

THE
VAARALEN
STRAIN



a SAND CIDER AND SPACESHIPS PRESS novella

This is my third novella in the Eve Online Universe. We're back to the Katsu Maru and good old action-adventure after the "experimental" last one!

Acknowledgements

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<http://www.eveonline.com/>

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Tony-Gonzales/e/B0034ND6OM/>

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Clive-Cussler/e/B000APJ4L6/>

Cover art by Rixx Javix of Eveoganda.

<http://eveoganda.blogspot.co.uk/>

Prologue

Six months ago...

Gazak slowly started to come round. His senses were dull and his head felt heavy. He slowly opened his eyes and looked around, he was somewhere unfamiliar. It appeared to be an old abandoned factory. The windows were mostly broken and the floor was littered with debris, old machinery, and broken glass. He sniffed the air, he was somewhere on the very lower decks of the space-station. After years of living in space, Garak could tell where he was on a ship or station simply by the smell and taste of the air. He'd only ever been up to the upper decks a few times but he remembered the air: clean, crisp, fragrant. The lower down in the station you were, the worse the air was. A combination of cheaper atmosphere processors, basic scrubbers and limited maintenance by poorly qualified and underpaid staff who didn't care about their jobs.

He took in more of his surroundings. He was sat on a filthy mattress and next to him was an unconscious, emaciated female. Gazak shook his head to try and clear the fog and was rewarded with a splitting pain. He stayed still for a few seconds waiting for the pain to pass. "Mindflood", that's what he must have been doing last night he thought. Only that narcotic gave him headaches like this the morning after. But who was the girl? What happened last night? He looked around the immediate vicinity and saw the small bottle laying on top of a filthy rag, "Yup" he thought, "Mindflood." He then saw a strange double syringe applicator. He recalled something from the night before. Some sort of new designer drug, the Matari girl had wanted that. It started to come back to him. He'd gotten paid with a good bonus. The factory order had shipped before schedule and they'd got an extra payment. He'd gone straight down to one of the illegal bars on deck 6. He'd partied hard and met the girl hanging about outside. The bouncers wouldn't let her in, it was clear she didn't have any money. She had offered herself to him if he hit her up. He had been wasted and wasn't thinking

straight. He'd agreed and bought himself the Mindflood and that other stuff for her from his dealer. They'd found this abandoned factory and..... Gazak held his head in shame. What was he becoming? He struggled to his feet, glass broke under his boots. This was all *'her'* fault!

He staggered over to one of the vents in the wall on unsteady feet and lent forward with his palms on the wall either side of the vent. The gentle breeze washed over him. He needed to sort his life out, things had spiralled out of control since *'she'* had left. Gazak fought back a tear. It had been six months since she walked out. He couldn't blame her. His drug use was out of control and it finally caught up with him. He had owed a dealer a substantial amount of money. Eventually the dealer visited his apartment on the station and threatened his wife. That brought it all out into the open. She'd given him a chance to clean up and get on the straight and narrow, and he'd blown it. The next time his dealer visited the apartment it hadn't been for a 'chat'. Garak arrived back home from work to find his apartment trashed and his wife furiously packing a bag. When she looked up at him, he saw the black eye and a look of complete and utter loathing in her eyes. She had stormed out of the apartment and he'd just stood there, paralysed with shame. He'd not seen her since.

There was a slight groan from behind him. The girl was waking up. Garak stood up straight and watched as she slowly pushed herself up. She looked sick, however he doubted she could look healthy even on the best of mornings. She was painfully skinny and dressed in soiled rags. He started to worry about what they'd done together the night before. He'd needed to get himself checked out at the clinic. He hated clinics.

"I don't feel too good," She whined.

"Neither do I," Gazak grumbled.

"No, it's not the come-down its something else. I... I..."

Suddenly the girl started to convulse. Gazak rushed over to her. She was thrashing on the mattress having some sort of fit. He saw strange movements within her arms, as if the muscles were trying to burst out.

"Red! Give... me... red!" the girl gasped as she continued to convulse.

Gazak wondered what she meant, then he glimpsed the applicator. One side was marked red. He grabbed it and jabbed her in the arm with it. It appeared to make no difference. She continued to thrash and the bulges under her skin grew. He leaned over her not knowing what to do. There was a sickening crack and her left forearm bent in the centre to ninety degrees. Gazak looked in horror as blood pumped from the wound where the white, splintered bone broke through the skin. The woman was screaming now and thrashing harder. Her foot came up and caught Gazak square in the chest. It sent him flying backwards. He landed in a pile of rubble and an incredible pain lanced through his body. He looked down in horror to see a two foot shard of rusting scrap metal sticking out the front of his chest, dripping with his blood. As his vision started to darken all he could hear was her screams, and the sharp crack of snapping of bones.

Chapter 1

The customs inspector looked up at the rusting industrial ship docked in hanger 4B with distain. Minmatar starships generally had a look about them he didn't like, but the condition this one was in was terrible. Its hull was pocketed, dented and streaked with rust. Over its long life it appeared to have been painted many times, but not recently, not for a good number of years. Thick steel plates had been haphazardly welded here and there as makeshift repairs. He doubted the vessel was fully air-tight. Several sensor arrays and communication antennas had simply snapped off leaving wires sprouting from rusting holes in the hull like weeds growing through an old road. He reached the personnel door which was open. A overweight Caldari man in stained overalls and a faded cap stood there looking bored.

"I am Officer Kanto from Station Customs. Permission to come aboard."

"Yeah whatever." the Captain replied and backed into the ship, spitting on the deck.

As they made their way through the ships corridors the customs officer wondered when the ship had last had an overhaul. If he had to guess it would have been a couple of decades ago. Everywhere he went makeshift repairs were visible. The majority of the junction boxes and access panels appeared to be held closed by duct tape. He had hoped the bridge would be better, he was disappointed. Many of the consoles were not working, and those that did appeared to flicker due to loose connections. A hulking dark-skinned Matari man was asleep in one of the chairs with his feet up on a console. He was snoring loudly and a line of drool left his mouth and ran down his chin leaving a dark patch on his shoulder.

Officer Kanto went through the ships log and inventory to ensure everything was in order. He was glad that the holds were empty, the ship was picking up a shipment at

this station. He didn't fancy going down to inspect the holds. He hated to think what the air was like down there. It was bad enough on the bridge, a stale combination of burnt electrics, sweat and oil. He shuddered to think what it must be like in the bowels of the ship. Thankfully the small crew did not raise any flags either. He'd half expected anyone crazy enough to serve on this flying death-trap to have a string of outstanding arrest warrants. Each one had more than a few brushes with the law he noted, mostly bar fights, but no outstanding warrants.

With the inspection complete he thanked the Captain and turned down his offer to inspect the rest of the ship. He was off the ship in half the time he usually took to do the docking inspection.

With the customs officer clear of the ship the captain stepped into the lift and depressed the button for the bridge holding it down. After a few seconds the hidden DNA scanner inside the button confirmed his identity and the lift dropped to the lowest levels of the ship. When the doors opened the captain stepped out into a smart, high-tech command and control centre. He breathed a good lungful of the clean, crisp air. Hos, the ships 'gadget master', did a great job injecting the faux odours into the ventilation system in the upper decks. They made sure official's visits were short and to the point. The Captain was always glad to be back in the fresh air of the lower decks. One of the bridge officers called out, "Captain on deck!" and a woman rose from the elevated captain's chair and took the seat next to it. The captain pulled a large padded insert from the front of his overalls that gave him the impression of being massively overweight and pulled the red cap off his head.

"OK, let's get the cargo loaded and this show on the road." he said in a commanding tone taking his seat.

Sixty minutes later the hauler was undocking from the station and aligning to the outbound stargate. Its forward cargo hold had been filled with a shipment of drone parts destined for an orbital station in a solar system some 12 light-years away. In the age of stargates, a short hop.

The rusting ship finally slipped into warp, its engines running at 30% of their output to ensure suspicion was not aroused. It took less than two minutes to cross the solar system and they dropped out of warp speed near the massive stargate. Whilst warp drive allowed ships to quickly cross solar systems, they were inefficient at crossing the vast distances of interstellar space. For travelling between solar systems, stargates were used to open an artificial wormhole allowing almost instantaneous travel over distances of many light years. The ship joined the queue of ships slowly making their way towards to massive grey structure. The viewscreen showed Emphyrean piloted ships coming and going: gunmetal-grey Raven class battleships and bright golden Amarrian freighters. Capsuleer piloted vessels did not have to wait in line, their navigation systems were much more sophisticated and relied a lot less on the gate's traffic control systems. Not only that, the immensely rich and powerful did not queue in New Eden. As they were nearing the front of the queue the Captain relinquished control of the ship to his XO and left the hidden bridge.

A short while later the Captain entered a small staging hanger. This was located in the belly of the ship with a camouflaged external hatch allowing the small shuttles they carried to be launched directly into space. It housed a number of different shuttles used for transporting the crew to where they needed to go. The primary ship-to-surface shuttle could hold a full squad of mercenaries with combat gear as well as the pilot and a tactical officer. Their smallest shuttle was not much bigger than a large missile. It was almost invisible to scanners and could discretely fly a single person, usually into harm's way. The hanger also served as the main access to the ships

armoury and also the 'toy shop' where Hos created the more unusually gadgets and devices that the mission might need.

The Captain had changed from the stained overalls and cap he had on to jet-black combat fatigues. He approached a table where a variety of weapons were laid out.

"I saved you the Ishukone spray-and-pray." Riku stated without even turning around.

The Captain picked up the machine pistol and checked the chamber. He slammed home a fresh magazine. Whilst normally he would choose something more accurate with greater stopping power, any fire-fight today would be in the narrow confines of a starship. Assault rifles were too bulky and too slow for such close quarters fighting. The machine pistol was ideal for such situations.

Riku turned around. He was wearing the same outfit as the captain and had a pair of pistols in his hands. Riku was their 'boots on the ground'. A former Caldari Intelligence Services operative, Riku had been hung out to dry after disobeying a direct order that would have resulted in the deaths of an innocent mother and her three children. The captain had sprung him from the military stockade and offered him a job with the mercenary outfit.

"Going light?" the Captain asked nodding at the two pistols Riku was holding.

Riku span both pistols and slammed them into twin holsters. He pulled out a heavy-duty combat shotgun from the pile of weapons and slipped it into his back holster giving an 'as if!' look to the Captain.

"Sir, we are jumping into the target system." The XO's voice came through the Captain's earpiece.

"OK men, here we go!" The Captain called and waved the assembled men towards the main lift.

In the Ops Centre, the room was deadly quiet as the ship was swallowed by the artificial wormhole created by the stargate. A few seconds later the viewscreen showed them emerging from the wormhole. The stargate sat 12km off their port bow. Several frigates were buzzing around the gate, the threat analyser showing them as pirates.

"Sir, we have six tango's in close orbit of the gate. Frigate class hulls. Cloak will hold for twenty seconds more. No other traffic about." The XO in the C&C centre had a direct open channel to the Captains comm unit.

When jumping through a stargate a limited cloaking field was projected around the incoming ship by the stargate. This allowed them time to make sure all systems were fully operational following the jump should there be any threats on the other side of the gate. Gate camps by pirates were common and the defensive sentry guns which were controlled by CONCORD edicts dealt only with capsuleer aggression. They didn't interfere with anyone else.

"Acknowledged. Wait for the cloak to drop. Then make it look like we're running. Try and warp out, but don't try too hard. Once they get a warp disruptor on us, burn back for the gate. Again, don't try too hard. We want them to catch us." the Captain replied.

The XO followed the Captains instructions. As soon as the cloak dropped she ordered helm to align to planet six and engage the warp drive. As they did the targeting alarms went off. Before they could slip into warp a graviton beam from one of the frigates enveloped the hauler. A second alarm sounded in the operations centre signalling the

warp drive had gone offline. The hauler then started to turn back to the gate, making it look like they were going to try and escape the way they came. The wormhole had deposited them 12km from the gate, they needed to be within 2.5km to reactivate it. The ship shuddered. Even with the inertial dampeners the crew felt the ship slow suddenly. As expected the pirates had deployed stasis webifiers, an offensive weapon that used graviton physics to slow the targeted ship substantially.

"Captain, they have us. Warp core is offline and we're webbed badly. Incoming fire is light, they are being careful not to damage us. I have our shields set at 10% and using the passive recharge to keep them up. We are not in any danger from these ships. They are launching boarding shuttles."

The captain entered the lift.

"Come on boys, we have guests arriving. Let's not keep them waiting."

-oOo-

The small shuttle slammed into the hull of the hauler and the airlock doors opened. The four-man team burst into the corridor, guns scanning for potential threats. The pirates didn't expect any, after all it was a tramp hauler with skeleton crew. Most likely they were already hiding. However, they had hit a lot of shipping on this route lately and you never knew if some corporate brass had paid for some backup. Worst case they expected was a couple of cheap mercs who wouldn't put up that much of fight when so badly outnumbered.

"Team 2, this is Team 1. We are in. We'll secure the bridge, you secure the cargo. If you find crew, S.O.P."

The other team leader acknowledged the order. S.O.P. stood for standard operational procedure. It was a nice short way of saying kill the men, and capture the women and children. The children could be sold to Amarrrian slavers. Whilst the Amarrrians tended to prefer Matari slaves, they would take any children without question. Any captured women would serve as 'entertainment' for the crew of the pirate vessels. When they divided up the loot, the women would be included just like any other stolen cargo or salvage.

The four pirates made their way to the lift and entered. Thirty seconds later they burst into the empty bridge. After sweeping the area they relaxed a bit.

"Team 2. Bridge secure. Nobody home. They are probably hiding in the engine room shitting themselves. Do you have the cargo secured?" There was silence. "Team 2 acknowledge? Command I cannot raise Team 2. Command, respond!"

The other three of his team looked at him worried. He motioned for them to return to the lift. This time he selected the lower cargo deck. As the lift descended in silence they checked their weapons nervously. The lift doors opened into the dimly lit corridor. With weapons held high the four men slowly advanced. Many of the lighting units along the corridor were out or flickering badly. They came to a junction and the leader used hand signals to indicate they were to split up. The two pairs separated and continued in opposite directions. After a minute a shot rang out. The leader of the team stopped dead. There was a second shot.

"Yatani. Doodar. Do you read?"

There was only silence.

"Yatani. Doodar. Team 2. Command. Can anyone hear me?"

The concern in his voice was obvious.

Back in the ship's hidden command centre the XO looked at the monitors. The intruders who had gone for the cargo bay first were already dead. The second team of intruders had split up and one half had been taken care of. She watched the Captain and Riku slowly advancing on the remaining two intruders.

"Frey, it appears that the Captain is about to mop up in here. Please do the same out there." she commanded nodding to the view-screen that showed the pirate frigates circling.

The Matari weapons specialist looked at her and grinned, "Yes ma'am! It will be a pleasure!"

On the bridge of the lead pirate frigate the situation was tense. Since entering the ship they had lost communications with their two strike teams. Arguments had broken out whether to send more men or wait and see. It was possible there was a malfunction in the comms units. Or the hauler could have been carrying a cargo that was emitting some kind of interference.

"Sir, I'm getting a target lock from the hauler." one of the crew announced.

"Acknowledge. That civilian Gatling rail gun won't give us any bother." The Captain of the frigate had already scanned the cargo ship and found the only armament on it was the obvious civilian Gatling gun mounted on top of the craft. This single woefully-underpowered weapon was no match for his defences. Unfortunately for the Captain, he didn't know that his scans were giving fake readings. Advanced

electronics and specialist shielding on the Katsu Maru ensured that any scanning reported that she was a dilapidated hauler with poor defensive capabilities.

"SIR!" the crewman shouted in alarm pointing to the large screen that filled the front of the bridge.

The captain of the frigate snapped his attention back to the view screen. He watched in amazement as the thick steel plates on the side of the hauler lowered. What appeared to be emergency hull repairs were in fact camouflaged hatches. As the plates lowered, spinning 220mm Vulcan auto-cannons were revealed. The Captain stood there speechless.

There is no sound in space. If there were the noise of the Vulcan's firing would have sounded like a buzzsaw. The phased plasma projectiles ripped through the small frigates in rapid succession. It was all over in a matter of seconds. As the last frigate exploded the silenced alarm in the Katsu Maru's command centre stopped. The warp core was back online.

Down on the cargo decks of the Katsu Maru the two remaining pirates felt the vibration from the guns firing. They jumped as a speaker mounted on the wall next to them crackled into life.

"Those vibrations you felt were the sound of your six little frigates being torn apart by the Vulcan autocannons hidden on this ship. The other two members of your team are dead, along with the entire other team. We gave them a choice, they chose badly. We give you the same choice, we can take you alive to face charges of piracy, or we can do this the even easier way and flush your dead corpses out of the airlock. We get paid the same either way. Which is to be... pirate?"

The two men cocked their guns and nodded at each other.

"Frack you!" one yelled at the speaker.

They took a step forward when the blast of a shotgun lit up the dark corridor. Riku had silently moved into position in the shadows and took both men down with a single shot.

"Tangos are down. Ship secure." he announced into his throat-mic.

There was no cheer, no celebration on the part of the Katsu Maru crew. The mission was complete. Job done.

Chapter 2

The Captain found Riku sat at a table in the armoury. In front of him were his weapons he had used earlier. He was in the process of stripping them down and cleaning them. The armoury was staffed by an expert ex-military quartermaster who would do that for him. Riku however, insisted on doing it himself. The quartermaster didn't complain, it saved him a job.

"How you doing?" asked the Captain.

"I'm fine." replied Riku.

"Just checking. It was a shame they chose as they did. It's not like we gave them a fighting chance with the trap."

Riku placed a part he was cleaning on a piece of cloth and looked up at the Captain.

"Cap, I've killed a lot of people in the past and I have to say, I'm not sure all of them deserved it. But when you are a soldier orders are orders and you carry them out. It is only after the event can you really think about it. Those men today? Not an issue for me. I read the file on their activities. They were the real-deal pirates. Not only did they steal from vessels but they weren't adverse to killing unarmed crew and selling kids to slavers. They chose to board this ship by force, we might have set it up for them, but they took the bait. This time they found the best of Mordu's Legion waiting for them, but that was this time. How many times previously had they found a terrified family trying to scrape a living?"

The Captain nodded. He didn't expect any issue from Riku, he was a true professional. However he always liked to make sure in situations like this those directly involved in

the fire-fight were OK after the event. Most of their work involved kill-or-be-killed situations. It was rare that anyone of his crew had an issue in that situation. But today, those men were like rats in a trap, they didn't stand a chance. It was closer to an execution than a fire-fight. The Client didn't care, his orders was to eliminate the pirate group by any means. Thankfully Riku was taking the pragmatic approach.

"Good to hear. We have a new job, I need you in the conference room in five."

The senior staff were already sat around the conference table when Captain Sosa entered immediately following Riku. The Captain took his seat at the top of the table. Captain Sosa was Caldari, in his mid-40's and kept his greying hair in a short buzz-cut. He was physically fit and spent a lot of time in the ships well stocked gym. The missions that the Katsu Maru undertook were just as likely to involve a foot-assault on a heavily guarded base as a dog-fight in deep space. Like most of the crew of the ship he was ex-Caldari State armed forces and very good at his job. In fact he was seen as the best captain within the Legion which is why he captained the Katsu Maru.

The Katsu Maru itself was perhaps the best ship in Mordu's Legion's fleet. To external viewers it looked like a dilapidated hauler, a ship on its last legs. Even those entering the ship's upper decks would think the same. Sparking lights, unpleasant air, tired decor and makeshift repairs. However the hidden lower decks were advanced as any top-of-the-line ship. The engines, shields, sensors and electronic systems were all battlecruiser rated. The armoury and hidden shuttle bay could send squads of heavily armed men to where ever they needed. The ship's offensive capability was well hidden but again rated at battlecruiser level with a variety of guns and missile launchers. All these weapons and systems were carefully hidden and never used at full power unless needed, the Katsu Maru was a remarkably unremarkable ship, unless provoked.

The Captain cleared his throat. "OK, good news and bad news. First the good news, the shipping company that hired us to take down the pirate blockade are extremely pleased and we've got a decent bonus from them for the quick resolution of the situation. The bad news is shore leave is cancelled. We're being diverted I'm afraid. The Old Man has been on. Apparently an old friend of his from his navy days has been in touch. His granddaughter has gone missing. Its only been 18 hours so the authorities won't touch it, not until its been a full 36 hours. He's asked the Legion for help. We are the closest ship and we are en route to the station where she went missing, ETA 2 hours. Probably nothing, but we are going to check it out. Aki, the Admiral sent you a present."

The Captain took his datapad and pressed a few buttons. Aki, the Katsu Maru's resident electronic genius, picked up his own pad up and looked at the message.

"Nice. Encryption keys for the stations mainframe. Will save me half an hour hacking firewalls. I assume you'll want me to find her without us having to leave the ship!" he smirked as he started tapping away on his portable computer.

"Ideally. We're supposed to be heading for the beach resort on Synchelle III for shore leave and whilst I would be disappointed if any of the crew complained that we were getting side-tracked to try and help find a missing 16 year-old girl, I still would rather resolve this quickly. This is a favour for a good friend of the Old Man's so we're doing it, no arguments, but let us try and do it quickly."

The senior staff nodded in agreement. The Katsu Maru was a vessel of Mordu's Legion, the largest and most respected mercenary organisation in the cluster. Whilst they were soldiers for hirer, the crew of the Katsu Maru was particular about what contacts they accepted. On many occasions they turned down contracts that were lucrative, but morally questionable. Very few ships in the Legion had this privilege.

Most were given a mission and expected to carry it out whether it was morally sound or not. The Katsu Maru officers were given a choice with almost all contracts. They were the best crew and best ship and the Old Man didn't want to do anything to risk breaking them up if he could avoid it. One of the best ways he'd found was to offer them the contracts rather than order them to do it. There were always other ships that could service the more grey area between the black and white type contracts that the Legion took on.

"So the plan is Aki hacks into the security section. The Admiral has given us her address, where she was going and the times. Aki uses the security camera footage to track her, we deliver the address where she is to the Admiral and be on our way to the beach without even getting into dock range of the station."

"Is it that simple, or are we going to find she's in trouble?" Yoshi the XO asked.

"I asked the Old Man that. Apparently the granddaughter never gets into trouble and doesn't hang out with the wrong crowd. Bit of a square by all accounts. Neither her parents or grandparents are rich. Admittedly there is no such thing as a poor retired Admiral, but not enough to warrant a kidnapping and ransom. No recent arguments or problems at home or school. She has just vanished with no explanation. I'm guessing she's met up with friends and gone somewhere. The old 'it's better to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission'. I'm betting Aki finds her on a beach, planet-side, and we don't need to step off the ship." the Captain replied.

"Sir. I'm afraid it is not going to be that simple." Aki sounded downbeat.

The Captain raised an eyebrow at him and looked at his watch.

"Seriously? In under two minutes?"

Aki held his hands up in the air.

"You gave me the encryption keys, locations and the times and dates. Plus a recent photograph which I could use for facial recognition. How long did you think it would take?"

The Captain smiled. Aki was also ex-Caldari military. If it ran on a computer he could hack it, control it or take it offline. On what was technically a warship, the resident geek looked seriously out of place. His clothing and hair would be suited to some college punk. However looks can be deceiving and he had saved them all more than once. Aki's speciality was hacking into other peoples systems. The holoprojector on the centre of the table lit up. A three sided display formed giving everyone a good view of what Aki had to show them.

"Here we have her on the corner of the street where she lives. She was heading to the mall as she told her parents." The screen changed. "Here we are inside the mall 40 minutes later. This security camera is located near the restrooms, where she just spent 25 minutes according to the timestamps. Notice anything."

The senior staff nodded. When she'd left her home she had been wearing jeans, an oversized jumper and carrying a bag with her hair in a plain ponytail. Now she was wearing a tiny satin miniskirt, black tights, a crop top with spaghetti straps and black heels. The hair was loose now they could just make out the heavy makeup. She now looked like a woman in her early 20's going clubbing.

"Looks like she's meeting someone special." The Captain stated.

The screen flickered again and changed. The granddaughter was walking arm in arm with a young man, she looked deliriously happy. They were laughing and joking.

"Boyfriend?" Riku postulated.

"Certainly!" replied Aki. "Look at this. This is the hotel attached to the mall.". Aki was still pulling video from the station security camera video storage banks.

The screen changed again. The two were stood at a reception desk laughing and filling out a form. The next shot showed they were in a lift, kissing. The final video clip showed a corridor from a hotel lined with doors. The granddaughter practically dragged the young man inside one of the rooms. The Captain laughed.

"Well that will go down in history as the shortest contract the Legion has ever taken. Well done Aki, I'll call the Old Man, he can decide whether to tell the Admiral that his sweet and innocent little granddaughter is not so innocent and..." Aki hadn't stopped working and suddenly held up a hand to indicate there was more. The Captain stopped. The video changed and showed two men dressed in hotel staff uniforms pushing large laundry trolleys down the hall. They stopped outside the room that the granddaughter had gone into. They knocked on the door and were let in. Two minutes later they pushed their trolleys out of the room and continued down the corridor and vanished. The room was silent.

"What happened there?" The Captain asked.

The screen suddenly broke up into 16 sections, each being a face captured from a security camera.

"Three things I noticed there captain. Firstly these are all the members of staff who passed through that corridor in the time between the lovers entering and then those two from housekeeping which are the two on the bottom right."

Riku looked at the faces and nodded. "They are all Caldari and nearly all female, except the last two, they are Amarrian males." Aki nodded at Riku. The screen changed again, it was a still of the men leaving the room.

Riku continued. "Those trolleys look a lot heavier than when they went in." Aki smiled at Riku again. "OK then hotshot, make it the hatrick, what is the third thing that shows our beach holiday is going to be delayed?" he teased. The screen swapped to a 15 second loop of the men knocking on the room door and being let in. Riku leant forward concentrating on the footage.

"Zoom in there." He pointed. "At the gap between the two men." The screen focused on the small gap the existed between the men. A flash of grey was seen.

"Slow it down. One tenth speed."

The senior staff gasped as the slower footage clearly showed a gun being drawn.

The Captain tapped his earpiece. "Helm, get us docked in the target station. Maximum speed."

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The Amarrian sat in a darkened room. The glow from the small holoprojector gave his face an eerie glow. There was a beep and he pressed a button on the projector. After a few seconds delay a projection of a man's head appeared.

"Report." It simply said.

"My Lord, phase one is complete. We have the location of the product. Our men are moving there now to acquire it."

"Good. I trust you still have the prisoners?"

The man fidgeted uncomfortably in his seat.

"My Lord, we had difficulty in extracting the information from the one who knew where the product was. We had to be... persuasive. One is injured. The other is relatively unharmed, although we have the location and they are only really useful as a hostage should we need one. Unless the male lied. We have broke him so we do not think he did. However we are keeping them both until we have confirmation."

The head above the holoprojection scowled. "Very well. Continue and tell me immediately once you have the product."

-oOo-

The man on the reception desk looked up as the main doors swung open. Two Caldari men entered with briefcases and small rolling suitcases. They were clearly bankers, or something to do with finance. To the man on reception it didn't matter they were all the same. They made more in a day than he did in a month, would treat him like shit and not tip any of the hotels staff. Hell those suits probably cost more than he made in a year.

They both had prepaid reservations and specific rooms booked so check-in was quick and easy. To the receptionists surprise they were very polite and friendly. As the lift closed he thought maybe he shouldn't judge all bankers the same, then he thought what the majority of Caldari bankers were like and decided that those two were rare exceptions and went back to watching the Mind-Clash game on the small datapad he had leant behind the reception counter.

The two 'bankers' exited the lift and walked along the corridor. They suddenly turned and entered a room to their right, the door being unlocked remotely as they approached.

"We're in," the Captain said into his concealed throat mic, "Nice job on the reservations and the door lock Aki."

The Captain and Riku searched the room. The bed was unmade and clothing was scattered around the room, mostly in a line between the door and the bed. The Captain noted the clothing was what they had seen the two lovers wearing as they entered the room. An unopened bottle of champagne lay on the floor. They hadn't ordered room service so the girl must have had it in her bag. They found the bag at the side of the bed. It still contained her purse and personal possessions. Other than that the room was empty.

"Yoshi, they are gone as expected. Are we anywhere with the two Amarrians or the young man she was with?" As the Captain left the ship, he'd asked them to run down the three unknowns and try to ID them.

"Captain, the Amarrians are ghosts. Nothing matching facial recognition on any files, not even in the port entry files. The boyfriend lives on the station Fratt Halane, Matari,

21 years old, maintenance technician on deck 43. Took the job two months ago. I've sent Ingvar and Hos down there to ask around and see if they can get intel on him."

"Acknowledged. We're heading back, nothing to see here. We're too late."

Chapter 3

An hour later the senior staff of the Katsu Maru were all seated around the conference table in the main briefing room of the ship. The Captain and Riku had finished their briefing of what they found in the hotel room and Ingvar had just started his.

"So this Fratt Halane was a bit of a bad boy. Nothing serious to worry about but he did have some links to some of the criminal elements according to his colleagues that we 'asked nicely' down on deck 4."

This intel was then confirmed by Aki who had hacked the stations security services database and pulled the records of the boyfriend. He had several cautions for assaults and minor drug possession but nothing serious.

"On the way back we did pop to the bar where he partied and spoke to a business associate who we heard was his supplier. After some persuasion he told us Fratt was an occasional customer, paid cash, never took credit and only small personal-use quantities. The only thing that was strange was he was into vitoc and insorium. Whilst not unheard of, it isn't the most popular recreational drug combo especially for Matari."

The Captain nodded. Vitoc was the infamous drug used by the Amarrians to control their slaves. As well as a delivering a blissful high and being extremely addictive, it was also fatal if not regularly consumed. It was a viral-mutagen that caused a horrific death if the user didn't get another hit in time. As well as drugging slaves to make them compliant, it also meant they became totally reliant on their masters. Lack of access to the drug didn't mean cold turkey, it meant a slow and painful death. For decades the use of this drug prevented the Matari tribes from rescuing the millions of their kin enslaved by the Amarr Empire. Then a few years ago the CEO of the Caldari

Megacorp Ishokune developed a cure. The cure was called Insorium. It was the antidote to Vitoc. It had been said that there could never be a cure. Vitoc was engineered specifically not to be curable. However, Insorium did indeed work and one single dose removed the Vitoc from the slaves systems, breaking the addiction and neutralising the mutating effects. Equipped with this new drug the Matari launched a massive offensive into Amarr space and rescued many slaves at the very start of the Emyrean war. However, some people still craved the blissful high of Vitoc. The criminal underworld was more than happy to supply this need with packs of narcotics containing both Vitoc and the cure, for those who wanted the narcotic high without the subsequent horrific death of course.

The Captain leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. The room fell quiet allowing the captain to think. Well-to-do girl has boyfriend from the wrong side of the tracks. Nothing new there, he recalled, he was that boy on more than one occasion in his youth. The boyfriend did occasional recreational pharmaceuticals. Nothing that would suggest a professional grab like the one he'd seen.

"We are missing something. Riku and Ingvar, go back down to deck 4. Have a real good snoop around. There is potential that this is something to do with his work or something with his criminal connections. Yoshi, you are going to her home. I'll get the Old Man to call the Admiral to clear it with his son . I want a full search of her room, see if you can find anything, this still could be about her. One of those two is the reason for the snatch, and whilst the smart money is on bad boy, I'm not ruling anything out."

-oOo-

Riku and Ingvar moved quickly through deck 4 guided by Aki. He had hacked into the systems of the maintenance company Fratt worked for and had discovered all

employers wore a locator beacon when on duty. This allowed the supervisors to assign urgent jobs based on proximity. Fratt had spent a lot of time in a heat exchanger in sector D.

The two men approached the door to the exchanger, guided by Aki, and noted the warning sign on the door. Riku hesitated.

"Aki, it appears that it is three hundred degrees behind this door and you never told us to bring sunscreen or straw hats!" Riku said sarcastically into his communicator.

Back on the ship Aki checked the systems again.

"That heat exchanger is not active, it is not even connected. It is an old backup of a backup. The pipeline connecting that exchanger was severed several years ago when they installed a new hanger in deck 5. Hang on, I'm accessing the fire-suppression systems. They have thermal scanners throughout the station... and... I'm getting nothing from that exchanger or the pipes leading to it. It's cool, literally."

The two men looked again at the sign again which was relatively new. It did look out of place on the old worn rusting door. They nodded at each other before opening the door carefully. There was no blast of heat, just an odd smell. They drew their concealed weapons and entered. Working together, they swept the small area with their torches. The heat exchanger was basically a 20m diameter pressure vessel, 30m high with pipework snaking around the edges. In the centre, there appeared to have been a small lab set up. Upturned tables and smashed glass littered the floor along with basic scientific equipment. They moved over to investigate.

"Drug lab?" Ingvar asked as he poked a beaker with the tip of his boot.

"Looks that way, but if Fratt was helping cook product, what was he doing buying his own from a dealer?" Riku asked.

"Vitoc and Insorium are almost impossible to create unless you have a top of the line lab and the formula. As far as I know, nobody has the formula for Insorium. It's unlikely they could create that product in what you have described." replied Aki over the comm signal. "They must have been cooking something simpler and had to buy the vitoc and inсорium for their own needs."

The two men collected some samples and headed back to the ship.

-o0o-

At the granddaughters house Yoshi was carefully conducting a search of the girls room. She had met the parents who were distraught. She had almost finished when she noticed that the last drawer she was looking through appeared too shallow. With a click she opened the false bottom and extracted the items. The last thing her parents needed to see were the contents of that compartment. She placed them into her bag and went back downstairs. She reassured the girls parents that they were going to do everything they could to get their daughter back before she headed back to the ship.

They all met back in the conference room. The objects Yoshi had taken from the girls room were all laid out on the table. There was a diary, which was that of a typical teenage girl. It was obviously hidden as she went into some detail about Fratt but there was nothing in there that indicated why she would be grabbed. There was also contraception tablets and some very racy underwear, obviously hidden from her parents prying eyes. Finally, there were several vials of a clear liquid.

"So we have a few vials of substance taken from the girls room. We have laboratory equipment from deck 4. Assuming they are some sort of drug, what are we missing?" Mused the Captain.

Dr Monique, the ships chief medical officer entered the room. "I've got some interesting results from those vials Captain. It's a modified version of vitoc along with a modified Insorium. It looks to be what they were cooking in that lab. According to the tests I did on the fragments Riku brought back from the lab, it's the same substance. However, there is something strange." The doctor took a seat at the table and used her datapad to transmit an image to the holoprojector. A chain of molecules appeared above the table.

"The vitoc has been chemically altered and without further testing I cannot say why. The modified insorium has been engineered to neutralised this specific vitoc. I also found other strains of Vitoc. They had been experimenting."

The Captain rubbed his temples. They were running in circles. The boyfriend was clearly mixed up in producing some form of modified drug, but the quantities that the small lab they found could produce would not bring any reprisals from the main dealers. The Captain asked the doctor if they could had been creating the drugs in the lab which the doctor replied was highly unlikely. It was more feasible that they were taking small quantities of the drug and modifying it. Insorium was almost impossible to create, nobody knew where it was made or how. However, it was easy to get hold of on the black market.

"Lets take this back a few steps. Aki, where did Fratt come from? Find the last station he was at and cross-reference the medical database for vitoc related incidents. Looking for arrests for dealing and any medical emergencies especially drug related deaths.

Also look for anyone else who moved between that outpost and this station around the same time as Fratt."

Aki went to work as the various people around the table discussed their theories. It only took Aki a couple of minutes.

"Cap, sometimes you are spooky. He was living on a small outpost in the system of Vaaralen in the Kurala constellation. There were five vitoc related deaths there in the month before Fratt left compared with two in the three-years before that. Appears from the death certificates of the victims the Insorium didn't work and they got hit with the mutations before they could source more Vitoc. The medical records state they'd never seen anything like it. The mutations happened in minutes when they kicked in. There have been none since our boy moved here."

The Captain nodded. "And did anyone else ship out the same day or within a week of Fratt leaving and come here too?"

"I've got a Matari male, almost same age as Fratt who left the same day as him and came to this station. Coincidence?"

"No such thing!" replied the Captain. "Send the other mans address to my datapad. Riku, you're with me!"

Chapter 4

The two men approached the apartment door. It was a typical apartment block on a Caldari orbital station. Hundreds of millions of people in the cluster of stars known as New Eden lived in apartments just like this. The blueprints had already been sent to Captain Sosa and Riku but neither of them needed more than a cursory glance. Over the years they had both lived and stayed in almost identical apartments. Riku had been running through the layout in his head. Door, entrance hall, storage closet to the right; bathroom to the left; then bedroom to the right; kitchen to the left; finally living room. He thought about places an assailant might hide or take cover. Obviously he had no idea how the furniture would be laid out, but he could take an educated guess.

Before they reached the front door they could see scorch marks around the keypad. The door was also slightly ajar. Both men nodded at each other drew their weapons. Riku went in first, his gun sweeping across the entrance hall. The place had been tossed and doors and cupboards were open with their contents littering the floor. Captain Sosa entered immediately after him and they moved methodically through the apartment covering each other's backs. Once they were sure there was nobody there, they holstered their weapons.

It took an hour to go through the apartment belonging to the man who had moved between stations the same time. Sosa was staring at a wall when Riku emerged from the bathroom.

"Nothing. You?"

The captain nodded to the wall which contained a number of pictures. Most were crooked where they had been moved. Obviously someone had looked behind each one to check for hiding places.

"That's the missing boyfriend along with the guy who rents this apartment." Riku said pointing to one framed picture of two Matari men on what looked like a hunting trip. "You were right, they did know each other. And we've got a framed certificate from the University of Calle over there. Our boy who lives here is a bio-chemist."

The Captain nodded as he had already come to the same conclusion. It made sense. A maintenance engineer would be unlikely able to run a small laboratory and produce narcotics. Fratt had the contacts to get the raw material and the opportunity to hide the lab. Drovora had the knowledge and skills to make the product. Obviously, there were some problems in the early drugs which had led to the deaths on the last station. They had finally perfected the drug but had to move here to escape the heat, and probably also to escape the reputation the failed drug had got following the deaths on that other station.

"Well there is nothing more of interest here. If there was someone has already taken it. Let's head back to the ship and plan the next move."

They left the apartment, pulled the door closed and headed to the lift. As the lift doors opened Riku stepped in only to jump back as a woman tried to exit.

"Sorry!" he said as he stepped back.

The woman smiled and nodded acknowledging his apology before leaving the lift and heading down the corridor. Riku entered the lift whilst watching her leave.

"Careful, if you stretch your neck any further you might pull something at best or at worst get decapitated by the lift doors." the Captain joked.

Riku smiled and hit the down button. Pity they were on a mission as that woman was stunning. Matari, dark skin, glossy long black hair and a toned body. May be a bit young for him, but still, one of the most attractive women he'd ever seen. The lift closed and started to descend back down to the lobby.

Down the corridor the woman heard the lift doors close and quietly spoke quietly into a concealed mic.

"Two suspicious men leaving the target floor. They were Caldari and looked military, get some captures from the security cameras of them as they exit and check them out. I have a hunch they were here for the same reason we are." she said as she approached the apartment door Riku and Sosa had left barely minutes before.

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"They are brothers." Aki stated passing a file to the Captain as he returned to the ship with Riku. "They've changed names, but I was able to delve deep enough."

The Captain looked through the comprehensive files the hacker had collected. They were born a year apart on Rens II. Fratt was the sporty jock whilst Drovora was the academic nerd. They had stuck together like glue other than the four years Drovora was away at university.

"And you need to hear this." Aki continued. "I've been in the system digging deep for anything useful I could get on either of them. Drovora's datapad went offline twelve hours before his brother and the Admiral's Granddaughter were snatched. And when I say offline, I mean offline. Not turned off, not on do not disturb, I mean its power cell was removed."

"The people who snatched his brother took him first?" Riku asked.

"No. They are still looking for him, I think he disabled his own pad to prevent being tracked. Listen to this, this message was left for him six hours ago. I pulled it from his voicemail storage." Aki pressed a button and an introduction to a voice message service was played.

"Drovora..... its me..... Fratt." The voice had a definite tremble. "Look man we're in trouble. They've got me and Illur. They want the old formula. The bad one. Please bro, call me back."

Aki stopped the recording and played the next one.

"Man where are you! This is serious, they are running out of patience. No! No! NO!" The message finished with the sound of Fratt screaming.

"That was four hours ago. This was two hours ago." Aki played the next message which was nothing more than 30 seconds of a man screaming in pain. The Captain winced.

"This is the last one and was left thirty minutes ago." Aki played the final message.

"Please Drovora. Call me back, I cannot take anymore." his voice sounded as if he was in agony. "Just give them the formula and they will let us go. No! No please no! Leave her alone!" The message ended with a shrill female scream. The Captain looked angry.

"Tell me you have a location on them!"

Aki nodded and handed a datapad to the Captain. "They were using Fratt's datapad to leave the messages and I've traced the signals to deck 46, sector 5, room 6521."

The Captain strode purposely towards the door. "Riku, let's go!" he growled, "and bring a big gun!"

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The Captain and Riku stood either side of the rusting metal door. 6521 was etched into the corroded metal in typical station font. This far down on the station replacement doors were not a high priority. Riku placed a hand on the door handle and it slowly turned. The door quietly clicked open. He looked at the Captain and mouthed a countdown from three. When he hit 'one' he burst into the room with his gun out in front of him, the captain was immediately behind. The room was dimly lit and appeared to be a storage area. Crates were stacked along the walls and in the more brightly lit centre were two chairs and some rope coiled on the floor. Slowly and deliberately they moved across to the chairs ensuring nobody was hiding in the gaps between the crates. Once they reached the chairs Riku knelt down. He picked something off the floor and showed it to the Captain who grimaced at the sight. It was a human fingernail.

"Bastards," he muttered.

"It's worse. I see ten around this chair... and two at the other."

"Frack." The Captain didn't need to ask for confirmation, the girl screaming on the final voice message was enough to know what had happened. Once they had pulled all of Fratt's fingernails, they had started on Illur's. The fact they had stopped after two gave some hope. Whatever information they wanted, they had it.

"He must have given them something," the captain tapped his mic as he and Riku started for the door, "Aki, we need to know where they are." the Captain said into his mic. As they stepped out of the room they practically bumped into someone. Without hesitation all three persons drew their weapons at lightning speed. The Matari woman from earlier had a gun in each hand pointing into the faces of Sosa and Riku. They in turn had their guns pointed at her head.

She smiled, "Gentlemen! Fancy bumping into you again!" she purred seductively.

"I'd say it was a pleasure to see you again, but I appear to have a PISTOL in my face." the Captain growled.

The woman smiled. All three were incredibly relaxed given the situation. That in turn told each one they were dealing with professionals. All three stood still, weighing up their options. The Matari woman slowly withdrew back, keeping her two guns aimed, whilst the two men kept her covered.

"I assume you are here for the same reason we are. If you were one of them you'd be long gone so I assume you're following the same trail as we are. I suppose asking to work together is out of the question?" Riku asked as he kept his gun trained on her as she moved towards a corner.

"I work alone," she replied "but never, say never, cutie-pie." With that she blew Riku a kiss and vanished around the corner.

By the time Riku looked down the corridor she was nowhere to be seen. The two men looked at each other and shrugged.

Chapter 5

A few hours later the Katsu Maru was heading towards the Vaaralen system at full speed. Sosa and Riku had got back to the ship were Aki had been trying to get a location on the boyfriend's datapad. However, it had not been used since the last call so he had nothing to go on. Half an hour later he finally he got a hit on the datapad. When jumping between star systems all communications are lost whilst travelling through the artificial wormhole. When arriving at the destination system all communications equipment must re-synchronise with the fluid-routers in the local stargates which allow for faster-than-light communications. One of the kidnappers had not turned off the boyfriend's datapad, probably hoping the other brother would call back when he heard the messages. They were travelling and with each jump their ship did, the datapad re-registered on the local net. It was like a burning beacon in the night sky to the Katsu Maru's resident hacker. Aki tracked the datapad as it reconnected with stargate fluid-routers as it travelled along its course. It was clear the people who had captured Fratt and the Admiral's Granddaughter were heading back to the station that the brothers had been living at before. And the Katsu Maru had undocked and was in hot pursuit

The Captain entered the operations centre and Yoshi hopped out of the captains chair. Once he was seated he started a shipwide broadcast.

"All crew this is the Captain. As you know our shore leave has been delayed as we try and find this missing girl. I've got good news and I've got bad news. The bad news is shore leave is suspended until we close this contract. The good news is that I'm beginning to suspect we will soon have another additional contract and that they are pretty much tied together. We find the girl, we should be able to complete both and then we've got double shore leave and a nice bonus."

A small cheer went up from the crew.

The captain relinquished the chair and headed down to the operations hangar. He found Riku sorting out his gear along with Ingvar. Several other members of the assault team were checking their equipment. The Katsu Maru was equipped for any mission. They always had at least two fire-teams on board. Ingvar generally led the squads with Riku being more independent given his skills and expertise. He had been a lone wolf for the Caldari Navy, operating alone and in dangerous situations. He was ideally suited for solo infiltration work. The plan was simple. Locate the Admiral's granddaughter and her boyfriend, rescue them and take down the kidnappers. The last bit was not part of their orders but had been decided upon by the Captain when he saw the pulled fingernails back on the previous station. Men who tortured 16 year-old girls would not be spared any 'professional courteous' whoever they worked for.

"Captain, this is Aki. They have docked and as requested I've been able to locate their ship. Sending details of the docking bay to you and Riku. The boyfriends datapad has been used and I have a good signal on its location. They are in a industrial area on deck 14. I'm sending the locations and engineering schematics to you and Ingvar."

The plan the Captain had discussed earlier was starting to play out. He assumed whatever they had come here for would be in the lower decks assuming the brothers had set up their drugs lab in the same manner as the last station. He also didn't know if they would take the granddaughter with them, they might leave her on the ship and just take the boyfriend. Ingvar and his fire-team would head to the suspected location of the original lab and rescue either or both the hostages there. Riku would head to their ship and rescue any hostage there.

Whilst this was occurring Dr Monique had already left the ship. Aki, using his formidable hacking skills, had sent a message to the local police that a doctor

employed by the State would be coming to review the case files of the five most recent vitoc related deaths. He said in the communiqué that it was part of a study into vitoc abuse that was being carried out in the region. Dr Monique found that the ruse had worked perfectly and that on her arrival a room had been set aside and the case files were already prepared. She sat down, took a sip of the coffee, winced at how incredibly bad it was and got to work.

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Riku entered the hostile ship via an open maintenance hatch. The docked ship was having some minor maintenance work being undertaken so he found it easy to slip past the armed guards and mingle with the technicians. The ship was Amarrian, a Omen, with a normal crew compliment of 75 and up to 125 passengers. He entered the engineering section and found a access panel which he opened. He connected a small box into the circuitry and closed the panel again.

"Aki. Riku. The door is open." he whispered into his throat mic.

Back on the Katsu Maru the resident hacker got to work establishing the datalink to the micro-modem Riku had just installed into the ships core system. Within seconds he had linked to the device and was into the central computer of the enemy ship.

"Roger Riku. Connection is good. I'm reading 102 tango's sharing that space with you. Deck 3, section N, looks promising. 1121, the door to that room is locked from the outside and alarmed. I am reading one life sign in the room."

Riku started to make his way through the ship. A flexible screen on his forearm displayed the internal sensor readings from the ship. He could see all life signs around

him and was able to quickly make his way to deck 3 without coming into contact with any of the crew.

"Knock, knock!" he whispered into his mic.

The red blinking light on the door panel turned a steady red to indicate the alarm was disabled, a few seconds later it turned green and Riku heard the quiet click as the lock disengaged. He drew his gun just in case and opened the door, he had no idea if he'd find a scared 16 year-old girl or some angry drunken crew member who had been confined to quarters. It was the former.

She was huddled in the corner with her knees under her chin. Her arms were wrapped tight around her legs and her left hand had two fingers bandaged. She looked terrified. Riku quickly holstered his weapon and stepped inside. The girl tensed as he approached.

"Don't worry." he whispered "Your granddad sent me!"

He saw a spark in her eyes.

"We need to get out of here!"

There was no hesitation, she took his outstretched hand with her remaining good one and he pulled her to her feet before leading her hand-in-hand to the door.

On the station down on deck 14, Ingvar and his team stood over the body of Fratt. He lay on his back with his hands tied behind his back and his legs were bent awkwardly. A small red hole in the centre of his forehead had leaked a small trickle of blood. He had been kneeling when they executed him. The hulking Matari warrior squatted

down beside the body and ran the palm of his hand over the boys eyes closing them. He whispered an ancient Minmatar prayer for the dead and rose. "Search the area. Whatever they wanted, they got it here. Let's see if they left anything."

After a few minutes of searching, they found an old conduit that had been cut open. The disused pipe had been turned into a secret compartment. It was mostly empty but there was some broken glass left. It appeared a vial had been smashed. Using a pair of tweezers they carefully bagged the samples and headed back to the ship. They wanted to take the boy's body, but carrying a corpse through half the station was not a good idea for a covert team carrying concealed weapons.

"Captain, Ingvar, we are too late. They have what they came for and they killed the boy. Heading back to ship. Riku needs to move, they could be back anytime now."

Riku was now running with the girl in tow. That was old news as he heard the announcement over the ships communications that they were getting ready to depart. By the time he managed to get to their escape point it was too late. The ship was already undocking.

Chapter 6

The leader's head appeared above the small holoprojector. The man on the ship bowed his head.

"My Lord."

"Report!"

"We have it my Lord. We were able to recover 23 vials plus a datacard containing all the research."

"What of the brothers and your extra hostage?"

The other man looked nervous.

"The brother we captured is dead. Once he led us to the cache he had no further use. The scientific brother still eludes us but we have a team searching. The girl..... it appears she escaped and fled the ship whilst we were recovering the drug."

The holographic head burst into a menacing laughter. "You are telling me you couldn't even hold a 16-year old girl?" there was a pause. "No matter, we have what we wanted. Return to the facility at haste. We have work to do."

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The Katsu Maru had passed the Amarrian ship and now was two jumps ahead of them. The device Riku had planted was allowing Aki to monitor the ships systems making it easy. Aki had accessed their flight plan and even had modified the enemy ships

warpcore subroutines to slightly slow the ship. They knew where they were heading and planned to be there before them. It would arouse less suspicion if they were there first.

Riku had sent a message that he had found a good location to hide and Aki had hacked the ships sensors to mask their locations. The Amarrians had been lazy. As soon as they had discovered the girl was gone they had looked at the sensor logs. Aki had done an excellent job of modifying the logs to show the girl apparently walked out of her room alone and left the ship via the hatch Riku had entered. They had done no more investigating than that. They apparently didn't care she had escaped or even why the door was unlocked.

The captain entered the engineering bay and looked up at the shining engines that were humming loudly. The Katsu Maru had two engineering bays. The first one was in the 'old' part of the ship. They were the original engines and could propel the ship along just fine. They were even modified to appear less efficient than they were. The second engineering bay was hidden in the lower part of the ship. The engines there were top-of-the-line and discreetly connected to the external thrusters of the other engineering bay. The ones here were in fact rated to power a battlecruiser class vessel. The power to weight ratio meant the Katsu Maru was very fast at sub-warp speeds and very manoeuvrable. Generally the engines were run at a fraction of their power. An old tramp hauler outrunning a cruiser would arouse far too much suspicion.

The Captain continued around the ship doing his rounds until his datapad beeped. The doc was ready to present her findings. By the time he got to the conference room the Captain found the senior officers assembled as Dr Monique took her turn to brief the assembled crew. Riku's chair was painfully empty.

"The five deaths were due to the brothers vitoc, but there is more to it than just that. There were two forms of vitoc in their systems. The first was the modified one created by the brothers, the second one was traditional vitoc that had been consumed after the modified version and in great quantities. I also found two types of Insorum. Just like the vitoc, the modified version was taken first then the original had been consumed."

The Captain was looking at his datapad which had the raw data from the doctors investigation.

"So if they had taken Insorum, why did the Vitoc kill them?"

"I cannot say for sure, but I can make a guess. The broken glass Ingvar found at this station was holding the modified Vitoc but it is different to the strain we found on the last station, I think this was an earlier version. I'm pretty sure the brothers were trying to boost the Vitocs narcotic potency, make an improved version giving a better high. By modifying the drug, standard Insorum no longer worked as a cure, so they had to modify that too. Unfortunately this original formula didn't work. The people who took it soon found that out. In order to stop the mutations I think that they procured more Vitoc thinking the hit would stop the mutations. But it didn't, it was a different formula. They took more Insorum but that only countered the standard Vitoc. As the mutations from the modified Vitoc took hold they consumed more Vitoc and Insorum but it did them no good. They needed the right modified Insorum but the brothers version didn't always match 100%."

The Captain went quiet, he was thinking. If the old product was so defective, who were these people who were desperate to get the old formula? Who was that Matari girl they had bumped into. Why were they heading to a backwater system in Amarr with a defective narcotic. None of it made sense.

"Anything else?"

"The later victims had different versions of Insorum in their system. It appears the brothers were trying to find the cure but nothing worked. The fifth victim had almost twenty versions of modified Insorum in his blood. He still died."

"That last victim was a test subject?" the Captain asked.

"It would appear so." replied the Doctor "The police report says the victim died elsewhere and was moved to the alley where they found them. I'm betting he was in the make-shift lab with the brothers as they tried to cure him. I found multiple doses of the modified Vitoc. It appeared they gave him more between trying the cures to keep him alive. Each new dose of the modified Vitoc worked in stopping the mutations for a while. He fared better than the fourth victim. She was a user found in an abandoned warehouse. The autopsy said she died 14 hours after consuming the drug and that the mutations killed her in minutes of first appearing. That version was the worst."

A beep on the Captain's datapad informed him they were nearing their destination. He dismissed his officers and retired to his quarters.

Captain Sosa was a logical thinker and that made him ideal for commanding the Katsu Maru and the missions she was used on. However logic was not helping here. The Captain stood under the warm shower and let the hot water cascade over his body. They smashed up the lab in the first station with the safe modified Vitoc and Insorum. They were not interested in the finished product, they wanted the defective one. The Matari woman was another loose end. The way she handled herself meant she was clearly military. Some kind of agent or special forces. The Matari government was unlikely to be interested in recreational use of Vitoc within the Caldari State, they had more than enough V-Heads in the Republic. So what was she doing here? Was she ex-

military and now worked as a merc for a cartel or syndicate who wanted the improved drug? No, again nobody appeared interested in the finished version. The older, defective and very fatal one was the one everyone appeared to want. Why?

He left the shower, dried off and shaved. He stared at himself in the mirror.

"You are missing something." he told his reflection gruffly. "You are missing the one piece of information that will clear these muddied waters."

Chapter 7

Riku took an energy bar from his belt and unwrapped it. He broke it in two and passed half to the girl. They ate silently listening to the idle chit-chat of the crew passing by the grill they were hiding behind. Riku felt the ship shudder slightly, he knew it was a tractor beam. They were being towed into a station, where no doubt the crew of the Katsu Maru were waiting for them.

After thirty minutes the ship was silent. The reactor was in sleep mode with the ship running on station-power and the engines fully shut down. The crew had either stood down and returned to their quarters or had exited the ship. Riku checked the scanner on his arm, it appeared to be a combination of both. However, the route was clear. He carefully opened the grill and stepped out, checking the corridor. He beckoned the girl to follow. The two started to make their way towards the maintenance hatch in engineering Riku originally entered. Just as they approached a corner a crew member almost walked into them. Both men looked shocked, but Riku reacted first. He slammed his fist into the crew members stomach blasting the air from his lungs. He then followed up with a blow to the back of the neck as the man slumped to his knees gasping for breath. That blow knocked him out cold. Riku dragged the body to a nearby access hatch and stuffed it inside. He resumed their route, this time paying more attention to the scanner.

A few minutes later he was crouched at the hatch looking into the hangar. The ship had docked next to a Panther class station-to-planet dropship. Personnel and cargo were being taken off the ship and they were on and loaded onto the Panther. He waited with the girl just behind him.

"Aki, you there?" he whispered into his mic.

"Certainly am. Long time no hear. Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Oh me? I'm having a ball. Looks like our friends are loading up a dropship. You got it?"

"Affirmative. We see it on the security cameras. Can you get a tracker on it?"

Riku picked a small rod from his utility belt about six inches long and half an inch in diameter. He checked the coast was clear before pointing it at the dropship and depressing a small button. A small projectile shot from the rod and magnetically attached to the outer-hull of the dropship. The small disk started to broadcast telemetry data to Aki back on the Katsu Maru almost instantaneously.

"Its tagged. Looks like it is getting ready to leave. As soon as it's clear we'll make our way over to you."

-o0o-

The Amarrian strode from the shuttle towards the massive double doors. The oppressive heat of the jungle producing beads of sweat on his brow. Two guards in ceremonial dress opened the doors allowing him to enter the building without breaking his stride. The guards themselves did not challenge or stop the man. At this point they were purely for show. The small pulse laser batteries lining the hallway hidden behind the portraits and mirrors were the real defence this deep in the palace. DNA scanners monitored everyone approaching the room and would not hesitate to vaporise intruders. The palace itself was also heavily defended and security was tight. This was one of the seats of power in the Empire and it was hardened against enemies from both outside and inside the Amarr.

Another pair of guards at the end of the corridor opened the door. Inside the ornate room an older Amarrian sat at a desk. The desk itself was made of a polished hardwood with gold leaf decorating the edges. A modern holographic terminal was mounted in the centre of the desk. Like many things in the palace, the desk was a mixture of old and new. The seated man looked up as he heard the doors open and he watched the younger man stride in. The visitor knelt before the older man as he rose. The older man extended his hand and the visitor stood.

"Welcome back Harfeen. What news?"

"My lord, it is how you said. All of it. He plans to bring a new wave of slaves to the Empire."

The older man stroked his chin. "This is disturbing news. Such an act would gain the Holder much respect and support from the older houses. Our Empress's reforms on slaves have weakened her position with some of the older houses. His plan cannot be allowed."

Over the last few years Empress Jamyll had done much to improve lives of the Matari slave population. One of the largest acts was freeing all 9th generation and older slaves. This had been a highly unpopular decision especially with the Holders who lost significant numbers of slaves with no way of regaining that number easily. The only Amarrians that had directly benefited from that decision was the slave traders who had seen the price of slaves on the market increase tenfold almost overnight as Holders tried to replace their loses.

"What are your orders sir?" asked the younger man.

"Do we know where he his?"

"Yes sir. We have tracked him to his summer palace, the one that is not actually held in his name. We have reason to suspect that this is where the weapon is to be developed. However, our sources say whilst the weapon is close, it is not yet at the palace."

The older man nodded. To strike against a Holder would set a dangerous precedent. Other Holders may believe their turn is also coming and could act against the current leadership of the Empire which was already weak and vulnerable. However, leaving the possibility open that this traitor could use this weapon was a greater evil.

"Deploy the 'Light of Our Lord' to the system. I will get the authorisation we need, but in the meantime ensure that we are ready to strike."

The younger man bowed and strode out of the room with purpose. The older man retook his seat and steepled his fingers under his chin and thought about what he must do next. They were heading down a dangerous path.

Chapter 8

The Captain and Riku stood back as the Admirals granddaughter spoke to her parents on the communications console. Her granddad was sending a ship to pick her up and return her home. The Captain had already called the retired admiral to give him the news.

"So mission complete?" Riku said with concern in his voice.

"I take it from your tone that you don't think so" the Captain replied.

"Something doesn't add up Cap. This whole sorry situation stinks to high heaven."

"Agreed, that's why I called the Old Man. He agrees too. He was making a call or two to the Republic. They know more than what they are letting on."

Riku simply nodded in agreement. That Matari woman they had bumped into was clearly a professional. She could have been a mercenary, but more likely Republic Fleet. Mercs usually went for the obvious. Big, muscled men who looked intimidating. That's what clients wanted to see. Men that looked like they could snap their enemies like twigs. Empire sponsored agents were usually the opposite. Mercs stood out like sore thumbs, agents needed to blend in or look like anything but an agent. There had been rumours around the Legion that CONCORD had been using genetically enhanced female agents, but nobody had any proof. Sosa was banking on her being Republic Fleet and them telling the Old Man what the hell was going on.

The young girl was sobbing and apologising for putting her parents through the ordeal. They too were crying. The girl's hand now had proper bandaging and Dr Monique had given her steroids to help regrow the two fingernails the kidnappers had

torn off. Captian Sosa had spoken to the girl, and she had confirmed what he already knew. They wanted the old defective drug formula and Fratt had said he no longer had it. The old formula would have been evidence that would have tied him to five deaths so he didn't want to give it up. The calls to his brother were to stall. He was scared that they were security services looking for proof of crime. He endured having all of his fingernails pulled in order to keep justice at bay. On low-sec outposts justice was usually brutal and quick so he had held out as long as he could knowing it would be a death-sentence. When they had started on the granddaughters fingers he had finally admitted there was a cache of the defective drug remaining in Vaaralen. The boyfriends plan had indeed been to develop a modified strain of Vitoc that gave a better high. They hadn't got the resources to mass produce, the plan was to get the formula perfected and then sell that to the Serpents or another major pirate faction. Fratt's bother was apparently a brilliant scientist but lazy. Rather than working for one of the major bio-tech corps, he and his brother had dreamt up the crackpot get-rich-quick plan between themselves.

Frey entered the room and whispered to the Captain. He nodded and gestured for Riku to follow. Once they were out of the comms room Riku spoke up.

"What is it?"

The Captain entered the lift that would take them up to the 'public' decks above.

"Apparently there is a smoking hot woman here to see us." he laughed.

-oOo-

The upper galley was the polar opposite of the lower galley located in the hidden decks. The furniture here was cheap and old. It was highly uncomfortable moulded

plastic which was stained and chipped. The floor and walls were no better with a variety of stains and random damage. A slightly unpleasant odour wafted from the kitchen that was plastered in grease. In the middle of the room the Matari woman they had seen twice before was sat on top of a table. As Riku and Captain Sosa approached, Riku scanned her body, professionally of course. She appeared to have a gun in the back of her pants and another in a holster on her left side. She had something strapped to her left ankle. Could be anything from a small backup pistol to a knife to a grenade. The woman smiled as the two men neared.

"Fancy seeing you two here!"

"Fancy." replied the Captain. "OK, enough bullshit, who are you and what do you want?"

"I've been told to come and see you. I would expect you will be getting a message from the Legion HQ to expect me any moment."

The datapad in Sosa's pocket vibrated. He didn't bother to look, he now fully expected this woman was from Minmatar intelligence services. If she knew that they were Legion she probably knew plenty of other things about them.

"If you look at that message you'll see that my government has contracted the Legion to assist with the destruction of the modified Vitoc and its formula that you have been following."

The Captain nodded. It was falling into place now. "We've actually been following two kidnap victims, but the drugs you speak of appeared to be the reason why they were snatched. Now did your Government contact the Legion, or did the Legion contact your Government I wonder?" asked Sosa knowing the Old Man was going to

speak to his contact in the Matari Government and ask what they knew about the vitoc deaths and who was this agent they kept bumping into.

The woman smiled and nodded as if she expected that some questions may had been asked of her government after their last encounter. "Well Captain, does it really matter? The fact is the Matari Government has now contracted the Legion to help here in recovering or completely destroying any samples and copies of formula from..."

"That's what this is about isn't it." the Captain interrupted "A new strain of Vitoc that Insorium doesn't cure. The Amarrians could mass produce this and we'd be back to the situation we were seven years ago. You cannot rescue any of your enslaved people as you'd kill them without dosing them daily with vitoc."

The woman smiled and nodded again. "It is worse than that captain. That strain isn't as fast acting as the brothers fourth version which killed in minutes. The mutations from the fifth Vaaralen strain start at the same time but take longer to fully take hold and kill the victim. The Amarrians could use stealth bombers to hit Matari inner worlds with the gas and our people would be forced to run to the Amarrian homeworlds for more, or die a horrific death. Forget Amarrian task forces raiding Matari worlds to capture slaves, they could simply fire a few bombs off into the upper atmosphere and have us running to them instead begging to be taken in as slaves."

The Captain thought about it. She was right. They could use this as a bio-weapon and have Matari flooding to the Amarr Empire desperate to save their own lives. It could be a return to the dark days when the Amarr raided the Matari planets with impunity for slaves whenever they felt the need.

"We can find them and destroy what they took" said the Captain "But the other brother is still running about, he is the brains behind the operation. With him still

roaming free there is the threat that more could be made or worse that the Amarrians could capture him and force him into mass producing it for them."

"Oh Captain Sosa, don't worry about him. He's safely back in the Republic. I grabbed him before those Amarrians could and gave him a nice ride in a shuttle. Our Government has, shall we say, persuaded him to stay and help us to try and develop a cure for that Vitoc strain. Just in case they don't succeed, it is our task to destroy the existing samples and formula. As well as standard terms and conditions for a Legion contract the Matari government has insisted I join your team for the duration of the operation. I'm sure it is all in the message you just got from HQ."

Sosa smiled. "Welcome aboard Miss.....?"

"Inga, just call me Inga."

-oOo-

The three men entered the ceremonial audience chamber. As with most Amarrian architecture, gold featured heavily. Banners of the great houses of Amarr adorned the walls. In the throne at the far end sat an older Amarrian man. He was dressed in traditional robes of a Holder and held a golden staff. Beside him stood two robed men, their faces hidden by the oversized hoods. The three men approached and knelt at the base of the steps leading up to the throne of their leader.

"Arise my loyal subjects" The old Amarrian said.

The men stood and one of them approached with a metallic silver case. He stopped at the base of the steps leading to the throne and opened it. Inside, secured by a grey fixing foam, were 23 vials and a datacard.

"Excellent!" said the leader. "Take that down to the laboratories so they may start analysis and production. Soon we reveal ourselves to the Empire. Empress Jamyl is weak and the time is right. We will offer the people of our glorious empire a new wave of slaves better than before. We will make the Empire great again!"

"Yes, my Lord," the three men replied and bowed before backing away and leaving the audience chamber.

The laboratories were located below the palace. Stealth had been decided as the key to this operation. Potentially they could have two Empires desperate to find them and destroy them. Any of his previous residences would be too risky. Also any heavily defended installation could draw unwanted attention. Guards and mercenaries talked too much. No, what this operation needed was simplicity. A small summer palace on a backwater planet, a small hidden laboratory and a few guards that wouldn't look out of place guarding a VIP's summer retreat.

He picked up his datapad from the arm of the throne he and reviewed the targets. A list of Matari worlds close to the Amarrian border to begin with. Once he had started and gain the support of the other house then they could look to the homeworlds of the sub-humans. There would be nothing they could do to stop it. Purifier stealth-bombers could sneak into the most heavily defended systems and launch their weapons at any planet of their choosing. Yes, it would be a great day for the empire as millions of Matari flooded to their planets begging to be taken into slavery he thought.

Chapter 8

Five kilometres from the palace the cloaked shuttle touched down in a clearing. Whilst the engines were almost silent and the cloaking device hid the ship from sensors, scanners and prying eyes alike, the animals in the clearing could sense its approach. A variety of birds and mammals retreated from the clearing in a cacophony of squawks and shrieks.

The four men and one woman exited the ramp. The humidity hit them immediately and they started to sweat. The combat suits they wore were specifically designed to prevent the body overheating in the jungle environment. However Riku still felt hot. They started to walk in the direction of the palace. The Katsu Maru had tracked the dropship and sent a covert drone to orbit the planet and take high-resolution pictures as well as passive scans. The target dropship had landed at a small palace on the surface. It was remote and hundreds of kilometres from any other buildings, a lone structure in the middle of an inhospitable jungle. The passive-scans had revealed more. Whilst the palace and grounds were relatively small, there was more underground. Without a full active scan they couldn't get any more information other than there were tunnels and energy signatures below the palace grounds. An active scan could have been detected which would have lost them the element of surprise.

Riku watched the Matari agent as they made their way north. She moved like a big cat. Graceful, lithe, fast. The assault rifle she carried swung by her hip as she worked through the thick undergrowth. Without turning she said "If you are that interested in my butt, I'll be happy to show you everything when we get back to the ship."

Riku blushed and Ingvar laughed slapping him on the back. "Busted!" the mighty Brutor roared.

An hour later they were soon at the edge of a large clearing, the white walls of the palace boundary wall were only 10 metres from the edge of the thick jungle. Sosa surveyed the area with a set of military optics.

"Laser detection grid, but it is offline. There are automatic sentry guns at the compound corners but they appear to be offline as well. Makes no sense why they'd have this level of security but not have it switched on! Smells like a trap." he whispered into his throat mic.

The group watched for a few minutes as a guard with a sniper rifle walked along the top of the wall casually scanning the perimeter. A noise to their right made them all tense and reach for their guns. Suddenly three deer like creatures bounded along the edge of the wall. The sniper immediately readied his gun and shot the first deer. The other two bolted into the undergrowth at the sound of the shot. Sosa couldn't believe how unprofessional this outfit was. You don't shoot wildlife and reveal your position and armaments when guarding a facility. The guard picked up his handheld comms unit from his belt. They were close enough to hear him clearly.

"Sector 3. One shot fired. Damn Asammi deer again. One down, two ran. I'll be glad when the migration season is over. Sector 3 out!"

Sosa heard everything and realised what was happening here. He picked up the optics again and scanned the ground between the wall and the jungle. This time he knew what he was looking for and found it. The ground in areas was pocketed by automatic high-calibre fire. Animal bones were scatter around each area.

"OK," Sosa whispered into his mic, "We got very lucky. It appears that these deer creatures are migrating and these idiots built their top secret base right on top of their migratory route. That is why the automated defences are offline. They were causing

alarms and the automatic sentry guns were burning ammo on wildlife. Get some rest, I'll take first watch. We'll move in tonight when it goes dark."

The five slowly backed away from the edge of the clearing, back into the jungle. They found a suitable location and started to get some rest. Ingvar was first asleep. The Captain was always amazed how the big Matari could fall asleep on queue. However, whenever he woke he was ready and alert. Years of military training and experience had conditioned him well.

Several hours later it was pitch black. Rest had not been easy as the guards were shooting deer all afternoon. The team of five were crouched at the edge of the clearing. Riku pulled a thick tube from his pack and unfolded a small winged drone. After he clicked the wings into place he threw it into the air and the tiny silent motor took over. He used the screen on his forearm to guide it above the palace grounds. Even if one of the guards saw it, the small black drone would be instantly dismissed as one of the many bats flying in the night sky.

"We have six tango's. One on each of the outer walls, one near the entrance of the main building and one at the gate in the southern wall. The tango's on the wall appear to have sniper rifles with the ones in the grounds having what looks like assault rifles. Check-check. Plus two. We have two more emerging from a small building next to the main palace. They are unarmed. That small building also appears to be completely empty."

Captain Sosa brought his datapad out and brought up the view from the drone. Riku was right, the three by three metre building registered as devoid of anything. Even a shed storing tools would have shown something on the scans. That building was clear of anything.

"Stairwell?" we whispered into his mic.

"My thoughts exactly" replied Riku.

"Ingvar. We are going in, north-east corner. Get in position."

The team slowly worked their way around the perimeter until they were in position. Riku watched Ingvar extract his sniper rifle and set up at the edge of the vegetation. He took his time and Riku watched him line up the shot at one of the guards on the wall. At the last moment he dipped the rifle and fired. The suppressor hardly made a pop but the round went low and impacted against the wall. Riku was stunned that he'd missed by so much, Ingvar had a reputation as the best sniper on the crew. He looked back at the target who was now leaning over the wall looking down to see what made the noise. Ingvar's second shot took him in the side of the head and he dropped the six metres into the edge of the jungle.

"What? You didn't think I wanted him falling into the courtyard?" Ingvar whispered with a grin.

He repeated the process for the guard on the northern wall, putting one round into the base of the wall to get the guard to lean over and the second one into his head. The team rushed from cover and took cover at the base of the wall. Each extracted a small pistol and fired at the top of the wall. Micro grappling hooks embedded into the wall and one by one the team clipped the monofilament line onto the harnesses and started to climb the wall. Ingvar was first and whilst still supported from the wire took, he took out both the remaining guards on the western and southern walls plus the one at the southern gate. The courtyard was dimly lit and the guard by the palace doors couldn't see his colleagues go down. The enhanced sight on the rifle was the only

reason Ingvar could see him. They descended the wall and approached the small building Riku had seen the two men leave earlier.

"Frey, wait here and make sure if anyone comes back here they take a dirt nap. Rest of us, lets head down."

Riku, Ingvar, the Matari agent, and the Captain slipped inside the building and down the stairwell. It was a long way down and they estimated they must be at least 100 metres underground as they entered the subterranean structure. The door at the bottom had a reinforced glass partition. Inside half a dozen people in lab coats were working. There appeared to be no other exits and it was one single room. Riku looked at the Captain.

"Scientists. I say we throw stealth out the window."

"Shock and awe?"

"Why not? There are no cameras here and we are so deep underground nobody topside will hear."

"Ingvar. Knock, knock." the Captain chuckled.

The scientists were busy working when the door was kicked off its hinges. A hulking Matari Brutor stomped into the room and fired his assault rifle in the air. The scientists dropped to their knees and covered their heads with their arms. Bits of ceiling fell to the floor with a clunk and one lighting unit was hit. Sparks flew as the unit shorted out.

"ANYONE MOVES AND I WILL KILL THEM!" roared the Brutor. As expected the scientists did exactly as instructed.

The rest of the team rushed in and Ingvar approached one of the scientists. A particularly weaselly Amarrian. He pulled a Matari Flaylock Pistol out of his holster and pushed it into the man's face.

"WHERE IS THE FORMULA AND THE SAMPLES THAT ARRIVED TODAY. NO BULLSHIT, NO DELAY. I PULL THIS TRIGGER IN 3, 2, 1..."

"WAIT!" screamed the scientist. He was so shocked he couldn't process all of the data coming at him. "There!" He pointed to a bench and Ingvar saw a metallic case propped open.

Ingvar walked over to the case. The data-card had already been hooked up to a reader and three of vials were missing.

"They've already started." growled Ingvar in anger.

"Stay frosty big man. These are non-coms. Unless they try something epically stupid like calling for help we don't harm them." the Captain ordered.

"Did you know Captain, there are some organisations in New Eden that classify Vitoc as a class-1 bio-weapon." he slowly approached another of the scientists whilst holstering the Flaylock. "Yes, a bio-weapon. Now people who research and produce bio-weapons, are they really non-coms? I mean, if you came across a group that were making bio-weapons intended to be used against your race, would you consider them non-coms?"

"Stow it soldier, that's an order." growled the Captain.

Ingvar drew a huge combat knife and held it under the chin of the scientist, forcing him onto his tiptoes. A dark patch formed on the front of the man's lab trousers and ran down his leg as his bladder let go. He made a whimpering sound.

"Where is that data going and where are the missing vials?"

The scientist pointed emphatically to a diagnostic terminal. Riku walked over and found the three vials. He held them up for Ingvar to see before putting them down.

"And the data?"

"Its..... local only..... no network down here..... its secure.... no outside line.... no wireless. The data is still encrypted!" the man stuttered.

Ingvar retracted the knife and put it away. He got his gun out again. He nodded to Riku who went over to the computer that was hooked up to the data-card. A decryption program was running on the computer. It was at 46% and estimated another two hours to crack the access codes to retrieve the data. Riku nodded at Ingvar to indicate the scientist was telling the truth.

"OK, everyone strip!"

The scientists looked at each other confused and very worried.

"OK, let me put it another way." Ingvar sighed "I'm going to blow this place sky high with enough phased plasma to vaporise anything, and anyone in here. Now you can remain fully clothed and stay in here, or you can leave naked. However, I ain't

taking the risk that any of you might leave this room with something that could recreate this shit." With that he fired the Flaylock into the diagnostic machine that the three vials were inside. The machine exploded in a roar of flame and a cloud of smoke. "Your choice!"

The scientists didn't need to hear the options a second time and began frantically removing their clothes. Ingvar smiled as he opened his pack and extracted a device which was two large steel cylinders connected to a small box with a keypad. An eerie green glow seemed to seep through a clear panel on the cylinders.

Above ground, the leader and his three acolytes exited the palace. The guard snapped to attention but was ignored by all four.

"My Lord, it will be an honour to see the facility where the rebirth of the Empire will start." said the man who had brought the Vitoc to the palace. The leader simply nodded and smiled. They started to cross towards the small building and stopped. It was a curious sight. Running towards them at speed were six naked Amarrians. The Leader recognised them as his scientists. He was about to demand an explanation when they charged past him without slowing. A particularly fast running woman clipping him as she sprinted past, knocking him to the ground. The other three rushed to help their fallen leader back to his feet. He watched the naked scientists run towards the gate with a puzzled look on his face. He turned back to the building that housed the stairwell that accessed the laboratory below and squinted into the darkness. He could vaguely make out five black shapes moving up the white compound wall. It took a few seconds for the bizarre sequence of events to come together in his head. At the same moment that he screamed "Intruders!" there was a low rumble and the ground shook so violently they were all knocked to the floor. By the time they got back to their feet, the centre of the immaculately tended lawn had sunk three metres and now had the appearance of a dried up lake.

The leader stood there, trembling in rage, his fists tightly balled.

"SOMEBODY SOUND THE ALARM!" he screamed.

Chapter 9

The five crew members were jogging through the jungle back towards the shuttle.

Riku came along side Ingvar. "You were putting on a show back there right?". The huge Matari Brutor gave him a question look.

"Come on. The bio-weapon angle, the knife, you weren't going to stick those scientists where you? It was a routine you and the Cap had planned right?"

Ingvar simply smiled, shrugged and picked up the pace leaving Riku behind. A few seconds later the Matari agent took his place at Riku's side.

"Don't be too hard on him. To be honest if I had gone in first I would have probably gone further. Just remember that was something that was being developed to enslave our race, just put yourself in his shoes." she panted before she too quickened her pace and moved forward to catch up with Ingvar.

The jungle was even more difficult to navigate at night. They retraced their route which they had cut through earlier but it was still slow going. The small drone Riku had launched earlier was still circling the compound and relaying real-time footage to his screen. He had seen four new people, but they were unarmed. The scientists looked like they were trying to flee the compound but had been knocked over when the device Ingvar planted went up. They were now being confronted by the four newcomers. Riku assumed the four were inside the palace and had come out when the explosion went off. Most importantly there didn't seem to be anyone chasing them. Half a dozen more guards had emerged, but that was it. It appeared to Riku this was supposed to be a discreet operation and they didn't have the manpower in the palace to do anything about the them.

Back at the compound the leader was screaming at the scientists. He was demanding to know why they hadn't done more to stop the intruders. The reasoning of six scientists taken by surprise by four heavily armed soldiers was falling on deaf-ears. Two guards in firefighting re-breathers emerged from the access building. Clouds of smoke was billowing through the door.

"Report!"

"Sorry sir, there is nothing left down there. The device was either fusion or plasma based. It has vaporised a 30 metre radius of ground where the lab once was."

The Leader just stood there, wondering what to do. The best opportunity he'd ever had was now vapour. A flash in the sky above made them all look up.

The leader picked up his datapad and sent a quick message, the others all looked at him questioningly.

"It is over my brothers and sisters. But I have used the last of our resources so that some vengeance may be taken. Those attackers will soon be dead, as will we."

-oOo-

In orbit the Katsu Maru was monitoring the situation with passive scans. The team was making good progress and there appeared to be no attempt by the remaining forces at the palace to pursue.

"Ma'am. I'm reading a Punisher class frigate heading our way. Imperial Navy, it is on an intercept course."

Yoshi looked at the panel built into the captains chair. A Punisher frigate would be no match for the Katsu Maru, but the last thing she wanted was to open fire on a vessel of the Amarrian Navy. She'd like to prevent any diplomatic incidents whilst the captain was away. A message appeared from the incoming vessel.

Unidentified Hauler,

Please vacate this space immediately in the name of the glorious Amarrian Navy.
Amarrian Navy Frigate 'Hope and Light'

"Simple and to the point." she thought.

"Helm, take us back towards the station, standard engines only and keep us at just over the 100m/s mark. The frigate might get suspicious if we outrun him."

"Yes ma'am. But he's not following. He's simply taken position in the same spot we.....
CYNO UP! CYNO UP! CYNO UP!" he repeated loudly and clearly.

A cynosorial field is a energy field that is created by a specific module that can be fitted to starships. The energy field is a very specific energy signature which penetrates both normal and subspace. They are used for ships equipped with a jump drive to lock onto and cross interstellar space. Whilst most ships had to use stargates, capital and supercapital ships were too big and therefore used jumpdrives to travel between solar systems. However, jump drives need a target to lock onto. By creating a cynosorial field in a system in range, the jump drive of the capital ship can lock on and jump to that beacon.

In a flash of light a Revelation class dreadnought appeared out of the artificial wormhole. Revelations were massive Amarrian capital class starships created for one

purpose. Destruction. The Katsu Maru was safe, the Revelations gigantic turrets were used for targeting battleships, other capital class ships, starbases and orbital bombardment. They did not have the tracking speed to hit the relatively small industrial hauler.

Yoshi quickly got on the comm unit.

"Captain, you might want to pick up the pace. We just got moved on by the Amarr Navy who have just jumped a Revelation class dreadnought above your head!"

"WHAT?" shouted the Captain? There was a pause. "Yoshi?"

"One second Captain!" came the reply.

The Captain picked up speed and shouted for the others to do the same. All pretence of stealth was out of the window as they charged through the dense undergrowth.

"Sorry Captain. We also have a dropship that is also heading your way. It is not Amarr Navy, it's an unknown, it appears it undocked from the station a few minutes ago. We have also seen a small shuttle launch from the palace. Looks like the boss there isn't looking to hang around for either the dropship or that dreadnought!"

On the bridge of the Katsu Maru the crew were working hard to track everything that was going on. The dropship which had launched from the station and was descending towards the palace, the dreadnought which was lining up for a firing solution, the shuttle fleeing the scene and finally the team on the ground which was running for the cloaked shuttle.

"Ma'am. That dropship just fired a missile!"

Yoshi looked up at the viewscreen which was showing a tactical view of the area, the missile was highlighted approaching the palace. The screen went white as it exploded above the structure.

"That missile has stopped all scans on the surface Ma'am. The Revelation is firing!"

The crew could only sit there and watch the readouts and the main viewscreen. The three massive laser cannons on the Revelation fired down on the planet. A few seconds later the viewscreen refreshed. The dropship, which was setting down near the crater that was once the palace, was the only thing registering in the vicinity.

"Captain, do you read? Captain. Captain!"

Chapter 11

Onboard the Revelation class dreadnought, The Light of Our Lord, the firing sequence had just finished.

"Report!" ordered the XO.

"Sir, target obliterated. We have confirmed the palace and tunnel network below are destroyed. However, we had an unknown dropship approaching as we fired. It launched some sort of missile. We are having issues getting scans currently."

"Can you get an ID on that dropship?"

"Negative sir. It appears to belong to a mercenary outfit. We also detected a shuttle leaving the compound at the time of the blast. It was registered to the Holder."

"Did it survive?"

"Unknown sir. The missile blast has ionised the lower atmosphere and we are having trouble getting our sensors to penetrate the interference. We believe the missile was ionic based designed to hide what was happening on the surface. Perhaps an EMP burst warhead."

"Acknowledged. Guns to remain ready and keep siege green. Find me that shuttle! That traitor must not be allowed to escape. The heretic must be purged!"

The team picked themselves off the jungle floor, brushing twigs and leaves off their clothes.

"What in Divinities Edge was THAT?" Riku asked.

"That..." replied the Captain "Was some angry Amarrians who didn't like the idea of some jumpstarts stirring up a revolution. We'd been hearing murmurs that the Amarrian Government were catching up slowly. Unfortunately they are able to move dreadnoughts a lot faster than they undertake investigations."

The team continued as Captain Sosa explained that the Matari government had voiced their concerns to the Old Man that the Amarr had been also investigating the modified Vitoc. The Amarrian government were worried that someone in their empire might try to start a new unsanctioned attack on the Matari Republic and use it as leverage for political power. However, they were so far behind and so slow in getting going, nobody expected them to be here. It was assumed by the time they picked up the scent, the Legion team assisted by Inga would have already neutralised the threat. A few minutes later they entered the clearing, surprised to see Hos standing next to the shuttle which was declocked.

"Let me guess, Ingvar used a little too much plamsa this time?" Hos joked.

"Nope. That was a Revelation dreadnought. And this declocked shuttle will be its next target? Why is it unclocked!" asked the captain. "We're likely to be the next thing to get vaporised!"

"Don't worry Captain, that Rev won't see us. The shuttle is fried. Didn't you hear the XO say that unknown dropship fired a missile?"

"Yeah, but I was a little busy running for my life at the time!"

"EMP. Fried the shuttle. Have you tried any of your gear?"

The team tried their com units and other pieces of equipment. It was all dead.

"Now what?" asked Ingvar.

"Now we wait." replied the Captain. "With no energy signature they won't see us and Yoshi knows where we are. So who has a some of cards and a six pack? Dodixie poker?"

Back on the Katsu Maru Yoshi was watching the five dots slowly work around the crater. They had disgorged from the unknown dropship and were performing a sweep. Aki had been using active scans, assuming that the Revelation dreadnought would have been as well and there was little left on the surface to spook. The 900m scar in the landscape and vaporised jungle had confirmed the game was up.

They had already worked out that the missile was an EMP burst round. The hypothesis was that these were the real guards for the palace. An elite unit ready to drop in if needed, but not based at the palace to attract attention. The arrival of the Amarr was a coincidence. Hos had managed to recalibrate the Katsu Maru's sensors to break through the EMP fallout.

"Ma'am. I'm getting some troubling readings from those soldiers. Even for this distance the scanner can pick up their body temperatures are way too high. Plus their armour and weapons are oversized. That can only mean they are...."

"Cloned soldiers." Yoshi finished his sentence.

-o0o-

The team on the ground heard the craft before they saw it. By the time the mini-shuttle was landing in the clearing they were stood waiting. The door opened automatically and the captain approached. The tiny one-man shuttle had no pilot, it was being remote controlled. Gear had been piled up on the seat. He picked up a new com unit that was on the seat and put it on.

"You there Yoshi?"

"Ah Captain, at last. I hope you are all OK?"

"We've got a bit of a suntan from that orbital strike but otherwise OK other than our fried gear." the Captain joked.

"We saw the EMP go off and assumed it fried your gear hence this special delivery. But I've got some more bad news. The dropship that fired the EMP brought a squad of five cloned soldiers and they've picked up your trail."

The Captain knew the significance. The Legion was instrumental in the development of clone soldier technology. They had been talking to the Matari Government about a contract to support the Republic Army at Pikes Landing in the system of Amamake when the Amarr had deployed the first cloned soldiers. Using recovered brain implants from wormhole space, the Amarr had bio-engineered a new breed of super-soldiers. They were stronger, faster, fitter and more resilient than any other soldier in the cluster. Their enhanced bodies allowed them to wear heavier armour and carry and use weapons that were normally mounted on vehicles. If you were able to put one down, that wasn't the end of them. Their brain implants transferred their consciences

and memories to a nearby clone-revival unit. So even if you killed one, he'd back in the field in minutes knowing everything they did at time of death. His team was no match for five clone soldiers in a direct fire-fight. There was no way to out run them. Clone soldiers could outrun anyone on foot. Neither was hiding an option. All clone soldiers had state-of-the-art scanning equipment. They couldn't fight, they couldn't flee, they couldn't hide. The situation looked hopeless.

"Shit!"

"You have two minutes to get ready Captain. What's your plan?" the XO asked over the comms unit.

The captain looked at the small one-man shuttle and smiled.

"We are going to need bigger guns, much bigger guns!"

-oOo-

"Troopers 3 and 4, take flanking positions. Two and Five with me. I'm detecting something ahead."

The heads up display on the squad commander's helmet showed a vehicle ahead. His orders from the Holder flashed up in the bottom left of his view as a reminder.

"Palace attacked by five unknowns. Escaped into jungle. Seek and destroy. Leave no survivors."

He moved up flanked by two of his troopers. As they approached the clearing he could make out two shuttle craft, one of which was not registering any power signature.

Probably dead from the EMP blast. The other of the two vessels looked to be a very small shuttle, the other larger one was probably their original extraction craft. He guessed the smaller of the two was some sort of one-man ship-to-surface craft that had either arrived after the blast or was specifically shielded against an EMP pulse. He moved forward slowly, sweeping his light machine gun from side to side. The squad reached the smaller shuttle and took defensive positions. There was no life signs on his scanner. The squad commander looked into the open hatch on the side of the small shuttle.

"Three get up here, Four keep us covered. There is something wired into the console of this thing."

Trooper Three broke cover and approached the small shuttle. He was the squad's electronics expert. The soldier leant into the small cockpit and saw a datapad crudely wired into the console. He picked it up and looked through the system files.

"It is very odd commander. This thing is running some form of program overriding the transponder on the shuttle giving a false registration. Why would they do that? Actually the ship's name it is transmitting looks familiar, isn't the 'New Dawn' the name of the escape shuttle from the palace that we saw leave on our....."

The squad members looked up into the sky as the clouds appeared to crackle with energy and glow brighter. The cloned soldiers simply looked at each other and shrugged in defeat.

"That was a pretty clever plan!" Three remarked.

"Yeah but I ain't acknowledging that. I fucking hate dying, puts me in a bad mood for about a week." the squad leader snarled.

A second later the five soldiers, the two spacecraft and everything for 900m was vaporised as the Revelation dreadnought in orbit fired on what it thought was the shuttle with the fleeing holder.

-o0o-

Although they were two kilometres away, the team from the Katsu Maru were knocked over by the shockwave.

"That's the second sustan I've got from a dreadnought today!" Ingvar moaned.

The Captain laughed and picked up the handheld comms unit he had taken from the other shuttle.

"Yoshi, wait for that dread to jump out and then send a shuttle down. I think you'll find there is a nice big clearing where that nice small clearing was. Oh and stick the cost of those two shuttles on the bill for the Matari Republic," the Captain said winking at the Matari agent.

Epilogue

His failure was crushing his spirit. He had been so close to achieving his goal. Enslaving the Matari race once more and propelling him to ultimate power in the glorious Amarrian Empire. Now he was a fugitive. The Amarr Admiralty had obviously discovered his plans and sent a team in to destroy the modified Vitoc before destroying his palace in an orbital strike. He had barely made it out alive in his shuttle. The EMP his cloned-mercenaries had deployed had covered his escape as planned. He felt a small pang of guilt for his followers and the scientists that were caught in the blast. He shook his head and tried to forget about them. He was alive and that was the main thing. He noticed his wine glass was empty. He looked around for the hostess and caught her eye. A Matari animal, not fit to clean his boots, but still, for such a lower form of life she was attractive. He shook his head again. He should not think such thoughts, she was sub-human, she was Minmatar. However he couldn't risk an Amarr transport ship. He had to use the InterBus and making a fuss about their cabin staff might raise suspicion. It was a private charter and he was the only passenger, but he still needed to keep his head low. He should have specifically requested Amarrian crew but he was in a rush.

She smiled as she poured his drink, her loose blouse hanging low giving him a good view. He tried not to stare but the temptation was too much. Once she'd left he took a gulp of the wine and tried to think about something other than his failure and the attractive Matari hostess.

He felt a twinge in his neck. He wanted to rub it but found his arm didn't move, in fact he couldn't move at all. Terror took hold as he realised he was totally paralysed. He saw the cabin door open and a large dark-skinned Matari Brutor stepped out wearing a captain's uniform of the shuttle company. He left the door open and approached the hostess.

"All done?"

"Yes. He's not going anywhere."

The man in the captain's uniform approached the Holder and bent down, staring directly into the Amarrian's eyes.

"His eyes are moving so he's conscious. You say he can feel everything even through the paralysis?"

The woman nodded. As she moved towards the emergency escape hatch.

"Yeah, he's fine. He'll feel everything that happens to him. Are you coming big boy?" she purred seductively.

The large Brutor stood up and smiled at the Amarrian. He joined the hostess at the door to the escape pod.

"Say 'Hi' to the Blood Raiders for us. They were 120km away and closing when I left the cockpit. Don't worry about us, we fitted this escape pod with a warp drive, we'll be long gone before they get here." he laughed as the two stepped arm-in-arm into the escape pod.

The Amarrian heard the pod launch.

Two minutes later there was an ominous clang and the small private shuttle jerked. He heard the crackle of a cutting touch behind him, slicing into the hull.

-oOo-

The captain discreetly checked his datapad before returning to his cocktail. He was sat at the beach bar at a exclusive resort in the Gallente Federation. Most of the crew were there. The Legion rewarded its men and women well. The Captain always gave them a choice with shore leave, do your own thing or join the rest at a beach resort with all expenses on the Legion. With most of the crew not having family other than their colleagues on the Katsu Maru, most chose the resort option.

Riku was sat on the barstool next to him and turned to face the Captain as he placed the datapad back in his pocket.

"All done?" he asked.

"Target neutralised, justice served and mission complete." the Captain replied.

"I assume Ingvar is going to head to us now? After all he'll only be two days late?"

The Captain turned and smiled.

"No, Ingvar won't be joining us at this rather nice beach resort. He'll see us back on the ship in two weeks."

"Really!" exclaimed a surprised Riku. "He's missing out on all this paid for by the Legion?". He swept his hand towards the tropical beach and the crystal clear waters. Several crew were laying on sun loungers and others played in the gentle surf crashing down on the white beach.

"His choice. Let's just say he's doing his bit for Legion-Matari Republic Fleet Intelligence relations."

Riku turned back to the bar and took his drink with a shocked and dejected look on his face.

"Seriously? That scorching hot Matari agent? Lucky bastard!"

The captain laughed and drained his glass before standing up. "I'm going for a swim before dinner. Don't try to think about Ingvar too much. I'm sure we're having the better time.... well may be not, but thinking that might make *you* feel better!" He slapped Riku on the back, laughing as he left.

Riku took another drink. "Lucky bastard!" he muttered with a half-smile and a slight shake of his head, please for his friend. He suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder and hot breath by his ear.

"That Matari girl might have the body and the energy, but us slightly older women have the experience." Yoshi purred into his ear.

"Room one, one, three. 10 minutes if you need proof on that."

With that he felt the hand and the breath vanish. He looked up at the clock above the bar, it was going to be a long ten minutes.

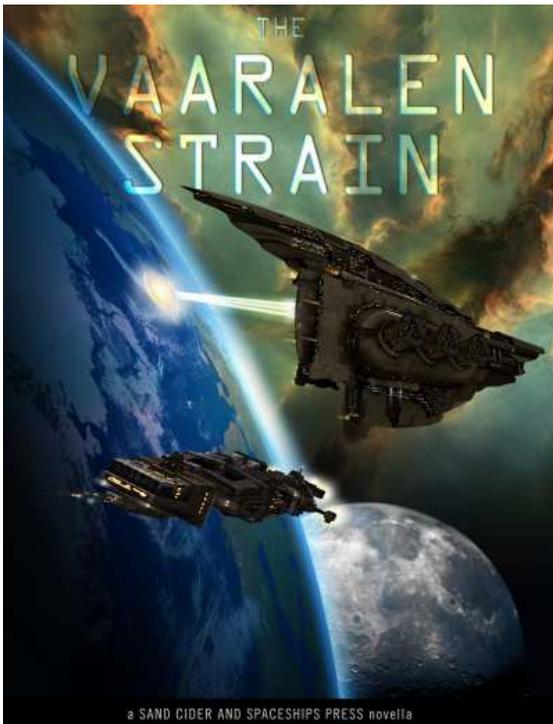
The End.

The Cover Story!

I originally tried to do the cover myself using the test server, singularity, and some alts.

It was.... meh? Putting the title in with MS Word and it just didn't look right. In order to get the sun shining on the right side of the ships I had to have the Matari nebula in the background. The ships weren't positioned right, the engine flares were not there due to the mechanics with speed and the hauler turning. I tried to get the Revelation firing at a cargo canister to make it look like an orbital strike. It just all didn't work and what you see here to the right is the best I could do in-game.

I approached Rixx Javix to see if he would like a commission. His first one was awesome.



The only problem being... well, Eve players to be honest. I didn't want anyone saying "The cover is awesome, but wasn't the planet inside Amarr space. I think you'll find that's the Gallente nebula rar rar rar rar...". If you read the forums I know you know what I mean.

I just wanted to show you the original one as I felt I had to go with the "story lore fitting" one for the actual cover, but the first one is still my favourite as the Gallente nebula is by far the best in Eve.

Thanks Rixx and I hope the ISKies are used to buy ships to asplode more ships!