Well sir, it's not that easy. We could request CONCORD monitor his current database entry and see if he tries to have it removed or a new ID assigned to him?"

"Do it. Also try and see if you can dig up any background on him. He's changed his identity once before that we know about. We need to know why. If you get anything more, I'll be in the system of Yulai."

"You're going to CONCORD HQ?" the officer asked surprised.

"Yes. If that bastard has someone working for him amending database entries, I want that guy. I have some questions for him!"

-o0o-

The Drake's small supply shuttle landed with bump in the station. There were no Neg-Grav docking berths or inertial-dampened tractor beams this far down the station. This standard hanger required the pilot to manually land on the dock. Marcus stepped out into the dingy hanger. The grey walls were streaked with filth. It was light years away from the capsuleer hangers that were a couple of hundred decks above them. He knew he had become too much accustomed to the lifestyle of the capsuleer.

"Sir, we'll be back tomorrow night to pick you up. The captain says you may have a guest?"

"May be" Marcus wasn't really paying attention to the shuttle pilot. The other crew had already started to load the waiting supplies into the ship.

Marcus entered the lift and pressed the button for deck 12. He leaned back against the wall and thought how all Caldari ships and stations looked the same. Grey and blocky. The lift door opened to the brightly lit security deck.

The floors above this were reserved for capsuleers, mega-corp executives and their select staff and guests. He moved forward into the scanner area as he had done several times before and stretched out his arms. Beams scanned him all over, looking for weapons, bio-agents, poisons and anything that could be used to kill. He then moved forward and held his face against another scanner. An iris scanner read his eye patterns and gave a green light to the security staff that he was authorised to enter the capsuleer decks. The laser barrier dropped and he entered the opposite lift. As soon as the door closed he breathed a sigh of relief. The capsuleer had assured him that the security on this back-water station would not have an up-to-date personnel database and it was usual to have 6-month updates so far off the main travel routes. Plus the retinal lenses he wore and the fake ID attached to them helped. Still, he was awaiting alarms to go off and heavily armed men to charge in.

The lift opened to a residential deck. The sweet, fragranced air was a welcome change from the stagnant air of the lower decks. He followed the corridor around to the guest quarters.

Ten minutes later, Marcus was settled into his guest quarters on the capsuleer deck. Tonight he would check out the bars, tomorrow night he needed to snag himself a victim.

-oOo-

Vizell waited outside the high security blast-door in the bright white and spotless corridor. His shift was about to start and he needed to get to work. He fingered the small object in his pocket impatiently. A whirl of mechanics sounded the opening of the massive secure door. He stepped into the small room. The guy he was relieving was stood there keying out on the data terminal.

"Evening" was the curt welcome.

Vizell nodded and replaced the man at the terminal. He keyed in his code and the outer blast-door closed as the other man left. When the outer door was fully closed, the smaller inner door opened. Vizell entered the next room which contained rows of data-storage banks. This was the Bureau station at planet 9 in the Yulai system and was the headquarters of CONCORD.

Vizell sat at the console and went to work. He removed the miniature holoprojector and placed it next to the keyboard. It lit up and showed a woman sat in a chair. She was clearly upset.

"Hi honey. I am well. Please don't worry I am being treated kindly. But 'he' needs you to do something more for him. He says he's nearly done and then he'll let me go soon....."

Vizell looked at the lines of code being holographically projected through teary eyes, and started keying into the data entry terminal. It was another ID change for the capsuleer that held her.

-o0o-

Marcus was disappointed. The bar was quiet, far too quiet. He'd passed through the security check again, but had changed and was now looking like a capsuleer. This time he'd only gone down a single level in the lift and was now in the most exclusive bar accessible to all in the station on deck 13. Picking up women in the top-deck bars would be too risky. The women in the bars above deck 12 were either societies elite, capsuleers themselves or high-class professional ladies. They wouldn't do at all. He needed wanna-be's, ones whose sense of judgement would be clouded by ISK signs flashing up before their eyes. The station was huge, but in a dead-end system there were much few people on it.

"Slim pickings" he thought as he glanced around the possibilities. A young and slender girl was chatting to a man in a booth across the bar. Marcus discounted her immediately. She looked too frail to withstand his special treatment for long. The next two possibilities were too plain looking. Marcus wanted beautiful women to take to his bed. The entertainment he planned for after they'd shared his bed didn't require looks, just the ability to scream. Notwithstanding that, he still wanted good looking women for the first session. He looked over to the bar and noticed a woman perched on the bar stool. She had short black hair and was fairly attractive, but much older than his usual victims. He guessed she was in her early forties, fit and attractive, dressed in a short outfit with killer heels, obviously trying to attract a man. She would

do he supposed as there was little choice in this backwater place. There were two other stations in this system, he hoped they had a better selection than this. He could sow the seeds tonight and whisk her away tomorrow.

He was about to make a move when his datapad bleeped. He looked at it and saw a message from the capsuleer. He was told to come back alone and that the shuttle was already there waiting for him. Marcus made a mental note of the woman for next time and left the bar.

-o0o-

Vizell was busying typing when the door started to open. Impossible! This was a secure room. The only way in was for him to enter the small room, close the inner door and then open the outer blast-doors. Scanners ensured only one person could access the data room at the same time. It was a security lock to prevent anyone accessing the database room without authorisation. It couldn't be happening! Only one of the Inner Circle of CONCORD could order the doors to be opened using their personal access codes.

As the door fully opened and Vizell knew instantly he was in trouble. Four heavily armed guards accompanied by the head of internal security and, what he assumed, was a Caldari Navy Police Officer by looking at his uniform.

"Inspector Avi" the head of internal security said, looking in disgust at Vizell, "You have him for 24 hours and he is not to leave this station. Then he's ours!".

"No! He has my wife, if I don't help he's going to kill her!" Vizell protested.

"Who has your wife?" asked Avi

"Petyr Ervert. Well that's his current name. He's a capsuleer pirate and con-artist. He kidnapped my wife. Made me work for him. As soon as his security status drops too low he asks me to give him a new ID"

"Why not simply adjust his sec-status?" Avi asked as the armed guards hoisted the man up and placed him in restraints. Before he could answer the head of security cut in.

"Inspector, capsuleer security status changes are logged and approved by a superior officer. This data clerk would be instantly caught" .

"But new entire new records can created without this oversight?" Avi asked.

"Ahem. Well obviously a loophole that we need to address. Guards take him to holding and give the good Inspector the required time to get all the information he needs" he was clearly embarrassed at the discovery of this loophole in the CONCORD database and that one of their own was the leak.

"Please! There must be a way. My wife! If he finds out you've arrested me he'll kill her!" Vizell cried as the security men dragged him away.

-oOo-

Marcus returned via the shuttle to the Drake and made his way back to his quarters. He was wondering why the capsuleer had brought him back a day early and empty-handed. He was getting an itch. He needed a new victim soon.

As he opened the door he saw a woman sat on his bunk. She looked very frightened but she was also young and attractive. Much better than any potential victims he'd seen in the bar at the station.

"Hello. And who might you be?" he asked smiling.

"I'm Kelli. The capsuleer..... he.... he said if I was nice to you, that he'd let me go finally."

"Oh he did, did he?" said Marcus as he pulled out his datapad. As he did he saw a message from the capsuleer flash up. He was obviously watching.

*The woman was leverage over someone I was using. That asset is compromised and she is now a liability. Use her as you wish. I am watching.*

"Ah yes. Just seen the message. So I get to decide if we drop you off at the nearest station or flush you out of the nearest airlock it would seem."

The woman let out a sob.

"There, there. Don't worry, I'm sure we'll get on famously for the next few hours and then we'll drop you off at the station. You are going to make me happy.... aren't you?" Marcus asked as he wandered over to his locker and discreetly checked everything was in place. The stun gun was easily accessible, his knife was there as were the restraints he would use to suspend her from the ceiling later. The blowtorch was

running low on fuel. He'd need to ask for another cell after tonight. He was confident there was enough left for this Kelli woman.

He turned back to the woman.

"Sorry I didn't hear an answer. You are going to make me happy.... aren't you?" he repeated.

She nodded and tried to give a smile even though she was still crying. With shaking, unsteady hands, she started to slowly unbutton her blouse. Marcus smiled and licked his lips before approaching her.

-oOo-

In his hydrostatic capsule, the capsuleer watched the scene unfold before him over the next few hours. He saw Marcus have the woman every way a man can. She appeared to be a willing partner but Petyr knew it was a show to try and save her life. Marcus used her for a whole two hours before walking to the locker, pulling out the stun gun out and shooting her. The capsuleer felt the blood rushing through his veins as Marcus suspended her from the ceiling and revived her with a stim-stick. Her screams, a mix of both terror and pain, flooded through his brain as the implants relayed the sounds from the quarters directly into his head. This was good, it was taking his mind of the fact they were now trapped with no plan of escape. He knew the net was closing in on them, it was only a matter of time now before they were caught. But for now, he didn't want to think about that. He just relaxed and watched as Marcus slowly sliced Vizell's wife's pale flesh before lighting the blowtorch and holding the blue flame against her eyeball bring her screams to new highs.

## Chapter Ten

Inspector Avi eyeballed the sickly thin man across the table from him. The stranger rested his hands on the table. The handcuff's chain scraped on the surface whenever he nervously moved them.

“So you did all the murders did you Gantar?” he asked the twitching man.

“Yes! I confess. You need to lock me away!” the man whispered.

This was the 4<sup>th</sup> different one this week who had handed himself in and confessed to being the Jita Ripper. Inspector Avi flicked through his datapad as the man fidgeted.

“What can you tell me about your third victim?”

The thin man paused. He made a face as if he was really trying to remember.

“There were so many. I don't think you found my third one yet.” He said with a half smile, finding some confidence finally.

Inspector Avi finally found the picture he was looking for.

“So who was this?” he asked showing the man the photo.

Again he paused.

“Erm.... There were so many. I think that was Nourvakiken somewhere. May be Tama. I did dip into low-sec for a few days.”

“Right. So who was she?”

The man looked at the photo again. “I don't remember.” He calmly said. “But I AM the Jita Ripper. You need to lock me up before I strike again.”

Avi was far from convinced. Since the news sites started taking more of an interest in the case, more and more nutters had been piling into the stations around the sector. It was becoming a real waste of resources. A message flashed up on his datapad. He checked a database and stood up.

“You are free to go. Be glad I'm not charging you with wasting police time.” He growled. Avi left the interview room as an officer entered to remove the handcuffs and

to the sound of the man pleading that he was the Jita Ripper. Another victim had been found, murdered the night before. The logs showed Avi that the man claiming to be the perp arrived on a shuttle the previous afternoon. He was not their man.

-o0o-

Marcus heaved the man's body into a chair and secured their wrists and ankles to the arms and legs. He then took the woman and did the same. He positioned them so they were facing each other, knees almost touching. He looked at the man in disgust. What sort of man gets off on *that*. The irony was all but lost on a man who got his kicks tricking women into bed and then slowly slicing them up.

He'd met the pair in a bar. Actually he'd met her first. A bit older than he usually liked but this deep into low-sec pickings were slim. He'd thought she was a dead-cert the way she was flirting and then her husband showed up. To Marcus' surprise he wasn't mad. He appeared to be happy to find them together. He soon found out this was what they did, it was their 'thing'. Her husband liked to watch and so she'd meet men in the bar and get them interested. The husband had been sat in the corner watching. Once she thought the man she was flirting with was interested she'd signal him over and they'd explain the situation and see if the other man was interested in putting on a show.

Marcus wasn't. He had no interest in taking a woman whilst her husband watch and was about to turn them down. He'd then thought about it and the options open to him. He'd invited them back to the Drake and immediately drugged them both. Usually he didn't spike the drinks till after his warm up fun. This time he decided to go straight to the main event.

Now he had them both stripped and in position ready for a completely new game.

Marcus took a pair of Stim-Stiks and jammed them into both of their arms. They came around quickly. Marcus stood back as they did the usual. First they screamed, then they threatened, then finally begged. After the cycle was done he produced the knife. They both went very quiet.

"OK this is a game we all can really join in together with." Marcus said standing behind the wife.

"In a short while I'm going to start really playing with your wife. It won't be in the way you were hoping for but it is what I was hoping for. Generally it involves this knife and a blowtorch." he grinned.

Both captives started crying and pleading. He paused waiting for them to stop.

“Don’t worry.” He said addressing the husband. “You can stop it at any time by saying the safety-phrase. Once you say it, I will immediately stop working on your wife and we’ll get you both into an escape pod and off the ship.”

“What’s the safety-phase?” the man stammered.

“Please Marcus, can you cut off my tiny dick and balls” Marcus laughed.

The husband went white.

-o0o-

Inspector Avi viewed the 3D hologram. He’d seen enough of the Ripper’s victims that he was no longer bothering to travel to the remote low-sec stations to view the corpses. He had the autopsy recordings sent to him. This was found inside the region of Black Rise again. The recording of the medical officer played as the Inspector looked at the written report.

This corpse had been specifically left to be found. It was the wife of CONCORD Data Officer Vizell. Her name was Kelli and it appeared the Capsuleer had kidnapped her a while ago and had been forcing Vizell to make changes in the CONCORD database to stop him appearing on their radar. Obviously uncovering Vizell had led to the capsuleer no longer needing leverage so had throw the young woman at the Ripper. The report was similar to the others. The Ripper had taken her to bed first. Evidence showed of a stun-gun used on her and it was apparent she had been suspended by her wrists. Avi didn’t linger on the details of the wounds. A knife and blowtorch had been used in his usual protracted session. Eventually her heart gave out. Too much pain, too many Stim-Stiks to bring her round after she passed out.

Avi thumped the desk and swore loudly.

-o0o-

Marcus was taking a breather. This had been a lot more fun than he thought it would be. The wife had passed out again. The husband just sat there sobbing, his head hanging forward unable to look at his wife. Marcus retrieved a Stim-Stik from the box, downed his whisky and walked back over to where the husband and wife were tied to their chairs.

“So what’s this? The 5<sup>th</sup>? I need to tell you, usually by the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> is when I start usually losing people usually. Two more rounds should be OK but after then, its getting a bit dodgy. I’m no doctor but I guess the amount of drugs just give them an overdose? Best I had was a Matari woman. She took 14 but she was a lot younger and fitter.” Marcus said as he jabbed the stick into the woman’s upper arm.

Her head flew up and she let out a piercing scream as the drugs brought her round and amplified the pain coursing through her body caused by dozens and dozens of wounds Marcus had inflicted.

“So anything you want to say to me?” Marcus asked the husband as he waved the razor-sharp Minmatar dagger between them.

He saw the wife’s eyes were pleading. She’d broken. She couldn’t take any more.

“Please....” She said to a husband. She must have know it was a death sentence for him. But she couldn’t take any more.

“I... I... I’m sorry, I can’t. I..... ” he cried. Unable to say the words.

“OK. Let’s get going again!” Marcus announced cheerfully.

The Capsuleer watched via the cameras as Marcus took the knife to the wife’s shoulder causing her to scream in pain. He eyed the blowtorch sat on the table and wished Marcus would hurry up and swap implements. He liked the burning fire.

-oOo-

“A press conference?” Inspector Avi said astonished “Chief, the amount of timewasters and nutters we are getting now is already a problem.”

They were sat in the Chief Inspectors office. Inspector Avi’s boss sipped the whisky he’s poured for them both. Avi’s glass remained untouched.

“I know and before you say it....”

“I’m going to say it anyway.” Avi cut in “I wanted to go public and catch this guy after the initial kills but was denied.”

The Chief looked embarrassed. “I know but....”

“But now they are out of Jita and somewhere in low-sec the board don’t mind us talking about it.”

The Chief just stared at him. Avi knew he was right and that made him mad. A public appeal could have saved dozens of lives. Stopped this asshole from being able to move freely and putting every woman on guard. However concerns about the negative press and its impact on commerce had prevented him from doing so.

“Well its green-lighted now. Scheduled in the pressroom for oh nine hundred in three days time. You’d better start thinking what you are going to say. The board want you to do it.”

Avi grimaced. This meant they wanted him as the public face of the case. The only reason for that would be if the board thought they might never catch the perps. Given it was a capsuleer this was a possibility. They needed someone they could throw under the transit-train if it went wrong.

Avi felt like if he’d just been asked to stand by the platform edge.

-oOo-

The howl of agony drowned out the husband’s quiet sobs. Marcus walked behind him and pulled the husband’s head back by his hair. He was forced to look at his wife. One side of her face was black. A dark hole where her right eye had been before Marcus held the lit blowtorch against it. It had boiled and exploded in front of his eyes. Hot optical fluid had burned the husband’s chest.

“Number nine and she’d still going. I’m impressed for an older chick. I hadn’t expected her to last this long. Problem is we are running out of real estate. I could work on her back but you’d not see that. Mmmmmmm.”

“Please, please no more.” The husband begged.

“Sorry, that is not the safe phrase. You tell me the safe phrase and this all stops immediately.” Marcus sneered.

The husband looked into his wife’s one remaining eye. He saw no pleading, no look of hope. It was the thousand yard stare. She’d been through too much. Her mind was trying to blank all the horror out.

“I suppose we can carry on with the torch and revisit areas I’ve already been to with the knife.”

Marcus walked over and relit the blowtorch. He ran a finger down the middle of the wife’s chest. It had already been cut to ribbons by the sharp dagger. Hundreds of small cuts sliced over a period of hours. She jerked and cried out as his finger ran over the small wounds, reopening some as it went.

“Last chance. I really don’t expect her to last another round.” Marcus sneered as he brought the flame close to her flesh. She could clearly feel the heat as she struggled in her bonds.

Her husband shook his head. His expression one of horror.

“No? OK.”

The sizzle of burning flesh and wet blood was soon drowned out by the shrill scream of agony.

-o0o-

The data technician on the station was not happy. This was a serious breach of basic data security.

His boss has been down earlier and told him to open a secure port to the police missing persons database. He had protested saying the book required authorisation from at least two senior members of the force and a specific form filling in. His boss hadn’t appreciated his knowledge of security processes and bluntly told him if the port wasn’t ready in 20 minutes he’d be fired.

Low-sec stations didn’t have the greatest demand for computer professionals. Asteroid miners yes, IT pros no. He made a note in the log and got to work.

The details he had been given were sketchy. However he saw on one bit of correspondence the request came from a CEO of a large Corporation within the State. That put his mind at rest. When someone that powerful wants something done, it gets done. Fast.

He opened the port and sent the address to the agent of the CEO as requested. He thought for a moment why would the powerful CEO of a corp be interested in a missing persons database on a remote low-sec station. He then decided asking

questions like that were a sure fire way to get into trouble and loaded the Raven Pilot simulator game he was playing when nobody was around.

## Chapter Eleven

Inspector Avi looked directly into the hovering camera drone. He knew law enforcement officers from over three thousand separate space stations located all around the cluster were watching him. From his top bosses here in Jita who were paid staggering amounts of money, down to cheap rent-a-cops in null-sec outposts who made most their money from bribes, they all wanted to know what he was going to say.

The press conference was their last hope. The capsuleer was hiding and they had no leads. New Eden was a large cluster of stars. Over 5000 solar systems and tens of thousands of planets, moons and asteroid fields. They had no hope of finding them without help. Inspector Avi cleared his throat as he began.

"I hope you've all read the file that was sent to you, the specific details of why we are so keen to get these guys are in there. If you take the file home, I'd suggest keeping it away from loved ones, it does not make for pleasant reading. Our first and only priority is tracking these animals down....."

-o0o-

"So no husband then?" Marcus asked.

The lighting in the bar was low and Caldari jazz drifted from the speakers. It was clearly an expensive bar for the station which was not saying much. This was another back-water system deep in low-sec. It was also a dead-end system meaning there was only one stargate here. There was no passing trade. No caravans moving through to their destination. Traffic was light and trade was low. These stations were very quiet compared to the hustle and bustle of the high-sec stations or low-sec stations in one of the 'pipes'. The term 'pipe' referred to a line of connected system that created a route to popular destinations. Marcus had seen her enter. She looked late 30s, may be 40s. A lot older than his usual victims but she was the only female he'd seen in the last two hours.

"No, no husband. He was killed in an accident several years. A blast at a mining colony at one of the local asteroids. Just me and Jess now. The compensation wasn't enough for us to return to Empire space so we're a bit stuck here for now."

"I'm sorry to hear that. And Jess?" Marcus enquired.

"His daughter from his first marriage, my step-daughter. She'll be along in a bit. She likes to party just as much as me by the way."

Marcus smiled.

-o0o-

"They've gone dark. That Drake hasn't been reported as docked anywhere since the attack on the transport. We assume he's hiding at a deep safe and using shuttles to resupply. Therefore we're looking for a good system to hide away in. Likely a dead-end system, they'll not be wanting passing traffic snooping on them. They'll also need a station system, preferably two or more so they can alternate their supply runs not to arouse suspicion. The egger is probably deactivating his Neo-comm connection, manually severing the connection when at his safe. Although he'd need to activate it when warping to get within a decent range of the station for the shuttle. We'll probably find he shows up for an hour a day or every other day as he warps to a close celestial such as an asteroid field to launch the supply shuttle and waits for it to return"

-o0o-

"Please to meet you Jess" Marcus kissed the young woman on the cheek.

For the first time Marcus started to see the possibilities here. There was obvious competition between these two. When the woman first told him about Jess he had decided that this Jess would be the target. Now he'd met her he'd had time to think. The step-mother had seen him and spent the last hour with him. If Jess vanished there would be issues. They had been careful so far. None of their victims had raised any red flags. Missing persons may have been reported by on a station like this people tended to leave without much notice. If he took Jess and she didn't return then the step-mom would be big trouble.

"Pleasure to meet you.... Captain." Jess smiled "Sam, how did you meet this hunk then?"

"I've told you before to call me mom."

"Yeah, not going to happen. So.... Captain..... what do you do for fun around here?"

Marcus signalled the barman who brought over an oversized ice bucket with a magnum of expensive champagne. Both women smiled and continued to flirt outrageously.

-o0o-

"Now, onto the grisly part. We do not believe for one moment that this perp has stopped his activities. But only one body has been found in the last week. This supports our earlier theory that they are operating from the battlecruiser at a deep safe. We suspect that he's joining the shuttle supply runs and probably staying back on the station. He'll probably use the time between runs to identifying victims, and get them to join him on the shuttle back to the Drake on its next resupply flight. That means he'll have a couple of days to identify and engage the victim. After he's finished with them he probably just flushes the body out of an airlock. We have no idea how many he's killed since the last victims. If we find his safe, we'll more than likely find bodies I'm afraid."

-o0o-

"Wow, you're fighting for the Federation?" Sam whispered. Marcus waved his hands downwards to signal to keep her voice down.

"Yes, that's why my warship isn't docked here. It's hidden out there in space. My crew are picking up supplies and will shuttle over there in a short while." Marcus knew that two Gallente women this far into Caldari low-sec space would be impressed if he pretended to be fighting for the Federation.

"But the Federation occupies this system, why would you need to hide?" Jess asked.

"Caldari sympathisers watch these stations, we don't want to reveal our strength to them. Hey, would you two like to see my warship? We can catch the shuttle over and I can bring you back in the morning? It's a great place to party!" Marcus suggested. The women glared at each other obviously wanting the other to decline the invitation to give the other the opportunity to go with Marcus alone. Neither did and the atmosphere went rather icy.

"Look ladies, I'm going to get one for the space-lanes. I'll leave you to chat and then if either or both of you want to come and continue this on the ship great."

Marcus rose and walked to the bar ordering a Amarrian gin. He looked into the big mirror behind the bar and could see Sam and Jess arguing. He smiled as he sipped his drink. He watched as they both picked up their handbags and started over. Whatever decision they had come to had obviously been made.

“We’ll both come. Although Sam might need a bit of sleep when we get there. She’s getting too old for real partying.” Jess smiled.

“Ah the ignorance of youth. I can party longer than you, experience counts for a lot you know.” Sam smiled back.

Marcus nodded and put his arms around each of their waists as he guided them to the door.

-o0o-

"What we're looking for are missing persons. Attractive, single ladies, 18-30. They will have just vanished with no official logs of them leaving the station. They are likely to frequent the high-end bars on the upper station decks. Not necessary the Executive or Capsuleer bars, just the ones everyone has access to if they can get past the doorman and have the cash. However, we need to minimise false alarms. It's not unknown for pod jockeys to take ordinary ladies for a spin for a few weeks before getting bored and dumping them on a random station. We cannot be arresting every pod jockey who takes advantage of a woman, we'd need to be arresting 80% of them if that was a crime. We also need to tread sensitively. There is no point upsetting the capsuleer community, especially when we need their help.

-o0o-

Marcus sat back in his favourite chair in his dimly lit quarters sipping his drink. The two women dancing provocatively in front of him as the music played loudly. Each trying to better the other by discarding an extra piece of clothing or getting tantalisingly close to him as they danced in front of him.

"Competition..." thought Marcus "...it brings out the best in women!"

-o0o-

"The reason we need their help is simple. Is any pilot here confident of taking down a Drake class battlecruiser piloted by a capsuleer?"

Avi paused to see if there was any response. The comm channel remained quiet. Even the best pilots couldn't hope to compete with a capsuleer. With their brain and nervous system hooked up to the ship directly they had faster reactions, better control and more power. The ships weren't any different to non-capsuleer versions of the ships, it's just the eggheads could push their ships so much further. Shields, weapons and

armour were significantly higher when a capsuleer was in control. They were also faster and more manoeuvrable. The pirate factions who were the ones who mostly faced capsuleers recommended odds of 10 to 1 minimum before engaging.

"We've spoken to CONCORD and they refuse to get involved. May be that's unfair, they are not allowed to get involved. Their mandate only lightly covers low-sec and in an observation role only, they will not send ships out there. The Navies of the Empires are too busy trying to blow each other up and don't particularly care about one criminal. That leaves us with the capsuleers. The official bounty on the perp and his egger protector now stands at a total of 250 million ISK. More than enough for your average capsuleer to take a risk. Our job is to help the capsuleer community find the targets, they'll take care of the rest."

-o0o-

Marcus' quarters echoed with pitiful sobs. He'd been on his feet for the last hour and had sat down for a rest. He sipped the whiskey from a tall glass and thought what a good night it had been. He'd had them both, but one at a time, they weren't up for doing anything together which disappointed Marcus. He'd need to draw things out a bit longer in that case. He wasn't sure if that was to make it up to himself, or to punish them both for not playing together. That duo he'd got a few weeks ago where much better in the sack, they put on a proper show for him. However, he didn't mind, these two had been much more fun in the following hour.

Both hung by their wrists from the ceiling. He pointed the medical scanner at each of them and looked at the results. The daughters life-signs were still strong, the step-mothers were a bit low. Not surprising as he'd been concentrating on her. He decided he'd let her rest for the next hour and let her watch him go to town on her step-daughter.

-o0o-

"Make no mistake. These two are probably the most dangerous perps you'll ever encounter. This Marcus is one sick bastard, probably the sickest you'll ever meet and deserves the death penalty for what he has done. But, we are all officers of the law, and we need to put that to one side. He must stand trial and face justice, officially. His capsuleer, what shall we call him, 'his sponsor'? Well, we all already know what they are capable of. Taking him down is going to be the hard part. IF we can pod him then we've got him alive. His only CRU has a law enforcement medical technician handling the reanimation and also an armed guard."

-o0o-

Marcus looked into Sam's face. She was crying hard.

"I know.... I know" Marcus said gently as a father might comfort a child. "You've suffered, but don't worry. I'll let you rest now."

He moved over to Jess who started shaking in her restraints. He pulled out the knife and went to work. She started to scream in pain as the knife made slow, shallow cuts in her flesh.

Jess was screaming in agony, Sam was screaming for him to stop hurting her step-daughter. The noise between the two was deafening.

"More competition ladies?" thought Marcus with a sick smile. He paused his cutting and looked at Sam.

"Please. Don't." she sobbed at him.

Marcus left Jess whimpering and went over the Sam.

"You don't want me to hurt her?" he asked.

"No. Please, leave her alone."

"I have to work on someone. Does that mean you'd prefer me to work on you instead?" he said as he stroked the cold steel of the knife over her skin. He could see the terror on her face and the conflict in her eyes. Goose pimples sprung up over her skin as the knife slowly scraped across. He'd given her a choice but she didn't say anything. He thought if they were proper mother and daughter she'd have agreed in a second. However, would she make the same sacrifice for her step daughter?

He left Sam and went back over to Jess, picking up the blowtorch en route. He fired it up and the blue flare hissed into life.

"Sam. Look at me Sam." Marcus said.

The step-mother looked up with tears in her eyes.

"During our partying I found your step-daughter here has three very sensitive areas she likes playing with. Here, here and here" he said pressing a finger to the points on Jess's body. The young woman shuddered at his touch.

“In 20 seconds I’m going to burn these off. That will be her body ruined for life. So young, so long to live without never knowing the pleasures of the flesh again. That is unless you say to me ‘No Marcus, burn me’ and then I’ll do it to you instead, Sam.”

Sam sobbed as Jess looked terrified at her step-mother. Jess’s pleading eyes were met with ones of pure horror from Sam.

“Five seconds.” Marcus cheerfully announce.

“Please. Please don’t let him ruin me.” Jess pleaded. Sam just sobbed in shame that she wasn’t strong enough to take it instead. Her head dropped and she looked at the floor in shame.

“No? You are happy for me to proceed on your step-daughter then I take it?”

Jess started to beg her step mother. Pleading with her. Sam just quietly sobbed, her head still staring at the floor.

The room filled with Jess’s scream of agony and the smell of burning flesh.

-oOo-

"So any questions?" Inspector Avi asked.

"Is that all we really have to go on? How are we going to find them with such vague search parameters?" the representative from some distant null-sec system Avi had never even heard of asked.

"That's the best we have. I see we have 3,054 open comm channels. When you actually look at that in terms of stations in the cluster, we don't even have every station covered. Let us not kid ourselves, this is going to be a difficult search. However, every day those two are out there, is another day where someone is probably dying a horrific death."

"Anyone else?"

-oOo-

Marcus finished his drink. He prodded both women with the tip of the knife a few times, the wickedly sharp top half inch of the blade sinking into soft flesh with ease. There was no movement or sound from either woman. They just hung there, lifeless with their heads forward and their faces down.

He picked up the medical scanner. There were life-signs still, but they were so faint they were barely registering on the scanner. He checked his watch.

"Mmmmmm, 4 hours. A new record ladies!" he said aloud. However neither woman heard him.

-o0o-

"So in summary. We are looking for a dead-end, probably low-sec system with multiple stations. A Drake class battlecruiser flown by capsuleer Petyr Ervert will appear infrequently, probably at an asteroid belt. The stations in that system will have several missing persons cases opened recently, women matching our victim profile. OK people, let's find them."

Inspector Avi ended the transmission and sat back in his chair. All he needed was the system name. The capsuleers would do the rest.

-o0o-

As the transmission ended, the capsuleers vision returned to the camera drones orbiting the Drake class battlecruiser. Someone in one of the stations security offices had just watched that feed which he'd been able to intercepted it. Would that someone put two-and-two together and realise they were in their own system. Or would they just pay little attention and go about their daily business.

The capsuleer activated the ships fitting HUD and checked over the ships systems. A life of piracy and the odd confidence scam back in Jita had made him rich. He'd invested heavily in his ship. The Navy Issue shield hardener had especially cost him. But would it be enough. How many capsuleers could he stand against? Two? Three? How many could he take down before his battlecruiser was destroyed? Was there any way he could get out of this predicament?

He knew the answer. He knew he was doomed. Surely the security forces had a guard by his clone. He'd die in space and be reborn into custody.

The fitting window dropped and was replaced by an image of Marcus' quarters. Cleaning drones were removing the evidence from the last two victims. The capsuleer rewound the feed and watched the scene again where Marcus had started with the blowtorch. He knew these could be the last two he might watch. His body hung limp in the hydrostatic pod. If his body was capable of responding it would have as he

watched Marcus pull Jess' long hair back and burn the spot on her lower neck where he'd been kissing and driving her wild just hours before.

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Several light years away Director Ogushi turned off his holoprojector as Inspector Avi finished his briefing. However, the video feed was not the official one, it was from a hidden camera that had been placed in Inspector Avi's office. A man in a black suit stood emotionless at the foot of Director Ogushi's desk in his luxurious office.

"So there you go. That is the law enforcements agency's view on the situation. Can I assume you'll handle this?"

"Yes sir. Obviously there are no guarantees, the eggers are a strange lot. One minute they'll refuse to help someone in distress unless it was more than worth their while, the next they're risking their ship and clone for absolutely nothing."

"A billion ISK, you have a billion ISK to offer and you say that is not enough! It has to be, that is all I have. I cannot pay any more."

"No negotiation, understood. However, sir, it will depend on the egger. If he can be bought, a billion ISK should be more than enough, there would be no need to offer more even if you have it. However, if he is one of these lawful and righteous pilots, no amount of ISK will stop him handing the perp over to the proper authorities."

Director Ogushi slammed his fist into the table.

"That must not happen! I want that man, alive, on this station and with everyone thinking he was killed in some capsuleer battle. Now that is your job to make sure that happens, Mr Smith. There is no way I am going to let that man have a trial and a quick execution. He made my daughter suffer in agony for hours before he killed her, I intend to pay him back ten-fold!"

"Yes, sir!"

-o0o-

"Farak, can you check plasma compressor four. I'm getting some strange readings from it." The Chief Engineer shouted from the walkway above.

Farak nodded and grumbled to himself as he crossed the engineering bay to the plasma conduits. The Drake class battlecruiser had four main plasma conduits and

they all ran hot. Opening the access and checking the compressors was a very unpleasant job and the Chief always asked him to do it. He was sure he'd wronged that asshat in a previous life.

He keyed the security code into the access panel. The conduits were always locked down and secured. They were too dangerous to be left unsecured.

As soon as the hatch opened Farak was blasted in the face by foul-smelling hot air. He shone his torch in, the conduit appeared to be shaking just above the compressor unit. He sighed as he thought about the possibility he might need to put on a hot-suit and crawl in there to see why. That would be 20 minutes struggling into the protective suit, half an hour maximum in there and then another ten minutes struggling out whilst hot, sweaty and annoyed.. No, it was probably just slightly unseated he decided thinking that would be the most logical explanation. He reached in and pushed the base of the compressor with his torch hoping that might get it to sit correctly. He never saw the thin crack in the housing. He pushed it harder.

The Chief was reviewing a terminal high up on a catwalk above the Drake's main reactor when he heard a strange hiss that suddenly became a roar. He looked down and the colour drained from his face. A jet of bright blue plasma flame was roaring from the access panel. On the floor was what was left of Technician Falak. The plasma had vaporised his head and neck. The body twitched on the floor, a dark crescent burnt into his upper torso.

"Evacuate engineering!" the Chief screamed. "Emergency shutdown on conduit four now! Sound the general alarm!"

## Chapter Twelve

Inspector Avi was tired. His quarters on the station orbiting planet IV, moon IV in the Jita system felt cramped and claustrophobic. It had been a week since his broadcast went out alerting the cluster to the type of system the perps could be hiding in. So far nothing. That sick bastard was probably still out there, murdering innocents, but they had no leads. Avi stared out of the window. A hulking Obelisk class freighter was undocking from the station.

A quiet bleep indicated there was an incoming call. The inspector rubbed his tired eyes and sat down at his desk.

"Inspector, this is Senior Analyst Yan from deck 42."

"Yes Yan. Thank you for calling. What have you got?"

"Well sir, we've had a few pings from the target vessel. When it has warped, the capsuleer has had to activate his NeoCom for a few seconds. But nothing long enough to get an exact trace. We think he's in the Black Rise region but cannot be sure for certain. He's not passed through any regional gates lately. Hell, in fact we're not sure he's passed through any stargate at all in the last week."

"Keep looking. He's out there somewhere."

"Yes sir, we've still got a lot more data to wade through. We'll keep you informed."

-oOo-

The Agent's cloaked shuttle warped towards the stargate, the sole pilot was half concentrating on flying the small ship and half on a monitor showing a live feed from the covert camera hidden in Inspector Avi's office. He knew his time was limited. The Navy Police were slow at connecting the dots, but they had the general area finally. The region known as Black Rise. It was likely that soon the law enforcement authorities would start heading this way in force to support the capsuleer's hunt. He'd had a head start. His ship had been cloaked off the station at Jita 4-4 as the police made the discovery of the region. He'd warped off instantly heading to the hi-sec border system of Nourvakiken and then jumped into the unsafe low-sec space of Tama. From there it was a handful of jumps to the most likely target system. But this was pirate space. Snuffbox, Shadows of the Federation, Mentally Unstable Enterprises, Red Squad the list went on of capsuleer corporations that were known to

attack neutral ships. As well as those pirates there was a war raging here. The State Protectorate battled the Federation Defence Union for control of these systems as well as numerous capsuleer corporation aligned with one side or the other. Whilst he was aligned to neither side, he could be still seen as a potential spy and attacked. Not that the capsuleers in these parts need a reason to attack, other than that they could. However he had to go there. There were only a couple of systems that matched the profile and he'd already had access to the missing person's database. One system stood out. They had to be there.

A few jumps later and he was in the heart of pirate space and one jump from his destination. He looked at the pilots visible on the local network, the vast majority were classified as outlaws by CONCORD. The massive stargate loomed in front of him as he approached the final jump.

He needed to be there to convince the capsuleer who took down the Drake to hand the suspect over to him and not to the Caldari Navy Police Force. Capsuleers could never be predicted. He might end up dealing with a law abiding citizen of New Eden who was convinced that handing the suspect to the law for a proper trial was the right course of action. On the other hand the capsuleer may be more open to a bigger reward, even if it was the morally dubious option.

"Capsuleers." he thought "Surely they'll take the money and to hell with what happens to the suspect!"

He activated his database and scrolled through a list of fake identities he kept ready for situations like this. "Dunraven! I haven't used him since the Villore incident." he thought. He entered a passcode as he got within 2500 metres of the stargate.

The shuttle vanished into the artificial wormhole created by the stargate in a flash of brilliant light. But the Agent did not appear on the other side, a capsuleer named 'Dunraven' appeared on the local network. The shuttle decloaked and warped to the bottom station.

-o0o-

Marcus lay on his bunk smiling. The quarters on this Caldari station weren't bad. Not as good as on the Drake but they would suffice until her took the shuttle back. His date was arranged for tomorrow. They'd get something to eat late afternoon and then take the shuttle back to the Drake when it made its return supply run. He was hoping that this one was going to be the best one yet. It had the potential.

This was an unusually long stay on the station for him at 72 hours. A mechanical breakdown had occurred on the Drake. Nothing too serious but the part needed to be replaced. The workshop on the station didn't have the part in stock but one could be brought over from Jita. Therefore the Capsuleer had decided Marcus should stay on the station and come back when the shuttle returned to the station to collect the part.

The first night on the hunt was a bust. The stations in this backwater system had slim pickings in terms of attractive potential female victims. Marcus supposed he shouldn't be surprised. He was in a dead-end system in the middle of a warzone. The system was crawling with Federation Navy outposts and capsuleers from both sides engaged here. He longed for a return to Jita. That station had an inexhaustible supply of potential victims. Beautiful, slender women looking to make themselves rich by seducing a capsuleer in any way they could. But here, here he had limited options.

Then last night it had all turned around. He'd spotted her sat at the bar when he entered. Provocatively dressed and showing far too much flesh. Her golden hair tumbled down her slender back over the short lace dress. As he approached he could see her skin was smooth and flawless. A true beauty. Then, as he stood alongside her he noticed things that didn't quite fit. Her eyes were an amazing pale blue, but they showed innocence, not experience. The heavy make-up was over-done and tried to hide her true age. When she struck up a conversation with him she had said that she was 22, he was sure it was much less than that. 17 he guessed, may be even younger. A kid almost, looking for a way off this backwater station. She wanted a ticket to adventure. His capsuleer con had never worked so easily. She'd bought it right away. Excited at the prospect at joining him on his ship she'd literally thrown herself at him. He couldn't risk sleeping with her on the station even though she couldn't have made it any more clearer she wanted him. The way she'd looked at him as they parted in the corridor, it was a look of pure lust.

He could have brought her back to his rented quarters on station, but too much could have gone wrong. One of the fake implants could come loose or he might not be able to stop himself from taking it to the normal conclusion. No, he had told himself, "Be patient! This time tomorrow you'll be on your way down to the docking bay, ready to fly back to the Drake and to take her to bed to rid her of any innocence she has left, then a few hours later and she'll be hanging by her wrists as she begs for you to stop whilst you slice that firm, flawless flesh."

Marcus checked his watch. 24 hours left until he needed to prepare to leave. A few hours after that he'd be able to have some real fun! He smiled and closed his eyes

imagining how a trickle of bright red blood would look against that stark contrasting creamy skin.

-o0o-

Inspector Avi woke with a start. He'd drifted off to sleep in his office chair and now the comms channel was bleeping again. It was Yan again.

"Yes Yan, what do you have?"

"Well sir, two interesting developments. Further analysis of the limited NeoCom ping has shown a bit more of the trace-route. We think the Drake is an absolute maximum of eight jumps from us, probably closer to six."

"Sixty jumps? That will be deep into null-sec."

"No sir, not sixty, six!"

"Six jumps from Jita? No way, you're guys have got to be wrong."

"I thought that too sir. I mean, some of the most wanted criminals in the cluster hiding a few minutes stargate travel from Jita? But we did some digging. There is a system within that range that is inside low-sec, a dead-end one with a single stargate and multiple stations. All of the stations in that system have new missing persons cases open in the last couple of weeks involving attractive women aged 20-35. There is also one case of mother and step-daughter vanishing, and we know how he likes two at a time."

Inspector Avi's attention was completely focused on Analyst Yan now.

"Additionally, one of the stations ordered a GZ-4295b plasma compressor two days ago. That component is used exclusively in Drake class battlecruisers."

"The most common battlecruiser in the cluster though." Avi pointed out.

"Yes sir, BUT, having an entire replacement plasma compressor is virtually unheard of. They are easily repaired by nanite technology at a station's starship mechanics bay. That's why this station didn't have one in stock and has had to order one in. They are never replaced, just repaired by station nanite technology. The only reason to order a replacement unit...."

"Is if you cannot dock your Drake at a station and need to do the repairs in space!"  
Inspector Avi cut in.

"Exactly sir. And I also thought you'd be interested to know the part is being shipped to the system currently and it is flagged to be collected tomorrow. Sometime between 16:00 and 18:00 Eve Standard Time."

Avi deactivate the comm link and ran through the facts in his head. The trace of the NeoCom ping, the missing persons, the replacement compressor, the proximity to Jita. He looked the system up on his datapad.

"Oh shit!" he exclaimed to himself. That system was occupied by the Gallente Federation.

Inspector Avi leaned forward and activated the comm panel again.

"This is Inspector Avi. I need a Navy capsuleer-piloted Buzzard prepped and ready to fly in one hour."

He leaned back in his chair. This could all be over tomorrow he thought. If the part is being collected at that time, then the Drake must be at a close celestial at the same time. A planet or an asteroid belt maybe. But Inspector Avi also had a sense of foreboding about this. A Caldari Navy frigate going to a contested solar system in the warzone, occupied by the Gallente Federation with a serial killer inside a Drake class battlecruiser piloted by a capsuleer. This could be one epic shit-storm.

-o0o-

The capsuleer floated in his hydrostatic capsule deep inside the belly of the Drake. He'd been unable to leave the capsule for nearly two weeks and was worried what effect that would be having on his body. Capsuleers were told in training that providing the ship was resupplied when required, they could live almost indefinitely in their pods. However he didn't fancy living forever inside the confines of this capsule.

He checked the defensive systems. The shield hardeners were a mix of Caldari Navy issue and also pirate faction modified modules. As he activated them they made the shields of the Drake highly resistant to all forms of damage, but not immune. He powered up the missile launchers, they responded immediately. Like one of the shield hardeners, these were also military issue from the Caldari Navy. Expensive, effective, devastating, but would they be enough? He finally check the ammunition, Caldari Navy issue missiles again.

Satisfied the ship was ready for combat he brought up the images he received last night again. The girl in the pictures was blonde, beautiful and young. The Capsuleer opened the rest of encrypted document sent from the station last night. He read the attached message.

*Look what I've found. Something special.*

*She is so soft and tender. Milky, flawless skin, ripe for slicing.*

*Young and innocent, but with a fire burning inside her. Oh the way she kisses and places my hands on her body desperate for my touch.*

*I promise you the best show yet tomorrow.*

*I think she'll last a long time.*

The capsuleer smiled. He was looking forward to this one.

## Chapter Thirteen

“Sir, we have a problem.” the captain of the Navy covert ops ship said through the comms unit. Inspector Avi went over to the terminal of his cramped quarters. The covert ops craft was designed for recon work. The quarters were minimalist and not much more than bunk space. It was not a ship designed for comfort. The screen showed the stargate into the system of Notoras, their destinations. He could make out a ship near to the gate.

“What’s the problem?” he asked.

“That looks to be a Cockbag Thrasher on the gate. Gallente militia. They tend to work in pairs. More than likely another set up on the other side of the gate. They have top of the line scanners and sensor resolution plus special target acquisition software. They are designed for instantly locking targets and destroying them in one volley. If we jump I cannot guarantee they’ll not get us. If it was just me I’d try it, but....”

The Navy capsuleer’s voice trailed off allowing the Inspector to fill in the rest. He knew what the pod jockey was trying to say. In his capsule the Captain of the ship would survive the destruction of their vessel. However Avi wouldn’t. Even if he strapped himself into an escape pod ready, the speed at which these ships could fire would mean he’d never have time to launch if they got a lock. There would be less than a second between the target lock and the volley of artillery shells vaporising the ship.

“What is your suggestion Captain?”

“Wait here cloaked off the gate sir. I’m monitoring CONCORD public kill records. If the target is destroyed I can give you the name of the capsuleer immediately. Its just they won’t speak to you sir. You are not one of them. Best we can do is I’ll send the capsuleer an Eve-Mail and hope he replies. We could also do a looped audio recording for broadcast. A personalised message to the capsuleer sir.”

“Understood” Avi said.

-o0o-

The Drake was lingering in the asteroid belt too long for Petyr's liking. The plasma compressor was taking too long to fit. He now regretted not getting safe and deactivating the NeoCom. It was a mistake.

He turned his attention back to the internal cameras. Marcus was walking with the girl down the corridor towards the executive quarters. Girl was the right word. The Capsuleer could see she was nowhere near the 22 she claimed to be. Petyr's guess at 17 was about right. This would be the best so far. He watched as they entered the quarters. As soon as the door closed he watched the girl jump on the killer, devouring him with the kiss and wrapping her legs around his waist as they tumbled to the bed.

The alarm broke his concentration. He hadn't been paying attention. Another capsuleer was locking him. He activated the warp drive to try and escape hoping the plasma compressor was ready. The other pilot aggressing him, an Amarrian capsuleer called Mandolis in a Hawk class Assault Ship, was already on him. The lock cycle completed before the Drake could get into warp. A separate alarm sounded that the Hawk was projecting a graviton beam at the battlecruiser. The Drake's warp drive went offline in an instant. They couldn't escape. The fight was on.

-oOo-

Marcus slowly started to undo the buttons on the front of her shirt. She was sat in his lap, grinding into him hard. It felt like her tongue was halfway down his throat. She was very energetic. Marcus couldn't wait to get his hands on her properly. A blue glow in the corner of his quarters caught his eye. The girl also noticed and stopped the kiss, turning her head. She gave a small shriek and jumped off Marcus. The hologram of the Capsuleer was there.

"What the frack!" Marcus exclaimed, furious at the interruption.

"There is no time. You have minutes remaining. Do her now, it has to be quick!" the capsuleer growled urgently.

"What? What do you mean minutes remaining?" Marcus asked, panic creeping into his voice.

"An Assault Frigate has knocked out our warp drive. My weapons are too big to use effectively against such a small frigate. He's unlikely to be able to take us down but he's probably already called for backup. Force yourself on the slut and slice her as you do it!"

The girl screamed.

“Can’t we escape?” Marcus was starting to panic.

“Look, it’s the end of the road. Do this bitch now! I want to watch.”

Marcus paused and then simply ran out of the quarters and vanished down the corridor.

The capsuleer looked at the sobbing girl. He reached out to try and touch her and she retreated back against the wall. His holographic hand passed through her. He shouted as she too ran from the quarters.

The hologram of Marcus tilted its head back and screamed in frustration.

-o0o-

His attention back on the situation outside Petyr looked for an escape plan. Everything appeared useless. The other capsuleer’s ship was just too small. Hawks were sometimes termed ‘heavy tackle’. A small, fast but tough ship whose job it was to get in close to the target, get the warpdrive scrambler on them and stay alive until backup arrived. This meant a lot of their power went on their defences and not as much was available to their weapon systems. Petyr was worried when this back-up might arrive.

He had launched a flight of drones. Autonomous combat bots that were more suited to attacking smaller vessels. The Capsuleer saw that there were only two left of the five. The Hawk was using its weapons against the drones whilst still keeping the warpdrive scrambler on the Drake. The Hawk’s rockets weren’t very effective against the Drake but they were devastating against the drones. Being unable to resupply meant that the Drake was now out nearly of drones. Numerous encounters with the Guristas pirates who inhabited this system had been slowly depleting his reserves.

A flash of light announced another ship dropping out of warp speed to sub-light in the asteroid belt. The scanners showed he was in major trouble. A Hurricane class battlecruiser piloted by another Emyrean had arrived. Was this the Hawk’s backup?

At range he’d be confident of beating the Matari made ship. He could rain missiles down from 70km away whilst using the microwarp drive to maintain range. Up close like this he had no chance. The Hurricanes short-range autocannons would be devastating against him. Petyr assume the pilot was already loading Republic Fleet

EMP rounds. The electromagnetic warhead on those shells would exploit the weak resistance his shields had against EM damage. He didn't stand a chance.

There was a flash of orange light and the Hawk exploded in flames. The Hurricane's autocannons much more suited to attacking the small craft than the Drake's heavy missiles made short work of the assault frigate. Petyr had a glimmer of hope. Was this stranger looking to make a deal? He had money, a ransom would be payable but they'd survive the encounter.

That hope was dashed seconds later as the Hurricane opened fire on him. Petyr realised the Hurricane wasn't here to help, he wanted to get rid of the competition. He'd destroyed the Hawk pilot as he wanted the reward and salvage all for his own. This Emyrean didn't want to share.

Petyr looked at the overview scanner. A capsuleer named Kirith Darkblade was the Hurricane pilot. His service record showed he was an experienced combat pilot and preyed on other Capsuleers without mercy. He was unlikely to make a deal.

The two huge combat ships traded blows. The EMP shells from the autocannons were tearing holes in the Drake's impressive shields. The Drake's missiles however were not having the same effect on the Hurricane. The missiles were designed for long range combat and had smaller warheads with enlarged fuel bays compared to heavy assault missiles which were designed for close-range work like this. Alarms started to sound as the shields dropped to dangerously low levels. If only he'd fitted heavy assault missiles he thought as the shells started to penetrate through holes forming in the shields. Wet-wired into the ship his brain could 'feel' the incoming fire smashing into the thin armour plates. The Drake's primary defence was its shields. Under that is was vulnerable.

Petyr physically felt the Drake start to fall apart. Its weak armour failing as the holes in the shields started to expand allowing more damaging rounds through. Structural damage alarms were going off throughout the ship. This was the end he knew. He noted escape pods launching. His crew was abandoning the ship. Its doom was rapidly approaching.

When it came, the explosion was massive. The Drake's reactor going critical and blowing the battlecruiser clear in half. Petyr's capsule was ejected as the ships systems detect the imminent destruction. Several smaller explosions rocked the spinning two halves of the Drake. Lights flickered on and off as the power supply started to deplete and the capacitor circuits failed. The tactical alarms in his pod went off immediately.

He was too disoriented to warp his pod away immediately. The warp disrupter enveloped the pod.

“Good fight” the other capsuleer said over the local channel. The traditional and somewhat polite end to an Empyrean fight.

“See you in hell!” Petyr snarled as the heavy projectile rounds impact against the hull of his pod, ripping through the armour and splitting it open. Petyr’s flesh was exposed to the vacuum of space and flash frozen seconds later. He never felt it though. The capsule’s system had already injected a lethal dose of drugs into him as it detected the 20 millibar drop in pressure within the pod. The lethal injection served two purposes. Firstly it spared the body the unpleasant death of explosive decompression in a vacuum. Secondly it froze the capsuleer’s brain-state. This allowed the neural scanner to scan his brain and transmitted that data to his waiting medical clone milliseconds after detecting the initial breach of the pod.

Tens of light-years away Petyr opened his eyes. The light hurt them. This was because it was the first time he’d used them. This was a brand new body that had been grown from his DNA and hyper-aged to be ready for him in such a case. The frosted glass of the clone revival unit hissed open. He knew he needed to be quick. As the door opened fully he was confronted by two Caldari Navy troopers pointing carbines at him. Escape was now impossible.

-o0o-

Kirith manoeuvred the Hurricane battlecruiser through the debris field that had been the Drake only minutes before. Bits of wreckage and the frozen corpses of dead crew members who didn’t make it to the escape pods in time bounced off the hull as it moved through. The capsuleer didn’t care. His salvage scanners swept the field identifying some useful modules not destroyed in the explosions. He was also running additional scans on the dozens of escape pods floating about. He had a specific DNA sequence provided by the Caldari Navy Police he was looking for.

A message came through as a system-wide broadcast. It was a repeating audio loop. The capsuleer played it.

*“This is Inspector Avi of the Caldari Navy Police. This is a message to Kirith Darkblade. Congratulations on taking down the most wanted men in the cluster. I am authorised by the State to pay you a reward of 250 million ISK. A further equal amount is payable if you are able to capture....”*

The audio broke up suddenly. With just a thought the capsuleer booster power to the receiver array but it was no good. Something was jamming the signal. A voice was heard through the crackle. Slowly the signal cleared.

*“Dear sir. Well done on ending the reign of terror these two individuals have brought to Caldari space and please forgive my very rude interruption. I know the Caldari Navy Police are keen to capture the man known as the Jita Ripper and send him to stand trial. You may have already identified his escape pod if he survived. I work for an interested party who does not believe the State can properly administer appropriate justice. The laws simply do not allow for the punishment this piece of sub-human scum deserves. The choice is yours. You can obviously scoop the escape pod and hand the man over to stand trial followed by a firing squad. A quick death for a man who has caused so many slow and painful ones. You can take the 250m ISK from the State and do what some might call the right thing. Or, you can simply warp away and send the co-ordinates of the correct escape pod. Once we have the animal on-board we will transmit one billion ISK to your account. All we ask is that you tell the police he didn’t make it to the escape pod and must have died when the Drake’s reactor went up. I promise on behalf of my Client that true justice will be served if you chose the latter option. The choice is yours.”*

The interference crackled again.

*“.... and we hope to be in system within the hour. I hope to meet you in person and shake the hand of a true hero. Inspector Avi of the Caldari Navy Police out! Message repeats. This is Inspector Avi of the Caldari Navy Police. This is a message to....”*

Kirith shut off the feed and checked the logs. Everything worth salvaging had been brought on-board.

He glanced at the logs of the escape pod scans. One was highlighted. He sent the co-ordinates as a message burst and warped away from the asteroid belt.

The Hurricane vanished in a flash of light as it broke the light-speed barrier. A second later a Falcon Covert Operations Recon Cruiser decloaked and started heading towards a specific spot.

## **-Epilogue-**

Inspector Avi walked into the Chief Inspectors office in Jita 4-4 station. He was staring out of the window at the station undock. At 09:30 Eve time, it was quiet, for Jita.

"My god Avi, you look terrible, please sit." The Chief Inspector produced a bottle of Matari Whiskey from his desk draw and poured two large glasses, passing one to Inspector Avi.

"To a successful ending?" the Chief Inspector said raising his glass.

Avi just stared at the brown liquid as he held the glass in two hands in his lap.

"I thought you'd be over the moon Avi. You did it! The killings are over now!"

"I should be happy, I know. But, all those people. Every victim after the first was a failure by us. You've read the reports I assume, what we found at the safe spot?"

"Yes" the Chief Inspector became solemn. "A dozen bodies drifting in space. But look at it this way. At least we recovered the battlecruisers flight recorder from the wreckage and were able to find the safe spot and discover the bodies. It gives the victims' families closure."

"I guess. But to be honest if I were the families, I might like to be still thinking they got captured by the Blood Raiders. It would have been a more pleasant death!"

Both men drank in silence contemplating that. The Blood Raiders were a pirate cult of Amarrian origin. They preyed on shipping, capturing the crew and draining their blood for their experiements.

"How's the young woman doing?" ask the Chief Inspector breaking the silence.

"She's fine. Still a bit shaken up after the event. It is not everyday someone survives almost going to bed with a serial killer and then escapes the destruction of a battlecruiser in the space of sixty minutes. She still cannot remember exactly what happened. She said the capsuleer appeared as a hologram telling the perp to rape and kill her quickly as they were under attack. The coward just ran for an escape pod. She then fled the quarters, but didn't see where he went, she just ran until she saw an escape pod hatch in the corridor and went for it. I shudder to think what would have

happened if those eggers hadn't turned up when they did. She doesn't know how lucky she is."

The Chief Inspector nodded.

"The Sisters of Eve turned up an hour later with a S&R fleet after detecting the various escape pod beacons. They knew she wasn't crew or family when she was brought onto one of their ships so they called us right away. We have her evidence but I don't think we'll need it. We've got enough on that bastard already. No need to put her in the witness box and put her through that."

"Are you going to the sentencing hearing tomorrow?"

"I guess so. Although it is a formality. That egger will fry for his crimes, no doubt about that. As a unanimous guilty verdict from the panel was delivered, the lead judge has no choice but to hand down the severest punishment possible. An immortal, executed."

"What about the husband that survived?"

Avi shook his head.

"He won't be giving evidence at the sentencing hearing. In fact he's not said a single word since the Sisters found him floating in that escape pod. You read the report right? He'd been floating for two days hugging his wife's corpse. They had to sedate him to separate the two. The Navy quack says it's a form of locked-in syndrome caused by massive stress. We might never know but the experts say most likely he was forced to watch the Ripper work on his wife. Doctors had barred us from putting him down as a witness but that's not a problem. He would have simply sat in the box and stare ahead. He might be like that for the rest of his life. However we have submitted he and his wife were found in a pod registered to the Drake. Seriously sir there is so much evidence we didn't need either of these survivors so no point putting them through the stress of a hearing and giving evidence."

"So, it is case closed then?"

"I suppose so. It's just that with the actual perp never being recovered from any of the rescue pods and his corpse never being found. He could be still alive.... technically, even though the official line is he died in the Drake when it was destroyed. Vaporised by one of the many explosions as the ship broke apart."

"You say it like you don't believe it. Do you think he survived?" asked the chief.

Avi considered the Chief Inspectors words. He knew what he meant. The bounty that Director Ogushi placed on the man's head for live capture was a lot more than the reward offered by the combined law enforcement agencies. Kirith Darkblade, the capsuleer who destroyed the Drake, might have scooped his escape pod up and sold him to the Director. They'd probably never know the full truth, although Avi had thought about what would have happened to the perp in the hands of the powerful father of one of his victims.

"May be." was the Inspectors reply finally.

"OK, I'll ask it in a different way. Did anyone visit the good Director after the event?"

"Yes, I did myself. I had to ask the question." replied Avi "He denied holding the perp or having anything to do with him. He said he believed he died in the destruction of the Drake and that was it as far as he was concerned. Good riddance and hoped he burnt in hell for his crimes etcetera, etcetera. He was rather... passionate."

"Do you believe him?" asked the Chief Inspector.

Avi paused and thought again.

"No, no I don't. I believe he had Marcus holed up somewhere after that egger, Kirith Darkblade, took down the Drake. That pod jockey probably scooped him up and cashed him in. I also believe that the perp died a very slow and very painful death at the hands of Director Ogushi."

"So what are you going to do about that?"

"Absolutely nothing. I have no evidence, no proof. All I have is a suspicion and a gut feeling. The Director has a huge amount of resources at his disposal not to mention political connections. Finding evidence now will be very difficult if not impossible. Plus I have a lot of work on, after all the paperwork in the last month on this case I'm low on stationary and need to sort out a trip to the store room to get some new folders! That is more important as far as I'm concerned."

The Chief Inspector laughed hard and raised his glass.

"To justice?"

The Inspector paused, smiled and raised his glass too.

"To real justice!"

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"Vital signs stable, brain activity normal, memories intact. The clone transfer was a success. He's OK."

The two armed guards nodded to the medical technician and opened the clone revival unit. A piercing scream resonated through the room as the soundproof door was opened. It stopped suddenly as the door was fully opened. Marcus looked around naked, confused and disorientated. He was just screaming. Why was he screaming, he felt OK? He did had vivid memories that he was in terrible agony but looked down and his body was fine. He looked around and didn't know where he was, however the room was familiar.

"What? What is happening to me? Where am I?" he asked as the men approached. The clone revival process fogged his brain.

The guards man-handled him into a wheelchair in silence and secured his ankles and wrists with straps. They pushed him through a door into a dimly lit room as Marcus continued to ask what was happening.

Marcus knew this room somehow, his brain was still struggling. He didn't understand what had happened to him. He looked around the room and saw what was what was left of a man strapped onto a table. Blood, stripped skin and flesh dripped over the side and there was the stench of death in the air. Another man dressed as a surgeon was moving the body, as he did its head flopped over to face Marcus. The face looked familiar. It was horrifically wounded but he was certain he knew that man. Marcus' heart suddenly missed a beat. He was looking at himself, or what was left of him. Suddenly his mind cleared. He screamed, recalling the terrible pain he had been in. He looked up in desperation and saw a well-dressed man staring down at him from an observation room high above. The body was removed from the table and dumped in a corner with several others. A huge pile of ruined flesh stacked unceremoniously on more ruined flesh. Marcus was wheeled over and lifted from the wheelchair. He was secured to the table. He recalled he'd been here before many times, there was pain, so much pain. Needles were pushed into his arm and his senses came alive as a cocktail of drugs entered his system. That triggered a memory in the back of his mind. The surgeon told him something about them the first time.

“Don’t worry, the drugs are not harmful. They are simply to prevent you from passing out and to make your nerves more sensitive to the pain. Stim-Stiks, as you well know, are good for reviving people but the adrenalin in them can cause overdose and premature death. These pharm-grade drips do the same job but without killing your subject before you are really finished with them.”

He screamed as the man in the surgical gown approached with a scalpel in his hand.

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Up in the observation room the back door opened. A suited man walked in and cleared his throat.

"Sir, it's time for the board meeting. If you're not there, people will start asking questions."

"Thank you Mart. Did you get the information I asked for?"

"Yes sir. The CRU team says that the 8th clone was fine, physically, but they are starting to see some mental degradation. The mind just cannot handle this for such prolonged periods. He's died a slow, horrific and painful death so many times in such a short space of time, he's losing it mentally. They predict by the 12th clone he'll be a jibbering wreck and it will be pointless continuing. The body will scream in response to pain but the mind will not truly register it. It will be like working on a blank clone. To be honest sir, given the money that you've spent on the reward, fitting the murderer with the implant and the cost of the clones, this is a good thing. Your personal finances aren't infinite."

The Director stared down at the scene unfolding before him as he had done the previous seven times. Marcus was screaming in agony as the specialist went to work on him.

"So 11 times is all we can do. Is that penance enough? After what he did to my daughter?"

"I'm sorry sir, surely it will never be enough. But the board is waiting for you. If you miss another meeting...."

"Fine. Keep things going here. But he is to be kept mentally stable, stop just before any breakdown. I am to be the one who presses the button on the airlock. I want to stare him in the face through the viewport as I flush that piece of shit, and any

remaining clones, into the cold, hard vacuum of space. I want him to understand what's about to happen to him as that airlock slowly depressurises. I want to hear him beg, plead and finally scream for his life, just as he made my daughter do."

"Yes sir, understood. You will have the final justice."

"Justice?" Director Ogushi spat "Justice? There is no such thing as justice here, just pure, harsh and cold retribution!"

***The End.***

## **Extra – Freedom to Die**

*This was an extra I wrote following the conclusion of the Jita Ripper. The first 'proper' victim of the ripper was a freed slave. The Insorium still in her system was why she woke up from the Rippers drugs early. How did she get from Amarrian Slave to Jita 4-4? I wrote a short based on the first chapter from her point of view.*

### **Freedom to Die**

So here I am. At the end. I cannot say that I'm not sad. To die before your 30th birthday is no achievement. However, this is it, this is how my life ends.

I was born into slavery. My parents were both Matari slaves on an Amarrian plantation world. I grew up as a slave, surrounded by slaves. We didn't mind, we didn't complain, we didn't know any different. The soothing Vitoc ensured our compliance and it made us docile and happy.

Whilst most children of my age played with toys, I played with tools. Uncle Wrench, that wasn't his real name as nobody knew his real name, taught me everything I know in mechanics. He was a kindly old Minmatar man who serviced the various generators and machinery at the plantation. Looking back, maybe he has been my only ever true friend. On a daily basis I'd help him out as he tinkered with the equipment. At the age of 12 I could strip down and clean a TG4 Plasma Generator. By 14 I was helping service the drop ships that took the harvest away. At 16 we usually have to join our parents in the fields. However our masters had long known about my skills. I suppose it was amusing for them. The attractive female Minmatar mechanic. They may have laughed, but it was me they always came to when their vehicles developed a fault or some mechanical problem had occurred at the palace. So rather than working in the fields, I helped Uncle Wrench keep the plantations machinery and vehicles running.

It was a simple life. We didn't know any better. Slaves to the Vitoc, we had no choice. No, that's not correct. We didn't know we had a choice.

Then one day, they came. Our brothers and sisters, to free us.

I was trying to fix a ground-hauler that had broken down in the field with a full load. It needed to be back at the barn with its harvest before sun-down. It was a hot day, I remember that, I had my overalls unfastened and tied around my waist, my white vest

top was covered in oil and sweat. Funny how certain things like that stick in your mind. I was laying under the hauler working on the engine when I heard a loud roar. At first I thought it was the hauler starting up, but then it passed. I heard a series of thumps as if something had fallen to the ground from a great height. Then the gas appeared. People panicked. We didn't know what was going on. Suddenly there were more roars of more powerful engines through the haze. Dozens of dropships descended on us. We were confused, disorientated. So use to blindly obeying orders we just followed them when they told us to come with them.

Next day when the effects of the Insorum wore off we were led into huge rooms by the hundreds. We were travelling in dreadnoughts, huge starships designed to carry hundreds of soldiers. The briefing rooms were as big as the cathedral back home. The situation was explained to us. Our history, the Amarr, the Vitoc, the Insorum, the future.

It was three days before it was my turn to be processed. By that time we had returned to a space station in the Minmatar home worlds. Vast rooms with tables were laid out in empty hangers. Each table had an officer with datapad with a chair opposite them. In rows of hundreds, our details were entered into the system. Our names, family, age, bloodline and abilities. Apparently massive resources had been donated from somewhere called the Gallente Federation. I left the room with a bag of ill-fitting clothes, toiletries and a few hundred local credits in cash and instructions on where I could find work given my skills.

The starship docking bay was huge. Remember, I was just a country girl, a week before, I'd never seen any man-made structure larger than the palace that loomed over the plantation. You could fit the palace into this docking bay 10 times over and still have space to spare. I joined the back of the queue as instructed. It was almost all men, I had no idea where I was going. I just slowly shuffled forward with the rest.

At the end of the queue a man took my details and looked me up and down. I was getting used to that. There were not many women in these lines and those that were could hardly be described as attractive. I looked, and felt, out of place.

"Right, you've got a position of Engineering Technician onboard the Hoarder class Industrial starship 'Freedom'. Docking bay 3-4-1." he had said.

And that was it, having hardly spoken a word I had a job and somewhere to live. I followed the signs to docking bay 341. The next few hours were a blur. Finding the ship. Being greeted by the XO, being shown my bunk and introduced to the Chief

Engineer. Apparently they had taken on 14 ex-slaves at this station. Mostly people skilled at engineering. None of us had any formal qualifications. It didn't matter we were told. We were all brothers and sisters on that ship. We were Minmatar.

Night after night I lay sleepless in my bunk staring at the ceiling. The work was interesting, the people nice enough. But part of me yearned to be back on the plantation. I knew that that life was a lie. The mutating vitoxin and soothing Vitoc putting a rose-tinted glow on the fact we were nothing more than livestock to the Amarrians. But that didn't matter. I wanted to feel grass under my feet and breath clean fresh air again.

I had spent nearly two years on that ship when one day there was a sudden buzz about the crew. Jita! The centre of the cluster, THE cosmopolitan station, we were finally going there. The Captain said he had won an important courier job and he was going to arrive a couple of days earlier and give us all 48 hours shore-leave on the busiest station in the cluster as a reward for all our hard work.

I had been saving up my meager wages since I first joined the Freedom. Unless you wanted to gamble your wages away, which most of the crew did, there was very little to spend your wages on that ship. Shore leave was generally short and all of your basics supplies were covered on the ship. So I had saved. I knew what I wanted to do in Jita.

Of a night on board the ship we'd watch Gallente holo-vids on an old TX-24 projector. One of the films, "82 Hours in Dodixie", had always been my favorite. In one scene the female lead sits at a bar in a revealing dress with every man in the bar staring at her, lusting after her, desiring her, wanting her. That is what I wanted. Class, beauty and desirability. A lifetime away from the existence I had on the 'Freedom' as a mechanic.

I was one of the first off the ship when we docked. I rented some quarters for the duration of the shore leave. The first night was bliss. A proper shower, a proper meal and a proper bed. The next day I went shopping. Three years of wages had given me a nice purse. I bought new clothes and shoes, even some fancy underwear. I bought makeup and hair and beauty products. All those products I'd seen on the holo-vid adverts before the movies, all those things that were pointless for an engineering technician on a Minmatar industrial vessel.

That night I dressed up and went to one of the upper deck bars and perched myself on a bar stool. I could feel their eyes on me, the men in the bar. I had done it, I was her in the movie

A few men had approached during the night, bought me drinks, told me jokes, tried their best to win my favour. Towards the end of the night a smartly dressed man approached and offered me a drink. It was getting late, but I accepted. Tomlin was his name, he managed a number of ship hangers on station. Not the capsuleer ones though, just the normal starships like the one I crewed upon. When I told him what I did he laughed and said he didn't believe me. When he realised I was telling the truth he was shocked. He said that was no life for a beautiful woman. He offered me a job. A desk job, reviewing the maintenance reports for the various hangers and ensuring the maintenance teams were doing what they were supposed to. The wage was much, much better, and best of all I'd be living on a station with my own quarters. The price I would have to pay for this job offer was very clear, even if it was unspoken. I considered it a fair trade. That night I stayed at his quarters, and in the morning he gave me a shower, breakfast and an employment contract. After spending a quarter of a century giving my mind, body and soul to the Amarrian's for free, giving my body to a Caldari man for one night in return for a way off that rust-bucket industrial was easy.

Over the next year I worked hard, climbing the corporate ladder. I'd like to say I won promotions based on my ability, but to be fair I used my looks and my body to my advantage. Yes, I slept with various managers. It didn't matter to me. I did what I needed to do to succeed. First was Tomlin's boss. He was easy. A sleazy Gallente man who made it clear he desired me on the first day. Next was the head of HR. He was a bit more difficult being a family man. But in the end I had both him and my desired transfer to the finance team. Unfortunately on my first day with them, my next target, the head of finance, was transferred and replaced by a woman. She was also Minmatar and had a reputation as a hard-nosed-ball-buster. I thought I was in trouble, my elevated position in the company at that time was certainly not based on my ability. However, I fell lucky in the end. Within a week I was in her bed. She liked it rough, she liked to be in control. After a few weeks of that, I was bruised, sore, but most importantly, promoted again.

Eventually I was made the Executive PA at the company and was sleeping with the owner. Well 'sleeping' is the wrong word, he could never spend the night as he had to get back to his wife and family. I didn't care. I had a great job, classy quarters, money and a great life. I had even started to buy some Minmatar antiques to furnish my living

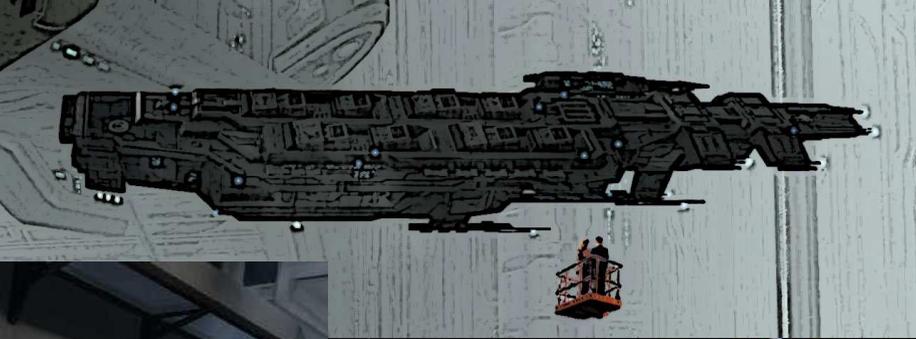
space. I thought filling my quarters with Matari tribal art and ancient weapons might help me connect with my ancestry, but it didn't.

Whilst my life was more than comfortable I wanted more. I knew I could seduce any man that I wanted. But in this universe it's not men that hold the power and the wealth, it's the Capsuleers.

So I started hanging around the top end bars. Looking for a capsuleer. My ticket to the big time. Hooking one of them would make my current lifestyle seem more like my old life back on the plantation. I didn't care what he looked like, I wasn't looking for a 'good sense of humour' or 'great with kids'. I just wanted any capsuleer with his money and power. Eventually I found one, and I thought I'd hit the jackpot. But I was played, he wasn't a real capsuleer. He was a fake, a conman, a thief and very soon to be, a murderer.

So here I am. After rising up from nothing and making something of my life, I am now fallen. I am naked, laying on the cold floor, with a knife sticking out of my stomach. My 'winning ticket' is busy looting my room of anything valuable, ignoring my pitiful pleas for help as I slowly bleed out.

I know that I'm dying, it won't be long now, but at least for one year, I got to live.



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